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Research Article

Recentring Peripheral Europe: Spatial Imaginaries and Regional Rescaling in the European Capital of Culture Programme

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Abstract: This article examines how the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme institutionally repositions peripheral places within European cultural geography. It asks how peripheral locations are revalued through spatial imaginaries, how city titles are rescaled into territorial platforms, and how symbolic recognition relates to the limits of structural change. A maximum-variation comparison of Matera/Basilicata 2019, Pafos 2017, Leeuwarden–Friesland 2018, Veszprém–Balaton 2023, Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut 2024 and Bodø/Nordland 2024 draws on 21 ECoC bid, selection, monitoring and ex-post evaluation documents, supplemented by peer-reviewed case research, regional survey data and other contextual evidence. The documents were coded through a transparent framework linking theoretical concepts, parent codes, subcodes, empirical indicators and evidentiary thresholds. Symbolic de-peripheralisation is identified only when spatial revaluation and institutional uptake coincide with either scalar repositioning or programme materialisation. The findings show how peripheral attributes are revalued as frontier, bridge, laboratory, open community or cultural landscape; translated into city-regional and multi-scalar programme structures; and selectively validated through the ECoC selection and monitoring system. Symbolic de-peripheralisation is therefore an institutional-discursive process, not evidence that peripherality has disappeared. It redistributes visibility and recognition, while documented resource and governance constraints, together with unresolved questions of mobility, regional distribution and temporal fragility, continue to delimit claims of structural change.

Keywords: European Capital of Culture (ECoC); relational peripherality; spatial imaginaries; regional rescaling; symbolic de-peripheralisation; territorial governance

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Highlights:

- A comparative framework links spatial theory, coding categories and documentary evidence.
- Symbolic de-peripheralisation requires spatial revaluation and institutional uptake, plus either territorial rescaling or programme materialisation.
- Symbolic recognition remains distinct from redistribution, mobility, governance capacity and durable territorial change.

1. Introduction

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme has become one of the European Union's most visible and durable cultural-policy instruments. Its institutional design connects local cultural strategies to European objectives concerning cultural diversity, participation, transnational cooperation and the long-term development of cities. Research has consequently examined ECoC through urban regeneration, cultural branding, tourism, participation, heritage reuse, identity-making and legacy (García & Cox, 2013; Jones & Zhang, 2024; Liu, 2024; Nelaeva & Iermolenko, 2024;

Richards & Palmer, 2010). These perspectives remain essential, but the geography of recent titleholders raises an additional analytical problem. An increasing number of ECoCs are small or medium-sized cities embedded in rural, island, Alpine, Arctic or regionally dispersed settings rather than metropolitan cultural centres.

The location of a cultural capital at Europe's margins changes the meaning of the title. A peripheral ECoC does more than acquire a temporary event label: it enters a European institutional arena in which distance, rurality, islandness, minority-language identity, regional dispersion or historical stigma must be rendered culturally intelligible. The bid process requires candidate cities to articulate how their local conditions carry a European dimension, while selection and monitoring panels assess whether those claims can be translated into a credible cultural programme. The programme therefore functions simultaneously as a cultural-policy instrument, a mechanism of symbolic recognition and a platform for territorial representation.

This article conceptualises that process as symbolic de-peripheralisation. The term refers to the institutional-discursive revaluation of a place conventionally positioned as marginal, so that its peripheral attributes become sources of recognised cultural significance. Symbolic de-peripheralisation does not imply that material peripherality has been overcome. It identifies a change in meaning, visibility and institutional position that can coexist with limited accessibility, uneven infrastructure, fragile governance or unequal regional benefit. The analytical distinction between symbolic recognition and structural transformation prevents cultural visibility from being treated as direct evidence of spatial justice.

The comparison examines six cases selected through a maximum-variation logic: Matera/Basilicata 2019, Pafos 2017, Leeuwarden–Friesland 2018, Veszprém–Balaton 2023, Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut 2024 and Bodø/Nordland 2024. Together they represent southern rural stigma, Mediterranean islandness, rural minority-language regionalism, a medium-sized lake region, a dispersed inner-Alpine territory and an Arctic northern periphery. The cases are not treated as equivalent manifestations of a single condition. Their analytical value lies in showing how different spatial positions are translated through the same ECoC institutional framework.

The article addresses three research questions. First, how do peripheral ECoCs construct spatial imaginaries that revalue marginal locations within European cultural geography? Secondly, how are city titles rescaled into regional, territorial and landscape platforms, and what distinguishes symbolic rescaling from programme logistics? Thirdly, under what conditions does institutional recognition amount to symbolic de-peripheralisation, and what are the limits of that process?

The empirical design combines 21 ECoC bid, selection, monitoring and ex-post evaluation documents with institutionally separate evaluations, regional evidence and recent peer-reviewed research. Candidate narratives and governing-body assessments are analysed as related but analytically distinct layers. This permits attention to alignment, translation and divergence between how places recode themselves and how those claims are subsequently recognised, disciplined or qualified by the ECoC framework.

The comparison makes three contributions. It first connects ECoC research more directly to relational geography and peripheralisation by treating the programme as a mechanism that redistributes cultural position. It then specifies the institutional pathway through which spatial imaginaries and scalar strategies become policy-relevant claims. Finally, it advances spatial-justice debates by demonstrating that recognition can be consequential without being equivalent to redistribution. The article proceeds from the integrated theoretical framework and research design to the comparative analysis of spatial imaginaries, scalar strategies and structural limits, before drawing out the implications for cultural policy and peripheral Europe.

