



Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2030 in Belgium October 2024

The Expert Panel's report
pre-selection stage

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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 in 2030 in Belgium. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985. The title “European Capital of Culture” has previously been awarded to four cities in Belgium, namely Antwerp in 1993, Bruges in 2002, Brussels in 2000, and Mons in 2015.

The ECOC 2030 BE Committee, consisting of representatives of the three administrations and cabinets of the three ministers of Culture of the Flemish, French and German Speaking Communities of Belgium (hereinafter referred to as “the Managing Authority”), is the authority responsible for organising and managing the competition in Belgium, which is governed by Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”). It issued the documents for the competition for the 2030 European Capital of Culture title in Belgium, in particular the call for submission of applications and the rules of procedure for the competition.¹

A panel of 12 independent experts was established for the selection process, in line with Article 2 of the rules of procedure. The European Union institutions and bodies (European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions) designated ten members of this panel, while the Ministers designated two members.

The competition takes place in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection. The call for submission of applications was published on 27 October 2023. Six applications were submitted by the closing date of 2 September 2024 by: Bruges, Ghent, Kortrijk, Leuven, Molenbeek, and Namur.

Panel Meeting

The panel members met in Brussels on 21-24 October 2024. One panel member was excused for health reasons. The panel elected Jelle Burggraaff as its chairperson and Annick Schramme as its vice-chair. All panel members signed a declaration of non-conflict of interest and of confidentiality and gave it to the Managing Authority ahead of the pre-selection hearings. Representatives of the Managing Authority and of the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers took no part in the panel’s deliberations or decision.

At the pre-selection hearings on 21-23 October, each candidate presented its case (30 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (60 minutes). The panel deliberations took place on 24 October.

At a press meeting on 24 October, the chair of the panel announced the panel’s recommendation that the Ministers invite **Leuven**, **Molenbeek**, and **Namur** (in alphabetical order) to submit revised bids for the final selection stage.

¹<https://www.ecoc2030.be/documents>

Next Steps

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

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

The deadline for the submission of revised applications will be announced on the same day by the Managing Authority to the three candidates on the short-list.

The final selection meeting is scheduled to take place in Brussels in September 2025. The precise date will be communicated by the Managing Authorities concurrently to the three candidates.

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

Thanks

The panel members would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in this pre-selection phase of the competition. The panel was very impressed by the high quality of the bids, which demonstrated a deep understanding of the ECoC Action and its potential impact. In particular, the panel noted that all the cities have used the opportunity of the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies as well as the role of culture and Europe in their overall socio-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition.

The panel encourages all the candidate cities, including those not recommended for the short-list, to continue with the development and implementation of their respective cultural strategies. The panel wishes to thank the European Commission for its advice and the ECOC 2030 BE Committee for their excellent administration.

Assessment of the candidates

In its assessment of the candidates, the panel noted the general and specific objectives in Article 2 of the Decision and the requirement for the application to be based on a cultural programme with a strong European dimension created specifically for the title (Article 4).

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

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

- Management,
- Capacity to deliver.

One of the most important features in Decision 445/2014/EU, governing the ECoC action from the 2020 titles on, is the requirement that cities have a formal and explicit cultural strategy. This is to ensure that the ECoC is grounded on a medium-term transformation of the city and its cultural life. The panel would therefore like to remind the candidates proceeding to the final selection, that the strategy should cover the ECoC year and include plans for sustaining cultural activities beyond the ECoC year.

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

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

Bruges

Bruges, a UNESCO World Heritage City with a population of 119,500 residents and eight million visitors annually, has submitted its bid for European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2030, centred on the theme "The Art of Conversation". Bruges2030 aims to use the city's cultural heritage and innovation to address key societal challenges, including climate change, diversity, poverty, and the effects of technological advancements. Bruges has a rich and varied cultural sector, in which unique actors from different disciplines bolster and form cultural communities that are continually growing. The bid also includes 9 neighbouring towns, such as Beernem, Blankenberge, and Knokke-Heist to mention a few of them, in its programme.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The bid explains the shift the city intends to promote with its candidacy: to enhance the legacy infrastructures and cultural professionalism engendered by Bruges 2002 and to put emphasis on human relations through the art of conversation. The panel appreciated this intention. At the same time, it expected that throughout the bid the lessons from Bruges 2002 would have been further investigated to bring a valuable distinctive contribution to the present bid.
- The Bruges Cultural strategy runs until 2030 and is aimed to foster interaction between contemporary cultural expressions and heritage, promote accessibility and reinforce the role of the city as a cultural creation hub in the region.
- The plans to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors are strong with a number of tangible actions listed in various fields.

- The bidding process served as a vehicle to enrich the conversation on how to improve the cultural strategy and introduced eight focus points. This is very much welcomed. However, it is not clear whether a new strategy going beyond 2030 is to be drafted and how these additional elements are to be built in.
- The expected long-term links with economic, touristic and social sectors could also have been further developed. To address the issue of over-tourism and to mitigate a possible increase in visitors due to ECoC 2030, the city intends to broaden the project's regional dimension, which the panel sees as a positive development. However, the bid does not thoroughly discuss this pressing issue.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluation are generic at this stage.

Cultural and artistic content

- The main theme of the programme "The Art of Conversation" is intended to serve both as a goal and as a tool. Overall, the panel failed to capture the innate connection between the theme chosen for the ECoC project and the cultural DNA of the city of Bruges.
- The objective is to encourage dialogue between people and organisations, between towns and rural areas, and between the past and the present. The team believes that this should help address such urgent topics as climate change, poverty, diversity, artificial intelligence, online connection but offline isolation, alienation, an ageing population, people fleeing their homelands, pressure on the quality of education and healthcare, polarisation, etc.
- The cultural and artistic programme is process driven. It consists of 30 pilot projects that are the outcome of an open call. Although the methodology to test and develop projects through a piloting process is commendable, the panel was not convinced that the proposed working method would provide the team with sufficient time to develop them into a concrete programme with solid projects for the final selection bid. The panel also noted that the scale of the projects were predominantly small and on a local level.
- According to the team, approximately 100 people were involved in preparation of the bid via open calls, however, it remained unclear to the panel what would happen with non-selected projects and how projects from future open calls would be included in the final programme.
- Besides some exceptions, there were no potential partners listed alongside the projects.
- Although the team claims that combining local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative, and experimental cultural expressions forms part of the city's cultural DNA, the panel lacked more elaborated project examples even for this stage of the competition.

European dimension

- The overarching idea of the bid, i.e. addressing a growing polarisation and isolation in our societies, has a strong European relevance. The intention to engage the undervalued voices in the conversation and to embrace critical and diverse positions to create connections between different cultures and subcultures in Europe is also highly valued by the panel. From this perspective, the idea to set up a satellite

operation in a network of ten European cities to spread the “art of conversation” method can be considered as an inspiring and promising initiative.

- Nevertheless, the bid stays at a too superficial level when pinpointing the current EU issues the ECoC year intends to explore, nor is it clear on how it wants to bring European citizens from diverse cultures and subcultures into that conversation.
- The idea of initiating a dialogue between residents and tourists is very interesting, particularly as it offers international visitors a diverse cultural experience. However, this aspect warranted a more thorough exploration, especially in clarifying how this idea would be implemented.
- The project intends to rely on the wide international networks the city and local cultural operators can display; yet the plans to deepen these connections with European artists and cultural organisations as well as with former and future ECoCs are not clearly explained and therefore not convincing.
- The team expressed their wish to use digital tools while underlining the importance to keep live conversations instead of developing a digital programme. However, the panel noticed that having a solid digital strategy could have been an interesting additional way to develop Bruges’ programme, responding to the over-tourism issue.

