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## Once upon a time in the European Capital of Culture

*A shift in the assessment of the ECOC – Pécs 2010 programme series*

**Abstract:** What has actually remained of the first European Capital of Culture (ECOC) programme in Hungary? Is it really another bad example for incompetence and another failure story of money spent in an intransparent way or shall we agree with those who consider the Pécs ECOC programme as a success story, talking of a motorway built, high quality events, new facilities of international standard and a city made more liveable? Is it meaningful, anyway, to make an accurate balance only after just more than two years following the programme year? Short term balances can surely be made. Does it make sense to talk about a clear success or failure? I do not think it does.

The publication of our research findings may put a different light on the professional views, by introducing the results of a questionnaire survey done with the inhabitants. The expectations of the population stated in 2008 were met, the series of events still lives as a positive experience in the majority of the respondents, and so the judgement of Pécs has changed for the better both locally and nationally, and also in the international arena. The key projects seem to be viable; numbers of visitors to the newly established cultural institutions are far above the values defined in the project expectations. The present essay is an attempt, partly based on the author's own empirical survey based on questioning more than three thousands respondents in Hungary between 2008 and 2012.

Keywords: European Capital of Culture, expectations, willing to participate, key projects, the image of the city, Pécs

### Introduction

#### *History of the programme called European Capital of Culture*

The first event organised in Athens in 1985 was a milestone, elevating culture, formerly treated as a national affair, to the level of the community; declaring that the effective operation of economic and political dialogue can be greatly promoted by cultural relations.

The programme initiated by the Greek minister of culture, Melina Mercouri was meant to support the objective of demonstrating the cultural diversity of the European cities and also promoting the approach of the nations through mutually getting to know each other, emphasising the common European heritage (Mittag, J. 2008).

Athens was followed by Florence, then Amsterdam, Berlin and Paris as European Capitals of Culture. Later it was Glasgow, the ECOC of 1990, that first had a radically different attitude to the title, as this Scottish city was the first capital of culture where culture was seen as an urban development tool in the regeneration of an industrial city on the slide (Garcia, B. 2005, Tucker, M. 2008). After the spectacular success of Glasgow (which of course was allowed by a very painstaking planning work of long years) many years had to pass until a Union directive was made in 1999 (1419/1999/EC) specifying that cultural programmes must have a strong coherence with the middle-term development concepts of the respective city applying for the title. From this time on former industrial zones have frequently been converted into cultural quarters, long-awaited cultural institutions have been built, run-down parks and public spaces have been renewed. Compared to the initial years, a significant shift of focus could be seen in the programmes after 2000, the former pan-European attitude was more and more replaced by considering the event as a potential tool for the solution of local problems.

Until 2000 the European Capital of Culture for the given year was chosen by inter-governmental agreement, which meant that the governments of the member states had substantial independence in deciding on the possible locations and the implementation of the events (1989 Paris, 2000 Avignon, 2004 Lille). The Treaty of Maastricht elevated the programme to the community level. This does not only mean that the European Commission and the Parliament of Europe are given an active role now in the definition of the operational principles (an assessment board created by the Commission makes a report on the applications, to be evaluated by the Parliament) but also that the principle of rotation determines which member states follow one another in the ECOC position in the 2005–2019 period. The previous regulation was amended inasmuch as after 2007 there are two member states in each year (a member state part of the Union in 1999 already, and a country that was an accession country then) which nominate a city for the title, one each.

