



Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2026 in Slovakia

*The Expert Panel's report
Pre-Selection Stage*

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Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
EAC.D — Directorate Culture and Creativity
Unit D2 — Creative Europe

E-mail: eac-unite-D2@ec.europa.eu

*European Commission
B-1049 Brussels*

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The Expert Panel's report Pre-Selection Stage

edited by

Jelle Burggraaff (Rapporteur), Else Christensen-Redzepovic (Rapporteur), Paulina Florjanowicz (Chair), Beatriz Garcia, Dessislava Gavrilova, Suvi Innilä, Jozef Kovalčík, Alin-Adrian Nica, Jorge Cerveira Pinto, Pierre Sauvageot, Ján Sudzina (Vice-Chair)

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	4
Introduction.....	5
Panel Meeting	5
Next Steps.....	6
Thanks	6
Assessment of the candidates	6
Banská Bystrica.....	7
Conclusion	9
Hlohovec	10
Conclusion	12
Martin	12
Conclusion	14
Nitra	14
Conclusion	16
Prešov.....	17
Conclusion	19
Trenčín.....	19
Conclusion	22
Trnava	22
Conclusion	24
Žilina	24
Conclusion	27
General recommendations	27
General	27
Contribution to the long-term strategy	28
Cultural and artistic programme	28
European dimension	29
Outreach	30
Management	30
Capacity to deliver.....	31

Introduction

This is the report of the expert panel (the “panel”) for the pre-selection phase of the competition for the European Capital of Culture in 2026 in Slovakia. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985. The title “European Capital of Culture” has previously been awarded to one city in Slovakia, namely Košice in 2013.

The Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic (the “Ministry”) acts as the managing authority of the competition, which is governed by Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”)¹ and by the “Rules of Procedure – Competition for the European Capital of Culture 2026 in Slovakia” (the “Rules”) – adopted by the Ministry and published on its website².

A panel of 12 independent experts was established for the selection process, in line with Article 2 of the Rules. The European Union institutions and bodies (European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions) appointed ten members of this panel, while the Ministry appointed two members. One panel member did not attend the meeting.

The competition takes place in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection. The Ministry issued a call for applications on 17 December 2019. Eight applications were submitted by the closing date of 15 December 2020 by: Banská Bystrica, Hlohovec, Martin, Nitra, Prešov, Trenčín, Trnava and Žilina.

Panel Meeting

The panel members met online, joining in from 10 countries on 2-5 February 2021. After Finland in June 2020, this was the second online preselection meeting, as the COVID-19 related travelling restrictions still in place at the time made it impossible for panel’s members and the delegations of candidate cities to be physically present in Bratislava. The panel elected Paulina Florjanowicz as its chair and Ján Sudzina as its vice-chair. One panel member did not attend the meeting. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality and sent it to the Ministry ahead of the pre-selection meeting. Representatives of the Ministry and of the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers took no part in the panel’s deliberations or decision.

At the pre-selection hearings on 2-5 February 2021, each candidate city, in alphabetical order, presented its case (30 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (60 minutes).

At a press meeting on 5 February 2021, the chair of the panel announced (via Zoom connection) the panel’s recommendation that the Ministry invites the following cities to submit revised bids for the final selection (in alphabetical order):

Nitra, Trenčín, Žilina.

It is important to note that the panel took into account the extraordinary context in which the bid books had been prepared due to the lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the transition from physical meetings to online

¹ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG (in English)

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014D0445&from=EN> (in Slovak)

² https://www.culture.gov.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Final_EN_gm_sp_suggestions2_rop2_upd..pdf (in English)

meetings have become the new normal, the continued lockdown situation in Europe and the world seriously limited the competing teams' possibilities of engaging citizens and local stakeholders and, to some extent, hampered the establishment of European and international partnerships. These dimensions are expected to be much strengthened during the final selection phase. It is expected that the pandemic will leave a long-lasting impact on the cultural sector, which needs to change substantially from within and adapt to the new situation. It is also expected that all three preselected cities focus on both practicalities and the artistic vision of their projects in the time after COVID-19. Similarly, budget plans included in the bids are expected to be revised and confirmed. It is important that all cities selected for the final round of the competition ensure a realistic budget contribution from the national government.

Next Steps

The Ministry will arrange for the formal approval of the shortlist based on the recommendations included in this report (Article 8 of the Decision). It will then issue an invitation to the cities named on the approved shortlist to submit revised applications for the final selection.

The shortlisted cities are encouraged to take into account the panel's assessments and recommendations in this report.

The deadline for the submission of revised applications is 2 November 2021.

The final selection meeting is scheduled to take place in Bratislava on 7-8 December 2021 (tbc).

Two to four members of the panel will pay a one-day visit to the shortlisted cities just before the final selection meeting, in order to obtain more background information on the respective bids. Representatives of the European Commission and the Ministry will accompany the panel members as observers.

Thanks

The panel members would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in this pre-selection phase of the competition. In particular, the panel noted that all cities have used the opportunity of the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies as well as the role of culture and Europe in their overall social-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition. The panel encourages all candidate cities to continue with the development and implementation of their respective cultural strategies.

The panel thanks all eight candidates and everyone who contributed to their bids, the European Commission for its advice and the Ministry for its excellent administration, including the IT team.

Assessment of the candidates

In its assessment of the candidates, the panel noted the general and specific objectives in Article 2 of the Decision and the requirement for the application to be

based on a cultural programme with a strong European dimension created specifically for the title (Article 4).

The panel assessed each bid against the six criteria outlined in Article 5 of the Decision:

- Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city,
- Cultural and artistic content,
- European dimension,
- Outreach,
- Management,
- Capacity to deliver.

It was not clear for the panel if all candidate cities had fully completed the formal approval of their cultural strategy at city council level. One of the most important features in Decision 445/2014/EU, governing the ECoC action from the 2020 titles on, is the requirement that cities have a formal and explicit cultural strategy. This is to ensure that the ECoC is grounded in a medium-term transformation of the city and its cultural life.

In the commentaries that follow, the panel notes the main elements of their findings during the pre-selection phase. In reference to successive cities, specific and common recommendations are made, in order to assist them in the preparation of their final bid books.

The panel emphasises that its assessments of the candidates were based on the bid book and on the cities' presentation sessions during the pre-selection meeting. A city's history, its recent and current policies and its cultural offer may form a basis for the proposed programme, but they are not relevant for the selection process. The panel's assessment and recommendation for the shortlist are also based on the analysis of the capacity of all candidate cities to make the required steps in order to win the ECoC title in the following months until the final selection meeting.

Banská Bystrica

Banská Bystrica presented its bid under the motto "Cultural Mining", which describes a process by which the most valuable parts of culture are renewed, and made useful for our time. With its candidacy, the city wants to initiate communication between the city and the institutions, the citizens who live, work and create there and connect them with the region. The city of Banská Bystrica and the Banská self-governing region have entered into a strategic partnership to do their best to lead the city to success.

Contribution to the long-term strategy:

- The city's long-term vision has been formulated and adopted in December 2020.
- The ECoC candidacy contributes to and is an integral part of this concept, which is basically a positive element. However, proper connections between the different bid sections and this strategy are lacking.
- The major priority of the strategy seems to be on capital investments in cultural institutions, with concrete infrastructural plans in place. Although a good cultural infrastructure can foster cultural development, still there are too few strategic guidelines on how to improve the local cultural capacity with its connections to and support from the economic and social sectors.

- The monitoring and evaluation scheme gives the impression that the project is more about city development and tourist attractiveness than an ECoC. The evaluation part is not concrete enough.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The programme - articulated around 6 areas: Art Mining, Heritage Mining, Human Mining, Eco Mining, Social Mining and Data Mining - is thematically well balanced. It is however underdeveloped and too succinctly described, even at pre-selection stage.
- Too few projects are mentioned and also in light of the aforementioned, this makes it difficult for the panel to adequately assess the consistency, the quality and the overall artistic value of the programme.
- The information from the bid book and the presentation failed to convince the panel that the concept of "cultural mining" went beyond a mere reference to the city's heritage and was relevant for the city of today.
- The proposed projects are very general and do not address clearly specific issues. The panel was left with the impression that no new projects would be created on top of the current cultural offer, while this is what is expected from an ECoC.
- The project idea to develop a Dark Sky Park has a lot of potential but this potential is underdeveloped in the bid book.
- The approach to cultural heritage is rather traditional.