Outreach

- Bruges has more than 200 cultural and sociocultural NGOs and diverse community groups. Possible collaborations with various social organisations are mentioned in the bid book. However, the panel would have appreciated the inclusion of more specific action plans with regards to community engagement.
- New-comers and immigrants, people living in poverty, seniors and disabled people are target groups of the outreach programmes. The panel appreciated the aim to develop new methodologies to hear and engage the voiceless - harder-to-reach and/or harder-to-understand - target groups. However, concrete examples of such efforts could have been mentioned to help get a better understanding.
- The involvement of the education system is rather underdeveloped at this stage of the bid. The panel welcomed the idea of a Cultural Education action plan for Bruges 2030 but would have liked to have more information on particular tools of collaboration with different levels of education.
- The panel was impressed by the high involvement of volunteers in the city (25% of inhabitants), yet, missed information on how these people would be involved in the ECoC’s volunteering strategy.

Management

- The city budget for culture represents 14% of the overall municipal budget, with plans for raising it up to 15% in 2030. Although the prospective increase is limited, the share of the budget allocation to culture is significant and shows the strong commitment of municipal authorities to culture.
- The total operating budget of the ECoC amounts to 75 million euros. 81% of the budget is planned to come from public sources (respectively 15, 25 and 20 million euros from the Federal Government, the Flanders regional government and the City of Bruges), while the remaining 19% will be covered by the private sector. While

the contribution from the Federal Government is secured, the remaining 45 million euros are to be confirmed in the second round.

- The revenue expected from the private sector, at 15 million euros, is very ambitious. This target is based on the sponsorship policy of the city's main economic players, but the fund-raising strategy is not fleshed out in the bid.
- Although no large-scale infrastructure is envisaged, the planned capital budget of 73,8 million euros is considerable and will be used to adapt or complete a number of heritage buildings. The financial allocations from the city and the region are to be confirmed in the second round.
- Whereas the team mentioned the possibility of assigning the responsibility of the delivery agency to Bruges Plus, the legacy organisation of Bruges 2002, the panel expressed its concern that plans for the delivery agency remained undefined and that the organisational structure for the delivery of ECoC was not sufficiently clear.
- A marketing and communication strategy is presented with a convincing action plan.

Capacity to deliver

- The city council endorsed the bid book on 23 August 2024. On the regional level, all nine partnering municipalities signed a letter of intent for further cooperation.
- The city has a very well-developed cultural infrastructure to host the title with clear plans for investments, well-defined projects and timelines. The panel appreciates that the new museum project BRUSK and the BRON research centre are to be completed before 2030 and sustainable adaptations for protected historical buildings will be carried out as needed.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are very good, as well as the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel does not recommend that the bid of Bruges proceeds to the final selection phase. The concept of "The Art of Conversation" is an interesting method to test and develop projects, however, the panel failed to capture the connection between the ECoC theme and the cultural DNA of the city itself. In addition, the panel expresses its concern on the feasibility of the proposed method to develop a solid programme in time for the final selection. The panel would have welcomed a stronger emphasis on how the ECoC project is embedded in the cultural strategy of the city to ensure its legacy. The European dimension explores relevant and urgent European themes. Yet, it remains unclear on how European citizens will be engaged in the conversation. The panel also lacked the theme of overtourism to be tackled as an important issue within the programme of a city hosting 8 million tourists a year. The bid presents a sound operating budget to host the ECoC title with an investment of 75 million euros and the panel appreciates the strong commitment of municipal authorities to the bid and the inclusion of a wider territory. The panel commends the city's well-developed cultural infrastructure and strong assets in terms of accessibility and hospitality for visitors.

The panel encourages the city of Bruges to continue building on the good work it has initiated with 'the art of conversation' as its long-term strategy to enhance the city's diversity.

Ghent

Under the title “Toopen/Together-Cultural recharge for a common future”, the ECoC 2030 project of city of Ghent (477,000 inhabitants) is aimed to promote cultural democracy as a new relational model between institutions and communities, which enhances the cultural ethnic diversity of Ghent (and other European cities) and provides equal cultural opportunities to everyone, breaking the silo between periphery and centre as well as between social and cultural sectors. The bid intends to provide a new way out of the “paradox of cultural progress”, where the investment in creativity policy, based on rules, specialism, and bureaucracy, have taken prominence over imagination. This paradox is also nurturing a feeling of disconnection between citizens and their governments. The proposal is shifting towards a new vision of “cultural capital” that invests more in people and collective action rather than in rules and systems.

The theme of the city’s bid is 'toopen', combining the Greek 'topos' (place) and the Ghent dialect 'tuupetegoare' (all together), promoting collaborative cultural programming in open workspaces for artistic and social innovation.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The city is engaged in an extensive bottom-up process spanning from 2018 until June 2025, aimed to design a new cultural strategy spanning until 2040. The pillars of the new plan are: connection, sustainability, freethinking, and wonder. The idea to contribute to a culture of trust, reducing bureaucracy was considered as a strength of the proposal.
- As part of its long-term plan, Ghent intends to enlarge the regional dimension of its cultural strategy, building a cross-border relationship with the Middelburg North Sea Port District in the Netherlands and new cultural bonds with the surrounding area comprising 22 municipalities.
- The bid provides a detailed mapping of its cultural and creative sectors and a clear analysis of the challenges they are facing, such as a silo attitude of cultural operators, ethno-cultural diversity, bureaucracy, and low cultural participation of people living in the periphery. The plans to strengthen the capacity of the CCS are well described. On the other hand, the expected long-term links between these sectors and the economic and social domains, though sound in itself, could have been more elaborated.
- The ECoC project is aligned with the key pillars of the strategy. Likewise, the long-term strategic objectives are well articulated and connected to the vision outlined for ECoC, although the European dimension is not explored.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluation are sound for this stage, providing adequate references on data sources and possible evaluators. The methodology draws on interesting theories (ABC of the Self-determination) and exchange of practices with other ECoCs is anticipated.

Cultural and artistic content

- The mission of the cultural and artistic programme is to create a city of resistance and resilience together with the physical and mental space for people to feel genuinely at home and contribute to active and cultural citizenship, both locally, regionally and in Europe.

- There is not really a general theme or concept to define the programme. “Toopen”, used as the heading for the bid, rather refers to a method or a process for the programme’s development. Toops involves collaboration or pairing and has several layers and elements. Due to this, the projects presented in the bid book form an exemplary programme. Although this participatory approach is interesting and valuable, it makes the assessment of the cultural and artistic content difficult, since it is more focused on the process than projects, as required for this stage of the competition. While the method is refreshing, the panel is not convinced that there is enough time to develop a concrete programme with solid, worked-out projects for the final bid book.
- The programme consists of three lines: Wasteland as a Wellspring, Water as a Weaver, and Shared Ownership. There are also twelve values, and three learning principles used to define the programme. The panel considered this structure to be rather complicated to ensure a clear outline of the programme and communication.
- The programme lists 24 project ideas with possible international partners listed. The team envisages that 30% of the programme will appeal to international audiences. However, the panel ascertains that the presented programme framework and themes have an overall local mindset.
- There is a clear connection between cultural programmes that combine local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative, and experimental cultural expression.

