



# **Skopje European Capital of Culture 2028**

**First Monitoring Meeting  
Report by the ECoC Expert Panel**

**Virtual Meeting, October 2024**

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## Contents

Introduction.....	4
Attendance .....	4
Report from Skopje 2028 .....	5
Discussion .....	5
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	9
Conclusion.....	10
Next Steps.....	11

## Introduction

This report follows the first monitoring meeting<sup>1</sup> between the panel and representatives for the city of Skopje in relation with Skopje2028, one of the three European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in that year. Skopje was nominated as the European Capital of Culture 2028 in January 2025 by the European Commission on the basis of the recommendation included in the panel selection report in the framework of a competition open to cities in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries and potential candidates<sup>2</sup>.

This report is addressed to the city of Skopje and will be published on the European Commission's website<sup>3</sup>.

## Attendance

The panel members:

Toni Attard

Jelle Burggraaff

Jorge Cerveira Pinto

Else Christensen-Redzepovic (rapporteur)

Marilyn Gaughan Reddan (chair)

Suvi Innilä

Anne Karjalainen

Hrvoje Laurenta

Rossella Tarantino

For Skopje:

Representative for the City of Skopje

Manager of Universal Hall, Skopje

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<sup>1</sup> The European Capitals of Culture action is governed by Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council for the titles 2020 to 2033, which provides for three formal monitoring meetings between designated cities and the Panel. See: [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L\\_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG)

<sup>2</sup> <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-10/ecoc-2028-noneu-country-selection-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture_en)

Also in attendance were observer(s) from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture), from the EU Delegation in North Macedonia, and from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of North Macedonia (EU Affairs section).

## Report from Skopje 2028

Ahead of the online monitoring meeting, the city of Skopje submitted a general report setting out their aims and objectives for Skopje2028.

The chair thanked for the report and invited the representatives from Skopje to give a short presentation. In the presentation, one of two representatives stated that the European Capital of Culture 2028 initiative aimed to unite all citizens through art and culture, fostering joy, fresh insights, and inspiration to create a better future together. He emphasised that Skopje 2028 was centred on providing cultural opportunities for connections with peers across Europe.

He acknowledged that while diverse cultures coexisted in Skopje, the city was facing numerous urgent challenges, including social exclusion, environmental pollution, political polarisation, poverty, intolerance, radicalization, and extremism. He articulated that the designation of Skopje as the European Capital of Culture signified a commitment to prioritising culture within the city's development plans, promoting inclusive and sustainable urban growth.

The representative conveyed that Skopje 2028 was not just about the city; it seeks to integrate culture on a broader scale and the title serves as a catalyst for societal transformation. He expressed the belief that the essence of a city was woven into its cultural fabric, shaped by its citizens and their connections to its stories and identity.

Furthermore, he extended an invitation to artists from across Europe and beyond to bring vitality to shared spaces, reflecting the essence of European values. He remarked that cultural diplomacy was a valued tradition in Europe.

The representative concluded by highlighting that the Skopje 2028 European Capital of Culture plan aligned with the city's cultural strategy, ensuring its sustainability and autonomy, while fostering a collaboration that would enhance the quality of life for all citizens, particularly those from marginalised groups.

The chair thanked the representative from the city of Skopje for the presentation and opened the floor to a general discussion.

## Discussion

In the initial discussion prior to addressing the six criteria governing the European Capital of Culture Action, the panel expressed significant concern that the report submitted by the city of Skopje did not adhere to the detailed instructions provided by the European Commission regarding the specific content required for an ECoC progress report. Consequently, in the first monitoring report, the panel had anticipated a comprehensive overview of the actual progress of the ECoC preparations, assessed criterion by criterion, since the selection twelve months ago and official designation in January 2024. Moreover, the report failed to reflect on the recommendations made by the panel in the selection report. This raises serious concerns about the state of preparations for Skopje 2028 and whether Skopje will, in fact, be able to deliver the high standards expected of a European

Capital of Culture by 2028, in line with the commitments made in the final selection bid book, which constitutes a *de facto* contract with the European Commission.

