



# **Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2031 in Malta**

December 2025

The Expert Panel's report  
pre-selection stage

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# **Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2031 in Malta**

## ***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 2031 in Malta. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985. The title “European Capital of Culture” has previously been awarded to one city in Malta, namely Valletta in 2018.

The Valletta Cultural Agency (the “Agency”) acts as the managing authority of the competition, which is governed by the Decision n°445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”) as amended by Decision (EU) 2017/1545, and by the “Call for Submission of Applications For the Union Action “European Capital of Culture” for the Year 2031 in Malta” adopted by the Ministry for the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government and published on the website of the Agency together with the corresponding call for submission of applications.

In line with Article 2 of the Rules of procedure, a panel of eight independent experts was established for the selection process. Six panel members were appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies (European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions). Two members of the panel were appointed by the Ministry responsible for Culture.

The competition takes place in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection. The Agency issued a call for applications on 7 October 2024. Two applications were submitted by the closing date of 26 September 2025: Birgu and Victoria.

## Panel Meeting

The panel members met in Valletta 03-04 November 2025. The panel elected Suvi Innilä as its chair and Georgina Portelli as its vice-chair. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality and gave it to the Agency ahead of the pre-selection hearings. Representatives of the Agency 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 the 3 November each candidate city, presented its case (45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (45 minutes). The panel deliberations took place on 3- 4 November.

At a press meeting on 4 November, the chair of the panel announced the panel’s recommendation that the Agency invites the city of **Victoria** to submit a revised bid for the final selection.

## Next Steps

The Agency will arrange for 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 city named on the approved shortlist to submit a revised application for the final selection.

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

The final selection meeting is scheduled to take place in Valletta in September 2026.

Two to four members of the panel will do a one-day visit to the shortlisted city just before the final selection meeting, in order to obtain more background information on the respective bids. Representatives of the Agency 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 encourages both candidate cities to continue with the development and implementation of their respective cultural strategies.

The panel wishes to thank both candidates and everyone who contributed to their bids, the European Commission for its advice and the Valletta Cultural Agency for its excellent organisation of the pre-selection meeting.

## 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.

In the commentaries that follow, the panel notes the main elements of their findings during the pre-selection phase. In reference to the city recommended to be shortlisted successive cities, specific recommendations are made, in order to assist the pre-selected city in the preparation of the final bid book.

The panel emphasises that its assessments of the candidates were based on the bid book and on the cities' presentation 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.

## Birgu

The theme of the bid "*Tanina tas-Sensi - Lullaby of the Senses*" draws on Malta's ancient name Maleth (shelter), its enduring history as a refuge for diverse people, with the aim of transforming the perception of Birgu from a historic fortress to a contemporary European forum. By reframing the historical legacy of the Knights of St. John, the bid seeks to leverage the symbol of the eight *langues* (Tongues) to foster European dialogue and artistic co-creation, through a programme that links each "*Auberge*" with one of the four classical elements of earth, water, air and fire.

The bid led by the Cottonera Foundation extends beyond the boundaries of Birgu and is specifically centred on the area of Cottonera, which includes the historic Three Cities of Vittoriosa (Birgu), Senglea (Isla), and Cospicua (Bormla), along with Kalkara. Deeply rooted in a maritime and fortified history, Cottonera is central to the Maltese identity, boasting a rich heritage and strong community ties. The bid outlines the challenges emerging from the decline of the shipbuilding industry and the closure of the Malta Drydocks in the late 20th century. Birgu forms part of the Port Region – a densely populated urban area covering 15.75 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 69,880 citizens in 2020.

### Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The bid does not present evidence of a city cultural strategy in place and does not indicate ambitions to develop a future one. This lack of strategic framing makes it difficult for the panel to understand the specific cultural priorities and long-term vision for Birgu.
- The bid references the Arts Council Malta's Port Regional Cultural Strategy, part of the broader Regional Cultural Strategies 2022-2027 framework, and the Government of Malta's Cottonera Strategy. Although the overall strategies are clear, the bid fails to explain how the European Capital of Culture action is included in these strategies and how the city's priorities align with these strategies, particularly beyond the 2027 timeline of the Regional Cultural Strategy.
- The vision of Birgu 2031 will be realised through three interconnected flagship projects: revitalising core cultural infrastructure and events (Birgu Parish Hall,

Sculpture Trail, Birgu Fest, and an expanded Grand Harbour Festival), creating the Cottonera Cultural Park as a city-wide green cultural ecosystem, and developing the Cottonera Digital Twin to preserve heritage and drive sustainable, future-oriented innovation. Although the panel appreciated the relevance and value of the proposed projects on a local level, the lack of an articulated strategic rationale for the city's ECoC bid does not provide insight on how these initiatives align with and advance, the long-term cultural, social, and economic development of the city and Cottonera.