European dimension:

- The European dimension is unconvincing. Instead of focussing on concrete European partnerships, there are mainly references made to already established events in arts and Slovak history. The listed links with other ECoCs and candidate cities are relevant though.
- The bid does not provide information on how the ECoC project would address the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history, as well as current European themes.
- The envisioned cooperation with the Visegrad countries on a series of discussions on issues such as extremism, emergence and growth, though relevant in theory as it has the potential to result in more cross-border activities and tackle topical European issues, has not been worked out.

Outreach:

- There is no clear involvement of the local community in the preparation of the application, although the panel appreciates that some NGOs have been included in the bid.
- The panel acknowledges the stated attempt to overcome the mistrust of the local population towards the candidacy. However, it had also expected this would have been overcome by now through an active involvement of citizens in the preparation of the bid book.
- The involvement of marginalised and disadvantaged groups has not been translated into the cultural and artistic programme in a convincing manner.
- The panel has some doubts regarding the way Roma minority issues are addressed, as it does not appear that members of this community have been involved in the process.
- The overall strategy for audience development is underdeveloped. References are made to sports and tourist events, but it is not specified how these relate to audience development.

Management:

- The city's annual budget allocated to culture has been relatively low in the past five years, representing less than 1% of the city's total budget in 2020.
- The bid book does not indicate the percentage of the overall city's annual budget intended to be spent on culture after the ECoC year, while this is a key element to assess a candidate's intention to ensure legacy and sustainability.
- The total operating budget for the ECoC project amounts to 20m EUR, and the city contribution is rather low at 3,3m EUR. The panel sees that as highly risky, because the candidate relies very heavily on the national contribution (which represents 73% of the income coming from the public sector).
- The contingency planning is superficial, as it does not take into consideration the financial risk whereas at the same time there is no formal budget commitment at local, regional and state levels.
- The candidate relies on EU funding for capital expenditure (85,6% of the budget for capital investment) whilst no national financing is envisaged. This is problematic because the bid book does not include a detailed strategy for seeking financial support from EU programmes for capital expenditure.
- The proposed budget does not include any provisions for the legacy activities and contingency planning.
- The legal form of the delivery structure is not described. The organogram is vague and does not cover the internal organisation between the concrete positions but rather on the relationship between the delivery structure and other bodies, entities and partners.
- The ECoC is planned to be managed by a project coordinator within the municipality and currently does not foresee the position of a CEO or Artistic Director. The organogram insufficiently explains who will be responsible for the practical implementation of the ECoC action.
- Although the variety of communication angles on the cultural mining concept is rather basic, it can translate well into promotion.

Capacity to deliver:

- There is a signed memorandum of cooperation agreement of the city of Banská Bystrica and the Banská Bystrica self-governing region, with the Matej Bel University and the Academy of Arts as confirmed partners.
- The city has or will have an adequate and viable infrastructure to hold the title.
- The bid takes the current pandemic situation into account by planning for less crowded events and events outdoors.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Banská Bystrica does not proceed to the final selection phase.

The strategy to only support existing events and bringing them to a higher level does not fully cover the whole spectrum of the aims of an ECoC project, which is to develop a unique cultural and artistic programme, especially created for the year itself. The development of the European dimension also lags behind what should be expected at this stage, with no sufficient international cooperation having been established so far. Another concern is the mistrust of the local community towards the candidacy, with seemingly no strategy in place how to overcome this in the future. The city and region, together with the Matej Bel University and the Academy of the Arts, have signed a memorandum focusing on achieving common goals regardless of whether the

city wins the title or not. The panel considers this a very positive asset and therefore also encourages the city to carry on its work with these partners.

Hlohovec

From a philosophical angle the bid of Hlohovec offers an interesting and aspirational narrative about the end of the industrial cities in the Western world. The intention is to link up small towns in Europe in a coalition to counter Destabilization, Demotivation, Dehumanization and Disinformation, which the panel sees as a very good starting point worth developing.

The solutions to the four main challenges in Hlohovec and in Europe (Safe environment vs destabilisation; Hope vs demotivation; Fostering humanity vs dehumanisation and Trustworthiness vs disinformation) are clear and very relevant, but the panel questions if the town would be able to satisfactorily communicate this quite complex message European wide through an ECoC project. It also leaves doubts if with the resources planned for the ECoC 2026 year this would be possible at a level where it could have a substantial impact.

Contribution to the long-term strategy:

- The cultural strategy for Hlohovec is developed but has not been adopted yet.
- The Small Towns Manifesto is a valuable concept for Hlohovec. However, the panel does not see clearly how the ECoC fits into this and therefore how it will lead to impact and legacy after the ECoC year.
- Although a cooperation is envisaged with the surrounding region, the bid does not provide concrete details on the shape and form of the cooperation with the surrounding towns.
- On a positive note, the plans for monitoring and evaluation are sufficiently addressed for the pre-selection phase.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The vision is centered on the audacity, boldness, stubbornness and ambition of a small town to prove that it can be the centre of the European culture and artistry in 2026. Although the panel acknowledges the level of ambition of achieving transversality in programming the panel does not find consistency between this vision and the cultural and artistic programme described in the bid.
- Whilst the capacity building aspect of the programme is positive as it shows a clear intention to strengthen the local cultural community, the cultural and artistic content of the overall project is rather weak and difficult to follow and fully engage with.
- The bid book does not present in a convincing way how the Small Towns coalition narrative, which is at the centre of the project, concretely fits into the ECoC concept.
- The level of willingness to engage and cooperate with the surrounding towns is not clear based on the cultural and artistic programme presented.

European dimension:

- The candidate shapes up its European approach around the Small Town Coalition structure and the intended legacy for the ECoC project, namely the Small Town Institute. Although there is an obvious European dimension in the 26 Small Town coalition (as it brings together towns from many different EU countries), it is not

fully and convincingly developed in the cultural programme and translated into concrete artistic projects.

- The bid is very succinct in explaining how the ECoC project would address the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history, as well as current European themes.
- Although Hlohovec does not have much cooperation with European cultural networks at this stage contacts have been established with several ECoCs asking for cooperation with Hlohovec on the Small Towns Coalition. Some ECoCs have been helpful in identifying relevant partner cities and other ECoCs have joined the Coalition themselves.
- The Small Towns coalition is undoubtedly of high relevance to Hlohovec and partnering small towns across Europe, but its attractiveness for an international audience is less convincing. The panel sees it rather as a first step towards a bigger project.

Outreach:

- The plan to create spaces for creative activities (e.g. HaCropolis) is encouraging.
- However, with the limited capacity of creative professionals in Hlohovec, it is difficult to see who will occupy these spaces and how the town will manage to attract outsiders to the city to pursue creative professions.
- Although the bid book includes some interesting ideas about how to engage with marginalised and disadvantaged groups, the panel was left with the impression this was more an enumeration of isolated projects than a real strategy.
- More generally, the audience development strategy, though it includes some interesting ideas, is still to be further refined and made more concrete.

Management:

- The overall operating budget of 29,5m EUR seems a large sum considering the size of the city, in particular because the annual budget of the city allotted to culture was just over 1m EUR in 2020. There is also no intention to increase the city funding for culture after the ECoC year, which may be problematic in terms of sustaining legacy.
- Furthermore, the city's contribution to the ECoC project amounts to just 1m EUR (i.e. 3.3% of the total public revenue to cover operating expenditure). This is rather low, while the dependency on the financial contribution from the national government (67.7%) is very high. The panel sees that as a risk, which is not properly covered in the contingency planning.
- Furthermore, planning only 54 % of the operating budget for the programme is too limited, given the objectives set in the bid book.
- The organigram offers interesting elements such as art diplomacy in fundraising and an international cooperation team tasked with identifying links to key areas of productions in the Small Towns coalition. But overall, the management structure appears weak. The legal form of the delivery structure is not described.
- It is not clear where in the governance structure the evaluation team is positioned.

