The EU on Thursday announced UK cities will be unable to host the European Capital of Culture after Brexit despite the scheme being open to other cities outside the EU.

According to EU regulation, the scheme is only accessible to candidate states, members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), or the European Economic Area (EEA).

Ukip’s Nigel Farage said the EU was being vindictive to punish Britain’s vote in favour of Brexit.
He said, “I think they look like they are being vindictive and nasty because that’s the kind of people they are.

“I’m not anti-European in any way at all and, if there is going to be a European Capital of Culture programme, maybe there will still be one when the European Union’s folded and perhaps we’ll find another means of doing it.”

Farage added, “I don’t want us to stay in the EEA but it’s not impossible that we would.”

More criticism came from Tory culture spokesperson John Procter, who has been personally involved in Leeds’ bid for the title in 2023, the year when the UK was due to share the title with Hungary.

The MEP described the European Commission’s surprise decision as “unnecessary and deeply unhelpful.”

He said, “Tens of thousands of pounds have been spent and organisations have come together in cities like Leeds to prepare very strong bids. For all that to be trashed at this late stage is an absolute disgrace.

“We are still members of the EU and are in the process of negotiating a new relationship. It beggars belief that the Commission has chosen this moment to announce we are not eligible to take part in an initiative that is all about fostering cultural links and bringing people together.”

The MEP added, “This is not the final word. I will be asking searching questions about exactly what is going on.”

The UK had been due to provide one of two European Capitals of Culture in 2023, with the other coming from Hungary.

Bids have been submitted by Leeds, Nottingham, Milton Keynes, Dundee and Belfast/Derry, but the Commission said that the UK is being barred because it will no longer be a member of the EU.

Cities from Iceland and Norway, neither of which are EU members, have previously hosted the capital but the Commission says they qualified through their membership of the European Economic Area.

East Midlands Tory MEP Rupert Matthews, whose constituency includes Nottingham, described the UK’s exclusion as “an act of bad faith.”

“We are looking to conclude an agreement with the EU which is not just about trade but develops our cultural and artistic links. The EU insists it wants that too, yet it makes an announcement like this out of the blue.

“The Commission has strung us along. I am determined this should not be the end of the road.”

A spokesperson for the UK government said Norway, Iceland and Turkey had been granted the honour before despite not being in the EU.

They said, “This would not have been the first time that a country that is not part of the EU has hosted the capital of culture.

“However Norway and Iceland are both members of EFTA while Turkey remains a candidate for EU membership.

“It remains unclear whether the UK will seek membership of either organisation after Brexit.
Celebrating the cultural heritage and innovation of our cities is part of our plan for a dynamic, global Britain. The UK will seek to agree our continued participation in the 2023 European Capital of Culture as part of our exit negotiations.

“Until we leave the EU, we remain a full member with all the rights and obligations that brings with it. This means fully engaging in cultural programmes.

“The UK is one of two countries that is scheduled to host the Capital of Culture in 2023, and the decision on which city wins the competition would be taken before we leave the EU.”

The chosen UK city would have joined two other UK cities - Glasgow and Liverpool - to become the third British host of the title. Liverpool, which held the title in 2008, estimated it saw a return of £750m to the local economy from £170m of spending.

The UK government says that three non-EU cities have held the title in the past - Reykjavik in 2000, Stavanger in 2008, and Istanbul in 2010 - with the hosts only required to show a “strong European dimension” to their cultural programmes. Aarhus, in Denmark, and Paphos, in Cyprus, are currently the 2017 European capitals of culture.

A Belfast council spokesperson said, “As a current and active member of the EU, the UK is continuing to run the European Capital of Culture competition. It and Hungary have been selected as the host nations for 2023 by the European Commission which has already appointed the jury panel to assess the competition.

“We remain very positive and submitted our first stage bid at the end of October. If we are successful in being shortlisted, we will be undertaking very high-level discussions to assure our continued eligibility.

“As formally stated by the Department of Culture Media and Sport, the UK government will advise bidding cities on any impact of Brexit on the title once negotiations have concluded, and we have been regularly monitoring all advice received so that we can continue to make informed decisions.”

Each city’s submissions are assessed by a panel of cultural experts appointed by the European Commission and a shortlist is expected to be announced by the end of the year. Shortlisted cities will submit a second bid and the winner will be announced in 2018.

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter for the Parliament Magazine

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