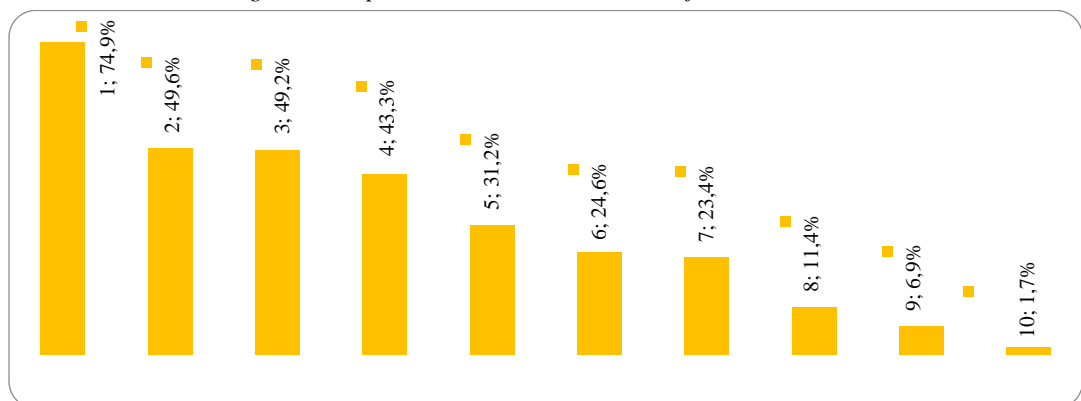
#### *The years of expectancy and uncertainty (2006-2009)*

Pécs won the European Capital of Culture title in 2006, competing with ten other Hungarian cities. The city of Pécs is the first holder of this title in Hungary. We can clearly say that the award of the title filled the – understandably proud – citizens of Pécs with optimistic expectations and hopes for the development of the city.

This is also why the following chaotic years resulted in so much disappointment; the chaos was primarily due to the personal conflicts within the organisation responsible for the management of the event, the continuous fluctuation of the staff, communication problems and belated tendering and implementation activities. (Four persons followed each other in the lead manager position of the ECOC project, the last one being Csaba Ruzsa.) The initial phase of euphoria was replaced by disillusionment.

In the representative questionnaire survey conducted in 2008 and 2009 (the breakdown of the respondents by gender and school education reflected the composition of the inhabitants in the cities with county rank and the capital city) a total of 2.000 persons were asked in Pécs and Budapest about the European Capital of Culture – Pécs 2010 programme. The research is made jointly with the students of the Faculty of Adult Education and Human Resources Development, University of Pécs.

*Figure 1: Expectations about the series of events in 2008*



1="many tourists will visit us", 2="infrastructure will develop", 3="the acknowledgement and image of Pécs will improve both in Hungary and abroad", 4="international cooperations and relations will be born", 5="the city will become a regional cultural centre also at international level", 6="the economy will boom, new jobs will be created", 7="the city will become more liveable", 8="the economic potential of the city increases, multinational corporations will locate in Pécs", 9="I do not expect any positive impact", 10="other"

As regards the expected impacts of having the European Capital of Culture title, the proportion of those was the highest by far who said "many tourists will visit us". No less than 74.9% of the respondents expected this. Our hypothesis was justified inasmuch as the second most frequently

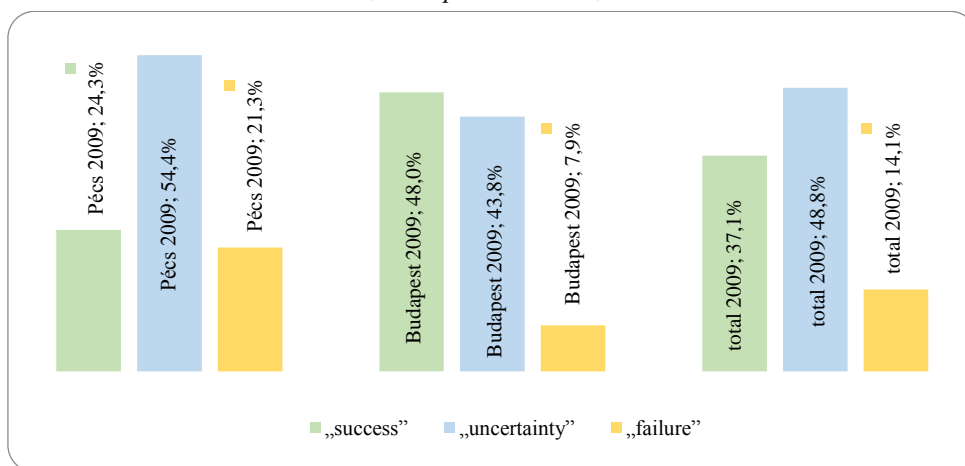
mentioned benefit was the answer “infrastructure will develop”, indicated by every second respondent (49.6%), the third most frequent answer was “the acknowledgement and image of Pécs will improve both in Hungary and abroad”, with a value of 49.2 per cent (see Figure 1). We must not forget, however, that the frequency of just these answers related to the better international recognition decreased to a considerable extent (3-8 per cent) by 2009. The proportion of those who did not expect any positive impact at all was relatively low, but the 10.5% rate of reply by the Pécs citizens is worth the attention, especially if we consider that the proportion of definitely pessimistic answers slightly increased by 2009 (to 11.7%).

