

Increasing the Benefits and Transparency of the European Heritage Label

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Heritage Label (EHL) is the EU's flagship heritage action. It focuses on promoting the European significance of the cultural heritage and a sense of belonging among the European citizenry. The nature of the action and its proclaimed aims in identity politics necessitate wide public engagement, openness, and transparency. Compared to the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) action and the UNESCO Heritage Lists, the EHL application process has poor transparency, as the applications of the labeled sites are not made public or accessible to other heritage professionals, managers, policy-makers, researchers, or public audiences. To increase the transparency of the EU heritage policy in the EHL action and to enhance the benefits this action has for various actors, we recommend changing its policy by making successful applications fully or partly public.

support wide access to a heritage with European significance, but also highlights the importance of gaining access to the information produced in recognizing and valorizing it as the first steps in supporting public debate on what this heritage is. The EU is often blamed for a lack of transparency. In the light of the principles of openness and transparency brought forth in the Treaty of Lisbon, the transparency of the EU's heritage policy and heritage actions is of utmost importance.

The EHL is the most recent EU heritage action. It focuses on promoting the European significance of the cultural heritage and enhancing a sense of belonging among the European citizenry. The action seeks to stress the symbolic value and raise the profile of sites that have played a significant role in the history and culture of Europe and/or the building of the Union. The European Commission (EC) awards the European Heritage Label to sites on the basis of their application. The labeled sites are first pre-selected by a national panel. The European panel, an international expert panel appointed at the EU level, makes the final selection. In 2018 the number of awarded sites will reach 38.

In the EHL application form, the candidates have to demonstrate their European significance. In addition, the sites have to introduce a project through which the European dimension of the site is brought to audiences, and present a work plan that indicates the operational capacity of the site to implement the proposed project. In its selection reports, the European panel has recognized various lacks in the applications of the candidate sites. For example, the sites have had difficulties explaining their European significance, the proposed projects have been poorly planned, and/or the sites have not clearly demonstrated their operational capacity. The panel has noted that the quality of the applications has improved every year, and to further improve the



INTRODUCTION

Heritage has become an increasingly important topic in EU policy discourse. The idea of a common heritage in Europe has been brought out in several EU resolutions, agendas, and work plans dealing with culture. The important role of this heritage has also been acknowledged in recent academic research (e.g., Lähdesmäki 2014a; 2014b; 2016; Delanty 2017). This research posits heritage as a powerful tool for creating a positive feeling of belonging, identification, and a sense of inclusion, but points out that it may also cause exclusion and create boundaries, divisions, and conflicts between people. This not only testifies of the need to



quality of the applications, the panel has provided guidance to future applicants in the first monitoring report of the EHL action.

The EHL application process still raises various questions:

- How to improve the applications in a way that the whole application process becomes more meaningful and useful for different actors and stakeholders at the local, regional, national, and European levels?
- How to make the EHL application and selection processes more transparent and, thus, increase awareness of, interest in, and trust towards these processes?
- How could the EHL action more clearly reflect key values, such as accessibility and openness, emphasized in EU policy discourses?



The EHL was awarded to The Great Guild Hall (Tallinn, Estonia) in 2015.

BEST PRACTICES FROM OTHER INITIATIVES

Lähdesmäki's previous and current research projects have scrutinized the policies and application discourses of the ECOC and EHL actions. Compared to the ECOC action and the UNESCO Heritage Lists, the EHL application process has poor transparency, as the applications of selected sites are not accessible to other heritage professionals, managers, policy-makers, researchers, or public audiences.

The EHL was created by using the longest-running and most well-known EU cultural initiative, the ECOC, as its case in point. As in the case of the EHL, the EC annually designates cities as ECOCs on the basis of their bid books. During the course of the ECOC action, its application process has developed into an ambitious, targeted, expert-based, and future-oriented project that brings together various actors and stakeholders and fosters interaction

and cooperation between different policy sectors in the cities.

The bid books of the candidate ECOCs are commonly published as books or booklets by the cities and disseminated online and/or made available in local cultural offices and libraries. The bid books of the designated cities have also been previously disseminated online on the web site of the EC. Similarly, the recent nomination forms for the UNESCO World Heritage List, the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the UNESCO Urgent Safeguarding List, and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices are accessible online on UNESCO's web site. Moreover, the EC has made public in the EUR-Lex online database the applications for entry into the register of protected designations of origin (PDO) or protected geographical indications (PGI) for agricultural products and foodstuffs in the EU.

The ECOC bid books function as strategic tools for urban and cultural development, communication, and policy-making in the cities (Lähdesmäki 2014c). The books include detailed information on the state of the local cultural sector and creative industries, plans for their development, and discussions on cultural identities, diversity, and (inter)cultural dialogue in the city. The books offer visions and prospects that can be utilized even if the candidate city is not designated. Similarly, the PDO and PGI applications and the nomination forms for the UNESCO Lists include evidence-based information and discussion on the meanings, values, uses, and practices of heritage.

The openness and accessibility of the applications impacts the application processes; the applicants are able learn from successful applications and use them as reference material when planning and preparing their own application. The lack of reference material may have impacted the heterogeneity, poor quality, and inadequate applications in the EHL action. The benefits of reference material was brought out by various professionals at the EHL sites during the field research of the EUROHERIT project in 2017 and 2018.

Greater accessibility and transparency can promote citizens' engagement with



the EHL and thereby contribute to achieving the set objectives of the action.

CONCLUSIONS

The first monitoring report of the EHL action emphasizes a common view of both the EHL sites and the European panel: the EHL needs to be a high-quality label, networking and cooperation are important, and the EHL should become more visible at the European level. The European Panel's vision for the EHL by 2030 suggests increasing the cultural, social, and societal impacts of the EHL. One way to strive for these goals is to enhance the transparency of the application process. Changing the EHL policy by making successful applications fully or partly public would have several benefits:

- It would increase public awareness of the European significance of the heritage as well as the visibility and awareness of the EHL action and the labeled sites.
- It would increase the transparency of the selection process at both the national and European levels.
- It would facilitate the dissemination of best practices among heritage professionals and managers.
- It would benefit actors who are planning to apply for the label by providing them reference material.
- It would strengthen the EHL action, as publicity would encourage the sites to use more effort in planning their 'project' and realizing it.
- It would benefit urban, cultural, and tourism managers and policy-makers at the local, regional, and national levels by providing them access to the visions and plans that the sites seek to advance.
- It would enable scholarly research and critical discussion on EU heritage policy and the promotion of Europe's heritage.
- It would promote the set objectives of the EHL action, namely strengthening European citizens' sense of belonging to the Union, and would increase intercultural dialogue by enabling citizens' participation and engagement with the project documents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To increase the transparency of the EU heritage policy in the EHL action and to enhance the benefits this action has for various actors, we recommend:

- developing the EHL application form to make the application document more readable and appealing and, thus, more relevant in public communication.
- developing the application form and guidelines in a way that the applications can be made at least partly public and accessible either by the European Panel/EC or the sites themselves.
- making public the first part of all applications (description of European significance) and the second part of labeled sites (the project seeking to bring the European dimension to audiences).

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