



Trenčín

European Capital of Culture 2026

First Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, September 2022

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate Culture, Creativity and Sport
Unit D2

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Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting on 20 September 2022 between the Panel and the team of Trenčín, one of the two European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2026. Trenčín was designated as European Capital of Culture on 8 February 2022 by the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic on the basis of the Panel's selection report¹. Its bid book is available on the Trenčín 2026 website². This report of the first monitoring meeting is addressed to the Trenčín 2026 team and will also be published on the European Commission's website³.

Attendance

The Panel members:

Jelle Burggraaff
Else Christensen-Redzepovic
Beatriz Garcia
Marilyn Gaughan Reddan
Goda Giedraityte
Suvi Innilä (rapporteur)
Anne Karjalainen (excused)
Jozef Kovalčík (national expert)
Hrvoje Laurenta
Jorge Pinto
Rossella Tarantino (chair)

For Trenčín2026:

Mayor of Trenčín
Chair of the Creative Institute Trenčín Board of Trustees
Executive director, Creative Institute Trenčín
Artistic Director, Creative Institute Trenčín
Executive Assistant, Creative Institute Trenčín
International Relations Manager, Creative Institute Trenčín
Outreach Manager, Creative Institute Trenčín

¹<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/designated-capitals-of-culture/2026-finland-and-slovakia#trencin>

²<https://www.trencin2026.sk/bidbook>

³<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/designated-capitals-of-culture/2026-finland-and-slovakia#trencin>

Financial Manager, Creative Institute Trenčín
Marketing manager, Creative Institute Trenčín
PR Manager, Creative Institute Trenčín
Production Manager, Creative Institute Trenčín
Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, Creative Institute Trenčín
Infrastructure Projects Coordinator, Creative Institute Trenčín
Vice-Mayor in charge of Culture, City of Trenčín
City Architect, City of Trenčín

Also in attendance were observers from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture), the Ministry for Culture of the Slovak Republic and the Permanent Representation of the Slovak Republic to the EU.

Report and presentation from Trenčín 2026

Trenčín 2026 submitted in advance of the meeting a comprehensive progress report under the name *First Monitoring Report – Cultivating Curiosity*. The report reflected the process since the city of Trenčín was recommended as ECoC 2026 in December 2021, following the six evaluation criteria of the European Capitals of Culture.

The report emphasised strong enthusiasm and dedication as well as good collaboration between the key partners: the Creative Institute Trenčín (CIT), a non-profit organisation responsible for the delivery of Trenčín 2026, the City of Trenčín and the Regional Government. This has ensured progress in the set timeline despite the long shadow cast by COVID-19 and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, a direct neighbour of Slovakia.

The report also noted the good cooperation with the Ministry of Culture. On a national level there have, however, also emerged challenges in the Slovakian legislation concerning public procurement and existing mechanisms for fund distribution.

According to the report, the main focus after the designation has been on laying solid foundations for the project, such as establishing the organisational structures and recruiting key staff members, e.g. CEO and artistic director for the Creative Institute Trenčín. During the last months, the team has also launched the delivery phase of the cultural and artistic programme and set the foundations for long-term strategy projects.

At the beginning of the meeting, the representatives of the Trenčín 2026 team made a presentation, which complemented the written report. The presentation was delivered by the Mayor, the Chair of the CIT Board of Trustees and the Monitoring and Evaluation Expert of the CIT. During the presentation, it was confirmed that many infrastructure projects were already on their way, and all infrastructure projects should proceed as planned. After the establishment of the CIT, open calls were published for the main management positions, many of which were eventually filled by the same persons who had been responsible for those positions already during the bidding phase.

There is strong political and financial support for the ECoC project in different levels, and this is expected to continue also after the next municipal election in October. According to the presentation, the cooperation with the City of Trenčín has been very fruitful, and several discussions have already taken place with the Ministry of Culture since the designation. It was also mentioned that the CIT team was strongly committed to the monitoring and evaluation plans, and that the research infrastructure is being established in cooperation with the municipality and the University of Trenčín.