The most frequently mentioned measure indispensable for the successful implementation of the event, not surprisingly, is “development of roads and transport”: no less than 82.9% of the respondents thought it was closely related to a successful series of programmes. Also, many thought it would be worthwhile to renew buildings (59.8%) and monuments (55.9%), and make green parks in the public spaces (52%).

Of course the European Capital of Culture events are worth nothing without the interest and active cooperation of the Hungarian and foreign tourists visiting Pécs. In the next part of the questionnaire we wanted to find out how much the respondents are willing to participate. We can clearly say that the largest group was that of the “uncertain”. Every second respondent (48.7% in 2008 and 52.5% in 2009) though that either s/he did not know or would only probably take part in one of the would-be programmes. It is sad that the group of those refusing participation is also high: in 2009 35% thought that s/he would definitely not participate in any event or at least his/her participation was very much unlikely. It is thought-provoking that the proportion of those who would certainly participate is not only low but decreasing (16% in 2008 and 12.4% in 2009).

Knowing the mostly negative events of the previous years it is not at all surprising that the idea which most people associated with the title European Capital of Culture – Pécs 2010 was “uncertainty” (48.8%), the word “success” came to the minds of less respondents (37.1%), while “failure” was mentioned by 14.1% of the respondents (see Figure 2). The respondents in Pécs were especially critical; it is interesting that in Budapest the majority was made by those who expected success, both in 2008 and 2009 – it is true, on the other hand, that their proportion decreased by more than 10 per cent in a year (59% and 48%, respectively).

Figure 2: Associations related to the expression European Capital of Culture – Pécs 2010, in Pécs, Budapest and total, 2009



The majority opinion was that “the programme will be implemented but not become a success story”. It is worrying that the number of those local citizens who supposed the cancellation of the programme almost doubled in one year.

**Facts and figures about the event year - 2010**

As a preliminary fact we have to make it clear that the events have been implemented, and the continuous offer of programmes resulted in the growth in the number of participants day by day. This was promoted by the construction of the motorway right to Pécs, and the investments realised. Although success propaganda has begun, we cannot hush up opinions criticising the programme series for the lack of character, the gradual depreciation and quality loss – also, many believe that the fragile and short-time success is only due to the originally low expectations coming from disappointment accumulated through the years.

In such a large scale event it is of course impossible to make a complete list of achievements, even for the short-term ones. It is only a few facts and figures about the event year that we want to demonstrate, about the programmes implemented, the international relations, tourism and the new investments.

