



# **Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2028 in a city from an EFTA/EEA country, a candidate country or a potential candidate**

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The Expert Panel's report  
Pre-selection stage

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## 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 2028 title between cities in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries or potential candidates for EU membership

The European Commission (the “Commission”) is 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 as amended by Decision (EU) 2017/1545 (the “Decision”) and
- Rules of procedure – Competition of the European Capital of Culture in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries and potential candidates issued by the European Commission and posted on its website in December 2021.

A panel of 10 independent experts was established for the selection process in line with Article 2 of the Rules. The members were appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies (The European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, and the Committee of the Regions). Panel member Anne Karjalainen was excused from the meeting.

The competition takes place in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection. The Commission issued a call for applications in December 2021. Two applications were submitted by the closing date 11 November 2022 by:

## **Budva & Skopje**

### Panel meeting

The panel met online on 16 December 2022. The panel elected Marilyn Reddan as its chair and Else Christensen-Redzepovic as its vice-chair. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality.

Observers from the European Commission also attended the online pre-selection meeting. At the meeting, the panel discussed both applications. Following the discussions, the chair of the panel announced the panel's decision to recommend to the European Commission to invite both bidding cities - Budva and Skopje - to submit their revised bids for the final selection.

Based on this report, the European Commission will invite these cities to submit revised applications. The shortlisted cities should take into account the panel's assessments and recommendations included in this report. The deadline for submission of the revised applications from both cities will be announced by the European Commission along with submission of this report.

The final selection hearing with the two applicant cities will take place in Brussels in September 2023.

At competitions between Member States, two to four panel members pay a visit to each shortlisted city, immediately before the final selection meeting. The ECoC rules of procedure for the competition between cities in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries and potential candidates do not mention the possibility of such visits. However, the panel would like to request city visits to Budva and Skopje prior to the final selection in order to gain a better understanding of the pre-selected cities. The visits do not form part of the formal decision-making process by the panel, but they do provide useful background information.

One of the most important features in Decision 445/2014/EU, governing the ECoC action for the 2020-2033 titles, is the requirement that cities have a formal and explicit cultural strategy. This requirement is to ensure that the ECoC is grounded in a medium-term transformation of the city and its cultural life.

The panel congratulates both cities for having used the opportunity of the bidding process to plan, devise or reinforce cultural strategies in their cities as well as the role of culture - and Europe - in their overall socio-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition. The panel encourages both bidding cities to continue developing and implementing such strategies regardless of the ultimate outcome of the competition.

The panel thanks both bidding cities and everyone who contributed to their bids. It also thanks the European Commission for its advice and administration of the competition.

## Assessments of the candidates

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

The assessment of the two candidate cities follows the general and specific objectives in Article 2 of the Decision and the requirement for the application of the European Capital of Culture to be based on a cultural programme with a strong European dimension created specifically for the title (Article 4).

The European dimension is the *raison d'être* of a European Capital of Culture and must be at the heart of a bid. Both candidate cities will need to work intensely at capturing better the European dimension in their bids.

The panel emphasises that its assessments of the two candidates is based on their respective bidbooks. 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 criteria in the selection process.

The panel offers common and city specific recommendations, to assist both applicants in the preparation of their final bids.

## Recommendation

It is the recommendation of the panel that both cities progressing to the second stage of the bidding process include the following in their bidbooks (in line with the final selection questionnaire included in the call published by the Commission):

- Clear commitment of all candidacy partners and commitments demonstrated in projects and budget lines.
- Clear project outlines, with named and committed local, national, EU and other international project partners.
- Strong European dimension throughout the bid.
- Clear and developed outreach models within the cultural programme.
- Clear organisational structure including clear decision-making processes.
- Clear budget breakdowns with clear distinctions between operational and capital spend.

The panel also recommends that all those attending the hearing at the final selection stage should be active participants in either the presentation and/or subsequent questions and answers session. A further recommendation for presentations is to respect a private sphere between the presentation team and the panel. The panel underlines the prohibition of taking photos, video, or sound recordings during deliberations and inside the deliberation room while the panel is still present.

## BUDVA

The philosophy underpinning the bid of Budva is the human strive towards attaining your maximum potential - of reaching the tipping point, the highest peak or the *TOP* of our capacities. With this message of pushing human beings to rise and strive for the top, Budva wishes to bring about necessary changes, not only in Budva but also in the surrounding areas of Boka and in Europe. The strive to the "*TOP*", however, must not be perceived as wishing to reach perfection but rather it is about the efforts, the journey, the sacrifice, and the will to do better. "*TOP*" as the aim of the strive and the scope and quality of the actions therefore is chosen as the slogan for the Budva bid. The concept of the cultural programme is built around

reaching and overcoming the TOP - of ascending and descending translated into three cycles: Earth, Sunlight, and Water.