Following this initial discussion, the panel proceeded to inquire about the status of the six selection criteria for the ECoC Action.

### **1. Contribution to the Long-term Strategy**

The panel enquired about the measures taken for monitoring and evaluation, the identification of who would carry out the monitoring and evaluation, and about the establishment of an early baseline to accurately assess the impacts of the ECoC from the onset of the nomination and onwards, as set out in the panel recommendations in the selection report. In response, the representative from the city of Skopje stated that at this stage, no measures for monitoring and evaluation had been taken and no baseline had been established.

### **2. Cultural and Artistic Content**

The panel enquired about the current status of cultural programme development and expected updates. Quite specifically, the panel wanted precise information on who was working on the cultural programme, how many projects from the bid book were confirmed at this stage, how they planned to continue developing the programme and based on which criteria. Further, the panel wanted to know when the city of Skopje expected to be able to provide an updated Skopje 2028 programme, detailed budgeting, and a project list to the panel. The city of Skopje representative mentioned ongoing cultural activities taking place in the city that were not specifically relevant to Skopje 2028 and failed to provide specifics on the European Capital of Culture-related projects and the special ECoC programme specially designed for Skopje 2028. The city representative noted that an updated programme list would be provided as available, but no clear timeline was established. Further, the panel was informed that once an artistic director had been sourced, she/he/they would work on projects from earlier open calls as well as launch new open calls.

The panel wanted to know how the city of Skopje had engaged programme partners from the selection bid book since the nomination. The representative from the city of Skopje responded that they were in touch with most of them but that no agreements could be made until the establishment of the delivery body.

### **3. European Dimension**

The panel enquired about actions taken to implement the European dimension of the ECoC title, i.e. actions taken or to be taken to set up new cultural cooperation partnerships with artists, festivals, and cultural organisations across Europe and the rest of the world. The representative from the city of Skopje responded that city of Skopje staff working on Skopje 2028 had daily contacts with European partners; however, the organisational structures to support the cooperations are yet to be established. Once in place, direct contact will be established with Brussels, Latvia, and a planned meeting in Paris for the three 2028 ECoCs.

### **4. Outreach**

The panel enquired about how the local populations and minority groups had been involved since the selection time and how they had practically engaged the local population, civil society, minority groups, young people, and the independent cultural scene in the preparation and implementation of the ECoC year. The representative from the city of

Skopje responded that they saw the city's cultural programme and Skopje 2028 as one and the same, and that all cultural events were branded with the ECoC logo. However, specific strategies for inclusive engagement were not detailed. The panel noted with concern this response, as the ECoC programme must be quite distinctive from the ordinary city cultural programme albeit sitting within the city's cultural strategy. Furthermore, the panel noted that no information or knowledge about the idea of community engagement had been shared.

The panel had also noticed that on the communication and outreach page of the Skopje 2028 website, the contact phone number stated appears unusual and wanted to know if this was a mistake or a genuine telephone number. The representative from the city of Skopje was unaware of this and assured the panel that he would look into this.

## 5. Management

The panel enquired about the status of the establishment of the delivery body responsible for managing the European Capital of Culture. Furthermore, they sought clarification on the roles of the two representatives from the city and Universal Hall respectively assigned to the first monitoring meeting, as they were different from the team running Skopje 2028 that the panel had met during the *in situ* visit in Skopje in April 2024 and at the selection meeting in Brussels in September 2023. Additionally, the panel requested information regarding the structure, composition, and functioning of the Board, as well as its relationship with the ECoC executive team and the various territorial levels of government and public administration.