- The bid provides minimal detail on monitoring and evaluation. KPIs and monitoring structures remain undeveloped and there is no indication of an external research body or partner to support these processes.

## Cultural and artistic content

- The programme is rooted to the human senses and the "Eight Auberges" and is divided into five seasons which structure the year between the Opening and Closing: Winter – The Upheaval of Water, Spring – The Resurgence of Earth, Summer – The Rebellion of Fire, Autumn – The Dissent of Wind and Aether, and The Digital Quintessence running throughout the year.
- The panel values the programme's ambition to address environmental, heritage-based, and imaginative themes with sensory, participatory, and digital practices and recognises some interesting and potential elements in the basic idea of the cultural concept. However, according to the panel, the coexistence of senses, elements, seasons, and auberges creates conceptual confusion, leaving the overall programme architecture unclear and not convincingly linked to an overarching vision.
- Although the proposal refers to 85 potential project ideas, the few examples it chooses to highlight are described with very limited information regarding their content, purpose, and artistic intent. Because of this lack of detail, the panel was unable to form a clear understanding of the full range and diversity of the activities being proposed, nor could it adequately assess the overall artistic quality of the programme.
- The panel acknowledges that the programme's strong local grounding is a positive aspect. However, the concept remains confined to that local context and misses the opportunity to connect its vision in a meaningful way to a broader European narrative.

## European Dimension

- The bid provides very limited information on activities to promote the cultural diversity of Europe, foster intercultural dialogue, highlight shared heritage, and understanding between European citizens. The panel considers the European dimension of the bid to be one of the most serious weaknesses.
- Beyond the initial contacts with Spanish cities bidding for the title of European Capital of Culture in Spain in 2031, there is no other evidence of international partners, co-productions, or networks. The bid does not reference other European

Capitals of Culture, related EU initiatives, or existing European cultural infrastructures that could anchor exchange, mobility, and cross-border collaborations.

- The bid does not provide any insight on the engagement of European audiences and on the city's potential positioning within Europe's cultural landscape.
- Whereas the concept had the potential to offer a rich basis for a strong European dimension - drawing on multilingualism, maritime exchange, and centuries of transnational encounters, this potential remains largely unfulfilled, with underdevelopment of these themes into concrete European collaborations, narratives, and projects.

## Outreach

- The bid states that the strategic approach for Birgu's ECoC 2031 is heavily focused on community engagement, inclusivity, and audience development. There is overall awareness of community engagement and inclusion in the bid, with emphasis on educational outreach and cultural participation.
- While the panel acknowledges efforts to engage members from the community during the bid's preparation, there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate how community input, local perspectives, and diverse interpretations of place were meaningfully incorporated into the bid.
- The proposal makes general references to 'new and sustainable opportunities for a wide range of citizens' but provides limited insight on how these opportunities will tangibly be designed, delivered and measured.
- The audience development is underdeveloped, presenting generic ambitions rather than specific actions. Evidence on links with education and schools is limited to a few projects.

## Management

- No information was provided on the annual budget for culture in the city over the last five years, excluding expenditure for the ECoC application.
- Other than information on the budgets for the preparation of the pre-selection and selection bids, no further information was provided on whether any funds from the city or regional budgets for culture will be used to finance the ECoC project and the budgets expected to be spent beyond the ECoC year.
- The bid only provides financial details for the operating costs of Birgu 2031 during the pre-selection and final bid stages, amounting to €400,000, funded through contributions from the Birgu Local Council (€100,000), the Local Council Division (€100,000), and Reġjun Port Council (€200,000).
- Information on the operational budget was not included in the bid. During the hearing, the team stated that the total operating expenditure for the Birgu 2031 is projected at €24 - €25 million with 12% expected from the private sector and the remainder from government sources. They indicated €15 million for programming and promotion, €6 - €7 million on administration and €2 - €3 million on research.