European dimension

- The themes developed in the programme could potentially have a strong European relevance, but they are not deeply investigated at a European level. The panel deems that a higher exchange with international artists, peers and future thinkers should have brought valuable insights to scale up at European level the topics assigned at the local level.
- On a positive note, the position to collaborate with cultural organisations that work in marginal and challenging areas or outside the traditional networks is interesting and consistent with the vision of the bid. The list of potential partner artists and cultural organisations from Europe and the Global South provided in the presentation is sound.
- The bid gives evidence of the networking activity with past and future ECoCs, and some possible exchanges and collaborations are pinpointed.
- The strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international public could have been further developed, as it is rather theoretical at this stage with insufficient information on practical implementation matters. Although the plans for the digital delivery of the programme to reach people remotely are not detailed, a potential capacity is acknowledged as well as the intention to embrace digitisation as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Outreach

- As more than 50% of the inhabitants of the city have different cultural backgrounds: Turkish, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, etc, the team puts emphasis on ethnic minorities. It is evident to the panel that diverse communities are fully embedded in the process which could lead to an impactful ECoC that would radically shift the approach

towards cultural engagement. However, not many details were provided on how this would manifest itself in the ECoC programme beyond the bidding process.

- The panel welcomes the team's aim to emphasise dialogue, where every voice should be heard and respected. However, concrete projects with educational systems, schools and higher education institutions are underdeveloped in the bid.
- A clearer plan for the volunteering strategy would have been appreciated.

Management

- The city has a high annual budget for culture of around 55,5 million euros, which has been confirmed over the last 5 years, while its share over the total budget has dropped from 5.2% in 2020 to 4.3% in 2024. The panel welcomes plans for raising it up to 6% in 2030, with a contribution of each policy area.
- The operating budget for Ghent 2030 amounts to 65 million euros and the planned revenues are well balanced with 92% public and 8% private funding. The planned public contributors are the Flemish Region at 30 million euros, the City at 10 million euros and the Federal Government at 15 million euros. Apart from this latter, the financial commitments are to be confirmed in the second round. The planned target of 5 million euros (corresponding to 8% of the budget) from EU programmes is very ambitious, but it is grounded in the proven capacity of the city in raising EU funds.
- The private sector revenue of 5 million euros (8% of the total operating budget) is achievable and based on a solid fundraising strategy.
- The distribution of the operating costs is not very well balanced with 57% dedicated to the programme and a high share of 8% to the "others" category (including research, monitoring and evaluation, inflation, risk management, and reserve budget).
- The non-profit organisation created in 2022 to manage the bidding process will also be the delivery structure, with the plan to enlarge the representation for stakeholders (including citizens).
- The organisational structure is not very clear and reflects the complexity of the "toopen" approach. While the participative/co-creation process embedded in the "toopen" method could work well in the design phase, the panel would have needed more clarity on the decision-making process and the structure to manage the shift to the finalisation of the programme and to the production and delivery phases.
- The marketing and communication plan is sound for this first stage of the competition. Built around the three learning principles of the bid, it contains some innovative aspects, as for example the use of alternative social media platforms, in line with the Ghent Manifesto that emphasised the value of new digital tools and data analysis at European level. Yet, the communication power of the concept "toopen" (referred to as a non-existent word) should be further investigated.

Capacity to deliver

- The bid book was validated by the Council of Mayor and Alderpersons on 20 June 2024 and across parties by the City Council on 24 June 2024 (unanimous support). The Province of Zeeland confirmed its support on 4 October 2023. Ghent has also signed a declaration of intent with the North Sea Port District and the Dutch city of Middelburg. 22 partner cities of the Ghent Reference Region, not yet formally endorsed, expressed their support on 29 March 2024.

- The available cultural infrastructure is convincing both in Ghent and in partnering municipalities. Ghent does not plan to build new cultural infrastructure. Instead, the city plans to extend and/or optimise use of existing empty spaces, investing in sustainability, in both the ecological and social sense.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are very good and the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is convincing.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Ghent does not proceed to the final selection phase. The bid is aimed to promote cultural democracy, giving power and cultural opportunities to many unvoiced people so as to enhance the diversity of the city. The panel welcomes the team's aim and cutting-edge approach. However, the focus was placed more on the process itself than on the result, and the panel has doubts that this approach can lead to a solid programme with concrete projects in the final round. The themes developed in the programme have a potential European relevance but are not deeply investigated at the European level. A higher exchange with international artists, peers and future thinkers would have brought valuable insights to scale up the project at a European level. Diverse communities are fully embedded in the process, and this could lead to a radical shift towards cultural engagement. Yet, the plans explaining how this will manifest in the ECoC programme beyond the bidding process remain generic. The panel notes that there is wide institutional support for the candidacy and that the city has the capacity to deliver the programme. The operating budget is sound. Yet, the governance and organisational structure of the delivery body is quite convoluted.

The panel welcomes the team's aim to give voice to diverse invisible communities and recommends the city to proceed in the elaboration of the long-term strategy through this approach, investigating other EU programmes, like the New European Bauhaus.

Kortrijk

Kortrijk, having slightly over 80,000 inhabitants, presents itself as an 'urban village' at the crossroads of cultural and geographic borders, which it aims to redefine and bridge through the ECoC project. The city presented a bid book on the theme "Just Durf" (Just Dare), which encapsulates a call to courage and innovation, inviting the community to embrace challenges boldly and creatively for tackling regional and societal problems, especially overcoming mental health issues. The programme aims to transform Kortrijk from an industrial hub into a dynamic, creative city, as recognised by the UNESCO in 2017, which fosters social and cultural growth and enhances community well-being and cultural inclusivity. The Kortrijk bid involves the South West Flanders region (13 cities and municipalities, including Kortrijk), which has an interesting diversity of professional cultural organisations and is a place for many well-known events.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The city adopted its new Cultural Strategy spanning to 2035 and resulting from a two-year participative process connected with the bidding endeavour. The Strategy is defined around 4 thematic fields: "100% welcome" (a city where everyone is welcomed), "Bursting with talent" (a city where everyone can develop their talent),

“A dynamic ecosystem” (regionally and internationally connected) and “Space, space, space” (activating public space). The panel welcomes the city’s strong cultural planning based on extensive consultation and the long-term perspective.

- The bid envisions the ECoC project as an accelerator for the Cultural Strategy. A clear alignment between the ECoC programme and the four strands of the strategy is presented.
- The bid presents a good analysis of the local cultural and creative ecosystem, highlighting its dynamism and diversity as well as the challenges it is facing. To address the latter, the DURF2030 platform, tested in the bidding process, will further develop into a toolbox that will serve as a model for a “Creative Solutions Factory”. It is, however, not clear how important the impact of this toolbox can be on the sector as a whole in the city and in the region. The expected long-term links between the cultural and creative sectors and the economic and social domains also should have been further developed in the bid.
- The anticipated impacts are investigated under different angles (cultural, social, economic, ecological/urban and image/identity). They are identified in detail and connected with indicators and with the seven specific objectives resulting from the participatory process. Whereas the overarching objective is to improve wellbeing, the panel is of the opinion that the strategic links between culture and mental health should have been better articulated.
- The monitoring and evaluation strategy is well designed. There are plans for collecting baseline data and attention is paid to access and participation, envisioning the creative involvement of artists to gather data or the use of a dashboard drawing inspiration from interactive games. The panel also welcomes the selection of the methodological tools.

Cultural and artistic content

- The artistic vision, titled “From Border//Line to Fl@xible Futures”, aims to enhance mental resilience and community strength through cultural and technological revolutions. The vision uses the historical significance of flax in the region as a metaphor for transformation and resilience, symbolising the city’s journey towards a more adaptable and robust cultural identity.
- The concept of the bid “Just Durf!” refers to doing things in a way which has not been done before. It is described as being about experimenting, failing, and learning. However, the panel has concerns on how the message “Just Durf!” refers to the main topic of mental health addressed in the bid.
- The bid presents 37 project ideas, with partners and potential partners listed for a number of them. The panel appreciated several interesting projects but noted that their level varied from just ideas to well-developed concepts. Considering the strong profile of the city in areas such as gaming and technology, the panel would have expected more innovative and bolder projects. For instance, the team could have looked at the ‘black’ side of gaming and its impact on mental health.
- The cultural and artistic programme is divided into four lines: Border//Line, MaYdaY MaYdaY, (R)evolution and Fl@xible Futures. The method of compiling the programme refers to the testing process, which raises questions whether there is enough time to develop a concrete programme with solid, worked-out projects for the final bid book.