2. Spatialising the ECoC as a Cultural-Policy Instrument

2.1. Institutional recognition and the European cultural-policy framework

ECoC is governed through a competitive and iterative policy process. Candidate cities formulate a cultural strategy and European dimension in bid books; expert panels evaluate these claims during selection; monitoring meetings examine whether the promised programme, governance and legacy arrangements remain credible; and ex-post evaluations assess delivery and effects. These documents do not merely record an event. They constitute an institutional sequence through which local narratives are formulated, judged and translated into authorised European cultural meaning.

This institutional dimension is central to the spatial argument. ECoC scholarship has shown that the programme combines urban development, participation, heritage, Europeanisation and transnational networks, while EU cultural-policy research explains how local claims are framed through institutional notions of Europe (Lähdesmäki, 2014a, 2014b; Lähdesmäki et al., 2021; Liu, 2024, 2026; Moldovan, 2025). The title also channels diverse local projects through a common policy vocabulary: European dimension, cultural diversity, participation, cooperation, capacity, sustainability and legacy. Peripheral places gain a European platform, but they must express their distinctiveness in terms that this policy architecture can evaluate. Institutional recognition is thus enabling and selective. It opens a route to cultural centrality while shaping the forms through which that centrality can be claimed.

Recent research strengthens this interpretation. Comparative analyses of citizen participation indicate that smaller ECoCs often mobilise culture as an arena for local engagement, while documentary reporting can still privilege external accountability over residents' decision-making power (Nelaeva & Iermolenko, 2024). Studies of narratives and participation similarly show that official success stories may coexist with contested local experiences (Kajdanek et al., 2024). ECoC should therefore be understood as a policy instrument that produces both recognition and governable representations of place.

2.2. Relational peripherality and peripheralisation

Peripherality is treated here as a relational condition rather than a fixed distance from a geographical centre. Places occupy unequal positions within networks of mobility, infrastructure, cultural authority, institutional attention and decision-making. Massey's (1994, 2005) account of power-geometries and Copus's (2001) distinction between spatial and aspatial peripherality both direct attention to how places are connected, recognised and governed. A city may be geographically distant yet institutionally well connected, or physically accessible yet symbolically marginal within national and European cultural hierarchies.

Peripheralisation identifies the processes through which such unequal positions are produced and reproduced. It encompasses demographic decline, economic dependency, limited accessibility, administrative weakness and symbolic devaluation (Fischer-Tahir & Naumann, 2013; Kühn, 2015; Lang, 2012, 2015). These dimensions interact but do not necessarily change together. Cultural recognition can increase while transport, public investment or governance capacity remain constrained. This multidimensionality is especially important for evaluating cultural-policy interventions whose strongest effects may concern representation and institutional attention.

Paasi's (1986, 2002, 2010) work on regional institutionalisation adds a further dimension. Regions become meaningful through territorial shape, symbolic representation, institutions and identity. ECoC bid books and programmes participate in this process by assembling cities, towns, villages and landscapes into coherent cultural territories. In peripheral cases, the European dimension may depend less on the title city alone than on the capacity to narrate a wider region as a culturally significant European space.

2.3. Spatial imaginaries and scalar strategies

Spatial imaginaries are interpretive frameworks that make particular geographical relations visible and meaningful. In ECoC documents they appear as recurring figures such as frontier, bridge, laboratory, open community and cultural landscape. These figures are not treated as isolated slogans. They organise a causal narrative: a condition commonly associated with marginality is assigned a different value, connected to a European concern, and incorporated into a programme through projects, partnerships or territorial arrangements.

Scalar strategies concern a different analytical operation. They identify how the institutional and programme space of the title is reorganised across city, region, nation, cross-border area, landscape or Europe. Scale is produced through governance and representation rather than simply inherited (Brenner, 2001, 2004; Cox, 1998; Swyngedouw, 1997). A spatial imaginary answers what a peripheral place is made to mean; a scalar strategy specifies where the cultural capital is made to operate and through which territorial relations. The two processes can reinforce one another, but they are not interchangeable.

Rescaling may arise from several mechanisms. It can express peripheral region-building, but it can also reflect small-city capacity, administrative structures, tourism geography or the logistical need to distribute events. The analysis therefore does not infer peripherality from regional scale alone. Rescaling is classified as a peripheral strategy only when the

wider territory is constitutive of the programme’s European claim—for example, when Arctic remoteness, Alpine dispersion, minority-language regionalism or a lake-region identity is explicitly transformed into the cultural basis of the title.

2.4. Symbolic de-peripheralisation and spatial justice

Symbolic de-peripheralisation is identified through a minimum evidentiary threshold. Spatial revaluation and institutional uptake must both be present, together with evidence of either scalar repositioning or programme materialisation. Spatial revaluation converts a negatively or marginally coded attribute into a source of cultural value. Institutional uptake is visible when selection, monitoring or evaluation documents recognise, reproduce or operationalise that recoding. Scalar repositioning or programme materialisation then shows that the recognised claim has been territorialised or enacted through projects, participation, partnerships, venues or governance arrangements. A positive narrative alone is therefore insufficient evidence.