- The panel finds that the financial information provided is very limited and insufficient, with several key questions on financing unanswered in the bid.
- The bid states that the feasibility and sustainability of the Birgu 2031 fundraising strategy are exceptionally strong, underpinned by secured public financing and a transformative co-creation model with the private sector. The panel notes that these claims were not substantiated in either the bid or the hearing.
- The Fondazzjoni Kottonera (Cottonera Foundation) will facilitate the coordination and implementation of Birgu 2031. The panel welcomes the presence of an existing organisation to lead the process, yet it remains unclear on how the foundation will provide curatorial independence for the delivery of the programme.
- The bid states that the governance structure for Birgu 2031 is built upon a core team of established national experts who will serve as the collective leadership through the entire process up to 2032. The leadership of the bidding process is assumed by an artistic director entrusted by the Foundation.
- No contingency planning outlining the main strengths and weaknesses of the project and plans to overcome identified weaknesses were presented in the bid.
- No information was provided on budget and commitments for capital expenditure.
- The communication strategy provided a basic outline on the city's intended marketing and communication strategy for the ECoC with no mention on how it plans to highlight the ECoC as an action of the European Union.

## Capacity to deliver

- The bid states that Birgu 2031 is founded on unanimous and robust political support across all administrative levels, including the Birgu Local Council and the Port Region Council. The panel notes that in both the bid and during the hearing there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate this political commitment.
- The panel notes that the flagship infrastructural projects mentioned under different parts of the bid are very promising and could have significant impact on the city as part of the programme and its legacy. On the other hand, the panel notes that over dependence on large infrastructure projects may pose high risk on the timely delivery.
- The bid provides very limited information on the city's infrastructure to host the title, the city's assets in terms of accessibility and absorption capacity in terms of tourist's accommodation. Consequently, based on the information provided, the panel could not ascertain Birgu2031's capacity to deliver the ECoC year.

## Conclusion

The panel recommends that Birgu is not shortlisted for the title of European Capital of Culture for Malta in 2031. Overall, the bid did not meet the criteria requirements for pre-selection. The panel found the bid severely underdeveloped across all six criteria, preventing a positive assessment of Birgu's readiness for the next phase. This was weakened further by the fact that the bid only partially followed the pre-selection questionnaire for the ECoC 2031 competition in Malta, leaving several questions unanswered and content dispersed across unrelated sections, despite the panel's attempts to fill in the lacking information during the hearing.

Despite a concept rooted in the rich heritage of Birgu and Cottonera, the proposal lacked strategic grounding, coherent artistic direction and a clear European dimension. In addition, the community engagement described in the bid remained generic. Major weaknesses in management included insufficient financial information. Limited evidence of political support together with the absence at the hearing of political representatives from the Birgu Local Council, the Port Region Council, or the Cottonera Foundation, further undermined the panel's confidence in the city's readiness to take the bid forward.

The panel recognises the cultural vitality and strong community spirit evident in Cottonera's history and in the aspirations underpinning the bid. With more structured preparation and deeper engagement with local stakeholders, this process could meaningfully contribute to shaping a long-term cultural vision for the area. The momentum generated through the bid could still serve as a foundation for developing a robust local cultural plan that supports the cultural ambitions of Birgu's communities and the entire Cottonera.

## Victoria

The Victoria2031Għawdex bid refers to both the city of Victoria and the region of Għawdex (Gozo) covering the entire island, reflecting its geographic and cultural realities. The bid is built around the theme "*Island of Islands*," a concept that positions Gozo as an archipelago of interconnected communities, landscapes, and cultural practices. The artistic vision is structured through three interconnected curatorial nodes - coast, salt, and waves - each exploring different dimensions of island life. Through this framework, the bid aims to transform Victoria and Gozo into a European platform for cultural co-creation, ecological awareness, and small-island innovation.

This narrative reframes Victoria, the island's Capital also known as *Ir-Rabat*, not simply as Gozo's administrative capital but as the centre of a wider relational ecosystem, where culture acts as a connector between people, places, and ideas. The bid interprets Gozo as a microcosm of Europe, an "archipelago of collaborators", providing responses to contemporary European challenges. The Victoria2031 Foundation was established to lead the city's ECoC bid on behalf of the Victoria Local Council, under an agreement with all of Gozo's 14 local councils. The bid outlines Victoria's and Gozo's strong community spirit and rich heritage while acknowledging challenges such as an ageing population, a fragile environment, limited economic opportunities, and continued outmigration of young people. Gozo is 67 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 40,191 residents (2022).

## Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The bid is anchored in a developing cultural policy framework composed of the forthcoming Victoria Cultural Strategy (2026) and the Gozo Regional Cultural Strategy 2022–2027, alongside Malta's National Cultural Policy and Arts Council Malta (ACM) Strategy 2025. The panel welcomes this strategic alignment, long-term policy continuity and coherence.
- The draft objectives of the city cultural strategy focus on empowering communities to engage with and reinterpret cultural heritage, supporting artists with fair and professional opportunities, fostering resilience and innovation through collaboration

and international exchange, and shaping Victoria into a sustainable, accessible, and culturally vibrant city.

- The objectives are envisaged to align with the ECoC's wider objectives of sustainability and social cohesion. The panel observes that the formulation process of the city cultural strategy remains unclear, particularly regarding how local stakeholders are being engaged and consulted.
- The bid outlines a cross-sectoral model linking culture with education, health, ecology, tourism, technology, and local enterprise. However, the panel found the level of detail on how the city plans to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors is generic and requires more detailed articulation.
- The monitoring and evaluation of victoria31ghawdex will be independently led by the University of Malta and is guided by the programme's vision and long-term goals, with research centred on four objectives and 20 KPIs. While this demonstrates a structured approach, the panel notes that the indicators lean heavily toward quantitative outputs, with limited mechanisms to capture qualitative or transformative change. Questions remain regarding their proportionality to the island's scale and utility beyond the ECoC year.

## Recommendations

- Strengthen the strategic vision to also include a more forward-looking position that highlights the role of European islands as drivers of cultural innovation, ecological stewardship, and social experimentation.
- Provide clearer strategic links on how the city plans to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors, particularly as the legacy of the year, between the sectors and the city's economic and social sectors.
- Develop a more comprehensive Monitoring & Evaluation framework, ensuring it aligns tightly with the city's strategic objectives and captures both quantitative outputs and qualitative, transformative impacts. The framework should be proportionate to the island's scale and designed for long-term sector development beyond the ECoC year.

## Cultural and artistic content

- The artistic vision of *Island of Islands* sees the city as a holobiont: a host and its symbiotic micro-organisms functioning as one integrated whole. Although this conceptual innovation is grounded in scientific research its current presentation is highly intellectualised, making it unclear how this vision will be communicated in an accessible and engaging manner to broader audiences.
- The three programme lines, Coast, Salt, and Waves, form a poetic and layered curatorial framework reflecting different dimensions of island life. Although the artistic programme is intellectually ambitious and conceptually unified, its programme structure is overly complex.
- The bid proposes a total of 31 projects: 3 main node-related projects with 8 developed projects that form the programme's "fil rouge", and 20 projects emerging from consultations and still being defined. The panel welcomes the prioritisation of

programming through collaboration, co-authorship, and process-based creation. However, while the process is presented as open and participatory, it remains unclear how broad and inclusive the engagement has been beyond a selective group of contributors and consultees.

- The list of partners is well presented, and existing commitments are clearly identified. Notably, the bid demonstrates strong international reach, with an impressive number of confirmed collaborations already in place.

## Recommendations

- Reconsider the artistic vision and programme narrative into clearer, more accessible language to ensure that the conceptual framework resonates with a broad and diverse public. Include prototyping and testing with diverse target groups and audiences, adapt and refine if necessary.
- Widen participation beyond the current circle of contributors, ensuring an open and transparent co-creation process.
- Simplify the programmatic structure and assess project scales to ensure they are feasible and deliverable, potentially favouring stronger, more ambitious initiatives over a higher volume of projects.