- The bid lists interesting examples of how local cultural heritage and traditional art forms are combined with new, innovative, and experimental cultural expressions.

European dimension

- There is clear evidence in the bid book of lessons gained from past European Capitals of Culture, as well as of a sound cooperation on specific themes with future European Capitals of Culture and other bidding cities.
- The bid gives evidence of the good connections with European cultural networks. A list of potential international artists and cultural organisations is presented, with the focus placed mainly on the border area and neighbouring countries. The panel missed a specific quest for European organisations with a focus on culture, wellbeing, and health, though.
- Kortrijk intends to address issues that resonate across Europe and are relevant in our present times. Yet, the panel felt that projects remained predominantly locally focussed.
- The strategy to attract European and international audiences is adequate for this stage. It is bolstered by the idea to develop new media interactive and immersive installations.

Outreach

- The bid contains a rather elaborated outreach programme, reflecting Kortrijk's strategy to reach out to people on the streets. It has involved both civil society and artists through meetings, open calls, and creative approaches.
- The audience development strategy is based on two principles (culture closer to people and active participation and co-creation) and all community members are well identified. However, the panel would have wanted more concrete tools to be presented, especially in regard to reaching individuals with mental health issues, a key topic of the bid.
- The panel saw a number of good ideas for the involvement of schools and youth in general. Also concrete ideas on a volunteering strategy are described. The panel welcomes the strong connection with existing voluntary organisations.

Management

- The city's annual budget for culture represents a fair share of the overall city budget (8%) and it is expected to remain at the same level after 2030. There is a declared intention to finance the Durf2030 platform as a legacy project, which is valued by the panel.
- The operating budget of 63,5 million euros is balanced with 92% covered by public contributions and 8% by private sources. The City and the Flemish Region will confirm their respective financial commitments of 10 and 30 million euros before the final round, while the contribution of 15 million euros from the National Government is secured. Additional public funds are under negotiation with the other neighbouring authorities including Eurometropolis (2 million euros). The panel expected a higher financial contribution from the 12+1 municipalities of South West Flanders (0,5 million euros), considering their relevant role in the bid.
- The fundraising strategy from the private sector is sound at this stage, exploring also digital initiatives and learning from other ECoC experience.

- 63% of the operating budget is allocated to the programme, 16% to promotion and marketing, 21% for overhead costs. The latter is slightly disproportionate, although they are justified by high labour costs in Belgium. No contingency provision is included, though.
- The bid presents a plan for cultural infrastructures, listing 3 major operations. Its budget of almost 46 million euros has been voted on by the Flanders Region and the city.
- For the purpose of the ECoC delivery, the intention is to set up a public benefit Foundation. The planned governance and organisational chart are presented in detail, with a clear definition of the tasks and responsibilities of the CEO and the Artistic Officer. The Foundation is envisioned to manage the ECoC legacy, which is valued by the panel.
- The marketing and communication strategy is solid for this stage of the competition. Although digital communication strategies are prioritised, the plan among other things envisions a road tour across Europe promoting No tech day with the ambition to make it a European day to reflect on mental health.

Capacity to deliver

- The Municipal Council Meeting has reaffirmed Kortrijk as a candidate city for the ECoC title on 10 June 2024 by the members of the majority parties, as well as almost the entire opposition. During meetings with all the other partnering municipal and city councils, an informal agreement has been given to support Kortrijk's candidacy.
- The city has a well-developed cultural infrastructure to host the ECoC. Infrastructure projects are described, mainly including refurbishing and/or restorations. There are currently two major cultural infrastructures underway to be completed in 2025 and 2026.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are good and the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is sound, referring also to cities within the region.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Kortrijk does not proceed to the final selection phase. The bid envisions the ECoC programme as an accelerator for the city Cultural Strategy and there is evidence of good connections with European cultural networks. However, the panel missed integration of European organisations with a focus on culture, wellbeing, and health. It is also not very clear how the programme will tackle European issues beyond the immediate cross-border context. The theme of the bid "Just Durf!" refers to doing things the way they have not been done before. However, the panel has doubts about whether this theme is the right overall tagline to deal with a very vulnerable topic such as mental health. The panel agrees that the idea of participatory process and project testing is interesting, but it has doubts about whether the chosen methodology can lead to a solid programme with concrete projects for the second round already. The bid presented an elaborate outreach programme, and the panel appreciates the strong support from the city and the region for the candidacy. The operating budget of 63,5 million euros is well-balanced. Kortrijk's assets in terms of accessibility are good and the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is sound.

The panel welcomes the team's intention to invest in innovation and to embrace contemporary challenges creatively. The panel encourages the city of Kortrijk to build on its strong cultural planning, exploring opportunities offered by other EU programmes or initiatives, such as the New European Bauhaus.

Leuven

The bid identifies two major challenges to tackle: climate change and the polarisation of society. These two challenges are ultimately connected with human dominance over nature (and other humans) and growing contrasts and divides between people, between city and countryside, science, and populism, etc. The bid intends to find new ecologically, socially, and economically fair ways to live in harmony with other ecosystems. In coping with these world-relevant issues, the bid relies on Leuven's strengths: human capital, a focus on nature and sustainability and a specialisation in innovation. The central theme of the bid is "Human Nature", as the intention of Leuven 2030 is to find solutions in humankind and in a new relationship with nature. LOV is the title of the candidacy, as a way to mix the city's name and "love" as a connecting force bridging gaps and polarisation. In its endeavour to address the growing polarisation between the city and the countryside, the bid intends to start a new dialogue between the densely populated city of Leuven (with almost 104,000 inhabitants plus 60,000 students) and the green East Brabant region (totalling 565,000 inhabitants).

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The city's Strategic Culture Compass 2035 was approved by the Municipal Council in June 2024. The Strategy was built upon a widely participatory poll and cultural mapping started in 2019.
- The bid presents a very clear connection between the key objectives of the strategy and the ECoC project.
- The plan to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors is clearly fleshed out and convincing. The "LOV network" and "LOV EU Academy" are well designed to foster cross-sectoral collaboration with the internationally reputed University, knowledge exchange with other ECoCs and closer links with the social sector.
- The expected long-term cultural, social, economic, and urban impacts are very well articulated.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluation, albeit quite generic, are sound with the main evaluation topics and research partners identified. In the second round, a more robust strategy is expected in this field, including the dissemination plan of the results.

Cultural and artistic content

- The main programme theme is Human Nature, through which the team interestingly explores how we can draw on our humanness to contribute to the battle against increasing polarisation of society and rapidly advancing climate change while rebuilding trust and connection within communities. The panel appreciated the clear focus on nature and sustainability, as well as LOV (understood as a mindset for radically new connections), but also recommended working more deeply with the

theme of humanism, especially since the city has a long tradition on this topic as well as exploring also controversial links between innovation and nature.

- The bid features a very clear and coherent programme structure with strong innovative projects, which have good and well-formulated descriptions. The programme is divided into three programme lines: "Human", "Nature" and "Innovation". These main lines are linked to the history, present and future of Leuven, the region and Europe. The panel noted the great potential of the projects to be folded out into a high quality cultural and artistic programme through the work of renowned and professional curators.
- 36 projects are presented in the bid book. They include local and international partners and diverse European networks. The panel could resonate with the plethora of relevant European topics presented by Leuven and welcomed the plans to work further with the pre-selected projects and open calls.
- The bid shows great examples of projects that combine local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative, and experimental cultural expression.
- The panel was impressed by the wide participation of the local cultural scene in the conception and implementation of the cultural programme.