Capacity to deliver:

- The candidacy has support of the mayor of the city (and the city council) as well as from the mayors of the towns and municipalities in the larger region, though it is not clear from the bid book how the support of those surrounding municipalities materialized. The panel foresees operational challenges in the small towns coalition and fails to see a satisfactory strategy for linking up the small cities via digital tools.

- Although the bid offers some alternative and innovative solutions aiming to overcome challenges in terms of insufficient cultural infrastructure and accommodation capacities, it leaves behind some doubts how this would work in practise.
- Delivering an ECoC at highest European professional standards requires a critical mass of capacities with the right skills at the right time. With the capacity at hand in Hlohovec and the region, the panel is concerned about the capacity to deliver within the plan of the bid.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Hlohovec does not proceed to the final selection phase.

The panel found the idea of forming a coalition of small cities in Europe very good, with a lot of potential that could be worth pursuing. However, it remains unclear how the theoretical concepts of the Hlohovec ECoC bid can be translated and resonate in Europe. Forming such coalitions of small towns no doubt would aid in a Small Town branding strategy and could help to attract qualified people to work and live in Hlohovec. However, the panel is not convinced that the Small Towns concept can really work as an ECoC and thinks that it may be more suitable in a national or another European context. The experiences gained and networks built nationally as well as internationally in this pre-selection phase could prove very beneficial if choosing to pursue alternative schemes.

Martin

The City presents its candidacy under the title **MARTIN '26**. The aim of the project and the cultural and artistic programme is to bring sustainable activities with a long-term effect on the cultural life of the city and the Turiec region. The bid plans to involve all villages and municipalities in this region.

Contribution to the long-term strategy:

- The current strategy is defined in the Programme of Economic, Social and Cultural Development of the City and runs from 2016-2023. This strategy is planned to be updated in April 2021. Though the bid book underlines the importance to include the ECoC project as an integral part of this strategy document, the connections between the two are unspecified at this stage. This is problematic because the absence of a clear interlinkage makes it impossible for the panel to assess the intentions in terms of impact, legacy and sustainability.
- The plans to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors seem to be mainly based upon investments in cultural infrastructure.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluating are underdeveloped even for this stage of the competition with 7 independent frameworks for evaluating the programme and basic elements such as key indicators or targets lacking.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The panel feels the concept of **MARTIN '26** divided into Seven Arts (i.e. the Art of Word, Art of Picture, the Art of Action, the Art of Sound, the Art of the Media, the Art of Reflection, the Art of Life) is conventional and neither very convincing, nor clearly justified.

- The programme is underdeveloped as it includes an enumeration of projects that are only very briefly described with no details on potential partners, curators etc.
- On a more positive note, the candidate shows an awareness of the value and need for co-creation, which can indeed be the basis for developing sound and cross-border events.
- The cultural and artistic programme - as it is based only on traditional art forms - does not have the artistic quality and the innovative element that would be expected from an ECoC year, in particular because a clear concept that would bind together what the panel sees as isolated projects is lacking.
- The bid's approach to cultural heritage is also limited to its intangible part.

European dimension:

- The approach to the European dimension is rather theoretical and does not show connections between projects and European themes and partners.
- The candidate fails to explain how the diversity of cultures in Europe would be celebrated during The ECoC year.
- There are no activities featuring European partners at this moment and apart from finding common platforms, there are no concrete ideas in place yet.
- Besides a letter of support from Rijeka, there are no connections with other ECoCs, international artists and cultural operators.
- Finally, the strategy to attract a European and international audience is very generic with no convincing examples given on how projects in the cultural and artistic programme could reach a resonance European-wide.

Outreach:

- Civic engagement in the preparation of the application took place via a Preparatory Committee, though the bid book is not very specific about the tools used to ensure active participation of various communities.
- The panel considers it positive that the team identifies the Roma community as a target group, but doubts that the actual challenges of this community are addressed in the best possible way. In addition, it seems that a direct involvement of members of the Roma community in the preparation of the application is missing.
- The willingness expressed in the bid book to create opportunities for marginalized and disadvantaged groups stays at the level of intention with no concrete tools presented on how to reach such an ambitious goal.
- The overall strategy for audience development is underdeveloped at this stage. Apart from the strategy to organise events outside and in the region, the bid does not provide any tools in how the cultural and artistic programme wants to engage the local audience and people in the region.
- Concerning the engagement of people, the understanding between the difference of teaching others such as the 'elderly' how to engage and realising the importance of actually working - as a team - on ways to engage them and understand their needs raises questions.

Management:

- The city's annual budget for culture has been relatively low in the last five years and most of the time under 1m EUR and 2% of the total city budget. It has also been declining since a peak reached in 2018. The intention is, however, to increase the share of cultural expenditure to 2,5 % after the ECoC year.
- The bid book includes different figures regarding the overall operating budget for the ECoC project in pages 44, 45 and 46 (4,658m, 4,961m and 5,171m), which is

somewhat puzzling, as it leaves the impression that figures have not been thought through thoroughly. The figures are also quite modest for the implementation of an event of the scale and scope of an ECoC.

- The panel has doubts whether the amount indicated for the programme expenditures (i.e. 3,774m EUR) is sufficient to cover the cultural and artistic programme.
- The ECoC is to be financed from the annual budget for culture, which is unusual.
- The contribution expected from the EU to cover operational expenditure represents 20.7% of the income from the public sector, which is relatively high, while no detailed information is given to the panel on which EU programmes will be used to reach this target. There is also a high dependency on the contribution from the national government (36,3% of the total).
- The risk analysis narrows most weaknesses to infrastructure shortages. The financial risk is not taken into consideration. No mitigation measures to cover the weaknesses are presented.
- A non-profit organisation will be established for the implementation of the ECoC. No organogram is provided. The artistic management of the project, based on seven arts managers, is not sufficiently elaborated.

Capacity to deliver:

- It is not clear from the bid book to what extent and in which way the city council and the region have given their support to the project.
- The city has a lot to offer, but seems to have relied on what is already there, instead of exploring to build something new.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Martin does not proceed to the final selection phase as it is too basic at this moment.

The panel feels that the bid is more a compilation of single projects to promote tourism and foster long-term development of the city, rather than a proposal for an ECoC. The proposed cultural and artistic programme is not at the level that can be expected of a candidate city at this stage, with no clear European partnerships identified. The overall audience development strategy is underdeveloped, while the panel also has concerns about the overall management of the ECoC. The panel recognizes that the city has a lot of potential, but at the same time feels that in this case it relies too much upon what it already has, instead of building something new.

Nitra

The theme of the Nitra bid is "Breaking Point", which is thought of as a space where habits, mechanisms and relationships are confronted, examined, thought-through and then reassembled and pulled apart again for further improvements in a continuous process for better and healthier societies. Nitra cooperates with the wider region in a territorial approach of interdependency between city and non-city. A further argument for including the region is the importance of addressing the clash of Eastern and Western religious customs of the city and region.

As a way to avoid "breakdowns" for people in Nitra and people around Europe, Nitra wants to embark on a process to look for new ways. "Breaking free" is the aim - as

opposed to “Breaking down”. Nitra2026 is to be the “Breaking Point” for bringing about processes of change through three main lines of BREAKS in the Nitra2026 programme: Break the Cycle, Break Silence and Break the Ground.