## European dimension

- The bid's conceptual framework resonates broadly, linking Gozo's ecological and social realities with shared European heritage and contemporary issues such as climate change and migration. While the bid emphasises connectivity, the panel notes a degree of ambivalence in the way it also reasserts insularity as an existential condition.
- Victoria2031 presents a strong and credible European dimension, articulated through a wide network of confirmed partners, exchanges, and collaborations. The bid demonstrates a strong transnational engagement across Europe and the Mediterranean, spanning universities, research institutions, festivals, and cultural organisations. However, it remains unclear how these partnerships will be integrated into a longer-term strategy beyond 2031 to ensure sustained collaboration and lasting European impact.
- A notable strength of the bid is the range of its collaborations with European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) past, present, and future. These partnerships already include co-productions, artist exchanges and joint initiatives.
- The programme's development reflects a clear intention to attract European audiences through thematic relevance, mobility of works, and transnational dialogue. However, further articulation on how European publics will be targeted, and how impact will be measured would help strengthen the overall strategy.

## Recommendations

- Consolidate existing international collaborations and develop sustainable partnership models that could reinforce the long-term European value of the project.

- Explore opportunities to broaden partnerships with other island regions and outermost territories, positioning Victoria2031 as a platform for Europe's islands and peripheral communities, which together represent over 20 million Europeans.
- Strengthen the overall strategy for attracting European and international audiences, and define clear methods for measuring their engagement and impact.

## Outreach

- The bid states that it has been shaped through consultation since 2024. Ten thematic workshops with 60 participants, targeted sessions with youth, and dialogues with mayors, civic leaders, and business actors informed both the programming and participation strategies. Engagement extended to diaspora groups, working communities (local and migrant), and neighbourhood networks.
- The panel recognises as a strength the collaborations with social institutions engaging a wide range of communities.
- The proposed Intersectoral Cultural Governance Forum aims to link culture with education, health, and economic development, supported by capacity-building measures, employment pathways, and inclusive infrastructure. Whereas the panel welcomes this participatory model, the terms of reference for this forum remain unclear.
- Victoria31għawdex will adopt a strategic audience development approach using the Audience Centred Experience Design (ACED) methodology, developed by the Adeste Partnership. However, it is unclear on how this approach will be adopted to Victoria's scale, culture and ambitions.
- The bid references residencies, labs, and participatory projects as pathways for school involvement, yet the strategy for engaging the education sector is not sufficiently developed.

## Recommendations

- Strengthen processes around participation methods, including how diverse voices, especially underrepresented groups, will engage with the programme.
- Develop clear terms of reference for participatory models, such as the forum, outlining mandates, memberships, decision-making procedures, and long-term functions.
- Ensure that the audience development strategy aligns with local capacities, audience behaviours, and the island's cultural ecosystem, supported by concrete targets and monitoring indicators.
- Develop a comprehensive education engagement strategy with clear pathways for children and young people to participate meaningfully in both artistic creation and audience experiences.

## Management

- The total envisaged operating budget for victoria31ghawdex is €43 million, of which €38 million is expected from the public sector. This includes an anticipated €12 million in new funding to public entities that will support the bid. The panel expresses concern that public funding has not yet been formally committed and there is a lack of clarity on the mechanisms that will be used to channel these funds to victoria31ghawdex.
- The bid anticipates 12% private-sector support (approximately €5 million) However, the bid does not outline the basis for this projection or provide evidence of prior fundraising experience to support this forecast. The feasibility of achieving this level of private sponsorship is not convincing.
- The bid envisages a capital expenditure of €57 million with 80% investment from national government and 20% from EU sources. The strategy to seek financial support to cover capital expenditure is by building on new and existing frameworks in partnership with the Ministry for Gozo and the Gozo Regional Development agency.
- The Victoria 2031 Foundation, established on 1 March 2024, leads the city's European Capital of Culture bid on behalf of the Victoria Local Council, under an agreement with all of Gozo's local councils. The Foundation is chaired by the President of the Gozo Regional Council and includes the Mayor of Victoria, representatives from the cultural, creative, and business sectors, the Ministry for Gozo, and an international cultural expert. The panel welcomes the establishment of the foundation yet notes lack of clarity on the appointment of the independent and sectoral representatives in its governance structure.
- The foundation will be supported by three advisory bodies: an Intersectoral Forum to link culture with sectors such as education, health, and economic development, a Reflection Chamber of cultural and civic representatives and an independent Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, led by the University of Malta. The panel welcomes the presence of these bodies yet would have appreciated more detail on the terms of reference for these advisory structures.
- The delivery leadership team foresees the appointment of an Executive Director to oversee operations and programme delivery and a Programme Director to lead the curatorial team. Dedicated teams will manage communications, finance and administration, EU funding and research. The panel welcomes the Foundation's strong commitment to operating on the arm's-length principle, ensuring autonomy for the delivery of the programme.
- The contingency plan is well worked out.
- The outline of marketing and communication strategy is considered solid at this stage, although the digital aspect is generic. The plans to highlight that the ECoc is a European Union action are adequately described.
- The panel notes that the region has only one staff member dedicated to culture, the city employs no cultural officer, and the foundation currently lacks sufficient personnel to engage fully with the project. This raises the panel's concerns about institutional capacity and underscores the urgent need to establish solid structures across local, regional, and foundation levels to ensure effective delivery.