Discussion

During the subsequent discussion, the Panel sought clarification on following issues:

Long-term cultural strategy

- The long-term strategy is very ambitious and paves the way for legacy. The Panel, however, wanted to know which were the main legacy projects, and if there was a plan B in case the long-term strategy would not be realised. In its response, the team underlined that there would be tangible and intangible legacy projects. For example, the Creative Cluster Platform, the CIT organisation or the Institute for Participation Trenčín (IPT) as a new Department in the City administration will be important legacies of Trenčín 2026. In addition, the renewed cultural centre and the Fiesta Bridge (a key element of the ECoC bid and the programme for the title-year) are expected to have a strong long-term impact. The team is continuously adjusting their objectives to match the possible changes, but they are convinced that the main legacy projects can be realised.
- The Panel expressed its concern with the various new and existing institutes mentioned in the report and wanted to know how these institutes would be funded. Furthermore, the roles of these institutes and their relations with one another caused some confusion, and the Panel wanted to ensure that the delivery entity would operate together with them as efficiently as possible. The team responded that three main centres would be directly funded through the ECoC budget, while the other initiatives would have different operating models with either already existing financial models or structures yet to be decided upon. The ambition was also that some of them would continue functioning after the ECoC year to ensure legacy.
- The evaluation plan is very detailed and well thought through, and the securing of data access agreements already at this stage was also highly appreciated by the Panel. However, some practical questions remained. The team responded that no director had yet been appointed to the Trenčín Cultural Living Lab (CULL), but recruitment procedure would soon be started. The relation between CULL and CIT has not yet been confirmed, but the primary idea is that CULL is a separate institute, possibly within the University. It could, however, also be located within the CIT as long as the political and academic independence can be ensured. A million euro funding for CULL has been confirmed within the ECoC budget, and the team is also searching for additional funding.

Artistic and cultural programme

- Regarding the programme development, the Panel wanted to know the meaning of 'not commenced' stated in connection with most of the projects in the annex list in the progress report. The team responded that this status note meant that those

projects were not in production phase yet. The team has so far concentrated mainly on building up the programme team and on launching the projects that were planned to be launched in 2022 such as capacity building, Garage and City Reimagined. The programme work is still in accordance with the timeline presented in the bid.

- The Panel also wanted to know, which one project would have the highest potential to draw the international audience's attention artistically, and the team responded that such a project would be Fiesta Bridge, which can also be seen as a bridge between Trenčín and Europe.
- Responding to a question about the open calls with a scope of 40 new projects mentioned in the bid, the team explained that many projects had inbuilt open calls for artists or contents. They will first collect more information from the cultural community and then decide when and what kind of open calls will be organised.
- Regarding a question about the number of events in 2026, the team stated that continuous monitoring and evaluation would be made to adjust the amount and size of events to the audience behaviour.

European dimension

- The Panel pointed out a current issue concerning the management of expectations during war time. How can an ECoC best communicate about the importance of investing in European cultural diversity in times of economic challenges? The team confirmed that this issue had been discussed considerably within the team, and that they believed the focus of the communication needed to be on the programme and projects and how they would also give back to the whole community.
- Regarding the European and international collaboration in the projects, the Panel wanted to know how the team would ensure that the European artists, organisations and cultural networks listed in the final bid would truly cooperate in these projects. The team explained that in the first period they had made contact with many international partners, more than 500 artists and organisations with different levels of collaboration. They have since made a system to constantly inform the partners about the progress in the form of a newsletter, and believe that the collaborations will be realised as planned.
- To a Panel's question about possible plans to join or be active with international professional cultural networks such as IETM, Res Artis and Unesco Creative Cities, the team's response was that both CIT and local stakeholders would be joining many of these networks, and that they also had tools to help the local stakeholders to do so. As Trenčín 2026 has a wide range of residencies planned, Res Artis is an especially important partner. In the summer, they managed to enter Culture Action Europe and Culture Next, and they are also in discussion with Culture Action Europe about a project on Culture for Health.