Contribution to the long-term strategy:

- The cultural strategy, which runs over the period 2021-2031, was approved by the city council on 10 December 2020. It is well-defined with clear elements of sustainability. The ECoC goals are listed alongside, but the panel is unclear about how they are embedded in the strategy.
- The strategy includes plans for strengthening the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors through working transversally with culture and has convincing visions for the long-term impact of an ECoC on the city.
- Soft legacy is presented quite extensively, but there is no mention about the impact of the title in terms of urban development.
- Plans for evaluation and monitoring are satisfactory and include clear justification of how the team plans to incorporate other EU cities to give their research a European dimension.
- There is an interesting emphasis on the collaboration with agencies, that will assist in providing fast data analysis alongside longer term research.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The cultural and artistic vision is clear and coherent and it involves local artists and cultural stakeholders in the concept and implementation.
- There is a satisfactory range and diversity of quality artistic activities albeit with many pre-existing projects. More innovation could be applied to programming.
- The panel would like to ensure that all important institutions play a role in the cultural and artistic programme as a way to ensure ownership of the ECoC project across the board.
- The panel welcomes that the programme includes an honest look into the past in order to learn from experiences.
- Cultural heritage has also been addressed but could be further developed and exploited in an innovative way and touching upon all aspects of it, including archaeology.
- The programme seems to have strong roots in the local traditions, themes and current topics, which is a positive element. However, the panel encourages the candidate to pursue its work to include the most appropriate partners from both the national and international levels.
- Many societal issues are addressed in the cultural programme, but the panel notices an apparent absence of project and programme addressing the ageing population as well as post transformation issues.

European dimension:

- There is a clear value of incorporating the European collaboration into the approach to monitoring and evaluation.
- Although some projects have potential of attracting a wider audience in Europe, this aspect has not been fully recognized yet, nor exploited.
- Although the programme contains many European projects, the European dimension could be more clearly emphasised through more co-productions.
- The bid addresses satisfactorily common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history and the programme explores three current European themes - identity, dialogue and sustainability, with projects that explore and address heritage and history, European integration and sustainability.

Outreach:

- The local community has been extensively involved in the preparation of the application through many very specific actions such as questionnaires, collecting people's ECoC wishes on graffiti walls, idea workshops with different communities and marginalised groups, targeted ECoC working groups, interviews and open calls for projects.
- The programme contains important elements of ways of addressing the sensitivities of various minority communities, including the Roma, as well as disadvantaged and marginalised groups such as migrants and the less visible examples of marginalisation being people with severe disabilities. The panel had doubts about the actual direct engagement of the Roma community in the project development at this stage, which may have been due to the current COVID-19 restrictions?
- There are several examples of good audience development practises. Links between schools and audience development are explained and there is a strategy in place to develop a life-long cultural education platform for professionals and amateurs.

Management:

- The candidacy and budget has been approved by the city council. A memorandum has been signed with the region and their financial contribution will be decided in the 2nd phase of the competition along with the contributions from other municipalities. Overall, the financial strategy and plans seem sound and feasible. The total operating budget of 29m EUR has a balanced division of national, regional and local contributions. Private funding of 1,5m EUR is modest but indeed realistic. 22% of the operating expenditure goes to "wages, administration and overheads", which is viewed by the panel as a rather high percentage.
- The overall delivery structure is satisfactorily described. An Association as a multistakeholder NGO is planned to be established in 2021 for the delivery of Nitra2026. It will be headed by a CEO accountable to a supervisory Board with all financial stakeholders in the city and region represented as well as representatives of civil society. The Programme director will be working conceptually independently and is responsible for the overall quality of the artistic and cultural programme. There is a sound contingency plan in place with many contingency elements built in within the project concept and its delivery.

Capacity to deliver:

- The Nitra2026 candidacy has been approved by the city council in May 2020 and by Nitra self-governing region in July 2020, which is positive.
- The panel is satisfied that the city and region have adequate and viable infrastructure to deliver an ECoC.
- Consideration should be made to ensuring a sound eco system for the cultural and creative sectors as well as ensuring ongoing capacity building.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Nitra proceeds to the final selection phase. The bid is very strong albeit there is room for some improvements over the next months.

The panel found that the bid was based on a strong consultative process in the city and region including relevant cultural actors and infrastructures. The cultural strategies of the city and the region have strong elements of sustainability with transversal plans for strengthening the cultural and creative sector's capacity. Soft legacy is mentioned but the impact of the title on urban development is missing. Indicators capturing the impacts on the city's unique vision could be worth exploring. The programme and cultural heritage actions could be exploited with more innovative aspects. The European dimension could be deepened through more co-productions and by looking at more options for attracting a wider audience in Europe and beyond. The engagement and audience development procedures are sound, although they could be further elaborated with minority groups in mind.

Prešov

The leitmotif of the bid of Prešov is 'From Periphery to Europe', which expresses the intention to bring peripheral arts to the forefront. Central to the envisaged city's visual transformation is 'The 2026 Green Ring'. On the regional level, the longer-term ambition is to develop 'The Green Ring of the Periphery' and create content and cultural infrastructure with 12 district towns.

Contribution to the long-term strategy:

- The city adopted its culture development strategy for the period 2021-2026 on 27 November 2020 and the ECoC is incorporated in this strategy, which is a good starting point.
- However, there seem to be no concrete plans to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors. The plans lack coherence with the essence of the question. The candidate only presents three strategic directions on public services, energy and mobility with no clear link to the cultural and creative sectors.
- Regarding monitoring and evaluation, the focus seems to be mainly on monitoring, while the evaluation plans are less developed, with no KPIs identified and only some concrete measures and targets presented. Other weaknesses are that the monitoring is being proposed as internal to the team only (i.e. no independent evaluators involved).
- Overall, a weakness is that the different sections of the bid are not connected (e.g. there is no indication of how the proposed cultural themes will be evaluated, there is no clear link between the cultural strategy proposed and approaches to delivery, outreach etc.).

Cultural and artistic content:

- Due to the city's location and connections to big highways, the panel has difficulties in linking the concept of the periphery to Prešov. The concept of the periphery becoming central requires further elaboration, and is therefore not fully understandable and coherent at this stage.
- It is difficult to see the connection between the three programme pillars and the content of the cultural and artistic programme.
- The cultural heritage is not much present in the programme and it is unclear how the local aspects of it will be tackled.
- There is insufficient concrete proof of the involvement of the local artists and cultural operators in the conception and implementation of the cultural and artistic programme.
- The core strength of the cultural and artistic programme is the 'Green Ring' project, which is an ambitious, yet well-developed idea. The development of cultural clusters along this ring is also very interesting. However, at the same time,

it is an infrastructure project and its relevance for an ECoC and with that its value for Europe is questionable.

- The panel considers the rest of the cultural and artistic programme underdeveloped and rather conventional. Also, the proposed projects do not relate to the cultural infrastructure that will become part of the green ring, which raises concerns about what events will take place in these venues. A clear artistic vision is lacking here.
- The plans to redevelop the Solivary and convert it into a 'Creative Factory' is an interesting initiative that aims to link the city's local cultural heritage - and the importance of 'salt', as a key concept well rooted in the area with a new generation of cultural and creative entrepreneurs.

European dimension:

- The approach to the European dimension is rather theoretical and does not show how projects will address European themes, promote European diversity and include European partners.
- No proper links with European artists, operators, cities and transnational partnerships can be identified whilst the links established with other ECoCs are limited.
- The panel welcomes that the city has entered the C40 cities and ICLEI networks.
- The strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international audience is not convincing in the sense that it is still underdeveloped in the bid-book and relies on generic considerations that are not closely connected with the projects included in the cultural and artistic programme.

Outreach:

- The panel acknowledges the endeavours made to overcome the disinterest of the local population towards the candidacy. However, it would have expected this would have been overcome at this stage.
- In terms of inclusion, the panel has some doubts regarding the relevance of the approach to involve marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Besides the already independent working group that has been set-up to monitor and propose solutions for the involvement of these groups, the bid mainly refers to the ethnic minorities in the city and their actual cultural facilities, without showing links to any concrete projects from the cultural and artistic programme that involves them.
- The strategy for audience development is rather generic with no concrete tools in place or planned to engage the local audience in the cultural and artistic programme.
- On a positive note, the panel welcomes how the city thinks of culture in a different way, in that it does not want to organise all culture activities in the centre, but also in the outskirts of the city.