## Recommendations

- Urgently obtain formalised public-sector funding commitments, including clear mechanisms for how the anticipated operational funding will be channelled to victoria31għawdex.
- Develop a more detailed and realistic fundraising strategy to ensure the feasibility of securing private sponsorship at the scale projected.
- Provide clear terms of reference and transparent selection mechanisms to ensure balanced representation and transparency in the governance structure and advisory groups.
- Strengthen staffing for culture within existing local and regional structures and address current capacity gaps by establishing solid, well-resourced organisational frameworks across all levels.

## Capacity to deliver

- The Victoria Local Council, with backing of both parliamentary parties' representatives, has been formally recognised as a candidate for ECoC since 2022. The bid for the title of European Capital for Culture was established as a priority action in Gozo's regional cultural strategy.
- The commitment of 14 Gozo localities to support Victoria's bid was formally signed on 15 April 2025 during a Gozo Regional Council meeting. The panel notes that formal evidence of commitments from national authorities is absent.
- There is a wide range of ongoing and planned infrastructure projects linked to the ECoC year, both new constructions as well as restorations and redevelopments of existing ones. Investments include the completion of the Gozo museum, upgrading of theatres, improved access to cultural heritage sites and new and upgraded transfer hubs for incoming visitors.
- The manner to reach Victoria is well mapped out. Malta International Airport (MLA) in Luqa is Malta's sole airport, offering frequent direct flights from major European and Mediterranean cities. Gozo has regular ferry connections to and from Northern Malta and Valletta. In 2024, over 3.5 million tourists visited the Maltese Islands, 57% of which visited Gozo and Comino. Of the Gozo visitors, 91% visited only as day-trippers, with only 9% staying overnight.
- Tourist accommodation facilities are spread across all localities in Gozo, with over 7,500 bed-places provided by around 1,400 self-catering establishments and 30 collective accommodation establishments (hotels, guesthouses, hostels, and holiday villages) providing just over 2,000 bedspaces.

## Recommendations

- Secure a formal commitment of the government's share of operational costs by the time of the final bid. This is essential to ensure the feasibility of the proposed activities, particularly given that the final bid effectively constitutes a *de facto* contract between the city, the State, and the European Union.

- Strategically identify how projected visitor numbers and the envisaged experience of Victoria31ghawdex will align with and uphold the principles outlined in the bid.
- Clarify the delivery plan for cultural, urban and tourism infrastructure and identify the entities responsible for implementation.

## Conclusion

**The panel recommends that Victoria be shortlisted for the title of European Capital of Culture in 2031.**

Victoria2031Ghawdex presents a compelling and imaginative proposal rooted in the unique identity of Gozo as an “Island of Islands,” supported by a strong spirit of community and a coherent policy environment. The bid demonstrates significant artistic ambition, diverse international engagement, and genuine potential to position Victoria as a platform for European collaboration, particularly around island futures, cultural innovation, and ecological stewardship. The panel recognises the strengths of the conceptual framework, the breadth of partnerships, and the early establishment of the Victoria2031 Foundation. However, certain elements require further development to ensure deliverability. These include clearer articulation of long-term strategic planning and financing, stronger mechanisms for community participation and more detailed measures for the cultural and creative sectors. The panel is convinced that Victoria has the capacity to deliver a sustainable and long-term cultural transformation at the European level.

## General recommendations

**The following general recommendations apply to the shortlisted candidate.**

There is a considerable step-change between the pre-selection and final selection bid books. Therefore, it is strongly advised that the shortlisted city develops the bid for the final selection to meet the required quality level of a European Capital of Culture.