The bid was put forward by the City of Budva with the support of the surrounding area of Bay of Kotor, otherwise known as Boka.

## Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city

- Budva is working on a city strategy that covers a wider area and includes both culture and urban development. The strategy will cover a period of ten years and is expected to be in place by July 2023. With this document, Budva wants to put culture first, where culture is understood as a way of life. The panel welcomes this progress but is concerned whether Budva will manage to have the cultural strategy completed and approved by the time of the final selection round.
- The city has undertaken a consultative process and conducted research in order to identify key challenges in the city and its cultural scene. As a result, Budva has identified the following challenges: lack of human capacity, lack of skilled artists and cultural workers, lack of audiences, inadequate spaces, inadequate cultural spaces, depopulation, lack of international presence and connections, lack of media presence and accessibility.
- The bid underlines that the ECoC is included in the upcoming ten years strategy with two main objectives that address the key challenges in the cultural sector in Budva, being the lack of capacity in terms of people and the lack of adequate cultural spaces. It is important to underline that the city's cultural strategy needs to go beyond the lens of ECoC to embrace the wider scope of the cultural scene of Budva - hence, it needs to be sustainable and able to stand alone without an ECoC. For the final round, the panel would like to see more specifically how the ECoC is embedded in the overall long-term cultural strategy of the city and the region.
- The emphasis on wellbeing and sustainability is very positive, as is the notion of addressing the importance of participation and direct community engagement. The panel recommends to also address other challenges such as the city's dependence on tourism, social problems etc. in its strategy. Moreover, the economic angle of an ECoC should be explored for the second round of the competition.
- An ECoC should be able to offer a yearlong programme. The panel is concerned about the choice to limit the cultural programme to just nine months, and not utilising more of the year to reach the objectives of the bid.
- The panel considers the concept workable per se, in its intention to activate the community into bringing about necessary changes - a message that Budva also wishes to take to Europe. However, it lacks a strong sense of place and may not be fully understood outside the regional cultural context. The panel recommends deepening

the work on the concept for the second round of the competition and ensuring that it offers clear examples of relevant strategic actions and communicates clearly the long-term cultural, social, and economic impacts, including urban development that it could engender.

- The different needs of the creative and cultural sectors are carefully identified, which the panel recognises as a sound basis for taking action; the capacity-building programme contains interesting elements such as Nodes. The panel recommends widening and deepening the plans for capacity building in the cultural sector as this is one of the two identified key challenges.
- It is unclear to the panel to what degree the area of Boka with its eight important cities is incorporated in the long-term strategic planning and how these fit in with the ECoC bid. This would need to be explained more clearly in the final bidbook.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluating are satisfactorily developed for the first round of the competition. Whilst it is positive that Budva builds on the good practices from Novi Sad on evaluation and monitoring including the ECoC instrument, the panel recommends also looking at other models that have been successfully applied throughout the ECoC history for inspiration.

## Cultural and artistic content

- The artistic vision of the programme is to "become the *TOP*" through an investigation of what breathes life? What supports life? And what enhances life? It has three strands to communicate this, *Earth, Sunlight and Water*. Although the three strands are easy to communicate and also run logically through the programme and communication, the overall concept has little European relevance and is not specific to the place - as it stands, the concept could be applied to any city. For the second round, work needs to be done to demonstrate its significance to Budva and Europe. Moreover, the panel would like to see more boldness and innovation in the programme.
- Budva together with Boka strive to become a top destination for living a good life in Europe that encourages big visions and dreams whilst staying grounded and connected to the local setting and to Europe. The aim is to reach the *TOP*. The panel would like to challenge the concept by asking what happens after having reached the *TOP*! What would be the better "next"?
- The programme is well structured with clear flagships, a clear flow and clear concepts in: earth, sunlight, water. It contains a wide range of artistic disciplines and interesting elements, and it has a sense of place, which is missing in the overall concept for the bid. The tribes are interesting topics for artistic investigation, with a good EU echo and a potential for involvement of the rural population.