The panel was informed that the independent delivery body for Skopje 2028 should be in place no later than one month after the first monitoring meeting on 8 October 2024, i.e., by early to mid-November 2024 at the latest. The delay in establishing an independent delivery body was attributed to the national and presidential elections in May 2024, which were said to have halted the process. The Board of the new body will consist of 13 members: three from the city of Skopje, three from the Ministry of Culture, and seven publicly well-known individuals sourced through open calls. The representative of the city of Skopje assured the panel that the new body would function within the office of the city of Skopje but independently with its own legal framework. The representative from the city of Skopje informed the panel that the statutes for the delivery body would be sent to the European Commission within a week from 8 October 2024.

The panel expressed deep concern that a delivery body for Skopje 2028 had still not been established, despite assurances made by the Mayor of Skopje during the panel delegation visit in April 2024. Further, the panel was surprised to learn that the interim team previously responsible for Skopje 2028 was no longer engaged in the ECoC process. While no explanation was offered as to why the previous team had been superseded, the representative from the city of Skopje assured the panel that continuity was secured.

Yet, the progress made by this interim team was presented to the ECoC expert panel and the European Commission during the visit; however, this progress was not included in the subsequent report. This omission raises further concerns regarding whether adequate measures have been taken to ensure the thorough transfer of information, established networks, partnerships, and tacit knowledge accumulated by the previous team during the candidacy and interim preparatory phases since the selection in September 2023.

Given the alarming delay in establishing the delivery body of Skopje 2028, alongside the prospect of hiring new staff to manage the preparatory phase of Skopje 2028, the

preparations are at significant risk, as it may be unrealistic to expect a fully operational organisation until well into 2025.

The panel sought clarification on the anticipated staffing and recruitment processes for the Skopje 2028 delivery body, particularly regarding key positions and the anticipated timeline for an updated organisational structure. In response, the representative from the city of Skopje assured the panel that personnel within the municipality were currently working on the project to replace the previous team and that general recruitment strategies had been developed. The plan includes a mix of direct appointments by the Board and open calls for key positions, such as the CEO and Artistic Director, who will then be responsible for recruiting the remainder of the team necessary for the delivery of Skopje 2028. It is also anticipated that some staff members may be seconded from other departments, including the Ministry of Culture.

It was indicated that a fully staffed office was expected by the end of the year, and an updated organisational structure would be provided. The panel was informed that five individuals from different departments in the city of Skopje were currently working on Skopje 2028 preparations, with plans to employ between 20 and 30 people by Q1 2025.

The panel noted that in the submitted report it was mentioned that the main task of the Skopje 2028 delivery body was to develop the necessary cultural infrastructure for the successful execution of the programme. However, the panel highlighted that a key aspect of a European Capital of Culture was the development of a high-quality artistic programme with a strong European dimension. This is even a legal requirement per Article 4, paragraph 2, of the abovementioned Decision 445/2014 of the European Parliament and the Council, as also reflected in page 3 of the call for submission of applications to which the city of Skopje responded<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the panel sought assurance from the city that this aspect would also be safeguarded within the proposed delivery body and that, alongside new cultural infrastructure in 2028, there would indeed be an ECoC programme taking place in these venues. The representative from the city of Skopje assured the panel that they would fully comply with the commitments outlined in the bid book regarding the delivery of a European Capital of Culture programme in 2028.

## **6. Capacity to Deliver**

The panel noted that following the recent elections there had been significant political changes at the national level and that the process had severely impacted the progress of the preparations for Skopje 2028. With local elections approaching next year, the panel wanted to know how a potential political shift in the city might impact the progress on Skopje 2028—whether it could be further jeopardised and what measures were being taken to ensure its successful delivery, regardless of which party might be in power after the next elections. The representative from the city of Skopje responded that the only measure really possible at this stage was to ensure the independence of the delivery body with a four-year mandate to be established to implement Skopje 2028.

Furthermore, the panel enquired about the status of the financial support for the project—specifically seeking assurance of the 129 million Euros foreseen solely for the operational budget in the final selection bid book, as further assured by the former Minister of Culture during the final selection hearing in Brussels in September 2023—not to be confused with the capital expenditure budget of 43 million Euros. The panel also wanted to know if financial agreements with the Ministry of Culture had been signed and who would, in fact, manage the ECoC budget.

