



# **Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2030 in a city from an EFTA/EEA country, a candidate country or a potential candidate**

**The Expert Panel's report**

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**Edited by**

Toni Attard, Csaba Borboly, Jelle Burggraaff, Else Christensen-Redzepovic (Vice-Chair),  
Suvi Innilä, Erni Kask, Hrvoje Laurenta (Chair), Tanja Mlaker (Rapporteur), Matthias Ripp

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### **EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

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

*E-mail: [eac-unite-D2@ec.europa.eu](mailto:eac-unite-D2@ec.europa.eu)*

*European Commission  
B-1049 Brussels*

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## Introduction

This is the expert panel's report (the "panel") for the selection phase of the competition for the European Capital of Culture 2030 title for cities in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries or potential candidates for EU membership. The European Commission (the "Commission") is the managing authority of the competition, which is governed by:

- Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 as amended by Decision (EU) 2017/1545 of 13 September 2017 (the "Decision") and,
- The "Rules of procedure in relation with call for submission of applications EAC/P01/2023 – Competition of the European Capital of Culture in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries and potential candidates participating in Creative Europe", issued by the European Commission and published on its website in November 2023.

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

The competition occurs in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection.

## Pre-selection and final selection rounds

The European Commission issued a call for applications (EAC/P01/2023) on 17 November 2023. Two applications were submitted by the closing date of 16 October 2024 by the cities of Lviv in Ukraine and Nikšić in Montenegro. On 16 December 2024, the panel recommended inviting both bidding cities to progress to the final selection stage. The panel's pre-selection report is published on the website of the European Commission<sup>1</sup>. The European Commission accepted the panel's recommendation and invited the two cities, Lviv in Ukraine and Nikšić in Montenegro, to submit final applications with a deadline of 15 September 2024. The two cities submitted their final applications ("bid books") by the deadline, and both applications were considered eligible.

A delegation of two panel members participated in online city visits on 13 October 2025 which were held simultaneously. The panel's delegation was accompanied by an observer from the European Commission. The delegation reported to the panel at the selection meeting.

## Panel meeting

The panel members met in Brussels on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of October 2025. One panel member was excused for personal reasons. Exceptionally, one panel member attended the meeting online. The panel confirmed Hrvoje Laurenta as its chair and Else Christensen-Redzepovic as its vice-chair. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality and gave it to the European Commission before the final selection hearings.

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<sup>1</sup> [ECOC, Pre-selection report EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries or potential candidate 2029](#)

Representatives from the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. They took no part in the panel's deliberations or decisions.

At the selection hearings on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October 2025, each candidate city, in alphabetical order, presented its case (in 45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (in 75 minutes). The chair of the panel announced the panel's recommendation at a public press conference on 21 October 2025.

## Thank you

In this regard, the panel members wish to extend their gratitude to everyone who participated in the selection phase of the competition. The panel specifically observed that the two cities utilised the bidding process as an opportunity to strengthen their cultural strategies and reinforce the significance of culture and Europe in their overall socio-economic development. This is already a substantial potential legacy that the ECoC competition has produced. Both candidate cities – one of which did not win the ECoC title – are encouraged to continue developing and implementing their respective cultural strategies. The panel wishes to extend its gratitude to both cities and all those who contributed to their proposals.

Additionally, the panel extends its appreciation to the European Commission for its guidance, its flawless coordination and its assistance during the meeting.

## Assessments 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 of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2030 in a city from an EFTA/EEA country, a candidate country or a potential candidate to be based on a cultural programme with a strong European dimension explicitly created for the title (Article 4). The panel assessed both bids 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.

In line with the specifications of the call, the panel assessed both short-listed candidate cities based on their revised bid books and hearings against the objectives of the European Capital of Culture action and the criteria as specified above. A city's history, its recent and current policies, and its cultural offer may form the basis for the proposed programme, but they are not criteria in the selection process.

The city visits are not part of the formal assessment process; however, they provide invaluable assistance to the panel members in gaining a deeper understanding of the context and background of the ECoC applications.

In the following commentaries, the panel highlights the main elements of their findings during the selection phase.

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

In the case of the selected city, specific recommendations are made to assist it in implementing its ECoC project.