The major part of the budget of the programme series (€ 138.4 million) was absorbed by the investments, implemented in 85% from EU support, in 10 % from municipal resources and the remaining 5% was support by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. In the framework of the government contract made for the 2007-2010 period, the total of € 22 million allocated for programmes was financed in the following breakdown: the largest part was paid by the city (€ 12.8 million), a smaller share by the national government (€ 9.2 million). This was complemented by a total of € 7.6 million for communication purposes, and another € 6 million as support from Baranya county, from tenders and sponsorships. (Pécs 2010 Európa Kulturális Fővárosa, 2010. évi programok értékelése, 2011)

In the framework of the European Capital of Culture series, more than four thousand programmes were realised in Pécs, from which approximately 2,700 were subsidised cultural initiatives (P. Müller, 2011). During the year 2010 the programme organisers invited artists and participants from 56 countries of the world. The events of Pécs were realised in 230 venues, with the active participation of almost 200 stakeholders (Pécs 2010 Európa Kulturális Fővárosa, 2010. évi programok értékelése, 2011).

As regards the enrichment of the international relations of Pécs, the cooperations with Germany are of special importance. In addition to the co-organiser city of Essen, it was, among others, Stuttgart, Karlsruhe and Berlin with whose cooperation almost fifty programmes were organised. The winning bid of Pécs also resulted in successful cooperations to the countries of the southern cultural zone, to Croatia in the first place but also to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the whole there were over a thousand articles mentioning Pécs in the major foreign press organisations (Ágoston, 2011).

The number of visitors arriving at Pécs grew by a considerable 25.7%, the increase of guest nights spent in the city was an even more spectacular, exceeding by 27.5% in 2010 the figure of the previous year. Over a quarter of the visitors to Pécs (27.8 %) came from abroad; they spent no less than 32.65% of all guest nights realised in the city (Pécs 2010 Európa Kulturális Fővárosa, 2010. évi programok értékelése, 2011).

As regards the touristic attraction of Baranya county, we can report short term success too, as there was a 12% increase in the number of tourists and a 9% growth in the number of guest nights in the county in the ECOC year. The increase was more significant among the foreign visitors (26%, as opposed to the 9% growth in the number of domestic visitors). The largest numbers of guests arrived at Baranya county from Germany, Austria and the United States.

If we add that in 2010 the number of guests and guest nights decreased in South Transdanubia, while the growth at national level was just 2%, the favourable figures of the county and the city are to be appreciated even more (Rappai, 2011).

The touristic impact of the ECOC after the year of the event – more precisely, the lack of such impacts – is reflected by the number of guests in the city in 2011 and 2012 (Tájékoztatási Adatbázis). The figures show a significant decline in the number of guests already in 2011, the decrease by 20% (which was even larger, 30% for foreigners) resulted in a return to the numbers

in the year before the event, 2009. A decline of similar magnitude can be observed if we look at the number of guest nights spent in the city of Pécs (an almost 15% fall as regards domestic guests and an over 25% decline for foreigners).

Let us return for a while to the key projects of the winning bid of Pécs. The programme of the renewal of public squares and parks is successful all in all, as the urban spaces and parks were revitalised in more than 31 hectares, offering a suitable location for the planned new uses of space. As regard the renewal of the public spaces, 94% of the respondents were satisfied with this (Kovács, 2011).

The thirteen thousand square metre, modern building of the Knowledge Centre is deservedly popular with the visitors. The project offered a framework for the complete service integration of the three libraries of the city, the knowledge centre function is completed by research rooms and internet workstations, while the uppermost level houses the children's library, connected to the roof garden. In 2013 the number of registered users is over 26 thousand, of whom almost 21 thousand can be taken as active readers ([www.tudaskozpont-pecs.hu](http://www.tudaskozpont-pecs.hu)).

The Zsolnay Cultural Quarter and the Kodály Centre together resulted in the birth of 44 thousand square metres of new cultural space (Kovács, 2011, 99 p.).

The outer and inner design of the Kodály Centre and the technical solutions of the building all deserve recognition. The complex includes a state-of-the-art concert hall of international rank and a conference centre on over 11,000 m<sup>2</sup> area ([www.kodalykozpont.hu](http://www.kodalykozpont.hu)). At the 131 events organised in 2012 a total of 79,368 visitors were registered, which is over the figures expected in the European Union bid (which is 50,000 paying guests throughout the whole year).