Management:

- The city's annual budget for culture has been relatively low in the past five years, with a peak at 1,72m EUR (i.e. 2% of the city's total budget) reached in 2018. The panel, however, welcomes the intention to increase it to 4m (i.e. 4% of total budget) after 2026 to ensure legacy and sustainability.
- In relation to the operational budget, different figures are mentioned.
- At 29,87m EUR, the total operating budget is ambitious but sound.
- The envisaged contribution of the city to the total operational budget of 25% is sound, showing a strong commitment from the city also in financial terms.
- At 5.6m EUR (i.e. representing 21% of the total income from the public sector), the expected revenue from the EU to cover the operational expenditure is

relatively high, without an explanation given on which European programmes will be used to apply for this funding.

- There is insufficient contingency planning that does not list financial shortcomings as a potential risk.
- The city has chosen Prešov 2026, a non-profit organisation, as the delivery structure for the ECoC. The level of artistic autonomy of the Artistic Director is not clear and there is no concrete information about the composition of the Board of Directors and the Supervisory Board. Both will be defined in the Organisation Statute. A description of the cooperation between the local authorities and the delivery structure is lacking. The organogram of the organisation is unclear.
- The marketing and communication strategy does not contain any stand out marketing messages.

Capacity to deliver:

- There is unanimous support for the bid from the city council, while the extent of political support from the region is less clear.
- The question concerning the city's cultural infrastructure is answered by referring to the city's rich cultural heritage and the city transportation system that will be transformed.
- Delivering an ECoC at highest European professional standards requires a critical mass of capacities with the right skills at the right time. With the capacity at hand in Prešov and the region, the panel is concerned about the capacity to deliver within the plan of the bid.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Prešov does not proceed to the final selection phase.

The core strength of the bid is the '2026 Green Ring' concept. However, the bid as a whole comes across more like a regional development project and needs to be developed further to align with the ECoC objectives. The concept of bringing the periphery to the centre is neither clear nor convincing. The cultural and artistic programme is not of the level that could be expected of a candidate city at this stage of the competition and also lacks clear linkages with the '2026 Green Ring' concept. Furthermore, the audience development strategy is underdeveloped, while the panel has serious concerns about the city's capacity to deliver in terms of its infrastructure. The panel, however, encourages the city to continue their well-developed plans for the 'Green Ring' with its clusters of culture and the revitalisation of Solivary (Saltern) and the Creative Factory.

Trenčín

The Trenčín bid takes its point of departure in a need to catapult the city into the 21st century and move it closer to Europe. A driver for reaching this goal is believed to be a process of people opening hearts and minds to creativity and curiosity. The Trenčín ECoC2026 concept and philosophy for this process is learning to appreciate the past and cultivating the future expressed in the theme "Cultivating Curiosity", which is based on three programme strands: Respecting the Common Ground, Creating the Playground and Opening towards Unknown Grounds. The Trenčín bid includes the surrounding region in what is described as a European cultural hub - "blooming place for both citizens and visitors" that links city, villages and rural areas and merges

people and lifestyles. Overall, the Trenčín ECoC concept is clear and simple and has great integrity.

Contribution to the long-term strategy:

- A cultural strategy did not exist in Trenčín prior to the bidding phase. While a Cultural Strategy to 2040 has been prepared and is awaiting city council approval in the beginning of 2021, it is important that a decision is in place before the deadline for submission of the final bid book.
- The panel sees a clear position of the ECoC in the long-term strategy as well as plans for strengthening capacity of the cultural and creative sectors and transversely across other sectors. As part of the cultural strategy, a three-tier system called Fields of Curiosity will be created to foster cooperation between cultural and creative sectors with social and economic sectors. However, the panel would welcome a clearer idea on how this links to developing long-term connections between the cultural, economic and social sectors.
- The panel sees a thoughtful approach to evaluation that completely reflects the ECoC goals – with an emphasis on data sharing and engaging people with the process. It is refreshing to see a way of articulating indicators that is not dominated by economic indicators alone.
- The panel welcomes the plan to launch an ECoC legacy Institute of Cultural Participation in 2022.

Cultural and artistic content:

- Overall, the cultural concept is well developed and contains many interesting projects and some with quite innovative aspects.
- The vision is coherent and realistically rooted in the local specificities and there has been an extensive involvement of local artists and cultural organisations in the conception of the programme. Interesting topics are tackled such as the impact of the army located in the city. However, overall, the cultural and artistic programme needs further development with more outstanding programme segments.
- The cultural and artistic programme has a strong and innovative approach to cultural heritage - arching past to present - and building infrastructure connected to these programme lines. It will be important for the second round to clarify the nature of the cooperation with for instance ICOM, ICOMOS, Europa Nostra etc.

European dimension:

- The panel recognizes the candidate's overall understanding of the concept of what should be the European dimension in an ECoC project.
- Whilst some good work has been done on developing connections with relevant European cultural networks, the view of the panel is that this work should be pursued in order to get a better understanding of these networks and how to build on them.
- There are some project examples that cover common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history but there is no clear narrative to link these aspects to the artistic vision and current European themes.
- It appears from the bid book that the current programme has few international partners outside neighbouring countries. From the presentation, the panel understands that there is a plan to involve 90% of European countries in the programme and reach a total of 300 partners. This is an encouraging plan that the panel looks forward to seeing described in the next round.
- While a plan to stream 50% of activities online is ambitious and responding well to challenges of pandemics and climate consciousness, the panel questions how the

city will manage to work on still making it attractive for visitors to come to Trenčín for ECoC2026.

Outreach:

- Through online and face-to-face questionnaires, collecting input for the candidacy at festivals and through focus groups, the city has involved the local population and civil society in the preparation of the application.
- In the approach towards marginalized and disadvantaged groups, efforts are directed mainly at the younger generation. The panel also got confirmation during the presentation session that the ECoC programme would target all minorities, which - in the panel's view - is an important element to ensure ownership by all communities that are present in the city and surrounding region.
- The panel sees the aspiration to stream 50% of activities online in an innovative and interactive manner as a very important and relevant development to reach a broader audience, especially in the current stage of a global pandemic. However, it will be necessary to develop solid plans on how to attract visitors from around Europe to Trenčín both physically as well as virtually.
- An audience development plan will be managed by the Institute for Participation Trenčín (PIT) in cooperation with several partners. Partners are encouraged to elaborate and tailor their own audience development strategies and to implement them. Cultural ambassadors will support citizens in bringing life back to inner blocks and support tools and education will be offered to artists and organisations. A special volunteer programme will be set up with the help of Novi Sad.

Management:

- The city's annual budget for culture has been constantly under 1m EUR in the last past years, representing 1,53% of the city's total budget in 2020. The panel, however, welcomes the intention to increase this budget to 4% after 2026 to ensure legacy.
- The total operating budget, at 20.2m EUR, is realistic and sound. However the contributions expected from the city and the region (respectively at 2,0m and 0,8m EUR, i.e. representing 9.9% and 4% of the income from the public sector) are very low. There is on the contrary a high dependency on the contribution from the national government (15,2m EUR, i.e. 75,3% of the income from the public sector), which the panel sees as a risk, which is however tackled to some extent in the contingency planning.
- Whilst, on a good note, the financial commitment from the local level is formal, the region's financial commitment is expected to materialise only later this year.
- The "wages, overheads and administration" budget line, at 8,38m EUR (i.e. 38.6% of the operating expenditure foreseen), is extremely high, which raises concerns in the panel.
- The panel is concerned that only 45.3% of the operating budget is allocated to the cultural programme, because, in its view, this may not be sufficient to fund the ambitious projects mentioned in the bid. There is a need for the panel to be reassured that the programme presented in the pre-selection bid book (but even more so, the more elaborated programme that will be included in the final bid book) can be realised in good conditions for the budget indicated without compromising the overall artistic quality and the impressive plans for international cooperation.
- Creative Institute Trenčín is described as the delivery structure for an ECoC and is envisioned to be set up in the second round of the bidding phase. Roles and responsibilities as well as selection processes have been defined and are considered by the panel to be sound and workable.

