

The value of cultural mega-events: assessing the economic, social, and urban impacts of Trenčín as European capital of culture 2026

Pouria Motalebi

Liverpool Business School -Email: P.motalebi@ljmu.ac.uk

1.Introduction and Research Questions

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) Program is an initiative of the European Union that aims to promote cultural diversity and encourage economic and social development of the cities in Europe (Garcia & Cox, 2013). Founded in 2004, the program often chooses to showcase second-tier cities (cities that are not capital representatives but have rich cultural and historic backgrounds) as an opportunity for elevating both community pride and international prospects (European Commission, 2018). Trenčín, Slovakia—chosen as the ECoC for 2026—is indicative of this pivoting toward second-tier cities and offers a chance to assess how these cultural mega-events can stimulate sustainable development while boosting city branding beyond big urban centers.

Despite the ECoC's potential for positive transformation, second-tier cities face distinct challenges when leveraging these events for long-term economic and social gains. Existing research on the ECoC has generally focused on economic outcomes in metropolitan areas, such as boosts in tourism and revenue, with much less analysis of wider social, cultural, and infrastructural effects in second-tier cities (Falk & Hagsten, 2017; Cardoso, Meijers & van Ham, 2016). Addressing this gap, this study aims to develop a scalable framework to measure the multidimensional impacts of ECoC events, using Trenčín as a case study to provide insights for similarly positioned cities. The framework could provide a systematic approach to examining both immediate and long-term impacts, allowing for deeper evaluations of the contribution that ECoCs can make to the cultural and economic growth of second-tier cities (Liu, 2014; Garcia, 2020).

1.1 Research Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of Value26 is to investigate the immediate and long-term economic and social impacts of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) program in Trenčín, Slovakia, a second-tier city—set to host the ECoC in 2026—as a focused case study. Second-tier cities like Trenčín, are outside the capital and important for the country's economy and are selected by considering political and economic factors (Cardoso et al., 2016). This research will contribute to our understanding of the gap in how cultural mega-events affect smaller cities with limited financial resources and fewer existing infrastructural resources than major urban centers. By studying Trenčín's ECoC, it aims to create a thorough framework for improving the advantages of holding such events and addressing particular regional difficulties.

1.2 Research Questions

To achieve this aim, the research objectives are as follows:

- 1- What are the most effective methods for capturing and analyzing the immediate and projected long-term economic and social impacts of Trenčín's role as the European Capital of Culture, with specific emphasis on metrics relevant to second-tier cities?
- 2- What specific advantages and challenges do second-tier cities encounter in their pursuit of the European Capital of Culture title, and how can these cities strategically leverage the opportunity to enhance their cultural identity and social influence within the broader national context?
- 3- Which econometric techniques can effectively evaluate the long-term social and economic effects of big cultural events?

2.Significance of the Study

The present research fills an important gap in the literature regarding the effects of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) program on second-tier cities, focusing on the case of Trenčín, which was selected as the ECoC host in 2026. In contrast, to cities like New York or London smaller urban areas often encounter obstacles such, as funding, underdeveloped infrastructure and insufficient connections

needed for hosting large events. The goal of this research is to develop a framework to improve the benefits of organizing an ECoC program in Trenčín and address the unique obstacles it faces while making the most of its cultural assets efficiently. Besides being specifically focused on Trenčín, this study also helps the overall field by using a comprehensive, mixed-method approach to analyze both economic and social impacts, thus bringing together quantitative econometric analysis with qualitative insights from stakeholder involvement. This covers both short-term results such as a boost in tourism and economic growth, and lasting impacts, like stronger community ties, cultural confidence, and steady city growth. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, this tool offers a holistic approach to decision-making that enhances the effectiveness of cultural event planning and maximizes community benefits.

In conclusion, this study can be applied to more than just Trenčín city. As second-tier cities continue to seek opportunities such as the ECoC to improve their image and promote regional development, the scalable model that will be created in this study serves as a practical tool that can be adapted to various contexts. In the end, this research provides a strategic methodology that promotes sustainable development of culture and economy in Second-tier cities within Europe.