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<sup>4</sup> [CALL FOR ECOC 2028 EFTA EEA EAC/A04/2021](#)



The Skopje 2028 representative responded that there was strong political support and alignment between local and national authorities. On the budget, the city representative informed the panel that both city and national authorities were in open conversation about the overall ECoC project for Skopje in 2028 and agreed that they would fully support the project. No financial guarantees have been signed at this point. He further underlined that Skopje 2028 was not only a prestigious project for the city, but also of great value to North Macedonia. Therefore, it is in the great interest of both city and national authorities to ensure full compliance with the conditions for being granted the European Capital of Culture title for 2028.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The panel wishes to draw attention to the following conclusions and recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** It is crucial for Skopje 2028 to establish an independent delivery body as initially anticipated in the selection bid book. This body should be fully operational with a clear mandate and equipped with the necessary resources as outlined in the selection bid to oversee the implementation of the European Capital of Culture year. The creation of this body will ensure that cultural activities are managed efficiently and are free from undue political influence, which is essential for maintaining artistic integrity and credibility.

**Recommendation 2:** In order to mitigate the negative effects of the substantial delay in the preparatory phase of Skopje 2028, it is crucial to ensure the full transfer of know-how, partner contacts and agreements, networks and general tacit knowledge from the bidding team that has also worked on various aspects of the preparatory phase until recently. Further, ensuring this transfer of knowledge will also mitigate the risk of negative reputation amongst local and international stakeholders and assist in building up trust with stakeholders, thereby ensuring a continuous atmosphere of trust in the Skopje 2028 project.

**Recommendation 3:** It is paramount that the cultural programme for Skopje 2028 is clearly a unique programme of very high international standards, with a strong European dimension specifically designed for the ECoC year—hence, regular cultural programmes and events in the city of Skopje and partnering municipalities do not form part of the ECoC programme.

**Recommendation 4:** Open calls for projects that involve public funding often need public procurement processes that have to adhere to very strong regulations, in which the artistic quality of projects does not always come first. The panel would like to stress the importance of not losing sight of the artistic quality when assessing applications. When administering open calls for projects, it is important to manage the expectations of all parties involved properly in order to safeguard the ECoC brand. Failing to deal with this optimally can lead to severe tensions, negative communication flows, and parts of the cultural sector turning against the ECoC Action.

**Recommendation 5:** The European Capital of Culture Action is innately European, and the European dimension must be at the heart of an ECoC programme. The European dimension ensures that an ECoC is an international programme and not solely a domestic event. Hence, the European dimension must permeate the entire cultural programme as well as the associated activities, including marketing and communication. It is of utmost importance to keep this fact in mind in all aspects of the daily work in preparing your ECoC programme and processes.

**Recommendation 6:** Skopje 2028 must greatly enhance its efforts to foster cultural partnerships across Europe. This includes establishing collaborative projects with European cultural institutions, organisations, and artists to ensure that the European dimension of the ECoC title is pronounced and meaningful. Active participation in European cultural networks and important conferences and meetings in the next years should be prioritised for capacity building and for establishing the necessary networks and building meaningful partnerships for collaborative projects for Skopje 2028.

**Recommendation 7:** Skopje 2028 must develop a strategy for the visibility of Europe in Skopje and the partnering municipalities that includes addressing the European themes listed in the final bid book, connections with cultural operators and their peers in Europe, co-creation processes, and invitations for hosting network meetings and conferences.

**Recommendation 8:** Developing a comprehensive strategy for community engagement is imperative. This strategy should include targeted outreach to diverse groups, including local populations, minority groups, young and old people, and the independent cultural scene. Engagement initiatives should be designed to include these groups in the planning and execution of the ECoC year, ensuring that the event reflects the community's diverse voices and contributes to social cohesion and inclusion.