Capacity to deliver:

- The panel welcomes the strong political support expressed at city and regional levels respectively in July and September 2020. With the interconnectedness of city and non-city throughout the bid, in the panel's view, it is paramount to ensure regional support also at stakeholder and community levels, and the panel is pleased to see that there is overall public support for the candidacy.
- The panel understands that the infrastructure in Trenčín is limited and takes note there are plans to develop this infrastructure in the coming years. It is necessary to ensure that venues are available to host an ECoC programme in good conditions, and the panel welcomes the cooperation envisaged with the Slovak army to use the ODA building.
- The plan for capacity building is welcomed and very necessary given the limited numbers of qualified cultural professionals for both delivering an ECoC and ensuring legacy. The challenge will be how to attract the right capacities and to keep them in Trenčín.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that Trenčín proceeds to the final round of selection. While the panel sees a lot of potential in the bid, there are areas where it needs deeper consideration.

The panel sees clear coherence between the vision and the cultural strategy. It is realistically rooted in the local specificities and integrating a coordinated urban development vision with the role of ECoC clearly embedded. Interesting and relevant local and European topics are tackled. The associated strong capacity building programme including the sector professionals and institutions, but also the citizens, as well as the creative industries strategies are also important assets. The engagement and audience development procedures are sound. The European narrative and the artistic vision need more outstanding and daring content. The strong dependency on national government funding and high budget for overheads and administration raises concerns. Financial considerations need further development also on programming.

Trnava

The city of Trnava takes part in the competition because it aims to restore the ability of people in Europe to speak, discuss and connect. It therefore presents a cultural and artistic programme that is centred around the role of silence in the art of debate, connecting and conversation. The bid plans to involve the Trnava self-governing region into the ECoC project.

Contribution to the long-term strategy:

- The city's cultural strategy was approved by the city council on 8 December 2020. The ECoC is incorporated in this strategy that runs until 2030.
- However, the panel does not see how the concept of "Silence" links to the cultural strategy and impact goals mentioned.
- The bid lists clear plans to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors, which the panel considers a positive element.
- However, it is unclear to the panel how the team views the future role of the city as an event producing organisation versus an enabler organization aiming to strengthen local cultural and creative actors.

- The long-term cultural, social and economic impact the title would have upon the city has been well visualised, showing linkages with the UN's SDGs. However, there is no mention about the impact from the urban development point of view.
- The monitoring and evaluation plans lack sufficient detail and are not embedded in a defined methodological framework. The candidate mentions some indicators that are quantifiable, but does not explore qualitative measures sufficiently, including on how to understand and capture the value of their core concept, 'silence'. The monitoring and evaluation will be carried out by local and international experts, which is a positive element.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The panel sees that the concept of silence has a lot of potential from an artistic perspective, but feels this potential has not been fully utilised in the cultural and artistic programme. The panel was also confused with the idea of silence as a remedy for contemporary social and political challenges. Moreover, the link between this very universal topic and the city of Trnava is unclear.
- Local artists and cultural organisations have been involved in the conception and implementation of the cultural and artistic programme.
- At the centre of the cultural and artistic programme are the capacity building programme and four flagships that are followed by other medium-sized and smaller projects, which further complement and develop the topics of silence and well-being. However, the panel considers the content of the cultural and artistic programme is underdeveloped and not concrete enough yet at this stage.
- The panel welcomes the strong presence of the independent cultural scene in the artistic and cultural programme, but is missing sufficient examples of input from the established cultural scene.

European dimension:

- The European dimension is weakly developed at this stage, with insufficient links to the cultural and artistic programme.
- The bid is rather generic in explaining how the ECoC project would promote the cultural diversity in Europe and address the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history, as well as current European themes
- The panel does not see how the cultural and artistic programme features European artists, or whether cooperation has been set up with operators and cities in different countries and transnational partnerships.
- The cooperation with other ECoCs is limited, which is in line with the city's strategy though.
- The strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international public seems to be rather philosophical and needs to be made more concrete.

Outreach:

- The panel feels there is insufficient demonstration of involvement of local population and civil society in the preparation of the application. The bidding team appears to focus on the concept of civic involvement over its actual realization.
- The team plans to work with identified marginalised and disadvantaged people as advisors to the programme board.
- The strategy for audience development is underdeveloped and seems to be particularly focussed on children. In this sense, no concrete tools are in place to engage the wider local audience in the cultural and artistic programme.
- The panel in particular misses a clear approach of how to involve the new workers and the football fans in the city in the cultural and artistic programme.

Management:

- The city's total annual budget for culture has been relatively low in the past four years and also shows a decrease.
- At 30m EUR, the operating budget for the ECoC project is quite ambitious.
- The panel considers it positive that the contribution of the Trnava self-governing region in the operating expenditure is equal to that of the city at 5m EUR (i.e. representing each 17,5% of the income expected from the public sector), reflecting potentially a commitment of these two levels of territorial governance in financial terms.
- Contingency planning is rather superficial at this stage with no mitigation measures of the weaknesses identified.
- A newly established non-profit organisation will be responsible for the implementation of the ECoC. Although it is refreshing to see a new approach to management, the panel considers the management structure quite complicated and has doubts about how solid and feasible this structure is.
- The international department cannot be found back in the organogram.
- Further information regarding the marketing and communication strategy is required for a better understanding of its objectives and effectiveness.

Capacity to deliver:

- The city council has unanimously agreed with the candidacy.
- There is an approved partnership between the Trnava region and the city of Trnava to apply for the ECoC title.
- The team presents every place in the city as a potential stage for their cultural and artistic programme and emphasises the public realm as the main area to work with. Although this is of course an opportunity, this strategy needs to be operationalised better to make it more concrete.
- No information is provided on the capacity of the city and region concerning accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Trnava does not proceed to the final selection phase.

The bid addresses topics like the oversupply of information nowadays, leading to disinformation, conspiracy theories and fake news. These are relevant and actual topics that need to be discussed today. However, the content of the bid and ideas for implementation are unconvincing. The concept of Silence has a lot of potential from an artistic perspective, but it has not been fully utilized in the cultural and artistic programme, while some approaches proposed are confusing. Furthermore, the European dimension is rather underdeveloped. The bid also seems to be prepared by rather a small group of people and misses a clear strategy on how to involve certain groups in society. The panel is not convinced of the delivery structure with too many colloquial bodies taking decisions. However, the aim to improve the city's cultural management structure is a good starting point for further development.

Žilina

The ECoC bid of Žilina derives from a wish to dream big. With the ECoC ambitions, the city of Žilina and its region wish to capture the right moment to deal with the complex legacy of their past and jointly work on refining the future. The dream is translated into the ECoC theme “Window of Opportunity”. The programme plan for bringing about the aspired positive change for Žilina and the wider region translates into three strands: Flow of Nature, Future Factories and Borderless Identity, with a Manifesto of 11 values and principles.

The past history of civil society organisations alongside cultural institutions rising to the challenging era of the 1990’s led to a unique generational experience that gives authenticity to the aspiration of Žilina to strengthen the cultural and creative ecosystem sustainably as a means of defending European and democratic values.

In this pursuit, the city of Žilina takes part in the ECoC competition as a transnational consortium with the cities of Bielsko-Biala in Poland and Frýdek-Místek in the Czech Republic. The name of the project is Žilina Beskids2026 - derived from the Beskid Mountains area, which connects the participating cities.