European dimension

- The bid has a strong European dimension, exploring new ways to bring different viewpoints into a dialogue and to contribute to a greater mutual understanding between European citizens. For the second round of selection, the panel invites Leuven to further develop the critical thinking to bring valuable insights to the intercultural dialogue.
- The bid provides many examples bringing together European artists, thinkers, and young citizens to address common challenges, such as pressure on democratic values and the challenge of climate change.
- The programme features European artists and cultural operators and collaborations with cities from different countries. There are calls planned specifically for European artists and designers, which is another positive aspect of the bid.
- The bid gives evidence of a well-developed network with both designated and bidding ECoCs, with concrete cooperation examples focused on specific shared themes.
- The bid also presents an ambitious plan to realise the whole programme online ("MetaLeuven") together with experts and partners in this field. However, the panel recommends to deeply analyse the feasibility of this project and to start with the preparation of this project as soon as possible.

Outreach

- The bid shows a sound involvement of civil society including several thousands of people and a very interesting approach for cultural participation with a plan to mobilise citizens in a meaningful way.
- The strategy of working not for, but with marginalised groups and disadvantaged people - co-creating or joining different people with diverse expertise - is strong. The panel appreciated examples of already existing projects and the list of eligible partners. However, in general, the strategy is still lacking some concrete tools for engagement.

- The bid presents an audience development strategy and shows links with education and schools, with specific examples of what has already been done and what the future plans are. However, the collaboration with the university, which is a major partner of the bid, should be further developed. The panel does not see a clear strategy yet for the engagement of the 60,000 university students, which represent a third of Leuven's population, and recommends working more profoundly with the university on this.
- There is no volunteering strategy yet, thus the panel recommends working on it for the second round, emphasising inclusion of diverse community members.

Management

- The city has a high annual budget for culture of around 20 million euros per year, representing a share of 8.5% over the total budget. The panel welcomes plans for raising it significantly up to 31 million euros, bringing its share to 10.3% of the total city's budget (as against 8,4% in 2024).
- The operating budget amounts to 72 million euros. Out of this budget, 86% is planned to be covered by the public sector and a high 14% is planned to originate from private sources. The City and the Federal Government have already deliberated their contributions, corresponding respectively to 10 and 15 million euros each, which is a positive signal at this stage. The funding of 30 million euros from the Flemish Region and of 3 million euros from the Province are still to be voted.
- A significant share of the operating budget (20%) is allocated to legacy, which is considered by the panel as a positive element to ensure continuity of the project after the title-year.
- The income expected from the private sector is considered by the panel as ambitious. While the sponsorship plan is convincing, the tax sheltering and ticketing strategies are to be further detailed in the final round of the selection process.
- The breakdown of the operational costs is balanced, with 65% dedicated to the programme expenditure, 16% to promotion and marketing, and 17% for wages, overhead and administration.
- There is an ambitious capital infrastructure plan, including two flagship projects, with an overall budget of almost 195 million euros. Final decisions from the funding authorities are expected in the final stage.
- There are clear plans to transform the non-profit organisation leading the bidding phase into the delivery agency. The idea is to develop a networking organisational model to catalyse all the stakeholders in the ECoC implementation. While the endeavour to elaborate new participative models is encouraged, in the final bid the governance and organisation schemes should be developed, specifying the decision-making process and a clear description of the different roles and responsibilities.
- The marketing and communication plan is convincing at this stage. The panel recommends clarifying which is the slogan and message the city intends to convey.

Capacity to deliver

- The bid book was approved unanimously by the College of Mayor and Aldermen on 7 June 2024. It has further been approved on 11 June in the Municipal Council Committee and 24 June in the Municipal Council (both cases unanimously). In

addition, 24 towns and municipalities in the East Brabant region signed a statement of intent on 28 June, including a financial commitment of at least €6 per inhabitant. There is also a possibility to build a candidacy as a formal intercommunal cooperation (getting funding from Flanders). A decision will be made on the 15th of November.

- The plans for investments in cultural infrastructure are clear, with well-defined projects and timelines listed. The panel appreciates that almost all infrastructure projects are to be completed before 2030, but there are some concerns around the Scheut site, which is expected to be completed after the ECoC year.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are very good, as well as the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Leuven proceeds to the final selection phase. The long-term strategy, based on a 5-year broad participation process, is clearly aligned with the ECoC programme. The capacity-building plans are well designed, while a robust monitoring and evaluation plan is expected in the final bid. The programme is clearly structured and displays a number of great examples of projects combining local cultural heritage with new and experimental cultural expressions. The programme draws on humanness to prevent increasing polarisation in society and rapidly advancing climate change while rebuilding trust and connection within communities. The panel invites to further develop the cultural and artistic programme deepening the topic of humanness and also exploring the controversial links between innovation and nature.

The bid has a strong European dimension, providing many examples bringing together European artists, thinkers and young citizens that address common challenges such as pressure on democratic values or climate challenge. There is also the welcomed ambitious goal to deliver the whole programme also online ("MetaLeuven"); the panel recommends developing the feasibility of the project in the final stage.

The bid gives evidence of sound involvement of civil society and clear plans to mobilise citizens in a meaningful way. The audience engagement strategy is well presented, but the plan to integrate marginalised groups and the volunteer strategy should be further developed in the final stage. Likewise, a focus should be placed on the involvement of the university students (that represent one third of the city population).

The panel welcomes the city's plan to significantly increase the budget allocation to culture after 2030 as well as the proposal to earmark 20% of the operational budget to legacy. The financial plans are sound, with financial contributions from the City and Federal Government already deliberated. More details are expected on the tax sheltering plan in the second stage. While there is a welcomed plan to develop a networking organisational model; in the final bid, the governance and organisation schemes should clarify the decision-making process. The bid is strongly supported at institutional level and the city has a good capacity to deliver.

Molenbeek

Molenbeek is one of the nineteen municipalities forming the Brussels-Capital Region. It describes itself as the “symbol” of diversity and multilingualism, being the home to people -predominantly young- from 140 nationalities, but it suffers from stigmatisation in relation to “terrorism”, as highlighted in the bid. Molenbeek intends to represent and lead other European cities that face similar challenges, where inhabitants do not feel part of Europe because they do not share Europe’s common past. The bid aims to forge a “New Us,” transforming the city’s fragmented past and negative image through its diverse and creative community. The bid promotes solidarity, climate justice, and social openness under the theme “Sadaka,” which means generosity in multiple languages (Hebrew, Arabic, Hindi, Swahili etc.). Sadaka is a method to forge new relations through a novel form of unconditional solidarity.

Molenbeek, which is a municipality of just under 100,000 inhabitants, includes in its ECoC bid all the other 18 municipalities of Brussels Capital Region, each to be offered a two-week focus during 2030. The collaboration may be extended to Mechelen and Charleroi.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The cultural strategy is the result of concurring plans developed at City, Flemish community, French community, and Bruxelles Regional Capital levels. In response to this multi-layered and fragmented policy framework, MB2023 was asked to integrate the priorities of these plans into 3 strategic objectives for Molenbeek: offering accessible and welcoming cultural spaces for all community members; creative Molenbeek, home to a wide diversity of artists and cultural actors; sustainably strengthening the network of local and regional cultural actors.
- Furthermore, MB2030 aspires to experiment with a new overarching cultural strategy along with the 18 other municipalities in Bruxelles integrating a plethora of policies at different levels.
- Although the panel appreciates this endeavour to set objectives built on existing strategies emerging from the multilayered policy context, it remains unclear if this overarching strategy is to be officially approved and funded at different levels and how the ECoC project - including its legacy - will be integrated within it. This is particularly relevant to prevent the possible risk of future gentrification, which was indicated in the bid. In the second round, the panel seeks full clarity on the above points.
- There is a capacity building programme, consisting of a learning platform aiming to reinforce the cultural ecosystem of Molenbeek, and to elicit and enhance tacit knowledge. It is planned to also target people excluded from the formal education system. The platform is linked with the economic and social sectors in the city, being the focus placed for the creation of jobs and training opportunities. The initiative seems very promising to the panel, and it is expected to be more elaborated and detailed in the second round of the selection process.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluation are well-developed at this stage, with information on research partners, data sources, evaluation methods and indicators in place. The panel appreciates, as well the creation of the independent New Centres Observatory to assess the urban, economic, social, and cultural changes produced by the ECoC process.