## Lviv

Lviv's bid for the ECoC title has the motto '*Responsibility to Be*'. It is clearly rooted in the value of culture as a language of human being and a foundation for resilience in the city under attack in the context of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. The three main elements – *Awareness, Acceptance* and *Agency* – are based on input from different communities, local artists and cultural institutions. The bid book emphasises the participation of the citizens as a curatorial principle, considering that the city is mostly constituted of minorities. The bid of Lviv for the ECoC 2030 title is a national ambition as well, underlining that culture has become a foundation for Ukrainian resilience.

The city of Lviv is fully engaged in European collaboration and builds its bid on solid and extensive connections with international partners, such as other ECoC cities, sister cities in Europe and several institutional partners. The experience of Lviv as European Youth Capital 2025 is a valuable reference for the city. The international collaboration is embedded in the Lviv Culture Development Strategy 2035. Lviv 2030 envisions creating a strong cultural, social and economic impact for the city, and as a gateway through which Ukraine presents itself to the world.

### Contribution to the Long-Term Strategy

- The Cultural Development Strategy 2035 has been adopted by the Lviv City Council on 24 July 2025. The strategy highlights community unity and resilience, human capital development, preservation and understanding of heritage and memory, innovation and cross-sectoral cooperation, modern management and infrastructure, and international cultural diplomacy. The European dimension is embedded and confirms Lviv's ambition to strengthen the connections with European partners and networks. This strategy also positions culture within the broader city development, as an important part for social recovery and urban resilience.
- The Cultural Development Strategy 2035 is clearly connected with the ambition to hold the ECoC-title. The proposed Lviv 2030 ECoC-programme is well aligned with the goals of the long-term strategy, the link with concrete projects is sufficiently explained in the bid.
- The long-term cultural, social and economic impact is well described and consistent with the pre-selection bid. The monitoring and evaluation plan builds on the envisaged impact with a clear definition of key performance indicators. The monitoring and evaluation plan is clearly described and includes different approaches, such as using AI tools and a strong participatory component. The monitoring and evaluation plan will be under the responsibility of a specially established consortium of different academic, research and cultural institutions. Although the roles and functions of each partner of the consortium are described in

the bid book, the manner this consortium will ensure an effective monitoring and evaluation is not sufficiently clear.

- A clear timeline with actions to be carried out until 2035 is in place, and connections with the Cultural Development Strategy 2035 and Lviv 2030 are made.

## Cultural and Artistic Content

- The artistic vision of the bid is built on the conceptional theme *Responsibility to Be*, powered by three values: *Awareness*, *Acceptance* and *Agency*. The programme lays out of 25 projects. The projects are structured around three topics: *Witnessing* the past and the memories, *Caring* about the other in the present by *accepting* the diversity and *Envision* a transformation in Lviv in the future.
- The programme is well described and structured, the project descriptions contain valuable and precise information about involved artists and partners, planning and deliverables. The overall artistic quality is convincing. The artistic diversity of the programme is high.
- The programme is based on a high involvement of local artists and cultural institutions from Lviv and Ukraine. Through the vision groups, more than 150 professionals contributed to the bid.
- The international ambition is high: the aim is to ensure the participation of international artists in more than 85% of the programme. While the panel welcomes the ambition, it is not sufficiently well explained how Lviv 2030 will create a balanced collaboration between local and Ukrainian artists with international artists.
- The description of how the cultural programme will combine local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions is focusing on some concrete projects as examples. The overall programmatic vision could be described more explicitly.

## European Dimension

- Lviv's bid provides a powerful statement on a vision of freedom, safeguarding cultural memory, solidarity, democracy and peacebuilding. It emphasises what Lviv and Ukraine have to offer to Europe in building a future together. There is a strong connection with current European themes, although the number of activities promoting the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding between European citizens could be highlighted more in depth.
- There is an excellent and very detailed description of involvement of European artists and cooperation with operators and cities in different countries. The city is already engaged in numerous European partnerships and intends to establish a clear connection with Ukrainians residing across Europe in order to make Ukrainian culture widely visible in several European cities.
- Whereas the programme aims to attract a broad European audience and presents a clear strategy with comprehensive goals and actions, the panel notes that a more robust plan is needed to ensure wide visibility and accessibility.