- Overall, the programme has a good selection of artists. The projects on healing mental illnesses could be better explained. Some international partners have been identified but overall, the regional and international dimension of the programme needs developing. The panel would expect to see a much stronger European relevance in the final bidbook.
- Adding “*empathy and happiness*” to the EU values in the project ACT II journey is enticing and timely given the disruptive times we are living in. Further, the programme contains interesting reflections about the concept of the Mediterranean.
- Local artists and cultural organisations have been involved in the conception and implementation of the cultural programme through a two-phased process of open calls. The first process generated over 200 project ideas of which 30 ended up in the 56-project programme. The second phase of the open calls will be in February 2023.
- The description on how the programme combines local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new innovative and experimental cultural expressions is described in too general terms. Although some projects are mentioned, they need to be further explained in terms of the connection between the existing and the innovative and experimental.

## European dimension

- The panel welcomes Budva’s approach to the European dimension by asking questions about what it means to be European and what a European identity is. Promoting the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding is appropriately explained. More developed projects and confirmed partnerships (and corresponding budgets) reflecting this understanding is expected in the final bidbook.
- The panel welcomes that Budva invites Europe and the world to get an insight into understanding the Balkans - the differences in nationalities and religions, the similarities in history, culture and languages and the many causes for feuds and fights over centuries. Moreover, Budva aims at trying to unite the Balkan countries, to find models to overcome differences and to embark on an integration journey amongst the people on the Balkan together with other Europeans such as in the project Brussels-Express.
- The Budva bid adequately explains how it plans to highlight the common aspects of European cultures, heritage, history and integration. The bid addresses major European themes as well as encompasses the European values in the projects. The bid introduces two additional universal values - “empathy” and “happiness” - and the panel looks forward to seeing plans for the above intentions and project concepts unfold in more detail in the final bid.

- Budva plans to cooperate with over 60 cultural organisations from around Europe as partners as well as heading projects. 90% of the planned cultural projects will be created and implemented together with European and international partners. Many former, present, and future ECoCs are mentioned as potential partners along with twin cities from around the world. For the final bidbook, the panel expects to see plans firmed up with detailed and budgeted content along with firm commitments from planned partnerships. Links with other ECoCs should be developed more. An attempt to reach out much beyond the region to cover most of Europe should be made.
- The strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international public has interesting elements of storytelling through SoMe platforms, involving emigrants as ambassadors in their country of residence. Furthermore, Budva plans to lure the relatively experienced and spoilt international as well as local and regional traveller of today to take part in cultural events in abandoned villages in the mountains, mediaeval old towns, on trains, underwater cultural tours etc. The panel underlines the importance of striving towards attracting visitors from Europe and other regions of the world that goes beyond the usual tourist in Budva.
- The challenge for the Budva bid will be how to engage the rest of Europe in topics and issues that are not already covered by other actions. Although very interesting and of great importance, the aim of "explaining the Balkans" needs to be balanced with an overall European dimension programme approach that embraces all of Europe.
- Given the current geopolitical situation in Europe, it is necessary to underline that: "In accordance with the EU Council Regulation 2022/576, Article 51, it shall be prohibited to provide direct or indirect support, including financing and financial assistance or any other benefit under a Union, Euratom or Member State national programme and contracts within the meaning of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046, to any legal person, entity or body established in Russia with over 50% public ownership or public control."

## Outreach

- Budva's outreach plan is well described. It is based on direct consultations with more than 400 people from cultural organisations, NGOs, private sector, informal groups, while some 1500 people from the general public attended various consultation events. The panel welcomes the described wide and broad participation. More visibility and transparency on the public engagement could be reached through social media platforms, a website, newsletters etc.
- Participation of marginalised and disadvantaged groups is mentioned but it is not clear if target groups are limited to people with mental health issues, visually and auditory impaired and seniors? The panel would like to know if ethnic minorities or other - for instance the LGBTQI+ - groups are included in the outreach programme. Moreover,

the panel would encourage a deeper analysis of the non-participation of people in cultural activities, which can have many faces.

- The programme includes activities for and with children and teenagers as well as capacity-building programmes. Programmes for kindergartens and schools are planned to be developed further for the second phase of the bid. For the final bidbook, the panel would like to see more concrete collaboration with the schools.
- For the final bidbook, the panel would like to see a clear plan for digital production and delivery of parts of the programme.