**Recommendation 9:** Skopje 2028 needs to improve financial transparency and management. This includes a clear distinction between budgets allocated for cultural programming, on the one hand, and infrastructure development, on the other hand. Regular public reporting and audits should be instituted to ensure that funds are being used as intended and to maintain public trust. Additionally, it is vital that Skopje 2028 adheres to the financial commitments outlined in the bid book, with strict compliance to ensure accountability.

**Recommendation 10:** Increasing transparency through public communication is crucial. Skopje 2028 should make the bid book and all progress reports publicly available to ensure transparency and to foster trust among stakeholders and the general public. Regular updates, including challenges and changes to the programme, should be communicated clearly and openly. This will not only enhance public engagement but also allow for community feedback and participation in the shaping of the ECoC year.

**Recommendation 11:** The Skopje 2028 website should be further professionalised and updated as soon as possible, and all social media platforms connected to Skopje 2028 should be designed and administered by professional communication staff. All communication platforms should have English language options.

**Recommendation 12:** It is essential to establish clear communication channels between the delivery body, the city authorities, national Government, and the community stakeholders. Regular stakeholder meetings should be scheduled to facilitate dialogue, update on progress, and gather feedback. This will ensure that all parties remain informed and engaged throughout the process.

**Recommendation 13:** A comprehensive risk management plan should be developed to identify potential risks associated with political changes, funding uncertainties, and other external factors. This plan should outline mitigation strategies to address these risks and ensure the continuity of the ECoC project.

## Conclusion

The meeting underscored the critical areas where Skopje must substantially improve to fulfil its commitments as one of the three European Capital of Culture 2028. The city is tasked with adhering strictly to the promises outlined in its winning bid, particularly the

creation of a high-quality cultural programme with a strong European dimension. While the representative from the city of Skopje presented ambitious milestones aimed at fostering cultural connections and addressing urgent social challenges, the panel recalled previous assurances made during the delegation's visit to Skopje in April 2024, which were not upheld.

The panel strongly hopes that this time, Skopje will deliver on the commitments articulated previously and confirmed during the first monitoring meeting, and that essential elements missing from the progress report will be swiftly addressed. The panel requires immediate access to all pertinent information not presented during the meeting, including the statutes of the delivery body, assurances of the level of political and financial commitments from the Ministry, the city of Skopje, and other partners as delineated in the selection bid book, a detailed cultural and artistic programme with corresponding budgets, an organisational structure, monitoring and evaluation plans, and a communication and marketing strategy.

Clarity regarding the upcoming milestones is imperative, particularly concerning the recruitment of the CEO, the Artistic Director, and other key staff by the end of 2024. The panel emphasises the importance of maintaining a robust channel of communication with the European Commission regarding Skopje 2028. Additional online meetings with the European Commission and the panel may be scheduled in the coming months to ensure that the Skopje 2028 project gets fully underway, potentially followed by in situ visits for further engagement and oversight.

As Skopje prepares for this monumental year, it is vital that the city addresses the recommendations put forth by the panel. Establishing an independent delivery body and sourcing highly qualified staff, ensuring the transfer of knowledge from previous teams, fulfilling budget commitments, creating a distinctive cultural programme, enhancing transparency and community engagement, and developing strategic partnerships will be essential to the success of Skopje 2028. By taking these steps, Skopje can not only meet its obligations but also leverage this unique opportunity to transform its cultural landscape and strengthen its position within the broader European cultural community.

## Next Steps

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

The Commission will call for a second monitoring meeting in autumn 2026. Prior to that, the panel requests an updated progress report by the end of January 2025 and possible other follow-up actions to ensure that the city of Skopje is on a good path for delivering an ECoC in 2028 of the high standards required.

At the end of the third monitoring meeting that will take place in the autumn 2027, the panel will make a recommendation to the Commission on whether to grant the Melina Mercouri Prize to Skopje 2028.

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.*

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*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 a 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 representative of the city of Skopje for a frank discussion and looks forward to the next developments of the European Capital of Culture project.

**(Signed) all attending panel's members**