## Outreach

- Lviv's bid demonstrates a solid foundation in the involvement of its local population and civil society through a variety of working methods, such as working groups, a large-scale study and community-building initiatives. It is particularly praiseworthy that Lviv engaged with different local communities as well as with national-level events.
- The programme of Lviv 2030 is designed with a clear and convincing ambition to give its population an active role as co-creators and engaged participants, not only as visitors and recipients. Around 20% of the programme is intended to be shaped through open calls with a clear focus on community involvement. The impact at a local level will also be monitored and evaluated.
- The approach to create new and sustainable opportunities for a wide range of citizens to attend or participate in cultural activities includes many different actions and communities. There is a strong social dimension, including a convincing strategy to engage with vulnerable and underrepresented groups, such as war-veterans, people with disabilities, internally displaced persons as "new residents" of the city, women, members of the LGBTQI+ community and low-income families and individuals.
- The audience development strategy is built around a series of sustainable, interconnected activities. The partnerships with schools and universities are established and the engagement of young people is clearly linked to specific projects detailed in the bid. However, the bid could have described more in detail which part of audiences will be approached for the first time and what needs to be done to ensure a sustainable dialogue with these groups.

## Management

- The total operating budget amounts to EUR 40 million. 85% of the budget is planned to be covered by the public funding, and 15% from private funding. The main part of public funding (EUR 18 million) is to be provided by the city, while the national government will provide EUR 5 million, through the existing open-call schemes run by the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation.
- Not all public bodies have formally voted on their financial commitments, but the team of Lviv 2030 trusts that they will follow through based on their ongoing contacts with the public bodies in Ukraine. The fund-raising strategy for support from EU-programmes/funds is present and realistic. However, the panel found the strategy to raise a significant portion of the ECoC funding from the private sector not entirely convincing.
- The breakdown of the operating expenditure is well-balanced, with 72% of the budget allocated to the programme.
- The capital expenditure is relatively modest and most of it is already committed.
- The Cultural Strategy Institute, a municipal non-profit organisation established in 2017, will be responsible for the implementation of the ECoC-programme. The Lviv 2030 Office will operate as a unit within the Cultural Strategy Institute. The procedure for appointing the Chief Operating Officer and Cultural Director is clearly described. The governance is sufficiently described, but there is no clear explanation

about the structure of the team. The bid lacks information about establishing the delivery structure with sufficiently skilled and experienced staff.

- The contingency analysis is well defined, including mitigating measures for security challenges. The bid also presents an alternative “Nomadic Culture in Exile” Plan in partnership with sister cities and other ECoC cities. More than 20 cities have confirmed their readiness to host the programme if necessary due to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- The marketing and communication strategy is comprehensive and clearly structured around different types of audiences. The slogan *Responsibility to Be: Witness, Care, Envision* is well chosen. There is a realistic planning and the approach to and partnership with media at the local, national and international level is robust.

## Capacity to Deliver

- There is continuous political and financial support at the local and national level. The Lviv City Council adopted the Lviv Culture Development Strategy 2035 and voted on funding on July 24, 2025. National support for the Lviv 2030 Programme is ensured through existing approved open-call programmes by the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation. The financial support from the regional level is not yet formally confirmed.
- The city has good and viable cultural infrastructure and has experience in hosting large-scale events. The budget for four infrastructure projects is not yet completely guaranteed. Although these infrastructure projects are of a great value, the implementation of the programme is not dependent on it.
- The city of Lviv is located just 70 km from the EU border and can rely on good international connections. The capacity of hotels and existing venues is sufficient to welcome large number of visitors.

## Conclusion

Lviv has delivered a solid and mature bid. The panel appreciates the outstanding commitment and resilience of the team. The proposed programme is of high artistic quality and the local engagement – despite the obvious war-related challenges – very impressive and inspiring. The engagement of local and national partners demonstrates a widespread support. The ECoC-programme fits very well in the long-term cultural strategy of Lviv.