A separate critical dimension concerns structural limits. Spatial justice requires attention to the distribution of mobility, resources, capacity and power, not only recognition (Harvey, 1973; Jones et al., 2020; Soja, 2010). Structural limits do not form part of the minimum classification threshold; they are coded independently to test whether symbolic recognition coexists with unresolved material constraints. The concept is therefore falsifiable: promotional language without institutional uptake does not qualify, and revaluation with uptake but no territorial or programme enactment remains an unmaterialised claim. Conversely, durable redistribution and transformed capacity would exceed symbolic de-peripheralisation and approach structural change. Table 1 operationalises the conceptual framework by linking each theoretical concept to parent codes, indicative subcodes, empirical indicators and evidentiary thresholds.

Table 1. Integrated analytical framework and coding logic

Concept	Parent code	Indicative subcodes	Empirical indicators	Evidentiary threshold
Relational peripherality	Peripheral position	distance; islandness; rurality; minority language; stigma; northernness	How the case defines uneven connection, recognition or capacity	Explicit spatial condition linked to unequal relations
Spatial imaginaries	Spatial revaluation	frontier; bridge; laboratory; open community; cultural landscape	Reinterpretation of a peripheral attribute in European cultural terms	Narrative appears across more than one document type
Scalar strategies	Territorial repositioning	city-region; regional platform; landscape; multi-municipal; Arctic/Mediterranean scale	Territory, partnerships, governance and programme distribution	Wider scale is constitutive of the European claim, not only logistics
Institutional recognition	Institutional uptake	alignment; translation; qualification; divergence	Panel assessments, monitoring priorities and evaluation judgements	Governing-body evidence supports, modifies or qualifies the claim
Symbolic de-peripheralisation	Recognised recoding	visibility; European relevance; participation; programme materialisation	Linked spatial revaluation and institutional uptake, with territorial or programme enactment	Spatial revaluation + institutional uptake + either scalar repositioning or programme materialisation
Structural limits	Recognition—redistribution gap	accessibility; internal inequality; capacity; funding; legacy	Evidence of persistent mobility, resource, governance or temporal constraints	Limits are documented separately from symbolic effects

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Comparative design and case selection

The study uses a maximum-variation comparative design. The six cases were selected because they occupy contrasting peripheral positions while participating in the same ECoC policy process. This design supports comparison of mechanisms rather than estimation of average programme effects. It asks whether different forms of peripherality are translated through similar institutional operations and where case-specific spatial, administrative or temporal conditions generate divergence. More specifically, the relational dimensions emphasised are symbolic devaluation (Matera/Basilicata), connectivity and capacity constraints (Pafos and Bodø/Nordland), cultural recognition (Leeuwarden–Friesland), non-metropolitan cultural position (Veszprém–Balaton), and multi-municipal coordination and capacity (Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut).

The comparison covers title years from 2017 to 2024. Earlier cases—Pafos, Leeuwarden–Friesland and Matera—provide ex-post evaluation evidence, while the 2023 and 2024 cases permit analysis of more recent regional and non-metropolitan title structures. The absence of final ex-post evaluations for the 2024 cases is treated as an evidentiary limit: claims concerning Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut and Bodø/Nordland remain focused on programme design, monitoring and institutional capacity rather than long-term outcomes. Figure 1 locates the six titleholders and the wider territorial frames through which their programmes articulate different forms of European peripherality. Table 2 summarises the maximum-variation case-selection logic, the complete case-by-case composition of the primary corpus and the external or contextual evidence used for each case; access routes for the cited documents are provided in the References.



Figure 1. Geographical distribution of the six comparative cases. City markers identify the titleholders; regional names indicate the territorial frames mobilised in the programmes. Map drawn by the author.

Table 2. Case-selection logic and primary documentary corpus

Case	Mode of periphery	Primary institutional documents	External/contextual evidence	Comparative role
Matera/Basilicata 2019	Southern rural marginality and spatial stigma; symbolic devaluation	Final bid book; selection report; ex-post evaluation (n=3)	Foundation open-data and regional survey evidence; recent ECoC research	Tests conversion of stigma into laboratory and participatory value
Pafos 2017	Small-island and Mediterranean periphery; connectivity and capacity constraints	Final bid book; selection report; second monitoring report; ex-post evaluation (n=4)	Dova et al. (2022); Farmaki et al. (2019)	Tests bridging narrative under severe budget and capacity constraints
Leeuwarden–Friesland 2018	Rural minority-language region; cultural-recognition marginality	Final bid book; first and second monitoring reports; ex-post evaluation (n=4)	Regional legacy material and recent participation research	Tests community-based region-building and territorial reach
Veszprém–Balaton 2023	Medium-sized city and lake-region periphery; non-metropolitan cultural position	Final bid book; selection report; two monitoring reports (n=4)	Recent cultural-policy and regional evidence	Tests city–region rescaling beyond the title city
Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut 2024	Dispersed inner-Alpine rural region; multi-municipal coordination and capacity constraints	Final bid book; second and third monitoring reports (n=3)	Programme and regional governance materials	Tests multi-municipal landscape governance
Bodø/Nordland 2024	Arctic northern periphery; connectivity and delivery-capacity constraints	Final bid book; first and second monitoring reports (n=3)	Programme and regional policy materials	Tests Arctic frontier framing and large-territory delivery

3.2. Documentary corpus and triangulation

The primary corpus comprises 21 institutional documents cited in the analysis: six bid books, three selection reports, nine monitoring reports and three ex-post evaluations. Bid books capture candidate recoding; selection reports record the first formal assessment of that recoding; monitoring reports trace translation into programme, governance and territorial arrangements; and ex-post evaluations provide the most institutionally separate and retrospective evidence concerning delivery, participation, effects and legacy. The Commission staff working documents for the 2018 and 2019 ECoCs (European Commission, 2020a, 2021) are supplementary institutional evaluation materials used for triangulation and are not counted among the three primary ex-post evaluation reports.