## Management

- The annual budget for culture is around 8% in 2021 and 2023 with plans for reaching 10% in 2029, which is satisfactory. The operating budget of 42 million Euros is sound. 20 million Euros are expected from the city, 20 million Euros from the National Government, 600.000 Euros from the region, 500.000 Euros from the EU and 400.000 Euros from other sources. The city's contribution to the ECoC project is 7 times the city's budget for culture. Is it risky/realistic to spend around 20% of the city's budget on the ECoC? The panel seeks further clarification on this aspect as it is considered a very high risk.
- In the planned budget, the operating expenditures are well balanced with 72% allocated for the programme, 15% for promotion/marketing, 12% for wages and 1% for contingency.
- There are no formal commitments to the Budva ECoC bid from the city, the national government nor the regional cities. Formal approvals from all relevant authorities and stakeholders must be in place for the final selection. The panel notes that the financial contribution from the supporting municipalities are rather low.
- The fundraising strategy is satisfactorily developed for the pre-selection phase.
- The marketing and communication plans are adequate for the pre-selection stage as well as the analysis for promotion and the identification of different techniques for implementation. The SWOT analysis with plans for addressing challenges is adequately worked through.
- It would be important to be clear about possible legislative problems/challenges in Montenegro in the delivery of the ECoC - such as contracting of staff, national and international artists and companies, funding terms and procurement regulations and possible implications.

- The proposed governance structure is sound. However, the panel notes that the pronoun "he" is used for senior positions. It is expected that the open calls for CEO, artistic director etc. will invite applicants from all genders.
- Overall, the panel is concerned about the lack of formal approval from the relevant authorities of the quite high figures committed to various posts in the budget. For the final bidbook, a very detailed and approved budget must be presented.

## Capacity to deliver

- At this stage, the political support is from the Mayor. For the final round of the competition, the panel requires proof that the bid and proposed budgets have been voted for at City Assembly level.
- The Government of Montenegro adopted an official act (Conclusion) to support the Budva2028 project in May 2021.
- The city has extensive experience in organising and staging large-scale international events. The panel expects budgets and plans for the described infrastructure projects to have been approved before the final selection. Moreover, plans must be realistic in terms of budget and time for completion to ensure the smooth delivery of the ECoC programme.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are good and capacities for visitors' accommodation are adequate.

## Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Budva proceed to the final selection phase.

Budva has prepared a first phase bid that is based on a consultative process with the local community and with a varied artistic programme that involves the local cultural scene. Although European and international partners are included in many projects in the programme, the European relevance overall needs to be developed further. The concept with the slogan TOP and three programme strands - earth, sunlight, water - is missing a sense of place and relevance for Europe, whereas elements of many projects in the cultural programme contain a strong sense of place. The latter could be used to strengthen the credibility of the overall concept.

The panel highlights the importance of the long-term strategy being in place for the second part of the competition and would like to encourage Budva to ensure that the strategy is sustainable and addressing the challenges of the city and region and can go ahead independently from the outcome of the ECoC competition.

The panel is very concerned about the missing political approvals of the bid and proposed budgets. The abnormally high city contribution to the ECoC exceeding seven times the city budget for culture is regarded as a very high risk. Guarantees and detailed plans must be in place for the final selection.

## SKOPJE

Skopje is a multi-ethnic and multicultural city and capital of North Macedonia. Despite its rich cultural heritage, it is described as quite poor with multiple problems and challenges that must be addressed urgently such as ethnic division, social exclusion, environmental pollution, marginalisation of vulnerable groups, political polarisation, poverty, unemployment, intolerance, radicalisation, and extremism, etc. Bidding for ECoC is an expression of the city's strong desire to give culture a prominent position in the necessary development plans for inclusive and sustainable urban development. The ECoC candidacy with its slogan "*Culture over Division*" is seen as an opportunity to bring art and culture closer to all citizens and thereby offering everybody moments of joy to their lives, new insights, and inspiration to contribute to building a better future together. In addition, the candidacy is hoped to become an opportunity for arts and cultural professionals to develop networks and partnerships with colleagues from all over Europe.

Skopje is bidding together with the ten municipalities that are part of the city of Skopje as a separate unit of the local self-government.

### Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city

- The panel is pleased to read that Skopje has had a cultural strategy in place since 2012, which covered a four-year period to 2015. The most recent cultural strategy 2021-2030 was adopted in 2021 and is the first ten years' cultural strategy for Skopje.
- The strategy was developed by independent external experts in cooperation with the city's Department of Culture and the SK2028 bid team and has a strong emphasis on legacy. It is however not clear if the strategy is based on consultation and mapping, which would be preferable.
- The strategy has clear goals and priorities in all cultural areas financed from the city budget. Moreover, although the ECoC plan is embedded in the city's cultural strategy, it is clearly sustainable and its implementation and anticipated impact is not dependent on the outcome of the ECoC competition. The panel welcomes the overall objectives of the city that views ECoC not as an "ultimate goal" but more as a platform - a catalyst for contributing to bringing about necessary changes.
- The panel welcomes the approach of aligning the cultural strategy with strategies across other sectors and thereby connecting culture with tourism, education, environmental protection, economic development, spatial development etc. A routine of working with culture across sectors is a good basis for implementing an ECoC. The

panel seeks clarification on the links with education and intercultural integration in the cultural strategy.

