Cēsis' cultural strategy 2008–15

Context

Cēsis is a small town of 17,000 located in the northern part of Latvia. Surrounded by rural areas and natural parks, its economy is based mostly on agriculture, retail and small industries (manufacturing, transport). Its cultural profile takes its roots in its medieval heritage, now populated with contemporary creative projects. Cultural life in Cēsis is surprisingly vivid despite the city’s size and remote location. Cēsis was the smallest city to ever bid for the European Capital of Culture title (for 2014) and despite its insufficient scale for a successful candidacy, the quality of its strategy was still acclaimed by the jury.

The Creative Latvia 2014-20 strategy (one of 15 different sectorial strategies under the National Development Plan 2014-20) acknowledges Cēsis as one of the most important cultural centres of the country. The main priorities are to support accessing new markets for creative industries (direct visits, participation in international fairs and exhibitions) and the international promotion of Latvian design. The main lines of action are the use of local specific culture and creative potential for the development of the territory (mapping cultural and creative cities and territories; using tangible and intangible heritage in creative industries etc.) and the availability of cultural services for everyone (development and modernisation of cultural institutions network).

Challenges

- Poor and old cultural infrastructure (from soviet times).
- Lack of qualified and ambitious culture managers and leaders based in Cēsis.
- Very limited available budget for culture marketing.

The main remaining challenge in the coming years is how to balance high art events and proposals for culture tourists and incoming artists with the needs of local inhabitants, using culture more for local social innovation and development of small-scale local creative entrepreneurship activities.
Cēsis’ cultural strategy 2008-2015

Cēsis is an excellent example of a city where an unsuccessful bid to become an ECoC was turned into an opportunity. The process leading to the bid allowed for the development of Cēsis’s cultural strategy 2008-2015 (currently under review). It pursues three objectives:

1. Cultural tourism development, supporting concert hall development plans and working together with producers of festivals (such as the Cēsis Art Festival described below), attracting new audiences from neighbouring countries.

2. Foster citizenship and attractiveness of the city for inhabitants, as the population had gradually been decreasing in recent decades. The plan aims at increasing wellbeing and quality of life through the development of attractive public space surrounded by cultural heritage, opportunities for creative learning and favouring participation in cultural events for different generations.

3. Development of culture and creative industries, promoting Cēsis as an attractive working place for creative professionals and increasing the economic impact of these industries (new working places, growth of local GDP). Concrete activities to accomplish this objective are planned in partnership with the private sector in the coming years, such as establishing a centre for creative learning, as well as residencies for artists and scientists.

Despite its unsuccessful bid to become a European Capital of Culture, Cēsis has kept investing in culture and the strategy was successfully implemented and significant actions are on track. Cēsis has developed a set of targeted actions to become a leading creative city, with a view to:

- developing culture infrastructures;
- safeguarding cultural heritage (with the goal of joining the UNESCO list of cultural heritage);
- organising professional arts festivals;
- supporting art hubs and residencies;
- supporting local creative initiatives and amateur arts.

Cēsis is not lacking in cultural resources and assets but they have long been largely untapped. Its landmark heritage (with an 800 year-old medieval castle and a 730 year-old church) is being conserved in an authentic way. Refurbishing and preserving these historic buildings around this iconic heritage (including in particular the regional acoustic concert hall of 800 seats), attracted visitors from the whole region and beyond, thereby improving considerably the image of the city. The Cēsis Art Festival (dating back to 2007) is the largest professional art festival in Latvia and has been recognised as an event of national importance. It is a successful grassroots initiative (now supported by the city) which aims to deliver the biggest and best professional arts festival outside the capital city. It now greatly contributes to boosting cultural tourism during summer.

New large-scale cultural infrastructures opened their doors to inspire vocations locally. Between 2011 and 2014, a new artistic residency, a centre for young urbanists and galleries opened in Cēsis. A support scheme for CCIs was also set up to encourage creative entrepreneurship, and start-ups can apply for small municipality grants to establish themselves in the city. This set of coordinated actions have led young creative professionals to choose Cēsis as a place for living and working, whereas the city’s population had been decreasing.

The city also leads joint initiatives such as the Cēsis-Tartu cooperation project “Local Artists for Regional Development”. In the framework of this project, an online portal was developed to allow local CCIs to market their work on a shared online portal to increase their visibility (see http://culture.cesis.lv/en/).

In order to stimulate access and participation to culture, the municipality finances premises and teachers for around 500 adults, who practice amateur arts (singing, dancing, performing) and around 1,000 children, who participate in creative after-school workshops. The municipality also supports art and music schools for children with a view to developing local cultural education. Such actions also contribute to involving more directly citizens in the cultural strategy and favour civic ownership of local activities for culture and creativity.
Budget and financing

The budget used for the implementation of Cēsis’s cultural strategy is tantamount to the total municipal budget devoted to culture:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Operation of cultural institutions and support for culture events (EUR)</th>
<th>Infrastructure investment (EUR)</th>
<th>Total (EUR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>1,303,174</td>
<td>1,040,691</td>
<td>2,343,865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>991,021</td>
<td>1,117,381</td>
<td>2,108,402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,121,008</td>
<td>3,491,750</td>
<td>4,612,758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,243,368</td>
<td>2,961,288</td>
<td>4,204,656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,497,493</td>
<td>6,652,317</td>
<td>8,149,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1,571,641</td>
<td>5,229,154</td>
<td>6,800,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 (planned)</td>
<td>1,667,168</td>
<td>623,987</td>
<td>2,291,155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>9,394,873</td>
<td>21,116,568</td>
<td>30,511,441</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For infrastructure development the greatest sum - €16.4 million - comes from European (ERDF) and state funds.

Impacts

The successful implementation of the strategy gradually solved the aforementioned challenges with considerable impacts:

- the main culture infrastructures (medieval castle and church acoustic concert hall, library, castle museum and castle park with an open air stage) are now reconstructed or restored thanks to European Regional Development Funds, leveraging investment of €16 million in total;
- successful development of the yearly Cēsis Art Festival with high quality cultural events and the ambition to apply for the title of European Capital of Culture 2014 helped to achieve both necessary goals – enhancing Cēsis’s reputation as an artistic and cultural place on a national level and attractiveness of Cēsis as a work-place for culture professionals. Cēsis Art Festival has been growing in quality and numbers of visitors every year since 2008, finding new sites in the cityscape, where music and art events are enjoyed by visitors (20,000 visitors in 2014);
- the number of tourists in Cēsis has increased by 60% over the past five years.
Transferability

The 2009-10 economic crisis was a significant obstacle as all municipal budgets were considerably cut, but the candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture helped to keep focus and maintain high ambitions to pursue a culture-led development strategy. The main factors enabling this to come to fruition were:

• Accessibility of EU funds for investment in cultural infrastructure (ERDF) helped to alleviate the impact of the economic crisis on the cultural strategy of Cēsis.

• Constant political support was critical to ensuring success, despite the changes of political representation in the municipality.

• Capitalising on successful initiatives.

Sustainability

Due to the region’s importance and the concrete provisions for culture in the national development plan for the following years, the Cēsis strategy will be refunded and sustained at least until 2020.

Management level and partners

The partnerships include the Cēsis Art Festival Foundation, small creative enterprises, and other organisations (such as the Cēsis Art School, Rucka Artists Residency, Society "Forum of Latvian Design" and Culturelab, to name a few).

Links :
http://culture.cesis.lv/en/
http://tourism.cesis.lv

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