However, the bid also revealed some areas of concern. The financial commitments are not yet fully confirmed, and it remains unclear to the panel which effects this could have on the proposed programme of Lviv 2030. The management aspect of the bid is lacking a solid basis.

Despite demonstrating a clear artistic vision with innovative projects and a strong local engagement, the bid shows weaknesses with regard to the organisation and financial aspects.

The panel does not recommend Lviv for the ECoC 2030 title. The panel nonetheless encourages Lviv to build on its strengths and continue advancing its cultural vision for the future.

## Nikšić

The bid portrays Nikšić as a post-industrial city now daring to reinvent itself as Europe's next "open city" of creativity, inclusion, and digital flair. The candidacy is an opportunity to reposition the city as a cultural and creative hub with solid European and global connections, and to strengthen the innovation in line with Montenegro's ambition to integrate in the European Union.

The bid has been initiated by the local and national cultural scene. It is a collective invitation to place culture at the centre of the city's development. The candidacy of Nikšić surpasses the vision of one city and is fully supported by the cultural and educational scene on a national level. The bid is built around the concept of the *Open City*, inspired by the radial concentric urban planning of the city Nikšić from the mid-19th century. Central to this concept is the vision of a city as an open system — constantly evolving through its receptiveness to diverse voices and many interconnections. The concept of *Open City* offers a multidimensional and multilayered approach for the ECoC 2030, revealing openness in many forms and various elements.

### Contribution to the Long-Term Strategy

- The Cultural Development Programme of Nikšić 2026-2030: "Nikšić - The Hub of Western Balkans" was adopted in September 2024. Under Montenegro's law on culture, municipal cultural development programmes can span a maximum of five years. This is the reason why the strategy cannot be extended beyond the ECoC title year. The city drafted the Legacy Activities Plan for the Nikšić 2030 Project, which will form an integral part of the Municipal Development Strategy 2028– 2032.
- The cultural development strategy has clear objectives and the Nikšić 2030 ECoC-programme is well embedded in the approved long-term strategy. The ambition to transform Nikšić into an Open City with specific goals covering cultural, economic, social, urban, national and EU-positioning impacts is convincing, defined by different perspectives of openness.
- The bid demonstrates policy continuity and strong political support at local and national level. It is positive to see explicit reference to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and alignment with broader European and global frameworks.
- The monitoring and evaluation plan is solid, there is a clear description of implementing body, objectives, timeframe and milestones. Establishing an independent consortium Culturometer 2030 contributes to a thorough and independent approach, to consistency on a long term and to a stimulating learning context. The governance of Culturometer 2030 and responsibilities of the partners is comprehensive and realistic. The use of data-driven monitoring tools is innovative and shows a commitment to evidence-based policy. The city considers this working model as a sustainable legacy for the future, it will remain functioning at least until 2035.
- The dissemination of results of the monitoring and evaluation includes a distinctive element with the installation of the Culturometer 2030 Tower in the city. This will also engage citizens.

## Cultural and Artistic Content

- Nikšić's bid reveals a comprehensive and coherent artistic vision and strategy. There is a rich variety of projects covering various artistic disciplines. Many projects demonstrate an inspiring combination of local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions. The projects engage with relevant issues contributing to wider European narratives.
- The programme is clearly structured in five programme lines: *Open Minds*, *Čojstvo* (Being Human), *Radial to Radical*, *Digital Ecologies* and *Share*. It contains a total of 42 artistic projects and 14 capacity building projects. One third of the programme budget is dedicated to open calls. The budgets for projects are estimated in a realistic way.
- The bid demonstrates strong involvement of local artists and organisations. Many projects are rooted in specific needs and ambitions of the city, addressing traditions of Nikšić and Montenegro while stimulating innovation. Aiming to foster the development of capacity building, artistic and social engagement, the ECoC 2030 has an enormous potential for the city. The panel noticed that many projects are built around individual artists rather than institutions or institutional networks. It is not always clear which institutions are the leading partners.
- In the centre of the programme, there is the capacity building programme Open Minds with projects designed with the themes 'Open to learn' focusing on learning new knowledge and skills and 'Learn to open' based on opening towards other cultures and cultivating dialogue. The panel is positive about this approach and finds it relevant that the capacity building programme is implemented in such an open way that it also reinforces the European learning exchange dimension.
- There is a wide range of international partners involved in the programme. The collaboration with international artists and cultural institutions is based on a clear and convincing understanding of the assets and challenges faced by Nikšić. The panel finds it positive that the bid is aiming to integrate new type of cultural activities and collaborations in the city.
- Several projects are combining various artistic disciplines which makes it an open space for cross-sectoral learning and further development of the cultural and creative industries in Nikšić and Montenegro.