Cultural and artistic content

- The theme of Molenbeek is built around the term “Sadaka”, which encompasses generosity, solidarity, empathy, selflessness, and aims to bridge cultural divides and empower communities. The main objective of the cultural and artistic programme is to spread Sadaka projects and practices of systemic solidarity from Molenbeek across Europe.
- The programme is built on principles of socially engaged creative work and is structured along four themes: Equality Machine, Creole Europe, Wild at Heart, and European Space to Embrace. Each of them has four different types of projects: Mills, Bridges, Brooks and Valleys. These themes are combined with four Seasons always having one central lighthouse event or happening. Although the panel considers the programme to be fresh, young, innovative, locally relevant, and European oriented, it is of the opinion that the structure is overcomplicated and therefore recommends rethinking it in a way to make it easier to understand and communicate.
- Approximately 30 projects with sub projects and an opening ceremony are presented in the bid. The programme is rich with interesting elements and includes many strong national and a few European partners.
- The programme has been designed with a wide participation of local artists and cultural institutions; however, the panel wants to encourage the involvement of individual artists and independent cultural organisations more clearly in the second bid.
- The bid does not sufficiently address the combination of local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative, and experimental cultural expressions; thus the panel recommends developing this section for the second round.

European dimension

- The bid raises issues and topics that highly resonate across Europe. The theme of unconditional solidarity, building a “new Us” and embracing different cultures of citizens who feel left aside, has a strong European relevance. While the contribution to a more diverse cultural identity of Europe is highly visible, the panel would have welcomed a stronger emphasis on mutual understanding.
- The structure and themes of the programme are weaved into a wider European context involving partners and European Capitals of Culture. Specifically, the bid indicates the intention to partner with similar cities from Europe and the Global South grappling with the same challenges, as well as cities featuring vibrant community-sourced movements with a diverse young population.
- Links with other ECoCs are wide and deep, although in the second round a detailed list of tangible collaboration project examples and illustrations on the nature of cooperation are expected.
- The strategy to attract a broad international audience is well laid-out, being based on the segmentation of different European audiences that can be targeted for specific projects. It is also planned to develop extended audiences, with a focus on digital audience development via social media and streaming. A detailed plan for the delivery of the programme on-line is expected in the final bid.

Outreach

- The bid shows a refreshing approach to outreach, also due to the unique cultural blend in Molenbeek. It shows a new insight into a community, which is so diverse, that everyone needs attention. The focus is on a strong involvement of communities and the local population to build a common future when not sharing a common past.
- The bid states that it is hard to single out minority groups in a fragmented Molenbeek: most citizens can be considered socially marginalised in some way or other. Nevertheless, clearly identified target groups, so called invisible people: youth, single parent families, the poverty-stricken, the homeless and undocumented people. The team plans each year to focus on a different target group so that the network continues to grow. However, the connections with other groups such as the LGBTQIA+ community are not mentioned and could be reinforced in the selection phase.
- Offering a daily fee for local or volunteers from all over Europe, as well as professional training, is a good strategy to reach out to those who would not normally come onboard for such an activity as volunteering.
- The bid also shows a strong emphasis on youth, including consultation with young people, a Youth manifesto, exchange of young talents with other ECoCs and the creation of job opportunities for young people. However, a more elaborated strategy of schools' involvement is needed for the next selection phase stage.
- There is a clear audience strategy in place, emphasising 5 goals and including several good principles, such as focus on the projects involving dance and music to overcome linguistic obstacles. Nevertheless, the panel would require more concrete measures and tools for implementation and measuring impact.

Management

- The city budget for culture in 2023 is low, representing only 4,4% of the overall municipal budget (against 5,4% in 2019), and the plan is to maintain it at the same level after 2030, which the panel sees as a concern. However, the city cultural budget is complemented by the contributions of the other funding institutions (Region Bruxelloise, Flemish Community, Wallonie Federation).
- On a positive note, a legacy fund of 4.2 million euros is included in the ECoC operating budget; the panel welcomes this fund but recommends earmarking a higher share.
- The total operating budget is ambitious and amounts to 89.61 million euros. 90% of the budget is sourced from a large spectrum of public partners: national Government (15 million euros), Brussels Capital Region (36.5 million euros), municipality of Molenbeek (4 million euros), Flanders and Wallonia (each with the same contribution of 8 million euros) and the French and Flemish Community (each with the same contribution of 4.05 million euros). While the contribution from the Federal Government is secured, the remaining funding from the other sources is expected to be voted in view of the final bid.
- The private sector revenue of 9 million euros (10% of the total operating budget) is quite ambitious. Information on possible partners are provided in the presentation, although the panel would have appreciated more insight on the fund-raising strategy.

- The breakdown of operating expenditure is well balanced with 63% for the programme, 19% for promotion and marketing and 14% for wages, overhead and administration. 2% of the budget is earmarked to evaluation, which is welcomed by the panel.
- The planned capital budget, amounting to almost 44 million euros, is reasonable, but for the final stage of the selection the panel would expect more clarity on the deliberations from the funding institutions.
- The plans concerning the delivery agency envisions the creation of a private Foundation, in order to include civil society as well in its governance structure. The organigramme is well detailed for this stage, although the panel noted the lack of clear leadership. Additional information should be given on how to ensure a sound interaction between the private Foundation and the partner institutions.
- The marketing and communication strategy is presented with a well-designed action plan for this stage. The plan contains unconventional and interesting ideas to give visibility to the European Union. In the second round, the panel recommends clarifying the core message to convey to the public making a choice between 'Flip the script' and 'Sadaka'.

Capacity to deliver

- The Molenbeek municipal council unanimously supported the city's candidacy on 30 of May 2024. On 20 April 2024, the other 18 municipalities that make up the BCR under the collective name MB2030 also confirmed the candidacy of Molenbeek unanimously. Charleroi has also decided to cooperate with MB2030.
- The city's cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme is rather limited with a lack of large-scale cultural infrastructure. Therefore, a substantial part of the programme will be taking place in public space. The panel is concerned that weather conditions can have a negative impact on this strategy though. Nevertheless, there are also agreements with major art institutions of the region to collaborate regarding proposing their infrastructure for ECoC events.
- The plans for investments in cultural infrastructure are clear with well-defined projects focussed on activating several cultural hotspots by repurposing industrial heritage.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are very good, but the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is limited in Molenbeek itself. However, there are enough accommodation opportunities in the Brussels Capital Region area as an alternative.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Molenbeek proceeds to the final selection phase. The programme is fresh and rich of interesting projects aimed to forge a "New Us", bridging cultural divides and empowering communities that felt to be set aside. The approach is based on socially engaged creative work; in the final stage, a less complex structure is welcomed. The theme of unconditional solidarity, embracing different cultures of citizens that do not share a common past, contributes to a more diverse cultural identity of Europe. Yet, the panel expects the dimension of mutual understanding being more addressed in the second round. The bid presents a refreshing approach to outreach. The plan to involve

different unvoiced communities and the youth is well detailed. A more elaborated plan with schools is expected in the selection phase.