The Zsolnay Cultural Quarter was home to a total of 1100 events in 2012. Of the more than 245,000 visitors, almost 205,000 were paying guests (the expected number of paying guests specified in the European Union bid is 150,000 persons), ([www.zsokkft.hu](http://www.zsokkft.hu)).

### **Research preliminaries, hypotheses**

The question is how these developments were experienced by the citizens of Pécs. What has been achieved from one of the major expectations against the ECOC title, i.e. that the series of programmes as a large community making experience would strengthen local identity and would make a positive contribution to the image of the cultural capital city. Is it possible that the disappointment of the stakeholders resulted in processes just opposite to what had been expected?

In the framework of our repeated data collection in 2011-2012, another questionnaire survey using a sample of 1000 people, representative for the country as a whole was done (the breakdown of respondents by gender, age groups and school education reflected the Hungarian population)

We sought the answer to the following questions in 2011:

- How closely is the expression 'ECOC' related to the city of Pécs?
- How did the assessment of Pécs change in the year of the programme series?
- What positive and negative impacts can be felt in the city as a consequence of the series of events?
- On the whole, what is the judgement of the programme series like?

The following hypotheses were stated prior to the processing of the questionnaires:

- 1.) The expression 'ECOC' has become part of the image of the city both locally and at national level.
- 2.) The judgment of Pécs has somewhat improved over the last one year. A positive change is experienced both in the city and in the country. In Pécs there is an even larger proportion of those who think that the image of the city has improved a lot.
- 3.) Among the achievements of the event series, most people mention the development of tourism, the improvement of infrastructure, the better domestic and international judgement of Pécs, the more liveable city and the more open people because of the event, the more positive

attitude towards culture and the birth of adequate cultural institutions. The frequently mentioned negative consequences include the growing indebtedness of the city, and the further penetration of corruption.

- 4.) On the whole, the programme series of European Capital of Culture – Pécs 2010 was more positively experienced by respondents.

### *Research findings*

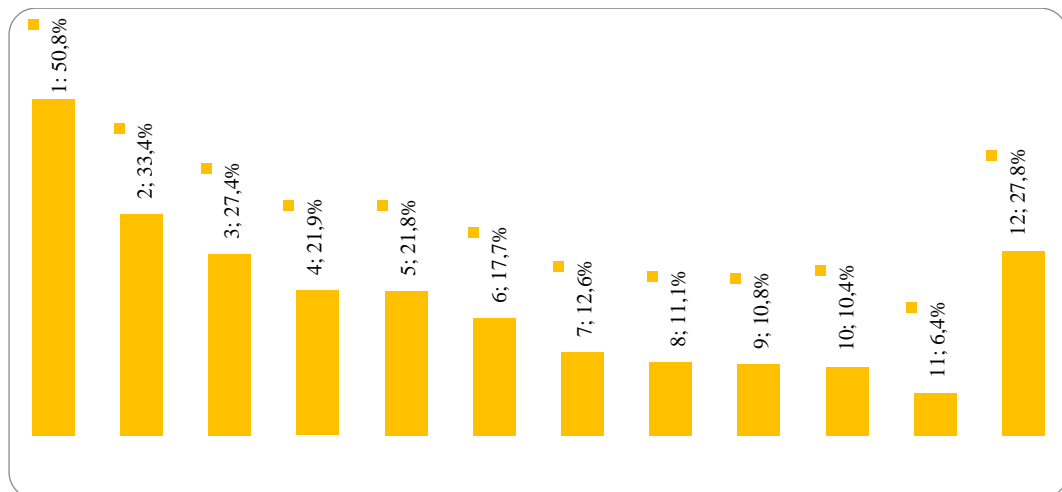
#### *Appearance of the ECOC in the image of Pécs*

To the question of what expression comes to their mind when they hear the name of Pécs, 21.8% of respondents mentioned the ECOC. This is the fourth or fifth most frequent mention (see in Figure 3), but if we calculate with the expression “European Capital of Culture” and the category “culture, museums, theatre” as one common category, the frequency of mentions is almost 50%.