Triangulation addresses the limitations of institutional self-description. Peer-reviewed studies of Pafos examine community participation, heritage, scale and stakeholder perceptions (Dova et al., 2022; Farmaki et al., 2019). Recent comparative research on ECoC participation, narrative contestation, industrial heritage and European cultural policy provides external interpretive baselines (Jones & Zhang, 2024; Kajdanek et al., 2024; Moldovan, 2025; Nelaeva & Iermolenko, 2024). Matera’s foundation open-data platform and a regional survey are used as implementation evidence rather than independent impact evaluation. For 2024 cases, the absence of ex-post evidence is explicitly reflected in narrower claims.

The analysis concerns institutional-discursive and programme effects. It does not estimate causal socioeconomic impact or claim that official recognition represents residents’ experience as a whole. External and contextual evidence is used to test whether official narratives are supported, qualified or contradicted, while structural outcomes are dis-

cussed only where the documentary basis permits. The documentary corpus consists entirely of publicly accessible documents. Where a general CultureNext ECoC Archive landing page is cited, the relevant bid book was retrieved from the titleholder-specific archive entry; the author can provide a consolidated corpus list and retrieval links upon reasonable request.

3.3. Coding and comparative analytical procedure

Coding combined deductive and inductive procedures. A preliminary codebook was derived from relational peripherality, region-making, scale and spatial justice. Parent codes covered peripheral position, spatial revaluation, territorial repositioning, institutional uptake, programme materialisation and structural limits. Subcodes were refined through repeated reading of the documents; recurring spatial figures such as frontier, bridge, laboratory, open community and cultural landscape were retained only when they appeared across documents or were reinforced by institutional assessment.

Each case was first analysed through a within-case matrix that separated candidate claims from panel and evaluation evidence. Documentary passages were coded for the spatial attribute being recoded, the European value assigned to it, the territorial scale activated, the form of institutional response and the programme evidence associated with the claim. A second full-corpus coding pass tested category boundaries and searched for negative or qualifying evidence, including funding reductions, governance warnings, uneven territorial participation and uncertainty over legacy.

Cross-case comparison then identified recurring mechanisms, differences and overlaps. The analysis distinguished spatial imagery from scale by asking two separate questions: what meaning is assigned to the place, and through what territorial arrangement is that meaning institutionalised? Alternative explanations were assessed by comparing regional rescaling with city size, administrative structure and delivery requirements. Interpretive consistency was strengthened through a fixed codebook, case matrices, analytic memos, a second coding pass and explicit evidentiary thresholds. Alignment, translation and divergence are used as comparative relationship labels derived from these coded dimensions, not as additional parent codes. As this is a single-researcher interpretive design, the classifications remain interpretive judgements and do not provide a measure of inter-coder reliability.

4. Spatial Imaginaries and Institutional Recognition

4.1. Identifying spatial imaginaries

A spatial imaginary is identified when documents do more than describe location. The text must reinterpret a peripheral attribute, connect it to a wider European concern and organise programme or institutional action around that reinterpretation. Under this criterion, references to distance, landscape or heritage do not automatically constitute symbolic de-peripheralisation. A promotional claim becomes analytically significant when it is repeated across the bid and assessment sequence, translated into projects or partnerships, and recognised or qualified by the ECoC governing process.

The six cases produce five recurrent imaginaries. Bodø/Nordland mobilises the frontier; Pafos foregrounds the bridge; Matera develops the laboratory; Leeuwarden–Friesland articulates the open community; and Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut emphasises the cultural landscape. Veszprém–Balaton combines bridge and landscape elements through a lake-region geography. These figures overlap, but each gives a distinct meaning to peripheral location.

4.2. Frontier and bridge: converting distance into connection

Bodø/Nordland offers the clearest frontier imaginary. The final bid book's formulation, "Midsummer Madness, Autumn Storms, Arctic Light", converts seasonal extremes and northern distance into a culturally productive European standpoint (Bodø 2024, 2019). Arctic location is presented as a position from which Europe can address ecological change, Indigenous and regional cultures, mobility and northern futures. Monitoring documents do not simply repeat this rhetoric; they assess the capacity to deliver a region-wide programme across Nordland, thereby translating the frontier claim into questions of partnership, funding, governance and territorial reach (European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2021, 2022b).

Pafos constructs a bridge imaginary through "Linking Continents—Bridging Cultures" (Pafos 2017, 2012). Islandness and Mediterranean location are reframed as mediation rather than isolation. The selection and second monitoring

reports retained the bridge narrative while translating it into requirements concerning the European dimension, community engagement and delivery (European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2015b, 2016). The ex-post evaluation found that the programme placed Cypriot heritage in a European context, brought cultural work from other European countries to Cyprus and used open spaces to facilitate encounter. It also records “non-Cypriots accounting for almost 40% of audiences” (European Commission, 2018, p. 17), demonstrating intercultural reach after visitors arrived. Institutional uptake was nevertheless qualified. International promotion remained limited, and the programme’s capacity to fulfil its intercommunity ambitions was constrained by a budget approximately 80% lower than proposed in the application. The bridge imaginary was recognised and partly materialised, but its reach was narrower than the candidate narrative anticipated.