- Acknowledging the turbulent times on micro and macro levels in North Macedonia and in Europe, the strategy is "open-ended" with plans to review objectives and adapt to circumstances every three years. The panel welcomes this approach and recommends ensuring participative processes and thorough mappings when reviewing and adjusting the cultural strategy in 2024.
- The panel acknowledges the strong links between the sectors and the clear understanding of the economic impacts of the cultural and creative industry such as gaming etc.
- The ECoC is included in the cultural strategy, but the connection between the two is described in rather general terms. This should be more explicit. The long-term social, cultural, and economic impacts are not described - only the goals are listed. The expected impacts of hosting an ECoC are directed more at advancing city objectives and not touching upon the impact on the broader European vision. Those areas should be attended to in a revised edition.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluation are sufficiently developed for this stage of the competition with external evaluation, timelines and identified indicators with clear attention to baselines. Given that this proposal places the evaluation team within the marketing division, the panel would like to underline the importance of ensuring full independence when it comes to assessing outcomes. For the final selection, the panel would expect clarification on this matter.

## Cultural and artistic content

- The overall artistic vision of the Skopje bid SK2028 is bridging divisions in society through culture. Social divisions are to be overcome via culture and culture is to be at the centre of the city's sustainable development. Skopje wants its inhabitants to conceive arts and culture as "a way of life" and to see culture as a lever for bringing about necessary changes in society by having culture bridge what otherwise divides.
- The topic of bridging differences is highly relevant and important in North Macedonia as well as in the rest of Europe, but the way it is translated in the programme is not sufficiently nuanced. The panel recommends working intensively on developing the programme with a view to giving it a stronger sense of place and relevance to Europe.
- The cultural vision for the Skopje ECoC bid is to take culture beyond the boundaries of art and culture into other areas such as tourism, urban planning, economic development, social welfare, education etc. In order to avoid thematic scattering in its attempt to bridge wide sectors, the Skopje bid's cultural and artistic programme is

structured along four thematic strands: *Art4Hope*, *Togetherness*, *rECOvering* and *CreARTing*.

- Although the programme is well structured around the four thematic strands, the projects are quite basic and would need more development to reach the high artistic standards of a European Capital of Culture. Most projects are of infrastructural nature, conferences, capacity-building activities, place-making activities and the like, and less about the arts and solid artistic and cultural project descriptions. For the final selection bid, the panel would like to see more high quality, bold and innovative arts, and culture projects with European relevance. Moreover, the panel wishes to see a larger portion of the cultural programme with a plan for digital production and delivery.
- A process of various joint activities with artists and cultural professionals has been conducted and the best ideas were collected and used in the programme. Further, questionnaires were sent out to artists, cultural workers, and professionals from different fields of culture to collect their input. Some 306 e-mails were dispatched and 61 answered. To further develop its programme for ECoC2028, Skopje is encouraged to launch an open call for project ideas. For the pre-selection stage, this approach is adequate but for the final selection stage, the panel expects to see a wide and deep consultation with the cultural sector through an open call for projects. It is important to convey clearly to the sector the importance of the European dimension in an ECoC project.
- Plans for combining local cultural heritage and traditional arts forms with new innovative and experimental cultural expressions need further development and must include strong and innovative elements. The panel expects this aspect to be presented more clearly in the final selection bidbook.

## European dimension

- Skopje's objectives for working on consolidating cooperation with Europe are solid. For the final selection, the panel looks forward to seeing these objectives reflected in concrete cooperation project descriptions and costings with European and global partners. Further, the panel expects to see confirmed agreements with partners in the final bidbook. Planning only 1/3 of projects to have European and other international partners does not really constitute a European Capital of Culture. For the final selection, the panel would like to see a much larger part of the cultural and artistic programme including European and other international partners.
- The panel welcomes the intent to work with European topics albeit not many concrete project examples are listed. Cooperation is intended with 21 twin cities in Europe and beyond. The panel welcomes that letters of intent are signed with several future ECoCs as well as candidate cities and that talks have been undertaken with several ECoCs with a view to developing projects. Fully developed project descriptions and firm agreements with partners are expected for the final selection bidbook.