The panel expects significant progress in the final bid book to fully meet the **objectives and six criteria of the European Capital of Culture Action** as outlined in the Decision, reflecting the panel’s recommendations.

Studying the evaluations of recent European Capitals of Culture (since 2013) and the monitoring reports of recently designated ECoCs will provide valuable insight. These are available on the European Commission website.

The panel also urges Malta Central Government to promptly indicate the State financing share for the ECoC 2031 as this information is crucial for the candidate to make accurate plans moving forward.

## General

In the panel’s view, given the global challenges of recent years, a new approach is needed to align culture and major year-long events with this changing world, particularly new procedures and expectations. This applies to all levels of operation, from artistic

expression to administrative work. A more comprehensive contingency plan with suitable alternatives should be an integral part of long-term planning for the ECoC. This presents a significant challenge, but also an opportunity to rethink and establish sustainable cultural models.

The final bid book essentially becomes, **de facto, a contract for the designated city**, outlining the artistic vision, objectives, projects, directions, financing, and management of the programme. Close adherence to the bid book is a key factor when the panel makes a recommendation to the Commission regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri prize after the monitoring phase.

In the final selection bid book, the candidate must address all 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, cultural and artistic programme, and the European dimension.

The panel has a responsibility to protect the long-term brand of the European Capital of Culture programme. With the level of international attention now given to ECoCs, policy decisions across a broad range (not just cultural) may affect the city's reputation and, by extension, the ECoC image. The panel expects the candidate to be aware of this and take proactive steps to minimise negative international and national perceptions through policy changes, rather than relying on marketing or public relations efforts.

The panel would like to remind the candidate of the correct formulation of the European Capital of Culture title, which must not be referred to as "Capital of Culture" or any similar terms. It is important that the title is correctly used when communicating about the initiative to avoid confusion.

The candidate progressing to the second stage should ensure that the bid book includes the following, in line with the final selection questionnaire:

- Clear commitments from all candidacy partners, demonstrated through projects and budget allocations.
- Clear project outlines, with named and committed local, national, EU, and international partners.
- A strong European dimension throughout the bid.
- Clearly developed outreach models.
- A clear organisational structure, including decision-making processes.
- A clear budget breakdown, with distinctions between operational and capital expenditure.

## Contribution to the Long-term Strategy

A formally approved city cultural strategy must be in place before submitting the final bid book. The panel expects the final bid books to focus more tightly on the priorities of the cultural strategy that relate to the ECoC project, its target outcomes, and how resources will evolve over the coming years. The cultural strategy should address the action plan and include plans for sustaining cultural activities beyond the title year. The expected legacy of the ECoC should also be clearly described.

An ECoC represents a transformational opportunity for a city. The pre-selection bid books generally outline why a city is seeking the title. These objectives should be clearly stated, as there is a tendency to perceive the ECoC as a panacea for every urban challenge. A critical area requiring further elaboration is the expected visible change in the urban landscape. The panel expects a more focused explanation of how the programme vision, themes, and activities will link to outcomes, and how monitoring and evaluation will contribute to long-term legacy. There is substantial literature and research available for cities to explore the cultural, urban development, and social benefits of an ECoC.

The evaluation section of the bid book should receive more attention in the final phase, particularly in relation to research for baseline data. The panel expects to see ECoC-specific success indicators. However, the monitoring and evaluation section should focus on priority objectives rather than merely compiling statistics and data. One priority should clearly address how the ECoC will meet the European dimension criterion.

Capacity building should be comprehensive, considering the needs of all cultural players as well as the hospitality industry. The cultural and creative sectors (CCS) should be integrated into the cultural and artistic programme, and linked to a mapping and needs analysis of the sector.

## Cultural and Artistic Programme

The final selection will focus on the operating programme from 2026 (when the ECoC will be formally designated) and especially the ECoC year in 2031. The panel recommends an open-minded and daring artistic approach, embracing new and experimental ideas. The vision presented in the bids could benefit from deeper consideration to clarify unique elements that specifically tie the concept to the city, rather than presenting a generic concept applicable to any European city. Consistency between the selected vision and all other elements of the bid must be ensured. Innovation and originality should be pursued not just in theory, but in practice. The panel expects more details on the programme, its projects, and partners, differentiating between those who have committed to firm participation and those who are still potential partners. ECoC programmes typically cover a wide range of art forms, including creative interventions in social issues. The budget should outline each major project's budget to provide the panel with an understanding of the balance between projects in the programme.