Outreach

- Concerning outreach, the Panel requested more details about the strategy and plans to stream programmes online. The team can evaluate only later which programmes are suitable and meaningful for online streaming, but the amount is expected to be approximately 50%. They want to be bold and find new ways of exploiting the streaming possibilities. Online streaming is also important for people with disabilities.

- IPT is indicated to have an important role in ensuring access to cultural and community life for everyone in the city. The team explained that the Institute was founded in July 2022. One manager will be employed every year adding up to four managers in total, but also experts and volunteers will help to form direct contacts with people and to ask them what they really need. The aim is to be in contact with people directly, in the streets, including people with disabilities. The Institute for Participation Trenčín will work within other projects, and it collaborates closely with the Outreach department of CIT, which has one employee. Whereas the Outreach department of CIT focuses on participation in the Trenčín 2026 cultural projects and the engagement of all groups, the Institute of Participation focuses more on audiences and involving people in general.
- The Panel wanted to receive more clarification on the roles and tasks of the Cultural Ambassadors, and the team confirmed that they had two functions. They can be co-producers or producers of events, or partners of the CIT projects. But they will also have a communicative role in reaching out to different communities.

Management

- The main organisational challenge pointed out in the report was the compliance with the strict procurement laws in Slovakia, which caused concerns in the Panel. The team explained that 10% of the programme, corresponding to the flagship projects, would be directly produced and run by CIT. But because of the strict procurement laws, CIT is not in the position to sign contracts with the project leaders mentioned in the bid book, i.e. with the organisations that proposed the projects in the bidding phase. The team has been consulting with some former ECoCs who faced the same challenge, and they are working with the Government's procurement experts to find a solution that allows them to decentralise fully the implementation of the projects. The aspiration is that a new law might have to be approved or an exception to be granted for the ECoC.
- The Panel also wanted to know if the recruitment strategy of Trenčín 2026 included a European dimension, meaning a possibility for international recruitments, and the team responded positively. All positions are planned so that work can also be done remotely, and all calls are made on an international level.
- The Trenčín 2026 programme contains many interesting elements that address the challenges of these disruptive times that can be difficult for many people, especially the younger population. The Panel wanted to know how Trenčín 2026 was planning to communicate locally and internationally that the ECoC can be a valuable tool for optimism, looking for new ways, inclusiveness and, more than anything, believing in a bright future. The team ensured their message was that young people could influence and make an impact. For example, The Garage is a project currently run by two young people selected through open call, reaching other young people they would never reach otherwise. There are also many activities in the education system from pre-schools to universities, as well as in other places where young people spend time. The key values of Trenčín 2026, including the European values and curiosity, are strongly present when communicating. Concerning international communication, there will be a plan and strategy on how and what to communicate to the whole of Europe. There will also be communication cooperation with other ECoCs, such as Kaunas.
- The Panel made a remark that the Supervisory Board consisted only of men, and was therefore interested in knowing about the gender policy concerning filling up positions in the boards and the team of Trenčín 2026. The team admitted that

although gender balance goals do exist, they unfortunately do not probably apply now. The most important qualification criteria for them is professionalism, but also the issue of gender balance will be discussed in the board.

- According to the report, the team has developed a contingency financial plan as a response to the growing inflation and threat of a financial crisis that could impact the delivery of Trenčín 2026. However, the Panel did not find this plan in the report and wanted to know if it already existed. The team responded that a preliminary plan had been developed, but it still needed to be discussed on a national level, and therefore it was not yet presented.
- Concerning the Programme Board's structure, the team explained that the Board would be established by the end of this year, and that it would consist of local and national members, internationally recognised artists and cultural managers. The role of the Programme Board will be advisory, not decision-making.