- The panel welcomes the strong engagement and experience Skopje has with Creative Europe projects. This is a good starting point for developing further European projects in the future. Plans for European cooperation projects (beyond Creative Europe projects) need further development. The panel looks forward to finding more extensive plans for European projects described with content, costing and partners in the final selection bidbook.
- Several compelling topics are identified such as insights into the interculturality question, cultural diplomacy in Western Balkans and the reflection on the necessity to put more emphasis on culture in the accession process to the EU. This is very promising, and the panel looks forward to seeing this part developed further for the final selection phase.
- The strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international public requires more concrete work beyond the very general and generic outline presented in the bidbook.
- Given the current geopolitical situation in Europe, it is necessary to underline that: "In accordance with the EU Council Regulation 2022/576, Article 51, it shall be prohibited to provide direct or indirect support, including financing and financial assistance or any other benefit under a Union, Euratom or Member State national programme and contracts within the meaning of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046, to any legal person, entity or body established in Russia with over 50% public ownership or public control."

## Outreach

- It is described how civil society has been involved in the process via questionnaires, objectives, and the volunteer programme. For the final bidbook, the panel would like to be presented to the independent scene in the city and the ten municipalities' cooperation on the bid with concrete examples of their involvement in the programme and its production.
- It is unclear how schools are linked with the ECoC project. For the final selection, the panel would like to see this aspect developed further with concrete examples of collaboration with schools in the ECoC programme.
- The plan to involve 70% of Skopje citizens to take part in at least one event in 2028 is a very bold ambition. The panel would like to understand better the participative aspects of such involvement of the citizens in the Skopje2028 cultural and artistic programme and would welcome a description of this in the final selection bid.
- There is a clear emphasis on inclusion and some consideration for an audience development strategy. The project *Art for disability* is a good example of a project that



addresses people with disabilities. The panel, however, seeks clarification on who are identified as marginalised and disadvantaged in Skopje. Skopje is innately a multicultural city and hence has many minorities, but the panel would like to know how not only ethnic and religious minorities but also LGBTQI+ and other minorities are included in the outreach strategy.

- The panel welcomes the presence of social media platforms for the Skopje2028 ECoC candidacy since 2019, a regular newsletter on the candidacy and a website but it also notices that there has been reduced activity on the platforms in recent years. The panel recommends re-activating these platforms.

## Management

- The budget for culture is 9.87% of the city budget (almost 11.5 million Euros). The panel is concerned to note a remarkable drop in budgets spent on culture in 2029 compared to 2028. The operating budget of 22.5 million Euros is low for a city the size of Skopje and the panel questions if there is sufficient budget to make a substantial impact with European resonance. The city contributes with 10 million Euros and the State also contributes with 10 million Euros.
- The decision to adopt the total amount of funding has not been formalised with the public authorities in the city, the cooperation municipalities, or the State. Formal commitments are expected in spring 2023. The panel must have guarantees from the different public authorities on funding for the final selection phase.
- Although described in general terms and sufficient for the pre-selection stage, the strategy for fundraising from the private sector needs more development. A strategy on fundraising from the EU is not presented. The panel expects to see detailed plans for the overall fundraising in the final selection bidbook.
- The operating expenditures are not well balanced. Only 60% of the budget is foreseen for the artistic and cultural programme, only 10% for promotion and marketing and a quite high percentage of 25% is foreseen for wages and administration. 5% is for contingency. The panel would like to see a better-balanced operating expenditure budget for the final selection. Moreover, the panel would like to know what is behind the 5% contingency.
- The bidbook states that there is no budget foreseen for capital investments but there are several infrastructure projects in the programme. The panel would like a clarification on this for the final selection.
- Renovations of Universal Hall are mentioned in the bidbook, but a decision on renovations has not yet been adopted by the City Council. For the final selection, all planned renovations and possible new infrastructure plans that affect the

implementation of the programme must be voted on by the City Council before the final selection phase.

- The establishment of a Foundation is planned for the delivery of the ECoC. The organisational structure is described satisfactorily except for the position of the General Director. Their role is not sufficiently described. For the final selection, attention to this should be paid to ensure clear descriptions of key roles in the delivery structure of the ECoC project.
- The marketing and communication strategy is described well for this stage of the competition. It will need to be elaborated on further for the final selection, in particular the international aspects of communication and marketing.
- It is important to be clear about possible legislative problems/challenges in North Macedonia in the delivery of an ECoC - such as contracting of staff, national and international artists and companies, funding terms and procurement regulations and possible implications. The panel would like to see reflections on this matter expressed in the final selection bidbook.