Molenbeek does not display an overarching cultural strategy, this latter being the result of concurring plans developed at multilayered policy framework. The Molenbeek team aspires to set strategic objectives built on existing plans; while appreciating this endeavour, the final bid is expected to clarify if this overarching strategy is to be officially approved and funded at different levels and how the ECoC project and its legacy will be integrated within it.

The financial plans are ambitious and in the final bid, clarity is sought about the financial commitments of the various funders. The organigramme is well detailed for this stage, but clarity on the decision-making process at the execute level is expected in the final bid. The communication strategy contains unconventional ideas to give visibility to the European Union. A clarification on the core message to communicate is recommended. The bid is fully supported by a large spectrum of institutions. Clear information on the indoor venues to host the events and on the nature of artistic collaboration with regional cultural institutions are to be detailed in the second stage.

Namur

Namur, the capital of the Walloon region with a population of 115,000 residents, presented its bid book under the title "Territory of Confluences". It reflects Namur's geographical position with the confluence of rivers Sambre and Meuse and a long-term strategy to transform the city through enhanced cultural engagement, aiming for increased diversity and social cohesion. The city has developed a vibrant cultural life and infrastructure. There are several UNESCO world heritage sites and events, giving attention to folk traditions. At the same time the city has a strong, internationally acknowledged digital arts profile and hosts diverse festivals.

The goal of the ECoC project is to position Namur as a laboratory for innovative cultural practices, enriching the city and its inhabitants, by engaging diverse groups in arts projects, juxtaposing heritage, and innovation, while also enhancing cultural connections across Europe. The Province of Namur, adjacent municipalities and 46 districts of Namur, are all full members of the non-profit organisation "Namur 2030 and beyond".

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The bid emerges as the outcome of a long and robust cultural strategy. The Namur Confluence Culture strategy (2012-2023) was aimed to endow the city with cultural infrastructures. In 2024, a new cultural strategy up to 2034 was drafted following an extensive participatory process. This strategy has unanimously been approved by the City Council. Its goals are to ensure that the newly built cultural venues are adopted by artists and citizens, to forge links between different sectors and to ensure cultural rights. The panel welcomes the good interaction between the cultural strategy and the digital strategy that positioned Namur as a UNESCO creative city for media arts; as well as the plan to adopt a regional cultural strategy up to 2040.

- The plans for strengthening the capacity of the Cultural and Creative Industries and their links with the social and economic sectors are well outlined. In the final selection round, more details are expected on the initiatives related to cultural rights and participation.
- The ECoC action is clearly aligned with the strategy and this alignment is effectively presented in the bid. The ECoC intends to strengthen the shared ownership of the newly built venues and to enable the city to become a laboratory, with the view to ensuring that cultural rights are being reinforced throughout the territory. The expected long-term cultural, social, urban, and economic impacts are well described, but need further development in the second round.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluation are well-developed for this stage, providing details on data sources, research methods and indicators. The relevant activities are to be conducted by the University of Namur in collaboration with several (inter)national partners. The panel states that since the University of Namur is a founding member of the delivery organisation and the Rector is its president, the university's role as the lead for monitoring and evaluation must be clarified to ensure impartiality and independence. The panel has concerns about this now.

Cultural and artistic content

- The main theme of the programme, "Territory of Confluences", aims at creating new confluences and collective initiatives, but also at reinforcing existing confluences or tried and tested projects. The panel considers this is a solid basis, well connected to the local reality.
- The programme is built on three major chapters or axes, which are based on the strategic objectives of Namur for the next 10 years: Territory of care, Territory of bonding and Territory for living. Each of these axes responds to tensions or conflicts that disrupt the territory or society.
- The programme consists of 28 projects plus the official opening. The bid shows very interesting projects set within a diverse and interesting programme across multiple artistic disciplines developed with local, regional, national, and international partners. There are no open calls planned in the future.
- Two types of structure will be created: 8 Confluence Hubs and Little Connexits, where local residents, institutions, businesses, and organisations from the territories and local districts will be able to converge. The panel considers this as an interesting element in the bid.
- The programme has been compiled in a wide participatory process. The involvement of local artists, organisations, etc. is described in a convincing way. The overall intention is to involve in the ECoC programme 30% artists from Namur and Wallonia, 30% from Belgium, and 40% from the rest of Europe and beyond. Links with Africa are also mentioned, which the panel welcomes, but should be more elaborated in the second stage.
- Although tensions and possible differences between traditional artistic forms and new expressions are at the heart of the team's (and bid's) concerns, the panel lacked clear project examples of heritage and traditional art forms combining with innovative and experimental art expressions. Therefore the panel recommends reviewing this part for the next stage.

European dimension

- The bid explains how the ECoC project intends to promote cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, providing a number of interesting examples that place emphasis on community festivities and multilingualism. Yet, the panel recommends elaborating on the common issues (“tensions”) relevant also in Europe and show how the cultural and artistic programme intends to address them.
- Many projects have been conceptualised in collaboration with European partners, which is very promising. The bid also gives evidence of good connections with European networks, which is a way to ensure the relevance and resonance of the project at an EU level. The panel invites further broadening and deepening collaboration with European and international artists and cultural organisations in the selection phase.
- The city has conducted a good scouting of the past and future ECoCs aimed to identify specific experiences in various areas of common interest. The links established with 15 ECoCs are sound, based on mentoring, sharing of expertise and artists names. In the next phase, tangible examples of cooperation are to be displayed.
- The strategy to allure international audiences is well laid-down, based on an attractive marketing plan and a cultural programme consisting of a good mix of innovative projects, original productions, and laboratorial projects.
- The programme has a strong digital dimension, that aims, from one side, to enrich artistic experience and, from the other side, to widen the participation for people who for different reasons cannot attend the events live in Namur. Considering the high focus on new media, the panel expects further details concerning the digital delivery of the programme in the final round of the competition.

Outreach

- The bid is based on “hundreds of bilateral meetings” with various types of partners, collective workshops, and events. Several helpful tools are also presented, such as a recruitment campaign, a support kit for ambassadors, a volunteer network with a voluntary work charter, as well as links between the different tourist information centres, etc. Examples are also given on how the team intends to pursue its efforts to involve local actors in the finalisation until final selection and in the process up to 2030.
- Attention is given to various marginalised and disadvantaged groups: from people living in poverty to seniors, from Roma people to residents outside the city, non-readers and mental health affected, etc. However, the connections with other groups such as the refugees, or the LGBTQIA+ community are not mentioned and could be reinforced in the selection phase.
- The bid shows a well thought involvement of the educational system as well as of youngsters of various ages. The role of the young people at all levels (“as members of the governance, as artists and as spectators of the process”) is ambitious and positive. However, the panel would like to see a more developed strategy for the engagement of the 50,000 university students.
- The bid also shows an interesting approach to take the children’s perspective at the governance level. However, it was not clear for the panel how this approach will criss-cross the programme.

- The plans for volunteers' involvement and activities need to be further developed for the selection phase.