Capacity to deliver

- As the plan for infrastructural projects is very ambitious, the Panel wanted to know if any new risks had emerged that would jeopardise its implementation. The team responded that due to the Covid-19 years and the war, they had to re-analyse the situation. Some projects of a lesser importance might need to be postponed to later years, but at this moment, no major changes were planned or expected.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel appreciates the progress made so far by Trenčín 2026 despite the challenges caused by the pandemic and the war situation. The Panel also positively acknowledges the Mayor's strong commitment to Trenčín 2026 and support to the team, and encourages all key partners to work on ensuring bipartisan, overall political support for the ECoC also in the future.

The Panel wishes to draw attention to following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The Panel is concerned by the multi-layered organisational structure that seems to include several institutes and other organisations with potentially overlapping tasks and responsibilities. The Panel strongly encourages the team to carefully identify the tasks of each unit and cooperation areas to avoid any overlapping functions, and if needed, to simplify the overall organisational structure. Although the process has advanced according to the original timeline, the Panel would like to remind that the delivery period from 2022 to 2026 is very short. The enhancement of practical issues should be prioritised over new structures and spending too much time on establishing their foundations. In addition, it would be advisable to have a timeline for plan Bs, meaning that in case the original plan does not work, what is the deadline for moving to plan B. The Panel would like to request the team to deliver by the end of the year such an organogram that visualises the positions and roles of these different units in relation to each other.

Recommendation 2: Understanding that it takes some time to build up the necessary programme team, the Panel is concerned that the preparations of the programme have not advanced more since the designation. At this stage, it would be good to have a clear plan and schedule for example concerning the potential open calls or other ways how the

programme will be complemented. The programme is the core element of an ECoC and should be prioritised and secured in its preparation. The Panel therefore recommends the team to concentrate even more on the cultural and artistic programme and its management.

Recommendation 3: The Panel shares the team's concern about the present procurement legislation in Slovakia, which is delaying the signature of contracts with projects and thus proceeding with the programme development. Solving this challenge is of utmost urgency and importance to the successful delivery of the ECoC. The Panel therefore strongly recommends all parties involved, including the Ministry, to find a solution to this challenge with the best procurement experts. At best, this can be a shared opportunity of "creative bureaucracy". However, as solutions such as law changes can take a long time, it is important for the team to set a practical deadline by when the best feasible solution needs to be established in order to proceed with the production of the programme in time for a successful delivery in 2026.

Recommendation 4: Regarding monitoring and evaluation, the Panel would like to recommend the team to be ready to establish plan B if the university arrangements are not sorted by springtime, as it is important to set the baseline scene by summer 2023.

Recommendation 5: Concerning the international networks and partners, the Panel would like to recommend the team to specifically ensure that the listed European and international partners are being connected to the accompanied projects from the bid, not merely informing them about the development of the project via newsletters.

Recommendation 6: Considering that the plan for infrastructural investments is very ambitious and that it is so far not entirely financed, the Panel recommends to prioritise the infrastructure projects that are closely necessary for the implementation of the ECoC programme, through a close coordination between the City, the Region and CIT.

Next steps

The Panel remains available for questions and advice, through the Commission services.

The Commission will call for a second monitoring meeting in the spring 2024 and the third and final meeting in the autumn 2025. At the end of the third monitoring meeting, the Panel will make a recommendation to the Commission on whether to grant the Melina Mercouri Prize to Trenčín 2026.

The conditions for the payment of the Prize are specified in Article 14 of Decision 445/2014/EU:

"The prize money shall be paid by the end of March of the year of the title, provided that the designated city concerned continues to honour the commitments it made at the application stage, complies with the criteria and takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports.

The commitments made at the application stage shall be deemed to have been honoured by the designated city where no substantial change has been made to the programme and the strategy between the application stage and the year of the title, in particular where:

- (a) the budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-quality cultural programme in line with the application and the criteria;
- (b) the independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
- (c) the European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final version of the cultural programme;
- (d) the marketing and communication strategy and the communication material used by the designated city clearly reflects the fact that the action is Union action;
- (e) the plans for the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the title on the designated city are in place.”

The Panel would like to thank the Mayor of Trenčín and the Trenčín 2026 team for a very informative discussion, and looks forward to the next developments of the European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending Panel's members

