

# Abstract: The Complexity of Identity Creation in Aarhus 2017

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## **Purpose:**

This study concerns the concept of European identity in the context of Aarhus as European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2017 - also referred to as Aarhus 2017. Many Europeans see themselves as rooted in their own nationality such as Danish, German or French, and therefore find it hard to identify themselves with Europe as a whole. Based on this assumption we find it relevant to investigate how Aarhus 2017 accommodates the challenge of awakening and sustaining a common European identity.

The aim of this study is therefore:

1. To examine how a common European identity is perceived among, and practiced by, the Central Denmark European Office (CDEO), the 2017 secretary and local projects of the event of Aarhus 2017.
2. Understand how the relatively complex frame of a European identity creation can be combined with the local images that people have.

This is an interesting research area since a paradox seems to exist in the ECoC-programme on a general level: Former ECoCs have experienced that a common European identity can be difficult to define among the collaborating projects of the event. This challenges a local commitment among the citizens in the European dimension of the project which has resulted in limited involvement in the ECoC-event. Based on this knowledge, we find it interesting to investigate how Aarhus 2017 in a modern globalised world accommodates this paradox.

## **Findings:**

The Aarhus 2017 event originates from the EU under the so-called ECoC Programme. To ensure that all the different ECoCs contribute to a development of European identity and to ensure a common denominator the following objectives for the programme are included:

- Highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe;
- Celebrate the cultural features Europeans share;
- Increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area.

Based on interviews, we have gained an insight of the challenges Aarhus 2017 are facing in the attempt to follow the criteria and accommodate a common European identity in Aarhus and the region. The interview participants were project managers from five collaborating projects under the Aarhus 2017 event, as well as two members of the Aarhus 2017's secretary and Lone Leth, cultural advisor at the CDEO with a special responsibility for Aarhus 2017. Deducing from the interviews there seem to exist a lack of communication between the three functional layers of the CDEO, 2017 team members and the projects, resulting in different

understandings of a European identity. On the one hand, the CDEO and the 2017 team members seem to have a rather clear idea about how to understand the idea of European identity within the framework of ECoC.

On the other hand this understanding is neither communicated to nor discussed with the projects which leave them on their own in defining the European dimension of their projects. The projects involved in this study generally perceive Aarhus 2017 as a political event rather than a cultural event, which influences their way of thinking about European identity as well. It makes it difficult for them to feel a sense of community in the creation of a common European identity. The projects are left with the impression that the overall ECoC initiative consists of fixed ideas of what European identity is and how it should be created rather than being culturally and historically created.

### **Discussion**

Since globalisation today has become more evident in identity creation than ever before, the creation of identity in modern society therefore differs from the traditional society. According to theorist Appadurai, the abstract and complex processes of globalisation have as a consequence that there are multiple ways of “doing” identity.

So when the projects are left with a feeling that there is a correct way of “doing” European identity within Aarhus 2017, they are right in understanding this as political rather than cultural. Consequently, they do not pay much attention to the set of criteria emphasising how European identity should emerge in the given projects. However, the ECoC and the (assumed) focus on politics may not be the possible approach to identity creation since globalisation seems to lead people (and projects) in very different ways. This lack of dissemination of the understanding of European identity from Aarhus 2017 to the projects that has created a communication gap may not necessarily be seen as a flaw or failure created by the Aarhus 2017 event, but rather as a reality of global processes in which identity creation is more fluid. Creating something fixed and coherent in a globalised world is almost impossible, which in per se may create a great confusion for the projects as it is argued that people have a need to find structure in complexity.

### **Reflections:**

Given the findings of this study we have pointed out areas that Aarhus 2017 can evaluate on in order to gain in-depth insights of and between the three functional layers consisting of CDEU, the Aarhus 2017 team members and projects of Aarhus 2017.

- A concrete conception of what a common European identity is does not necessarily exist due to a lack of communication amongst the three functional layers. The communication from the EU is quite opaque since the projects involved in the

research do not seem to agree on a common European identity. The reason for this is argued to be based on a hidden political agenda as a tool to promote the EU rather than creating a sense of community and hence a common European identity. In order to strengthen the perception of what a common European identity is, communication from top-down therefore ought to be improved.

- Given the fact that identity creation is a complex process including a lot of different impulses, it is important that the top-down initiated dialogue is dialogical and includes different aspects and understandings of a culturally and historically rooted European identity.

**Keywords:** Aarhus 2017, European Capital of Culture, European identity creation, globalisation