Veszprém–Balaton also uses connection, but the bridge operates through a lake-region frame (Veszprém–Balaton 2023, 2018). The title city is positioned in relation to Balaton and to European networks rather than represented as an isolated medium-sized city. Selection and monitoring reports accepted the regional basis of the European dimension while repeatedly linking credibility to coordination, programme coherence and the distribution of responsibilities (European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2018, 2020, 2022c). The case shows that institutional recognition transforms relational language into governance obligations.

4.3. *Laboratory, open community and cultural landscape*

Matera’s “Open Future” narrative (European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2014; Matera 2019, 2014) transforms a history of poverty, displacement and the stigma attached to the Sassi into an experimental cultural position. The city and Basilicata are presented as a laboratory for cultural citizenship, co-production and new relations between residents, artists and visitors (Fondazione Matera Basilicata 2019, 2019). Implementation evidence supports more than rhetorical recoding. The Commission records that “about 57,000 citizens were directly involved in cultural productions” and that citizens contributed to about 70% of the cultural programme (European Commission, 2021, “Effectiveness in reaching and engaging with local citizens” section). Foundation evidence also identifies 590 core volunteers contributing to more than 300 events and over 30,000 students participating in dedicated programmes (Fondazione Matera Basilicata 2019, 2021a, 2021b). The ex-post evaluation likewise identifies extensive participation and an enhanced international profile while treating legacy and regional development as continuing challenges (European Commission, 2020b).

Leeuwarden–Friesland converts rurality and minority-language identity into the imaginary of iepen mienskip, or open community (European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2015a, 2017; Leeuwarden–Friesland 2018, 2013). The phrase links local social relations to participation, openness and European connection. At the end of monitoring, the panel “praised the excellent work done in bringing the project forward”, highlighting its “strong European dimension” and citizen involvement (European Commission, 2020a, p. 8). The ex-post evaluation further reports that “some 7% of the audiences (around 300,000 people) were international” (European Commission, 2020a, p. 20), while overnight stays increased from 0.8 million in 2017 to 2.1 million in 2018 (European Commission, 2019). The significance of the evidence lies not only in visitor growth but in the institutional validation of a regional programme that deliberately prioritised community engagement over a more conventional metropolitan cultural showcase.

Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut constructs a cultural-landscape imaginary through a dispersed territory of 23 municipalities across three Austrian federal states. The region’s salt history, tourism, settlement patterns and Alpine landscape become the substance of the title rather than a background setting. The bid book’s phrase “Culture is the New Salt” condenses this revaluation. The final monitoring response positively assessed the project’s progress and supported the award of the Melina Mercouri Prize, while still treating artistic delivery, management, outreach, communication and long-term strategy as matters requiring continued scrutiny (European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2023). Together with the second monitoring report, this evidence validates the regional ambition while exposing the organisational difficulty of coordinating cultural production, finance and governance across a multi-municipal structure (Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut 2024, 2019; European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2022a, 2023). Institutional recognition is therefore inseparable from the capacity to govern the landscape being symbolically assembled.

4.4. *Distinguishing symbolic de-peripheralisation from place branding*

The recurrence of positive narratives does not by itself distinguish peripheral ECoCs from place branding. Metropolitan ECoCs also promote openness, creativity, heritage and European connection. The recurring mechanism across

the six cases is that a condition conventionally associated with marginality becomes the substantive basis of the European claim. Arctic distance, island position, rural language, southern stigma, Alpine dispersion and lake-region geography are not obstacles concealed by a generic brand; they are recoded as the reason the place matters to Europe.

Institutional uptake supplies an additional distinction. Candidate narratives are accepted only selectively. Pafos's bridging claim was accompanied by critical evaluation of budget, programme scale and international promotion. Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut's landscape claim generated monitoring attention to dispersed governance. Bodø's Arctic framing produced obligations concerning regional delivery. Symbolic de-peripheralisation therefore describes a relationship between local recoding and institutional recognition, not the unilateral projection of an attractive image. Table 3 compares the evidence used to identify symbolic de-peripheralisation across the six cases, including spatial revaluation, institutional uptake or programme materialisation, and qualifying structural evidence. For compact presentation, Table 3 combines institutional uptake and programme materialisation in one column, although they were coded as distinct components.

Table 3. Cross-case evidence for symbolic de-peripheralisation

Case	Peripheral attribute	Spatial imaginary	Institutional uptake and/or programme materialisation	Qualification or divergence
Matera/Basilicata	Southern stigma and rural marginality	Laboratory / open future	Participation, co-production and international cultural positioning recognised in ex-post evaluation	Visibility and participation did not by themselves establish wider structural change; legacy pressures remained
Pafos	Islandness and Mediterranean position	Bridge	European/intercultural programme and open-air city model recognised	Severe budget reduction and weak international promotion limited scale
Leeuwarden–Friesland	Rurality and minority-language identity	Open community	Regional community programme and international reach validated	Durable regional capacity and distribution beyond the title year require further evaluation
Veszprém–Balaton	Non-metropolitan lake region	Bridge / cultural landscape	Regional European dimension entered selection and monitoring criteria	Coordination and city–region balance remained governance tasks
Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut	Alpine dispersion	Cultural landscape	Twenty-three-municipality programme institutionalised the regional claim	Organisational complexity and capacity constraints complicated delivery
Bodø/Nordland	Arctic distance and territorial dispersion	Frontier	Arctic programme and Nordland-wide reach accepted and monitored	Distance, funding, capacity and post-title continuity remained unresolved

5. Scalar Strategies: From City Title to Territorial Platform

5.1. City–region rescaling

Scalar strategies reorganise the spatial field through which the ECoC title operates. Leeuwarden–Friesland, Veszprém–Balaton and Bodø/Nordland all retain a title city while shifting programme meaning to a wider region. The title city provides the formal institutional anchor; the region supplies identity, cultural resources, partners and a claim to European relevance. This is more than event dispersion because the larger territory is built into the conceptual architecture of the programme.