The panel recommends a more focused approach to digital cultural content as an integral part of the programme, rather than just relying on social media promotions. Additionally, more attention should be given to the sustainability of the projects - culturally, ecologically, socially, and economically - to ensure the legacy of the ECoC is substantial.

## European Dimension

The panel urges the short-listed candidate to revisit this criterion carefully. Merely marketing a city in Europe is not a strong interpretation of the European dimension. An ECoC provides a city with the opportunity to promote itself internationally, but this is only half the story.

Developing European cooperation requires strategic partnerships with artists, cultural organisations, and institutions across Europe. These relationships should extend beyond former and future ECoCs, existing European cultural networks, or twin cities.

The European dimension has a two-way direction. It's about presenting the city's contribution to European cultural diversity, but equally important is broadening the understanding of the city's citizens about the diversity of European cultures and linking through cultural and other projects with citizens in other countries. The panel expects to see how the European dimension is concretely reflected in the cultural and artistic programme, with a focus on learning from other cultures. This is what primarily differentiates an ECoC from a national city of culture.

The panel expects to see a significantly increased focus on European partnerships, including co-productions, co-curations, conferences, networking, and visiting artists. Recent ECoCs have included European and international partners in more than half of their projects. The shortlisted city should encourage its cultural operators to engage actively in European cultural networks.

One key element of the European dimension is the ability to attract visitors from across Europe and beyond. The programme should be attractive and distinct from the typical tourist offers of the city or region. The panel advises the candidate to carefully consider a strategic communication plan that aligns with the cultural and artistic programme and an international marketing vision.

## Outreach

The audience development strategy should be much further developed in the final bid books, including both online and offline measures and channels for all identified target groups. The final bid book should approach audience development from a long-term, strategic perspective. Special attention should be paid to reaching harder-to-reach audiences, such as minorities, the elderly, people with disabilities, the LGBT+ community, and others outside city centres or temporarily in the city.

The panel expects the candidate to show how the audience development strategies of the main cultural organisations, independent operators and NGOs, relate to the ECoC programme.

## Management

New times of uncertainty demand new approaches to management. Special attention should be given to risk assessment in the final bid book, including a thorough analysis of

the potential impacts of global challenges during the preparation and implementation phases.

Regarding management models, the panel recommends learning from other ECoCs' experiences while avoiding the direct adoption of pre-existing models. The delivery team will play a critical role, and the cities should clearly outline the best model for ensuring the quality and independence of the artistic management of the project. Recruitment processes and staffing arrangements from 2026 to 2031 should be well-defined, including plans for secondments, interns, and volunteers.

Marketing for an ECoC should go beyond standard information dissemination to include a compelling narrative of European importance. It is vital that marketing communicates the city's European message, aligned with the artistic vision, rather than focusing solely on city branding.

### **Capacity to Deliver**

The candidate should confirm that the bid book, including the overall vision, concept, and financial commitments, has formal approval from the mayor, city and region, councils, and all political parties. The panel also recommends that the candidate and the national government has a shared understanding of the financial contributions.

The candidate is reminded that an ECoC requires a special programme for the year, in addition to the normal cultural offering. The panel expects detailed information on managerial capacity, both in the city and region, to manage a programme of such depth and range. Capacity building should align with local and regional development plans and be planned comprehensively. The city should also plan strong capacity-building programmes to meet the scope of the ECoC, as it exceeds current local capacities. If projects are planned to be funded through competitive EU programmes, such as Creative Europe, this should be clearly indicated.

Information on urban development, infrastructure programmes, cultural heritage restoration projects, and new cultural venues is useful at pre-selection, but the final selection should focus on projects that directly impact the ECoC programme. The candidate should provide a timeline and realistic estimate for completion of these projects.

The final bid book should clearly indicate how these capital projects will be managed, including management structures, state-of-play regarding EU ESI Funds, timelines, and public procurement details.

## **Signed**

Toni Attard (Rapporteur)

Csaba Borboly

José Herrera

Suvi Innilä (Chair)

Hrvoje Laurenta

Tanja Mlaker

Georgina Portelli (Vice Chair)

Matthias Ripp

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