Contribution to the long-term strategy:

- The city of Žilina started to work on its new cultural strategy: Žilina Creative Vision 2035. On the municipal level, until now, the cultural strategy has been included in the Plan for economic and social development (PHSR), adopted in 2014. The city plans to adopt the new strategy in May 2021. At the same time, the Žilina self-governing region is working on its new SMART Cultural Strategy, due to be approved in March 2021.
- The strategy offers clear insights into how the city plans to apply tools and build programme elements to strengthen the capacities in the community, civil society, cultural scene, artist mobility and residence programmes, art factories - technical production supports, environmental capacities - education and technical support, capacity building in the public sector and in the related industries. However, the exact links between the cultural and creative sectors and the different capacity building programmes and tools are unclear.
- The long-term strategy for the city of Žilina, which incorporates the ECoC, takes a transversal approach, where all sectors are interrelated. It offers a very detailed overview with well-defined and precisely described expected impacts in the cultural, social and economic fields. The aspiration to work across the region is realistic and has great potential. It could bring about meaningful impact and legacy.
- The evaluation plan is well conceived, reinforced by a broader - and credible - research plan, and has clear linkage to the outreach plans as well as the cultural programming priorities. The plans for evaluation do not include explicit plans to capture the impact of the proposed ‘Manifesto’. This could be developed further.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The cultural programme contains many interesting elements and covers most art disciplines, but it could be enriched with more original and memorable segments.
- References to traditional culture are integrated in all three main programme lines. Linkages between cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, cultural expressions are mentioned. Although the examples of ways of bringing arts closer to sports, outdoor culture and traditions are sound, the panel questions the innovative and experimental aspects of this.

- Many of the project ideas are inspired by the local intangible cultural heritage; however, tangible heritage such as buildings, artworks or archaeological sites do not seem to have been exploited.
- Local artists and cultural organisations have been actively involved in the bid from the beginning with key cultural operators taking part in the decision to run for the ECoC title. The involvement of the local cultural scene in the 1st and 2nd bidding phases as well as in the preparatory and realisation phases is well described.

European dimension:

- The European dimension lacks focus and is still insufficiently exploited.
- Historical topics and themes such as WWII, totalitarian communist regimes and industrial revolutions are explored with clear project examples to illustrate these common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history. The current European themes such as democracy and trust in public affairs, rise of nationalism and populism, freedom of media and environmental issues are also explored with project examples to illustrate this objective. The bid, however, does not clearly explain the value of these projects for Europe, although the selected topics carry significant potential in the EU context.
- The objective to promote the cultural diversity in Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding between European citizens is adapted into a strategy on a) Diversity at home, b) Cross-border dialogue and c) EU mobility and opportunities for intercultural learning - each linked to concrete projects in the programme.
- The panel notices that the programme focuses mainly on the city and the challenges it faces albeit with partners from neighbouring countries - specifically the Beskid Euroregion. Although very beneficial for Žilina-Beskids and the region, the panel has concerns that the programme in its current form may not resonate satisfactorily in Europe in line with ECoC requirements. Moreover, it is unclear to the panel how the Žilina-Beskids will manage to attract a broader European audience - physically and digitally.

Outreach:

- The Outreach plan is well worked through with several innovative projects and sound inclusion of minorities and the wider range of citizens and people with special needs.
- The panel welcomes the strategy to support the existing local expertise and provide sufficient support to the field organisations to empower the target groups by means of creative tools. Concrete projects are given to illustrate how the target groups will be involved.
- A complex strategy for audience development for each participating institution is being developed and looks promising. Involvement of schools through creating a network of teachers is interesting.
- Given the lessons from the COVID-19 lockdown situation the panel does not see provisions in the outreach programme for rolling out segments of the programme digitally.
- The bid alerts to the fact that there is scepticism to the ECoC project; however, the panel does not see a plan on how to address this scepticism.

Management:

- The overall operating budget of 23.5m EUR is reasonably divided over the various levels of territorial governance (State, City and Region). There is a clear strategy in place on how regional municipalities and partner cities will contribute with and

what they will get in return. 18% of the operational budget allocated for “wages, overhead and administration” is quite high.

- In the bid a wide set of programme projects and many large-scale capacity building projects are presented - however, the overall budget is only 23,5m EUR. The panel is uncertain about how the city will be able to ensure that the ECoC programme can be realised fully with this budget without compromising quality and international cooperation.
- The envisaged governance and delivery structures are satisfactory and have provision for establishing an umbrella European organisation for cross-border cooperation.

Capacity to deliver:

- The city council unanimously approved the candidacy in February 2020 and partner cities have signed a Memorandum of Cooperation encompassing the resolution on joint candidacy together with a shared cultural programme and some investment projects.
- Although capacity building elements are envisaged in the programme, it is unclear how the city will ensure capacity building in the partner cities.
- The city and region possess a solid cultural infrastructure, which will be supported by developing new or reconstructing existing cultural facilities.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that Žilina-Beskids' ECoC bid proceeds to the second round of the competition. It is a strong and solid bid with room for improvements.

The Žilina-Beskids bid is well rooted in the problems of the city and region and has strong support from the local community and the local arts and culture scene, as well as political support. It is genuine and responsive to local challenges that are common to many other places in Europe, even though the ECoC legacy needs to be further reflected upon and planned. The participation and outreach process is extensive and convincing. Given the stated scepticism towards the ECoC, the panel is questioning if a strategy is in place to address this problem. The topics proposed for the artistic and cultural programme have a high European relevance, but the programme does not have many innovative and memorable elements. Moreover, it needs to be further coordinated, exploring the full potential of the proposed topics at a European and artistic level.

General recommendations

The following recommendations apply to all three shortlisted candidates.

The panel considers it necessary that all shortlisted cities develop their bids for the final selection in order to reach the required level of quality of such a demanding project as the European Capital of Culture. There is a considerable step-change between proposals at pre-selection stage and those at final selection. The panel expects significant progress in the final bid books to reflect the recommendations of the panel.

The shortlisted candidates are advised to continue studying carefully the **six criteria in the Decision** and the specific comments to all candidates in the assessments above.

A study of the evaluations of recent ECoCs (since 2013) and monitoring reports of recently designated ECoCs may also be of value. These are available on the European Commission's ECoC web page.

General

Since last year Europe and the world has entered into a new reality as a consequence of COVID-19. The pandemic has created major disruptions, anxiety, fear and limitations. In the panel's view, there is a need for a new approach to align culture and major yearlong events with this new world, notably new procedures and expectations. This refers to every level of operation, from artistic expression to administrative work. A more elaborated contingency plan with due alternatives should be an integral part of such long-term planning as the ECoC. This is a great challenge for us all, also for the bidding cities, but equally - an opportunity to reflect on new and sustainable culture models.

The bid book at final selection becomes, *de facto*, a contract for the designated city. It sets out the artistic vision and the key objectives, projects, directions, financing and management of the programme. Close concurrence with the bid book is a factor when at the end of the monitoring phase the panel makes a recommendation to the Commission regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri prize.

In the final selection bid book, candidates must cover all the questions in the final selection questionnaire included in Annex 1 of the call for applications. For the next and final stage of the competition, the panel expects a considerably more developed section on the proposed artistic vision, the cultural and artistic programme and the European dimension.

The selection panel (and the subsequent monitoring panel) has a responsibility to protect the long-term brand of the European Capital of Culture programme. Candidates should be aware that with the level of international attention now being given to ECoCs, policy decisions over a wide area (not just cultural) may affect the reputation of the city, and in turn the ECoC image. The panel would expect to see candidates being aware of this and taking steps to minimise international and national negative images of their city through policy changes rather than marketing/PR.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

A formally approved city cultural strategy needs to be in place before submitting the final bid book. The panel will expect a tighter focus in the bid books of the final round: cities should indicate the priorities of the cultural strategy that are connected to the ECoC project, its target outcomes and how resources will be changed over the next few years. The expected legacy of the ECoC should also be described.

