



NOVI SAD

City Culture & SDG Impact Profile

ECoC Status	Legacy City — European Capital of Culture 2022
Prepared by	Culture Next SDG Lab
Based on	Structured conversation with Dula Ribar, January 2026
Date	February 2026

Executive Summary

Headline: Culture as Participation, Continuity & Quiet Influence

ECoC Status: Legacy City — European Capital of Culture 2022

Novi Sad delivered one of the most ambitious European Capitals of Culture programmes in recent years. In 2022, the city hosted over 4,000 cultural activities, attracted 1.5 million attendees, and achieved a participant satisfaction score of 4.9 out of 5. €110 million was invested in cultural infrastructure. The scale was significant.

Three years on, the question is not whether the title year worked — it demonstrably did — but what it left behind, and what role the legacy organisation now plays in a city that has moved on from the peak. The answer, is nuanced: the legacy is real but fragile; the organisation's influence is genuine but informal; the cultural ecosystem is positive but constrained by the wider situation in Serbia.

What this profile shows is that cultural impact in Novi Sad in the post-ECoC period operates through continuity, decentralisation, and quiet policy influence — rather than through scale or visibility. This is not a lesser form of impact. It is often the more durable one.

Key Insights

- Citizen participation in culture increased during the ECoC year and this upward trend has been maintained — a significant legacy achievement.
- Decentralisation of cultural activity beyond the city centre is a lasting structural change, taking culture into neighbourhoods where it was previously absent.
- The legacy organisation operates with limited formal authority but genuine strategic influence, particularly through EU-funded policy advocacy and the UNESCO Creative Cities network.
- The wider political and economic situation in Serbia creates headwinds for cultural engagement; the legacy organisation's continued delivery under these conditions is itself noteworthy.
- A strategic inflection point is approaching: a new city cultural strategy is being drafted, and the legacy organisation may transform into a public institution — decisions that will shape the next phase.

SDG Pathway Overview

Pathway	Primary SDGs
1 — Culture as Participation & Decentralisation	SDG 10 · SDG 11
2 — Culture as Continuity & Civic Stability	SDG 3 · SDG 11 · SDG 16
3 — Culture as Policy Influence (Emerging)	SDG 16 · SDG 8 · SDG 11

Evaluation Maturity at a Glance

Dimension	Maturity Level
Vision & Strategic Direction	Developing
Partnership & European Networks	Established
Delivery Capacity	Developing
Quantitative Data & Evaluation	Established

Section 1 — Process & Capacity Profile

How culture is planned, delivered, and evidenced in Novi Sad

1.1 City & ECoC Context

Novi Sad is Serbia's second-largest city, with a population of approximately 289,000 and a strong cultural identity shaped by its multi-ethnic heritage and university presence. The city held the European Capital of Culture title in 2022, delivering a programme of exceptional scale — 4,000+ activities, 1.5 million attendees, €110 million in infrastructure investment — against a challenging geopolitical backdrop.

Since the title year, the Foundation “Novi Sad — European Capital of Culture” has transitioned from programme delivery to legacy stewardship. It operates with an annual budget of approximately €2.4 million, focused on legacy programming, EU-funded projects, and the UNESCO Creative Cities (Media Arts) designation. It is legally a foundation, though there are discussions about transforming it into a public institution of culture for the creative sector — likely in 2026 or 2027.

ECoC Lifecycle: Legacy City (post-2022)

Legacy cities typically face: a reduction in scale and visibility after the title year; pressure to demonstrate lasting impact; a shift in purpose from delivery to stewardship; and resource dependency on the city budget. Dula's account reflects all of these dynamics. The organisation's honesty about its constraints is itself a sign of institutional maturity.

1.2 Delivery & Evaluation Capacity

The legacy organisation has strong European network capability — partnerships are its most developed asset, and it is actively engaged in EU-funded projects alongside networks including Culture Next. Its media arts focus, through the UNESCO Creative Cities designation, gives it a distinctive and forward-looking strategic identity.

Internal data and evaluation capacity is constrained. Most of the city's cultural data sits with the municipal cultural department, which is a separate organisation and not always accessible to the Foundation. Evaluation evidence from the title year (2022) is robust, but post-title monitoring is

limited. Dula acknowledges this directly, noting that he sometimes struggles to access basic city-level indicators.