According to previous surveys, the city of Pécs has no powerful symbols and a distinguished character, it is most frequently (6.6 %) linked to the university (Mészáros B., Orosdy B. 2012).

Our first hypothesis, i.e. that the expression ‘ECOC’ has become part of the image of the city, is justified.

*Figure 3: What expressions come to you mind about Pécs?*



Legend: 1 = sight of interest in Pécs (Djami, TV tower, Cathedral, Széchenyi Square), 2 = University of Pécs (student city), 3 = culture (museums, theatre, National Theatre Days of Pécs), 4 = Mecsek (zoo), 5 = ECOC, 6 = Mediterranean atmosphere (a milieu), 7 = Zsolnay, 8 = public services (clinics, public administration, shopping centres), 9 = locations of the industry of Pécs (mining, brewery, tobacco factory), 10 = entertainment and fun, 11 = sport life of Pécs (women’s basketball, PVSK), 12 = other. Source: Questionnaire survey of the author (2011).

#### *Changing of the judgement of Pécs*

Our survey revealed an improvement in the judgement of Pécs both locally and nationally as a result of the year 2010 (see in Figure 4). As opposed to the 61.7 per cent proportion of more positive thinkers at national level, 66.4 per cent of the local residents believe this.

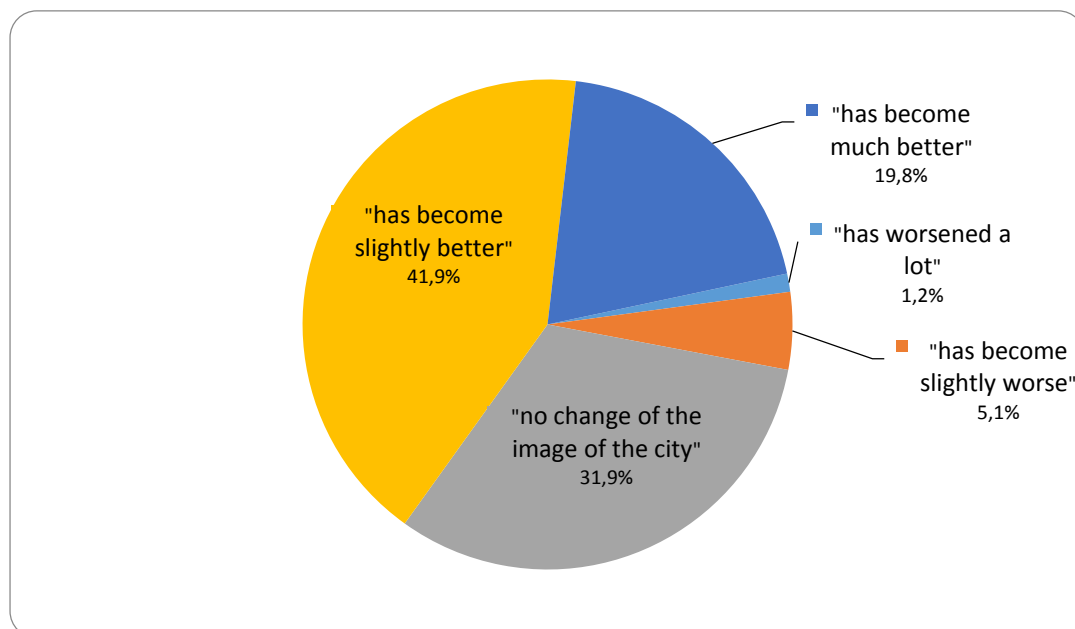
Not surprisingly, there is a more positive image in the participants of the events of the ECOC than in those who did not take part in any form in the series of events in 2010.

Our hypothesis has not been verified inasmuch as the most favourable attitude (5 = has become much better) is a little less frequent among the responses given in Pécs than nationally (16.1% and 19.8%, respectively).