## Capacity to deliver

- In 2015, the City Council unanimously adopted the decision to form the ECoC Initiative board, in 2019. The bid has strong support from the city Mayor. Cooperation agreements with the ten municipalities that make up the City of Skopje as well as some other cities from the country are planned to be signed in the first half of 2023. For the final round of the competition, the panel requires assurance that the bid and proposed budgets have been voted for at City Assembly level.
- Skopje has adequate cultural infrastructure. In addition, there are plans to reconstruct the Universal Hall building with 1500 seats capacity. The panel, however, needs a better understanding of the apparent inconsistency on the infrastructural investments where on the one hand, no budget is allocated for infrastructure and on the other hand, infrastructural plans are part of the programme.
- Skopje's assets in terms of accessibility and accommodation capacities are considered good.

## Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Skopje proceed to the final selection phase.

It is a strength that the city of Skopje includes culture across other sectors and that the cultural strategy is aligned with the other sectors. The cultural concept of bridging divides with culture is highly relevant in the current climate in Europe, where there are increasing forces attempting to divide Europe. The concept has great potential, but it must be worked on more

to give it a strong sense of place and a high European relevance. The cultural programme for Skopje's bid is structured around the four themes of *Art4Hope*, *Togetherness*, *rECOvering* and *CreARTing* and contains interesting project elements although mainly of a capacity-building and infrastructural nature. The programme needs substantial work and development into an innovative and bold artistic programme with a strong European dimension.

The bidbook contains several technical mistakes, inaccuracies in page numbers and some inconsistencies. The panel expects to see a coherent and well worked over bidbook with attention to details and accuracy throughout. Moreover, the panel expects to see the results of a more extensive consultative process with all relevant cultural stakeholders and local community in the preparation of the final bid.

## General recommendations

The following recommendations apply to both shortlisted candidates.

The final bidbook needs to be far more coherent and concrete than at the pre-selection phase and hence needs to reflect a considerable step-change from the pre-selection phase. The final selection phase offers an opportunity for shortlisted candidates to develop and consolidate bids and to improve the level of quality throughout, paying particular attention to the attractiveness of the cultural and artistic programme and to a higher European relevance.

The panel expects significant progress in the final bidbooks to reflect the expanded **six criteria in the Decision** and the recommendations of the panel. 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 website.<sup>1</sup>

## General

In more recent years, Europe and the world are facing multiple challenges as a consequence of the global pandemic, climate change, digitalisation and a new geo-political crisis that brings with it significant economic and social implications. The new reality is causing major disruptions across the world along with energy and financial crisis, social inequalities, and uncertainties. At the same time, new perspectives offer the opportunity to rethink the role of culture. It offers the possibility to redesign approaches that will align culture and major yearlong events with a new reality. Procedures and expectations need to be re-evaluated as well as artistic expressions and administrative procedures. Contingency plans must contain solid alternatives and be an integral part of the ECoC long-term planning. The new challenges however also offer the opportunity to reflect on new and sustainable culture models.

It is important to underline that the final selection bidbook becomes, *de facto*, a contract for the city winning the ECoC title. It sets out the artistic vision and the key objectives, projects, directions, national and international partners, financing, and management of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/european-capitals-of-culture>

programme. Close concurrence with the bidbook is a factor when at the end of the monitoring phase, the panel makes a recommendation to the European Commission regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri prize.

It is the responsibility of the panel (which functions as both the selection and subsequent monitoring panel) to safeguard the European Capital of Culture brand. Candidates should be aware that with the level of international attention now being given to ECoCs, policy decisions over a wide area (not just in the area of culture) may affect the reputation of the city, and in turn the image of the European Capital of Culture Action. The panel expects the ECoC candidate cities to take all possible steps to minimise negative and potentially harmful international and national issues connected to their city.

### Contribution to the long-term strategy

A formally approved city cultural strategy needs to be in place before submitting the final bidbook. Bidding cities must clearly indicate the priorities of the cultural strategy that are connected to their ECoC project, its target outcomes, and impacts and how resources will be changed over the next few years. The expected legacy of the ECoC should be clearly described.

An ECoC is a transformational opportunity for a city, but it is not a panacea for every city challenge. The pre-selection bidbooks set out in general terms the objectives of why a city seeks the ECoC title, but for the final bidbook, objectives should be more concrete and realistic. The panel expects to see a very clear link from the objectives to the programme vision, themes, activities, and through monitoring and evaluation, to the outcomes in the subsequent legacy.

The evaluation section of the bidbooks should indicate clearly planned research and processes for establishing baseline data as well as for developing indicators of success. Monitoring and evaluation should go beyond mere statistics and data gathering. The final bidbook should focus on the priority objectives for the ECoC (rather than those for the entire cultural strategy). The European dimension, being the *raison d'être* of a European Capital of Culture, must permeate the bid and run like a red thread throughout the bidbook from the objectives, to the strategies, the programme, outreach and communication to the legacy and not just be explained separately in the European dimension criteria section.