The city's cultural strategy (adopted 2016) expires in 2026 and a new strategy is currently being drafted. The direction of the new strategy — and whether it will give more prominence to creative sectors and media arts — is uncertain. This represents both a risk and an opportunity for the legacy organisation's future positioning.

Dimension	Maturity Level
Strategic Direction & Narrative	Developing
Partnership & European Networks	Established
EU Funding & Project Management	Established
Legacy Programme Delivery	Developing
Internal Data & Evaluation Access	Emerging
Monitoring & Reporting Systems	Emerging

1.3 What This Enables and Limits

Enabled: Strong European network engagement allows the organisation to punch above its operational weight. EU funding provides both income and legitimacy that supplements the city budget. The media arts focus gives a clear identity that is genuinely distinctive in the European cultural landscape.

Limited: Formal authority is low — the city decides what happens in culture, and the Foundation's influence is informal and relationship-dependent. Data access is fragmented. The wider situation in Serbia creates an unpredictable operating environment. As Dula notes: "You always have to please the one who gives you the money."

Inflection point: The new cultural strategy and potential institutional transformation are the two decisions that will most shape the next five years. The organisation's ability to influence both — through the policy advocacy project and through relationship management — is the most consequential strategic task it currently faces.

Section 2 — Cultural Context & Quantitative Signals

The conditions in which culture operates in Novi Sad

Data note: Novi Sad has the most complete quantitative data of the Culture Next pilot cohort, largely drawn from its ECoC 2022 evaluation report. Post-title data is more limited. All indicators are used as contextual signals only — not benchmarks. Where data relates to 2022 (title year), this is noted explicitly.

2.1 Title Year at a Glance

The 2022 data paints a vivid picture of what the ECoC year achieved — and provides the baseline against which the legacy period should be understood.

1.5M Attendees <i>Title year 2022</i>	4,000+ Activities <i>Cultural projects & programmes</i>	4.9/5 Quality Rating <i>Participant satisfaction</i>
€110M Infrastructure Investment <i>2017–2022 for ECoC</i>	93.8% Rated events very good / excellent <i>Audience research, 2022</i>	131,476 Social media followers <i>FB + Instagram + YouTube</i>

2.2 Cultural Ecosystem at a Glance

Culture Next quantitative theme framework — applied as contextual signals across all pilot cities

Economic — Value / Investment

Foundation budget 2024: €2.4M total (programming €1.24M, administration €783K, marketing €313K).
City cultural spend 2024: €10.9M. Regional (Vojvodina): €64.1M. National (Serbia): €131.2M. ECoC total programme budget: €138.5M.

Data: Available — internal records & public budgets

Social — Sustainability / People

93.8% of participants rated ECoC events as very good or excellent (2022). Citizen participation in cultural events increased during and since the ECoC year — a sustained upward trend confirmed by evaluation surveys.

Data: Available for title year; post-title tracking limited

Governance — Management / Delivery

Dual structure: municipal cultural department (main decision-maker) + ECoC Foundation (legacy programme + EU projects). City council resolution naming all 8 ECoC themes as official legacy provides operational flexibility. Strategy renewal underway (2016 strategy expires 2026).

Data: Qualitative / documented

Infrastructure — Physical Cultural

€110M invested in cultural infrastructure 2017–2022 for ECoC purposes. Creative District development included. Post-2022 infrastructure maintenance and programming capacity dependent on city budget allocation.

Data: Available for ECoC period; post-title data limited

Vibrancy — Cultural Vibrancy

4,000+ activities in title year. Key legacy programmes: Kaleidoscope of Culture (5-week annual festival, now in reduced but continuing form); dual New Year's Eve concept (Gregorian + Julian calendar events, city-wide decentralised). Exit Festival historically a major brand signal; presence uncertain in 2026.

Data: Title year: strong. Post-title: partial

Images — Perceptions / Media

4.9/5 quality rating for programme content (2022). Strong international profile through ECoC title. UNESCO Creative Cities (Media Arts) designation adds ongoing visibility. Social media following: 131,476 across platforms.