Leeuwarden's European significance is articulated through Friesland, its language and rural communities (European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2015a, 2017; Leeuwarden–Friesland 2018, 2013). Veszprém's claim is expanded by Balaton, which connects cultural production, tourism, settlement and regional identity (European Capital of Culture Expert

Panel, 2018, 2020, 2022c; Veszprém–Balaton 2023, 2018). Bodø's title represents Nordland through an Arctic frame extending across a large northern territory (Bodø 2024, 2019; European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2021, 2022b). In each case, the city becomes a gateway or convening node rather than the exclusive spatial subject of the title.

5.2. Region-building and territorial coherence

Regional rescaling requires the production of territorial coherence. Paasi's account of regional institutionalisation is evident in the way ECoC programmes combine symbolic narratives, organisational structures and programme geographies. Leeuwarden–Friesland is held together through iepen mienskip; Veszprém–Balaton through the lake region; Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut through a cultural landscape shaped by salt, tourism and Alpine settlement; and Bodø/Nordland through northernness and Arctic cultural relations. In Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut, the 23-municipality structure required explicit cross-municipal coordination; in Bodø/Nordland, monitoring linked Arctic reach to regional partnerships and delivery capacity (European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

The evidence also reveals that coherence is constructed rather than given. Selection and monitoring documents repeatedly translate broad regional narratives into questions concerning who participates, how municipalities are represented, where projects occur, which organisation carries responsibility and whether local capacity is sufficient. The institutional process makes the region visible while also exposing its internal differences.

5.3. Scalar alignment, translation and divergence across the institutional sequence

The comparison identifies three relationships between scalar or regional claims and official assessment. Alignment occurs when the panel accepts both the spatial narrative and its programme implications, as with the regional basis of Leeuwarden–Friesland and the Arctic dimension of Bodø/Nordland. Translation occurs when a broad narrative is converted into specific conditions concerning governance, partnerships, European cooperation or legacy, as in Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut and Veszprém–Balaton. Divergence occurs when implementation evidence qualifies the original claim, most clearly in Pafos, where the bridging narrative survived but financial contraction narrowed programme scale and reach.

Matera demonstrates alignment combined with later qualification. The open-future and laboratory narrative was materially supported by participation and production, yet ex-post assessment located those achievements within the limited temporal and policy reach of a title year. This double reading is analytically important: the ECoC institution both validates recentring and documents why recognition should not be equated with structural transformation.

5.4. Peripherality, small-city scale and alternative explanations

Regional rescaling cannot be attributed to peripherality alone. Small population, limited venue capacity, pre-existing administrative regions, tourism geographies and programme logistics can all encourage a wider territorial structure. The comparative evidence therefore assesses whether scale is merely operational or whether it carries the spatial meaning of the title.

Pafos provides a useful counterpoint. It is a small peripheral city, yet its principal imaginary is Mediterranean bridging rather than extensive city–region construction. Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut, by contrast, is explicitly constituted as a multi-municipal region; without the wider landscape, the cultural-capital claim would lose its central meaning. Bodø similarly uses Nordland not only to extend delivery but to define Arctic European relevance. These differences show that smallness may facilitate or necessitate regional delivery, while peripherality becomes analytically decisive when the wider territory is the object of symbolic and institutional repositioning.

Governance capacity also shapes outcomes independently of peripherality. The capacity to coordinate municipalities, maintain budgets, distribute projects and sustain organisations affects metropolitan and peripheral ECoCs alike. The argument is therefore conditional: peripherality helps explain the content and spatial meaning of rescaling, whereas city size and governance arrangements help explain the feasibility and unevenness of implementation.

6. Qualifications and Limits of Symbolic Recentring

6.1. Recognition and resource constraints

The evidence confirms that symbolic recognition can be substantial. Matera's participatory programme, Pafos's intercultural open-air model and Leeuwarden–Friesland's regional community approach all altered cultural visibility and institutional attention. However, ECoC is principally a cultural-policy action. It can mobilise projects, networks, audiences and temporary investment, but it is not designed as a comprehensive instrument for transport, housing, regional fiscal redistribution or long-term public-service provision.

Matera illustrates the distinction. Foundation evidence reports broad participation and a powerful change in external image; a regional survey found that 96.8% of respondents viewed Matera as more famous and 92.8% as more international after the title process (Regione Basilicata, 2020). The same survey recorded concerns about congestion, while ex-post evaluation treated legacy, tourism pressure and the relationship between the city and Basilicata as continuing issues. Recognition changed the city's cultural position more rapidly than the structural geography of southern Italy.

Pafos reveals a more direct resource constraint. The ex-post evaluation attributes positive audience development, infrastructure investment and cultural-sector learning to the programme, but also records an approximately 80% reduction from the proposed budget. Non-Cypriots accounted for almost 40% of audiences, showing that the bridge imaginary generated intercultural reach once visitors were present; limited international promotion and programme scale nevertheless reduced its capacity to transform the city's wider position (European Commission, 2018).