Capacity building should encompass all areas connected to the delivery of an ECoC from the cultural professionals and staff delivering the ECoC over civil servants in the municipalities, the hospitality and tourism sector and other relevant services in the city. 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 cultural and artistic programme between 2023-2028 and in particular, the ECoC year of 2028. The panel recommends both cities to have an open minded and daring artistic approach and not be afraid of new, experimental ideas.

For both shortlisted cities, the artistic vision of the programme must be highlighted, with a further elaboration of the challenges relevant both locally and European-wide and with significant cultural cooperation partnership at EU and international level. Consistency between the vision underpinning the programme and all other elements of the bid must be ensured. Innovation and originality are 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.

The panel strongly encourages the two final candidate cities to forge significant partnerships with artists, cultural institutions and networks both within the EU and globally. ECoC programmes normally cover a wide range of art forms and include the increasing development of creative interventions in social issues. An approximate but at the same time realistic budget should be shown for each major project for the panel to understand the relative balance of projects in the programme and to give evidence of the feasibility of the ambitious programmes the two cities are expected to present.

The panel recommends a more focused and detailed approach to digital cultural content and delivery (not just social media promotions and interactions) as integral parts of the programmes. Furthermore, careful attention should be given to explaining the sustainability of projects and activities – culturally, ecologically, socially and economically – so as to ensure the substantial legacy of the ECoC.

## European dimension

The European dimension being the *raison d'être* of an ECoC the panel expects to find Europe at the heart of both final bids and permeated throughout the cultural and artistic programmes. The panel expects to see a continuous focus on European partnerships: co-productions, co-curations, conferences, and networking as well as artist residences. Cities should encourage their cultural operators to be active participants in European cultural networks.

Although with a promising approach to this criterion, so far the two pre-selected cities have focused their European cooperation mainly on the neighbouring countries and on networking with ECoC or twinning cities. The international cooperation strategy cannot be limited to relations with other, former and future ECoCs, existing European cultural networks or twin cities. Both cities need to further develop the international strategy by forging actual partnership with artists as well as cultural organisations and institutions and to extend its geographical scope throughout Europe and even other continents.

An ECoC enables a city to promote itself internationally but that is only half of the story. Becoming the ECoC means becoming the representative of diverse European cultures. The panel therefore would like to see a deepening and widening of the cultural and artistic programme and actions that ensures an embracing European dimension that goes much beyond reinforcing the cities' visibility and relations within the respective countries and/or neighbouring regions.

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.

One of the elements of the European dimension criterion for the ECoC title is the ability to involve a wide audience from the rest of Europe and beyond, both in the designated city as well as digitally. The programme therefore must contain innovative and bold elements of high international standards that go beyond the usual tourist offers for the city and region. The panel expects to see such extraordinarily attractive programme segments in the final bidbook for both cities.

Emphasis should be paid to the production and delivery of an elaborate digital programme, able to lure and engage European and international audiences. A strong connection must be sought between the digital outreach delivery plan, the cultural and artistic programme and the strategic international communication plan.

## Outreach

The audience development strategy for the ECoC is expected to be much further developed in the final bidbooks, including online and offline measures and channels for all identified target groups.

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, LGBTQI+, the elderly, people with a disability, people living outside the city centres or temporarily living in the city, refugees, people living at the edge of poverty and/or with a lower education level, 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 (beyond the engagement in evaluation) needs to be consolidated in the final bidbooks.

Cooperation with schools must be further developed and the strategic approach that illustrates how schools are linked to the ECoC project (not just current practices) must be described in more detail.

## Management

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

Special attention needs to be dedicated to the risk assessment in the final bidbook. This section should include a thorough and deeper analysis of the impacts expected for the preparation and implementation phase of the ECoC related to the ongoing pandemic, economic and geo-political crisis focussing on the main issues to be addressed in the years to 2028.

Regarding governance and management models, the panel recommends learning from the experiences of other ECoCs models and adapting best practices to the local and national situation.

The delivery team plays 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 2023 to 2028 should be outlined including secondments, internships, and volunteers.

The communication strategy must more clearly set out how to target European and international media. 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 bidbook, including the overall vision and concept and the financial commitments, have the formal approval of the mayor, the City (and, where appropriate, County/Region) Councils and all political parties. The institutional support is fundamental also to ensure the legacy of the project.

The panel also recommends that the candidates show evidence of the level of the financial contribution they can realistically expect from their respective 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 the 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 bidbooks 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

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