Management

- The city budget for culture amounts to around 13,7 million euros in 2024, with a steady increase over the past 5 years (10,7 million euros in 2020), while its share in the total municipal budget (4,8% in 2024) has slightly declined over the same period. The panel welcomes plans for raising the cumulative cultural budget of the city and province significantly after 2030, up to 38 million euros (against 31,4 million in 2024), bringing its share to 8% .
- The operating budget amounts to 79 million euros. Out of this, 90% is to be covered by the public sector and 10% by the private sector. The confirmed contribution from the City, the Province and the National Government stand respectively at 5, 3 and 15 million euros. The funding from the Walloon Government (15 million euros) and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (30 million euros) are to be confirmed. A smaller contribution of 0,5 million euros is expected also from the cities of the surrounding area.
- The target of private fund-raising is set at 8 million euros (10% of the total operating budget). The plan to achieve this objective is sound at this stage, based on a number of initiatives already carried out to mobilise entrepreneurs and drawing inspiration from the Mons 2015 experience.
- The breakdown of the operational costs is sound with a significant 69% dedicated to the cultural and artistic programme.
- The capital infrastructure plan, including two significant projects, presents an overall budget of 85 million euros. The panel misses information on clear timelines and financial coverages for these projects, which are to be clearly detailed in the second round.
- The non-profit organisation Namur 2030, established to lead the bidding phase, will be transformed into the delivery agency. The idea is to have a governance aimed to involve various stakeholders and an organisational model based on holacracy that encourages shared responsibility. While the endeavour to explore new organisation models beyond the traditional hierarchical one is encouraged, it is advisable in the second round to further develop the governance and organisation schemes, clearly specifying the decision-making processes.
- The communication and marketing plan is well developed at this stage. For the final bid, a stronger emphasis on the strategy for activities implemented at the international level is expected.

Capacity to deliver

- The decision to support the bid was unanimously made by political parties of the municipal college of the City of Namur. The municipalities of the territory involved in the bidding process agreed to join the non-profit organisation Namur2030, which requires an initial contribution of €1,000 per municipality.
- Namur has good experience with hosting large-scale events. There are plans to organise outdoor events, in particular exhibitions. The panel is however concerned that weather conditions can have a negative impact on this strategy. A list of several infrastructure projects is presented, but without clear budgets or timelines for

completion. It is expected that this missing information will be presented in detail in the final selection bid, together with plan B options if delays occur.

- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are very good, but no information has been provided on the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Namur proceeds to the final selection phase. The main theme of the programme "Territory of Confluences" aims at creating new confluences and collective initiatives, but also – reinforcing existing or tested projects. The panel recommends strengthening the connection between heritage and traditional art forms with innovative and experimental art expressions.

In 2024 a new cultural strategy was drafted following an extensive participation process. The ECoC action is clearly aligned with the strategy, and this is effectively presented in the proposal. The bid gives evidence of good connections with European networks and many projects have been conceptualised in collaboration with European partners. Yet, the panel recommends elaborating more the common issues ("tensions") relevant also in Europe and how the programme intends to address them. The panel also expects further details concerning the digital delivery of the programme.

The outreach programme is convincing with a well thought involvement of schools and the educational system, yet working more profoundly with the university and developing volunteer activities is recommended. The plans for strengthening the capacity of the Cultural and Creative Industries and their links with social and economic sectors are well outlined. More details are expected on the initiatives related to cultural rights and participation in the final selection round.

There is strong support for the bid at the city and regional levels and the operating budget of 79 million euros is sound. But the panel encourages developing the governance and organisation schemes further, clearly specifying the decision-making processes. Although the city has a less strong cultural infrastructure, its strength lies in good experience with large-scale events. The city's assets in terms of accessibility are very good.

General recommendations

The following recommendations apply to all three shortlisted candidates.

It is strongly advised that all shortlisted cities substantially develop their bids for the final selection in order to reach the required level of quality of a European Capital of Culture. There is a considerable step-change between pre-selection and selection bid books.

The panel expects significant progress in the final bid books to fully meet the **objectives and six criteria of the European Capital of Culture Action as specified in the Decision** and to reflect the recommendations of the panel. Studying the panel's comments to all candidate cities in the assessments above may also be useful.

A study of the evaluations of recent ECoCs (since 2013) and monitoring reports of recently designated ECoCs may also prove valuable. These are available on the European Commission website.

General

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

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

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

The panel would also like to remind the candidates about the right formulation of the European Capital of Culture title, which is not Capital of Culture or other similar forms. It is important that the right form is used when communicating about the initiative in order to avoid confusion.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

A formally approved city cultural strategy needs to be in place before submitting the final bid book. The panel will expect a tighter focus in the bid books of the final round: cities should indicate the priorities of the cultural strategy that are connected to the ECoC project, its target outcomes and how resources will be changed over the next few years. It is important to note that the cultural strategy should cover the action and include the plans for sustaining the cultural activities beyond the year of the title. The expected legacy of the ECoC should also be described.

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

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

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

Cultural and artistic content

The focus of the final selection is the cultural and artistic programme spanned between 2025, when the ECoC will be formally designated and, in particular, the ECoC year of 2030. The panel recommends the three cities to have an open minded and daring artistic approach and not be afraid of new, experimental ideas. Deeper considerations on the visions presented in the bids could offer more clarity overall, including unique elements that tie the concept specifically to the city in question (instead of being a generic one that could take place in any European city). Consistency between the selected vision and all other elements of the bid must be ensured. Innovation and originality is required not only in theory but also – even more importantly – in practice. The panel will expect to see more details on the programme, its projects and partners. Indeed, the cities should set out more clearly not only their artistic vision, but also the programme and projects; differentiating between partners who have indicated firm interest and those who are still only potential or possible partners. ECoC programmes normally cover a wide range of art forms and include the increasing development of creative interventions in social issues. An approximate budget should be shown for each project for the panel to understand the relative balance of projects in the programme.

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

European dimension

The panel recommends that all three cities revisit this criterion with great care. Although with a promising approach to this criterion, the proposals failed to engage fully with the challenges. That a city aims to market itself in Europe, is not in itself a strong interpretation of the European dimension. An ECoC enables a city to promote itself internationally, but that is only half of the story.

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

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

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

One of the elements of the European dimension criterion for the ECoC title is the ability to attract visitors from the rest of Europe and beyond. The programme has to have its attraction and that is why it is something else than the usual tourist offers of the city and region. The panel would expect to see these attractive programme ideas in the final selection's bid for ECoC 2030. The panel advises to thoroughly consider building a strategic communication plan for the ECoC project as well as to make a connection between the cultural and artistic programme and an international marketing vision.

Outreach

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

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

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

Management

New times of uncertainty require new approaches in management, too. Special attention needs to be dedicated to the risk assessment in the final bid book. This section should include a thorough analysis of the impacts expected for the preparation and implementation phase of the ECoC, related to the current and possible global challenges.

The panel expects the three shortlisted cities to carefully investigate whether investments into the infrastructure are actually feasible.

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

The delivery team 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 2025 to 2030 should be outlined including secondments, interns, and volunteers.

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

Capacity to deliver

Candidates should re-confirm that their bid book, including the overall vision and concept and the financial commitments, have the formal approval of the mayor, the city (and county/region if appropriate) councils and all political parties. With reference to the recent local and regional elections held in Belgium, the continued support of the involved institutions is expected as well as the deliberation of the financial contributions. The panel also recommends that all candidates have common understanding and expectations regarding the financial contribution from the national government.

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

Information on urban development and infrastructure programmes, cultural heritage restoration projects and new cultural premises is useful as background and context at pre-selection. The final selection will focus on those infrastructural projects that directly impact the ECoC programme activities (e.g. a new cultural centre in a restored building that becomes a focal point for community arts projects contained in the programme). A timeline for these projects and the realistic estimate of completion should be given. The final bid books should clearly indicate how those potential capital projects would be managed (management structures, state-of-play related to the EU ESI-Funds such as the connection with the relevant Operational Programme, timeline and public procurement).

Signed

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Else Christensen-Redžepović
Goda Giedraityte (Rapporteur)
Suvi Innilä
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Brussels

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