*Achievements of the event series*

With our question about the impacts of the ECOC – Pécs 2010 we partly repeated our previous data survey, conducted in 2008-2009 (see in Figure 1). The most frequently mentioned results were the growth in the tourism sector, the birth of new cultural institutions, the positive change of the image of the city, the development of infrastructure, the more positive attitude of people towards culture, the development of Pécs into a regional cultural centre by international standards, and in general, the fact that the city became more liveable. (See in Figure 5)

*Figure 4: How has the opinion about Pécs changed in you over the last one year? (breakdown of responses nationally, 2011)*



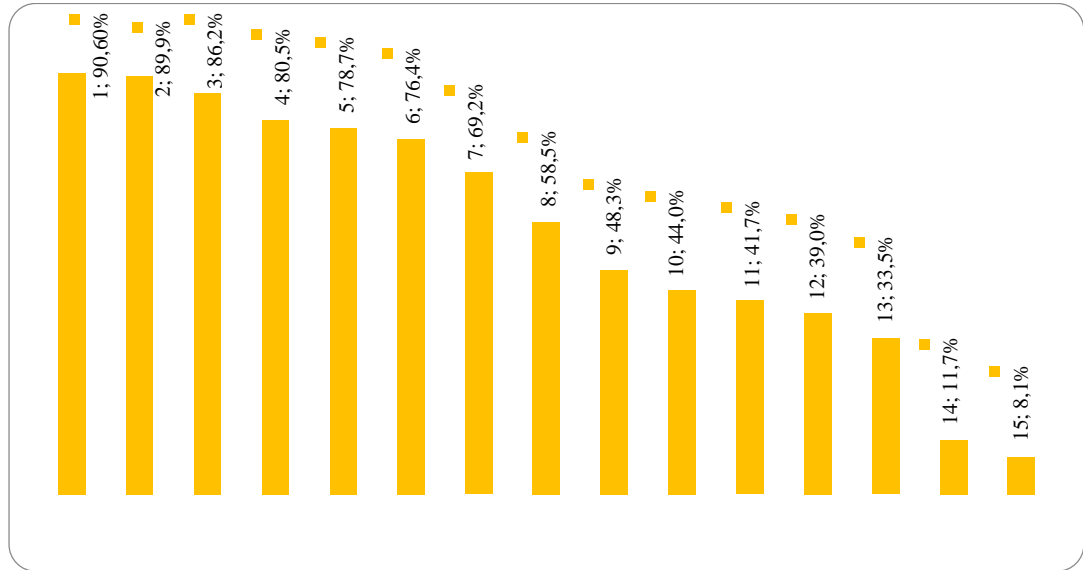
Source: Questionnaire survey of the author (2011).

The figures of 2011 are even more appreciated in the light of the values registered in 2008, considering that there was a significant, 15-45 per cent growth in the values. The fact that the “city is more liveable” was mentioned by three times more respondents after the event than the number of people who had previously expected it (Koltai, 2012). The reason why our hypothesis was only partially verified is that the negative consequences (growing indebtedness, penetration of corruption) were less frequent than had been expected among the responses.

*Evaluation of the ECOC – Pécs 2010 programme events*

The last question of our questionnaire survey sought the answer to how respondents saw the event on the whole, after its closing. The breakdown of the responses received clearly shows that almost 82% of respondents experienced the programme as a positive phenomenon (See in Figure 6). The result on a five-grade scale (4.0) supports our last hypothesis.