3.Literature Review

Politicians and researchers are interested by cultural mega events like the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) due to their ability to change the economics and communities of the host cities (Garcia & Cox, 2013). Such occasions normally serve to promote tourism, foster civic pride, and inspire city development, especially in cities that do not frequently receive worldwide attention (Quinn, 2005). Second-tier cities differ from big cities with advanced infrastructure, despite the majority of literature describing those cities. However, hosting mega-events like the ECoC is challenging due to their relatively small size, regularly limited resources, and unique local customs (Cardoso et al., 2016; Meijers, 2007).

Cities outside the main urban areas are crucial to national and regional economies. However, these places often struggle to compete with big cities for cultural funding and attention (Bell & Jayne 2006; van Heur 2010). According to studies by McGillivray McPherson (2018) and Cardoso et al. (2016), the ECoC program could provide these cities with a unique chance to overcome these obstacles. Indeed, Garcia and Cox (2013) described how Liverpool's ECoC status in 2008 brought with it economic regeneration and higher levels of cultural engagement, but also infrastructure pressures and social tensions. However, there is a major gap in the literature regarding how second-tier cities can benefit from their cultural resources through such events, as there are few studies that particularly address the effects of ECoC on these cities (Jones & Wilks-Heeg, 2004).

Moreover, while much research has been conducted on the economic impacts of mega-events (Falk & Hagsten, 2017; Gomes & Librero-Cano, 2018), the social impacts, particularly in smaller cities, remain underexplored. According to Bianchini and Parkinson (1993), the ECoC can improve social cohesion and a sense of community, but the results are highly dependent on the environment. Furthermore, assessments of ECoC projects are more likely to include cost-benefit analysis and tourism business indicators than measures of social and cultural long-term legacies (Holden, 2004; Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). The gap emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive strategy that considers both the immediate and long-term expected effects, especially in second-tier cities where resources are more limited, and outcomes are less guaranteed.

To address this gap, the study will employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches to assess economic and social impacts, closely observing the processes involved in the second-tier cities in the host cities of European capital Culture of the Year (ECoC). Using Trenčín as a case study, this research basically wants to further the existing literature by investigating what policies second-tier cities may adopt toward maximizing the cultural and economic benefits of hosting a large-scale cultural event.

4. Research Design

The present study takes a mixed-methods technique including both quantitative and qualitative aspects to assess the economic and social impacts of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) program, regarding Trenčín as a second-tier city. Depending on data availability, we plan to use quantitative econometric methods, such as Difference-in-Differences (DiD) and synthetic control analyses, to examine both short- and long-term economic effects. These will look at things like the increase in tourism, the income of local businesses, the number of jobs, and other factors. These methods are effective in embarking on a more casual approach to investigating the effects of ECoC by looking at the case of Trenčín in relation to regions that were not part of it. This would enable us to factor in potential variables such as increased investment and the development of the city's prestige.

We will evaluate the ECoC's impact on community identity, unity, and cultural pride through quantitative analysis, local stakeholder interviews, and surveys with residents and authorities. These findings will help to fill in the gaps in the literature by providing a better understanding of the lived experiences of those who experienced the event and its potential impact. By combining the quantitative and qualitative methods, we will develop a thorough framework for evaluating the broader impacts of the ECoC in second-tier cities, creating a model that could be applicable to similar cultural events in other locations.

5. Significance and Expected Outcomes of the Study

The ultimate goal of this study will be to develop a model for ECoC impact evaluation that is scalable in order to contribute effectively to adding substantial insight to academia and industry. By focusing on Trenčín's experience as an ECoC host, the research will provide actionable findings to guide second-tier cities in using cultural mega-events to drive sustainable growth and enhance cultural identity. The anticipated model offers a practical tool for cities seeking to revitalize their economies and societies, supporting policy decisions and cultural planning in urban development contexts. For Trenčín, it could be a framework that secures the maximum social and economic benefit for ECoC, positions the city as a cultural hub, and acts as an adaptable framework for other second-tier cities in how to take full financial advantage of cultural events in their drive for long-term growth and prosperity.

6. References

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