6.2. Accessibility and territorial reach

The institutional corpus identifies accessibility as a recurrent delivery concern, but it does not directly measure travel time, cost or participation barriers. For Bodø/Nordland, monitoring reports connect region-wide delivery to distance, dispersed settlement, staffing and partnership capacity (European Capital of Culture Expert Panel, 2021, 2022b). For Pafos, the ex-post evaluation records limited international promotion and a programme operating within island and tourism geographies (European Commission, 2018). The interpretation that mobility conditions shape participation is therefore an evidence-based analytical inference rather than a measured transport effect.

The corpus likewise does not quantify the distribution of benefits within each region. It does, however, show that Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut had to coordinate 23 municipalities, that Veszprém remained the formal institutional anchor of a Balaton-wide programme, and that Leeuwarden–Friesland depended on extending projects and capacity beyond the title city. These arrangements create a spatial-justice question—whether organisational resources, visibility and durable capacity reached the wider territory—rather than demonstrating a uniform pattern of intra-regional inequality. Regional coherence should therefore be treated as both an achievement and an empirical issue for further evaluation.

This concern is not exclusive to peripheral ECoCs. Uneven participation and legacy occur across the programme. Peripheral cases make the issue particularly visible because their European claims depend on the inclusion of territories whose distance, dispersed settlement or limited capacity are integral to the title. The same region-building that enables symbolic recentring enlarges the field over which spatial justice must be assessed.

6.3. Governance capacity and temporal fragility

The title year produces an intense concentration of attention that may exceed the capacity of local institutions to sustain it. Monitoring reports for Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut and Bodø/Nordland repeatedly connect programme ambition to staffing, finance, coordination, regional partnerships and legacy planning. These concerns do not negate the cultural claim; they indicate that symbolic centrality requires organisational infrastructures that are themselves unevenly distributed.

Earlier cases show different legacy pathways. Leeuwarden–Friesland's audience and overnight-stay growth demonstrated that a rural region could attract international attention, but the long-term significance of *iepen mienskip* depends on continued institutions and community practices. Pafos developed skills and cultural infrastructure under severe financial constraint, making continuity especially important. Matera's challenge is to convert exceptional participation and recognition into durable cultural capacity while managing visitor pressure and the relationship between the city and surrounding region.

For the 2024 cases, long-term conclusions would be premature. The available evidence supports claims about institutional recognition, programme design and monitored capacity, not post-title transformation. This temporal differentiation strengthens rather than weakens the comparison by preventing aspirations and monitoring judgements from

being treated as completed legacy. Table 4 synthesises the enabling effects, cross-case patterns and structural limits identified in the comparative analysis.

Table 4. Comparative findings: enabling effects and structural limits

Analytical process	Enabling effect	Cross-case pattern	Qualification / structural limit	Implication
Spatial revaluation	Peripheral attributes become culturally legible and valuable	Frontier, bridge, laboratory, open community and landscape recur across different margins	Complex conditions may be simplified into policy narratives	Recognition must be assessed through institutional uptake and programme evidence
Territorial rescaling	Small and non-metropolitan cities speak through wider regions	City–region, multi-municipal and landscape platforms broaden the European claim	Internal centre–periphery relations and governance burdens require further evaluation	Scale is both a resource and a distributive problem
Institutional recognition	Selection and monitoring validate European relevance	Candidate narratives are aligned, translated or qualified	Policy criteria discipline local claims and expose capacity gaps	Symbolic de-peripheralisation is relational and conditional
Title-year mobilisation	Participation, visibility and cultural networks intensify	Earlier cases show significant audience and programme effects	Mobility, redistribution and long-term capacity are not directly established by the corpus	Cultural centrality should not be equated with spatial justice

7. Discussion

7.1. ECoC as an institutional-discursive mechanism

The comparative findings reposition ECoC within cultural geography. The programme does not simply attach a prestigious label to pre-existing places. It establishes an institutional sequence in which locations are narrated, evaluated and materialised through cultural programmes. Peripheral places gain centrality when their spatial conditions are translated into recognised European concerns and when expert panels, programme structures and evaluations give those claims institutional form.

This explains why symbolic de-peripheralisation is neither empty rhetoric nor proof of structural transformation. Recognition affects how places enter policy networks, attract attention, mobilise participants and construct regional institutions. Its effects are real but domain-specific. The concept identifies the redistribution of meaning and institutional position while retaining a clear analytical boundary around infrastructure, mobility, resources and power. In relational terms, this extends Massey (1994, 2005), Copus (2001) and Kühn (2015) by showing how a policy institution can partially rework symbolic position without removing material unevenness. It also links Paasi's (1986, 2002, 2010) region-making and the strategic production of scale (Brenner, 2001, 2004; Cox, 1998; Swyngedouw, 1997) to an institutional sequence of selection, monitoring and programme delivery.