## European Dimension

- The bid of Nikšić proves openness to European and transnational collaboration. It intends to put the culture from the whole country on the European map. Montenegro is a candidate for EU accession. The bid demonstrates a profound connection with the themes of Europe's cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue with some unique transnational projects, such as Roma fashion and Submerged Cultural Landscapes.
- The commitment from European artists and partners is highly present. It is well described in specific projects and programme lines and based on an exchange of equals. Almost all projects have international partners. The international partners are from 49 different countries and their commitment is underlined by letters of intent. There is also a high engagement with several leading European cultural networks.

- There is a solid collaboration with other ECoC cities, clearly described with concrete projects and exchanges with the aim to create and learn together. Several projects engage with shared European challenges such as heritage reinterpretation and ecological awareness.
- The strategy to attract the attention of the broad European and international public is very well described and convincing.

## Outreach

- The ECoC 2030 programme addresses social openness with a strong outreach strategy full of creative ideas. The local population and civil society were involved in the preparation of the bid. Besides, there was a series of outreach activities implemented in 2024 and 2025 to gain experience and strengthen connections with relevant partners or to build new local and regional networks. That makes the proposed ambitions clear and based on realistic estimations with already-established connections with various partners.
- The key target groups are well defined and outreach plans for reaching out to them and involving them are convincing. The bid demonstrates the intention to foster civic participation and co-creation in a sustainable way. The Open Citizens Council and Open Youth Council will be operating as direct participatory bodies.
- The audience development strategy is very good and mature. The bid shows a good understanding of barriers and needs of different audiences and seeks a convincing answer to these, including the use of different digital tools. The scale and depth of engagement across regions outside Nikšić is not yet clearly demonstrated and requires additional effort.
- Young people are one of the key target groups and hold a central role as co-creators of the programme, for example with a specific open call for projects proposed by this specific target group. The connection with educational institutions is well established and illustrated with concrete projects.

## Management

- The total operational budget for Nikšić 2030 is EUR 40 million. The budget is based on a contribution of EUR 37 million (92,5%) from the public sector and EUR 3 million (7,5%) from the private sector. The commitments from the Nikšić Municipal Assembly and the government of Montenegro are secured as both were voted on in September 2025. The strategy to raise contributions from EU Funds is well developed with realistic goals and clear links to specific projects. The fundraising from the private sector is well explained and building up on some reliable connections that are already in place.
- The breakdown of the operational budget is well-balanced. 70% of the budget will be used for the programme.
- The capital expenditure budget is EUR 33,96 million. 90% of the budget is already confirmed by the city and national government. The fundraising strategy for the remaining 10% is realistic.
- The municipality of Nikšić intends to set up the Open City Cultural Company, a new delivery body for ECoC 2030, operating with the strategic and institutional support of the city and the government of Montenegro. The proposed governance and

management structure is well designed and transparent. The panel finds it positive that the cross-sectoral expertise is included and embedded in the organisation.

- The CEO and the Artistic Director will be appointed through an international open competition. The profiles and criteria for both positions are well described in the bid.
- The marketing and communication strategy is clear, based on the main slogan *Open City – From Radial to Radical* and *Nikšić 2030: The Courage to Open* as a supporting angle. The key principles of engagement of and with different audiences is convincing. There is a wide range of media partnerships on the local, national and international level. The plans for highlighting that the action is a European Union action are clearly described.
- The bid addresses the capacity building for the ECoC team with a concrete plan and actions to build the organisation with sufficient skills and knowledge to be able to deliver the programme Nikšić 2030.