An ECoC is a transformational opportunity for a city. The pre-selection bid books set out in general terms the objectives of why a city is seeking the title. The objectives should be clearly put, as there is a tendency to perceive ECoC as a panacea for every city challenge. An important aspect that requires elaboration is the expected visible change in the urban landscape. The panel would expect a more focused (and shorter) explanation, which can link to the programme vision, themes, activities, and through monitoring and evaluation, to the outcomes in the subsequent legacy. There is considerable literature and research available for cities to see the range of cultural, urban development and social benefits of an ECoC.

The evaluation sections of the bid books should be given more attention in the second phase (especially research in order to establish baseline data) and the panel expects to receive ECoC indicators of success. The monitoring and evaluation should not be overwhelmed with (just) statistics and data gathering though. The final bid book should focus on the priority objectives for the ECoC (rather than those for the entire cultural strategy). One of the priority areas should refer to how the ECoC will meet the various elements of the European dimension criterion.

Capacity building should be based on a wide understanding of specific capacity building needs of all kinds of cultural players and hospitality industry and services. The cultural and creative sectors (CCS) should be understood as a transversal topic of the cultural and artistic programme and must be linked to a related mapping and needs analysis of the sector. Capacity building should therefore also encompass the CCS.

Cultural and artistic programme

The focus of the final selection is the operating programme between 2022, when the ECoC will be formally designated and, in particular, the ECoC year of 2026. The panel recommends the three cities to have an open minded and daring artistic approach and not be afraid of new, experimental ideas. Deeper considerations on the visions presented in the bids could offer more clarity overall. Consistency between the vision selected and all other elements of the bid must be ensured. Innovation and originality is required not only in theory but also – even more importantly – in practice. The panel will expect to see more details on the programme, its projects and partners. Indeed, the cities should set out more clearly not only their artistic vision, but also the programme and projects; differentiating between partners who have indicated firm interest and those who are still only potential or possible partners. ECoC programmes normally cover a wide range of art forms and include the increasing development of creative interventions in social issues. An approximate budget should be shown for each major project for the panel to understand the relative balance of projects in the programme.

The panel recommends a more focused and detailed approach to digital cultural content (not just social media promotions and interactions) as integral parts of the programmes. Furthermore, more attention should be given to the sustainability of the projects – including cultural, ecological, social and economic wise – so as to ensure an expected substantial legacy of the ECoC.

European dimension

The panel recommends that all three cities revisit this criterion with great care. Although with a promising approach to this criterion, the proposals failed to engage fully with the challenges. The teams focused mainly on their cities' image and relations within Slovakia and/or the neighbouring regions whereas the panel would like to see a deepening and widening of the programmes that ensures a more embracing European dimension. That a city aims to market itself in Europe, is not in itself a strong interpretation of the European dimension. An ECoC enables a city to promote itself internationally but that is only half of the story.

Developing European cooperation requires strategic approaches and actual partnership with artists as well as cultural organisations and institutions throughout Europe. It cannot be limited to relations with other, former and future ECoCs, existing European cultural networks or twin cities.

The European dimension has a two-way direction. It is of course to present to the rest of Europe the city's contribution to European cultural diversity. But an equal focus is on seeking to broaden the understanding and awareness of the city's own citizens on the diversity of cultures in Europe and linking through cultural and other projects with citizens in other countries. It is important to clearly demonstrate how the European Dimension is translated into concrete projects in the cultural and artistic programme. It is this focus on other cultures that primarily differentiates an ECoC from a national city of culture. An ECoC offers the opportunity for a city and its citizens to learn from others in an open way. One important legacy area is the creation of new and sustained partnerships between a city's cultural players and those from other countries.

The panel expects to see a significantly increased focus on European partnerships: co-productions, co-curations, conferences, networking as well as visiting artists/performers. Most recent ECoCs have included European and international partners in well over half their projects. Cities should encourage their cultural operators to be active participants in European cultural networks.

One of the elements of the European dimension criterion for the ECoC title is the ability to attract visitors from the rest of Europe and beyond. The programme has to have its attraction and that is why it is something else than the usual tourist offers of the city and region. The panel would expect to see these attracting programme ideas in the final selection's bid for ECoC 2026. The panel advises to thoroughly consider building a strategic communication plan for the ECoC project as well as to make a connection between the cultural and artistic programme and an international marketing vision.

Outreach

The audience development strategy for the ECoC is expected to be much further developed in the final bid books, including online and offline measures and channels for all identified target groups. The bids should approach audience development from a long-term and strategic perspective, using both online and offline measures.

A special focus should be dedicated to those audiences that are more difficult to reach but crucial for a new "cultural climate" in an ECoC city (e.g. minorities, the elderly, disabled, people outside of city centres or temporarily in the city etc.).

The panel would expect to learn how the audience development policies of the main cultural organisations including independent operators and NGOs relate to the ECoC programme.

The role and contribution of universities (except engagement in evaluation) was underplayed in most of the pre-selection bid books.

The panel appreciates the ideas for the involvement of schools that are already present in all three selected cities. However, all final bids should show a strategic approach (in relation to the ECoC and not just current practises) that illustrate how schools are linked to the ECoC project.

Management

New times of uncertainty require new approaches in management, too.

Special attention needs to be dedicated to the risk assessment in the final bid book. This section should include a thorough analysis of the impacts expected for the

preparation and implementation phase of the ECoC related to the ongoing pandemic and economic crisis focussing on the main issues to be addressed in 2022. The risk assessment analysis of all three bids remains in light of COVID-19 experience.

The panel expects the three shortlisted cities, which all plan in their pre-selection bid books a considerable level of capital expenditure, to carefully investigate whether these investments are actually feasible.

As far as the management models are concerned, the panel recommends learning from other ECoCs' experiences, while not necessarily copying ready-made concepts.

The delivery team play a key role in all ECoCs. The cities should address in a clear and well-informed way the best model to guarantee the quality and independence of the artistic management of the project.

The recruitment processes and planned staffing arrangements from 2022 to 2027 should be outlined including secondments, interns and volunteers.

The marketing of an ECoC should go beyond standard information dissemination tactics to include an attractive narrative of European importance and relevance coherent with the artistic vision. It is important to remember that the marketing of an ECoC is not only about city branding but mostly about a European message that the city is wishing to share with the rest of Europe and requires a thorough communication strategy.

Capacity to deliver

Candidates should re-confirm that their bid book, including the overall vision and concept and the financial commitments, have the formal approval of the mayor, the city (and county/region if appropriate) councils and all political parties. The panel also recommends that all candidates have common understanding and expectations regarding the financial contribution from the national government.

Candidates are reminded that the criterion for an ECoC requires a special programme for the year in addition to the normal cultural offer. The panel expects more information on the managerial capacity in the city/region to manage a programme of the depth and range of an ECoC. Capacity building should not be confused with the implementation of the cultural strategy, but it should be in accordance with local and regional development plans. The cities should also plan strong capacity building programmes as ECoC's scope goes beyond current local capacities. If projects are planned to be funded from competitive EU programmes (e.g. Creative Europe), this should be indicated.

Information on urban development and infrastructure programmes, cultural heritage restoration projects and new cultural premises is useful as background and context at pre-selection. The final selection will focus on those infrastructural projects that directly impact the ECoC programme activities (e.g. a new cultural centre in a restored building that becomes a focal point for community arts projects contained in the programme). A timeline for these projects and the realistic estimate of completion should be given.

The final bid books should clearly indicate how those potential capital projects would be managed (management structures, state-of-play related to the EU ESI-Funds such as the connection with the relevant Operational Programme, timeline and public procurement).

Signed

Jelle Burggraaff (Rapporteur)
Else Christensen-Redzepovic (Rapporteur)
Paulina Florjanowicz (Chair)
Beatriz Garcia
Dessislava Gavrilova
Suvi Innilä
Jozef Kovalčík
Alin-Adrian Nica
Jorge Cerveira Pinto
Pierre Sauvageot
Ján Sudzina (Vice-Chair)

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