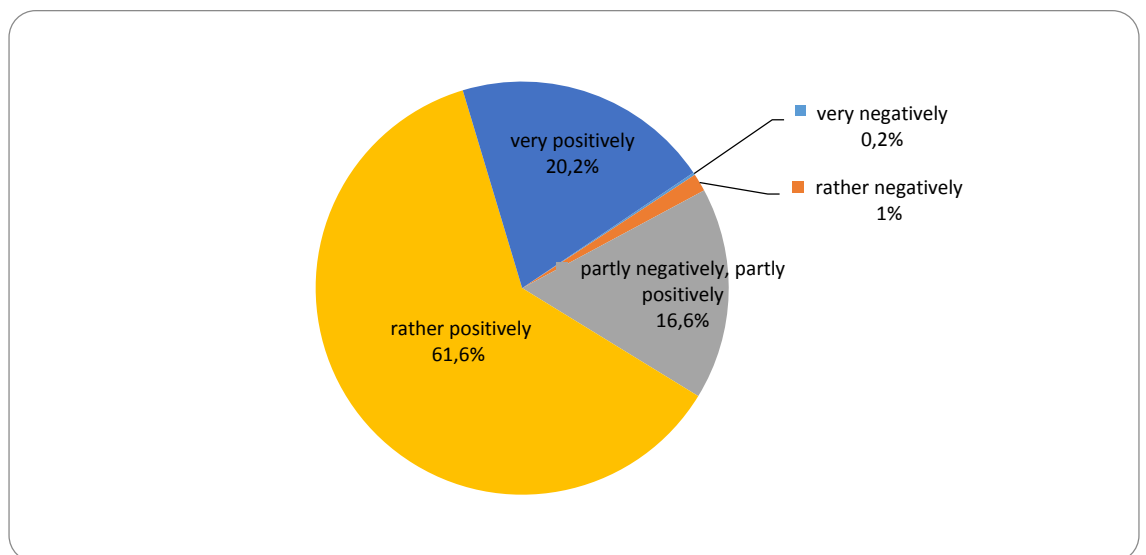
Figure 5: Agreement with the impacts of the series events on Pécs in 2011



1 = many tourists came, 2 = the city was enriched by adequate cultural institutions, 3 = the domestic and international assessment and image of the city has improved, 4 = infrastructure has developed, 5 = a more positive attitude of people towards culture, 6 = the city has become a regional cultural centre by international standards, 7 = the city has become more liveable, 8 = local patriotism has strengthened, 9 = economic progress has taken place, new jobs have been created, 10 = increasing ticket prices, 11 = traffic within the city has become more problematic, 12 = the indebtedness of the city has increased, 13 = corruption gained further ground, 14 = a bad image of the city in Hungary and abroad, 15 = no positive impact has taken place at all.

Source: Questionnaire survey of the author (2011)

Figure 6: How do you assess the programme series European Capital of Culture – Pécs 2010 on the whole?



Source: Questionnaire survey of the author (2011)



### For a final conclusion

Before anyone expects me to make a balance of the ECOC – Pécs 2010 programme series, I must admit that now, after more than two years following the event, it is still not possible to do it objectively.

The publication of our research findings may put a different light on the professional views, by introducing the results of a questionnaire survey done with the inhabitants.

The expectations of the population stated in 2008 were met, the series of events still lives as a positive experience in the majority of the respondents, and so the judgement of Pécs has changed for the better both locally and nationally, and also in the international arena. The key projects seem to be viable; numbers of visitors to the newly established cultural institutions are far above the values defined in the project expectations.

Does it make sense to talk about a clear success or failure? I do not think it does. Could more have been realised from the original ideas of the winning bid? Probably yes. Was the programme year less successful than it had previously had been expected, leaving a lack in almost all stakeholders? It certainly was.

Do not forget, however, the statement of József Takács (author of the winning bid) who described the bid of Pécs as a convincing fiction, sort of putting the ways and depth of implementation into the hands of the citizens of Pécs.

“The ECOC created the foundations for the further steps.” (Kovács, 2011, 113 p.). The development potential is given and although the change of cultural scale that had been dreamt of has not yet been achieved, by a shift of scale in our thinking we may get closer to the so attractive ideal and the already weakened spirit of “The borderless city”, perhaps implementing this way a real cultural decentralisation (A határtalan város, 2005).

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