### Capacity to Deliver

- The political support and commitment are solid at the level of the municipality of Nikšić as well as on the national level by the government of Montenegro. The financial commitments are already voted on.
- The city and the national government are investing in a substantial and sustainable way in expanding and enriching the cultural infrastructure in Nikšić in the coming years. The foreseen infrastructure projects are already progressing and planned to be finished before 2030. The investment in infrastructure is well aligned with the long-term strategy, especially, the complex House of Revolution which was once a symbol of broken dreams and is already being used by Radio Television Nikšić and Tehnopolis with its new creative and innovation hub.

### Conclusion

Nikšić presented a convincing and consistent bid based on the concept of *Open City* aiming to transform the city on cultural, economic and social level. The involvement of local and national artists, cultural institutions and civic society is convincing and there is a clear political support at the local and national level.

The proposed programme shows a rich variety of projects with a clear focus on capacity building that will lead to a sustainable growth of the cultural and creative industries in Nikšić and Montenegro. The European dimension of the bid is strong in all aspects: addressing European themes, working together with European artists and partners, including the leading cultural networks, collaborating with other ECoC and reaching out to European public.

The panel has confidence in the delivery of the bid, knowing that there is already a substantial financial commitment from the public sector and that Nikšić presented a convincing fundraising strategy for EU Funds and the private sector. The delivery body will be founded by the municipality. The described governance and management structure are a solid basis for the next steps.

While the bid for Nikšić 2030 is ambitious and creative, certain areas require further clarity and effort in the implementation phase, which are further detailed in the section outlining the panel's recommendations. The panel recommends Nikšić for the ECoC 2030 title.

## The panel's decision

The panel was presented with two high-quality but also very different bids from significantly diverse cities, each with its own interpretations of the ECoC criteria. The bids tackled issues of significant urgency for Europe and the world at large. Both bids had their own strengths and weaknesses. According to Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, the panel looked at the programme designed explicitly for the ECoC year and with a strong European dimension. The panel debated the merits of each city against the two objectives and six criteria of the Decision, and then, in the final discussion, the applications were weighed against each other.

Each panel member weighed their interpretation of the criteria against the two cities with their bid books, presentations, questions, and answers. **The panel decided by vote to recommend to the European Commission to designate Nikšić as European Capital of Culture 2030 in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries or a potential candidate.**

## Designation

This report has been sent to the European Commission to be published on its website. In accordance with Article 11 of the Decision, the European Commission will proceed to the designation of the ECoC 2030 in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries or a potential candidate based on the recommendation contained in this report. It will then inform the European Parliament, Council, and Committee of the Regions. This formal designation enables Nikšić to use the title "European Capital of Culture 2030".

## Melina Mercouri Prize

Based on this report, the panel recommends that the European Commission award the Melina Mercouri Prize to the designated city. However, the payment of the EUR 1.5 million prize is deferred until 2030, in line with Article 14 of the Decision. It is conditional.

The ECoC panel will make a further recommendation to the European Commission in late 2029 at the end of the monitoring process on whether to make the payment. The conditions for the payment are as follows (Article 14):

- The ECoC continues to honour its commitments made in the application;
- It complies with the criteria;
- It takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports;
- There has been no substantial change to the programme and strategy set out in the bid book, in particular:
  - The budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-level programme and at a level consistent with the bid book;
  - The independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
  - The European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final programme;
  - The marketing and communications strategy and material reflect it is a European Union action;
  - Plans for monitoring and evaluation are in place.

## Reputation of an ECoC

A city awarded the ECoC title receives considerable international attention from the selection recommendation extending well beyond the ECoC year. It is responsible for

upholding the reputation of the ECoC brand for the benefit of those previous title holders and future ones. City administrations should be aware that decisions taken (and not just in the cultural sector) might attract media and social media attention far beyond what they are accustomed to handling. This adds a unique and new aspect to decision-making in the city over a wide, full range of issues, much beyond culture only.

## The monitoring phase

Once an ECoC has been designated, it enters the “monitoring phase” (Article 13 of the Decision). Under the auspices of the European Commission, the panel will work with the ECoC to ensure the quality of the ECoC brand and to offer advice and experience. **The bid book at final selection becomes the *de facto* contract** between the designated city, on the one hand, and its citizens, the panel, the European Commission, on the other hand. It has an important role in the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize.