7.2. What is distinctive about peripheral ECoCs?

Spatial imaginaries and regional platforms also appear in metropolitan comparison cases. Liverpool 2008 used culture to reposition a post-industrial port city through urban regeneration, cultural branding and international visibility (European Commission, 2009), while Marseille–Provence 2013 assembled a metropolitan-regional cultural platform around Mediterranean identity (European Commission, 2015). These cases are not treated as devoid of peripheral dynamics; rather, they provide metropolitan comparators with larger urban systems, more established infrastructure and different institutional capacities. Heritage reuse, participation and scale-building are therefore common ECoC practices rather than uniquely peripheral mechanisms (García & Cox, 2013; Jones & Zhang, 2024). In these metropolitan comparison cases, the primary claim concerned the renewal or repositioning of an established urban centre and its wider region. The difference is not the exclusive presence of branding, rescaling or European narratives, but the spatial condition

that supplies the programme's substantive European rationale. Because Liverpool and Marseille–Provence are indicative rather than symmetrically coded comparators, this contrast should not be read as evidence that the pattern is exclusive to peripheral ECoCs.

Across the selected peripheral ECoCs, a recurring pattern appears when marginal spatial conditions become the cultural argument itself. The selected cases do not merely seek to resemble established centres. They claim that Arctic, Mediterranean, rural, minority-language, Alpine, lake-region and southern positions offer perspectives Europe needs. This produces a non-metropolitan form of centrality: the place becomes significant through difference, mediation, experimentation or regional community rather than through convergence with a metropolitan model.

The comparison also clarifies variation within peripheral Europe. Pafos demonstrates that smallness does not necessarily produce strong region-building; Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut shows that a wider territory can be the title's primary cultural subject; Matera illustrates intensive participatory revaluation; and Bodø demonstrates how remoteness can be made into a European frontier while remaining a practical challenge. Peripheral ECoCs should therefore be analysed as a family of relational positions, not a homogeneous category.

7.3. Implications for cultural policy and spatial justice

The findings suggest that ECoC evaluation should separate recognition, territorial reach and structural change. A programme may succeed in altering symbolic geography while still facing uneven regional participation or limited legacy capacity. Conversely, the persistence of structural inequality does not render cultural recognition meaningless. Evaluation frameworks should document both domains and specify the mechanisms connecting them.

For peripheral titleholders, territorial ambition should be matched by early investment in multi-municipal governance, mobility planning, local cultural capacity and post-title institutions. Monitoring panels already address many of these issues, but a spatial-justice perspective would make internal regional distribution more explicit. Indicators should ask not only how many events occur across a region, but which communities acquire durable organisational capacity, whether access barriers change and how decision-making is distributed.

The framework also has relevance beyond ECoC. European cultural initiatives increasingly seek to connect cultural value with territorial cohesion, sustainability and inclusion. Symbolic recognition can bring peripheral places into European policy narratives, but its translation into durable spatial change requires coordination with transport, regional development, education and social policy. Cultural policy can initiate recentring; it cannot carry the entire redistributive burden.

8. Conclusion

This article examined how six peripheral European Capitals of Culture used spatial imaginaries and scalar strategies to reposition marginal locations within European cultural geography. The first research question concerned spatial revaluation. The comparison found that distance, islandness, rurality, minority-language identity, Alpine dispersion, northernness and historical stigma were recoded through frontier, bridge, laboratory, open-community and cultural-landscape imaginaries. These claims became analytically significant when they were linked to European concerns, materialised in programmes and taken up by the ECoC selection, monitoring or evaluation process.

The second question concerned regional rescaling. Leeuwarden–Friesland, Veszprém–Balaton, Bad Ischl–Salzkammergut and Bodø/Nordland demonstrate that the title city can function as the institutional anchor of a wider cultural territory. The comparison also shows that regional scale cannot be attributed to peripherality alone. Small-city capacity, administrative structures and delivery logistics matter. Rescaling becomes a peripheral strategy when the wider territory supplies the programme's central European meaning rather than merely extending event locations.

The third question concerned the limits of symbolic de-peripheralisation. Institutional evidence confirms meaningful changes in visibility, participation, cultural positioning and territorial representation. It also documents or indicates limits: Pafos's severe budget contraction and limited international promotion, distance-related delivery concerns in the Arctic case, the coordination burdens of dispersed regions, questions about internal distribution between title cities and surrounding territories, and uncertainty over post-title capacity. Symbolic de-peripheralisation therefore describes a selective and conditional redistribution of recognition, not the disappearance of peripherality.

The article's principal theoretical contribution is to connect local spatial narratives to a specific institutional pathway. Peripheral places are recentred when spatial revaluation and institutional uptake coincide with either scalar repositioning or programme materialisation. This framework avoids circular reasoning because a positive narrative alone is insufficient; the claim must be supported through distinct documentary layers and remain open to qualification, non-implementation or failure. It also distinguishes the effects of cultural policy from the broader material and institutional processes that produce spatial inequality. Because it specifies recoding, institutional uptake and enactment as distinct conditions, the framework may also be applied to other place-based cultural-policy instruments that redistribute symbolic visibility without directly transforming structural position.

The study is limited by its reliance on documentary evidence and by the uneven temporal position of the cases. Ex-post evaluations are available for the 2017–2019 titleholders but not for the 2024 cases. Future research should examine how residents, cultural organisations and regional institutions receive these spatial claims, and whether recognition produces durable changes in mobility, cultural capacity, governance and territorial cohesion. Comparative work with metropolitan ECoCs would further test which mechanisms are specifically associated with peripheral position.

ECoC does not erase Europe's margins. It creates an institutional arena in which those margins can become visible as culturally generative European positions. The programme's significance lies in this double effect: it can redistribute recognition and reorganise cultural geography while leaving major conditions of peripheralisation unresolved. Peripheral ECoCs therefore reveal both the spatial power of cultural policy and the limits of cultural centrality without redistribution.

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