The panel will expect a close alignment with the bid book during the preparation phase and during the ECoC year. Significant variations from the bid book should be discussed with the panel through the European Commission in advance of decisions being made. There are three formal monitoring checkpoints (**autumn 2026, mid-2028, and autumn 2029**) when the ECoC will meet with the panel under the auspices of the European Commission. Before each meeting, the European Commission will invite the ECoC to provide progress reports.

After consultation with the panel, the European Commission will indicate areas that specifically need to be addressed in the reports. In addition, the panel may decide, with the agreement of the European Commission, to visit the city to observe progress. The panel’s reports after all three monitoring meetings will be published on the European Commission’s website. The ECoC may decide to publish its progress reports in the interest of transparency.

## The panel’s recommendations

The designated ECoC now moves to a transition period from a set-up suited to a bid campaign to the more formal ECoC delivery structure independent of the local city administration.

The panel expects Nikšić to develop cooperation with other cities holding the ECoC title and with the wider artistic and cultural community in Montenegro. The ECoC in Montenegro in 2030 provides a national opportunity, which will reflect internationally on the designated city and the country as a whole.

The panel will expect the first progress report in autumn 2026 to consider the recommendations and comments in the bid assessment, as stated above and below.

### Contribution to the Long-Term Strategy:

- Nikšić should continue to align long-term impacts of the ECoC 2030 with the Municipal Development Strategy 2028-2032.
- Regarding monitoring and evaluation Nikšić should establish the governance structure and operational network for Culturometer 2030 consortium within the long-term strategy and vision presented in the bidbook. In this new consortium the potential risks and challenges should be addressed with all key partners and collaborators.

### **Cultural and Artistic Content:**

- The panel encourages Nikšić to articulate how knowledge and experience from Montenegro will contribute to European partners and strengthen the inclusion of various traditions and innovation in the cultural and creative industries in Europe.
- While the list of collaborators is coherent and comprehensive, the programme would benefit from greater clarity on project leadership. Clearly identifying project leaders could help build capacity among local organisations and artists, and support the delivery team in producing a higher share of the programme. Define clear leadership roles for each artistic project, specify timelines and indications of the budgets for specific projects.

### **European Dimension:**

- Enhance and specify the collaboration with international partners more in depth and involve European partners in the communication strategy.
- Develop targeted strategies to attract European audiences during the ECoC 2030.

### **Outreach:**

- The panel recommends continuing to expand the regional engagement strategy beyond Nikšić in order to further strengthen the national dimension of the ECoC opportunity. Building on the strong foundations of the Open Citizens Council and Open Youth Council, the panel encourages the city to explore additional partnerships across Montenegro so that citizens in other regions can feel included in and benefit from the programme.
- The panel encourages Nikšić to ensure continuity of experience and networks when moving from the bidding phase into the implementation phase

### **Management:**

- While founding the delivery body for ECoC 2030 the profile for the members of the executive board should be defined more precisely in order to ensure the governance transparency.
- The panel encourages the cross-department collaboration, especially between Outreach, Open Minds, and the Artistic-curatorial team and recommends defining clear reporting lines within the organisation that will support a transparent and effective collaboration.
- The budgets for projects are estimated in a realistic way, ensure that the project budgets will be more detailed and precisely calculated during the next phase, providing greater clarity, accuracy and financial accountability across all programme components.
- The panel recommends providing training and mentoring for young professionals, so that the capacity building will support future cultural growth in the city and Montenegro beyond 2030. The panel also encourages Nikšić to strengthen the local cultural institutions to ensure that the experience, knowledge and new skills gained during the ECoC-programme remain in the city after 2030.

### **Capacity to Deliver:**

- Develop contingency plans for infrastructure projects with regular milestone reviews. Identify programme dependencies on venues and establish alternative delivery options for potential construction delays. Include these scenarios in the progress report.

## **Signed**

Toni Attard

Csaba Borboly

Jelle Burggraaff

Else Christensen-Redžepović (Vice-Chair)

Suvi Innilä

Erni Kask

Hrvoje Laurenta (Chair)

Tanja Mlaker (Rapporteur)

Matthias Ripp

Brussels, 21 October 2025