Data: Available for title year; ongoing tracking limited

2.3 What the Context Suggests

Novi Sad's quantitative picture is strongest for the 2022 title year — and this is both its asset and its challenge. The headline numbers are impressive and provide a credible platform for the legacy narrative. But the post-2022 data is patchy, reflecting the structural reality that much city-level data sits with the municipality rather than the Foundation.

The most important contextual signal for the legacy period is not a number but a direction: citizen engagement with culture increased during the ECoC year and has continued to trend upward. This is the core legacy achievement, and it is the thread that connects the quantitative context to the qualitative pathways in Section 3.

Section 3 — Impact & SDG Pathways

How culture contributes to change in Novi Sad

How to read this section

SDG Pathways trace how cultural activity creates meaningful change: what exists → how people engage → what changes first → what broader outcomes this contributes to. SDG alignment is applied by Culture Next as an interpretive framework. The pathways below reflect the legacy period (post-2022) rather than the title year itself, and are grounded in Dula Ribar's account of what the organisation actually does.

PATHWAY 1

Culture as Participation & Decentralisation

Impact Domain: Inclusion & Access

SDG 10

Reduced Inequalities

SDG 11

Sustainable Cities

Cultural participation in Novi Sad increased during the ECoC year and has continued to trend upward. Critically, this was not achieved simply by adding more events — it was achieved by changing where culture happens.

Taking Culture to Where People Are

Before and during the ECoC year, the legacy organisation made a deliberate choice to move cultural activity beyond the historic city centre into the outer neighbourhoods and outskirts of Novi Sad. This decentralisation is now embedded in the city's approach to cultural programming and persists through the legacy programmes.

The New Year's Eve programming is the clearest example. Rather than a single large commercial event in the centre, the organisation runs two distinct celebrations: a larger event on 31 December, and a network of smaller, more intimate events in cafes, alternative venues, and neighbourhood spaces on 13 January (the Julian calendar new year). This is an active, ongoing choice to bring culture to communities rather than expecting communities to come to culture.

The Kaleidoscope of Culture — a five-week annual programme presenting different art forms across the city — continues in reduced but genuine form, maintaining the principle of broad cultural access that defined the ECoC year.

Illustrative example: New Year's programming

The dual New Year's concept — introduced during the ECoC period and continued as a legacy programme — deliberately focuses on underground and less well-known artists rather than

commercial acts. Events are dispersed across the city. “We kind of focus more on the underground scene, the cultural workers and artists who are not so well known.” This is inclusion in practice: culture for people who might not otherwise engage with it, in spaces they already inhabit.



“It used to be mainly in the city centre, but now on different parts of the city and the outskirts you can also find activities related to culture. Since Novi Sad became European Capital of Culture, the participation of citizens in cultural events has increased.”

— Dula Ribar, Novi Sad ECoC Foundation

SDG Pathway Logic

Stage	What happens
Cultural inputs	Decentralised legacy programmes (Kaleidoscope of Culture; dual New Year concept); neighbourhood venues and alternative spaces; underground and emerging artists
Participation mechanism	Low-barrier, informal, geographically distributed events bring culture to communities rather than requiring them to travel to central venues
Intermediate outcomes	Increased citizen participation (evidenced by evaluation data); greater geographic spread of cultural activity; visibility for less well-known artists
Urban outcomes	More inclusive use of urban space; reduced geographic inequality in access to culture; culture embedded in everyday neighbourhood life rather than concentrated in the centre

CONFIDENCE
High

Clear, repeated evidence across participation, decentralisation, and citizen surveys. Survey data from evaluation report confirms upward participation trend. The mechanism is explicit and ongoing.

PATHWAY 2

Culture as Continuity & Civic Stability

Impact Domain: Social Connection & Wellbeing

SDG 3

Good Health & Wellbeing

SDG 11

Sustainable Cities

SDG 16

Peace & Justice

In a period of significant uncertainty for Serbia, Novi Sad’s cultural sector continues to deliver. The legacy organisation’s ongoing programming — understated, consistent, and community-facing — provides a form of civic stability that is easy to overlook precisely because it works quietly.

Culture as a Stabilising Presence

Dula is candid that the wider situation in Serbia is “not very good,” and that this affects people’s engagement with culture. Against this backdrop, the continued delivery of legacy programmes — Kaleidoscope of Culture, city day events, New Year celebrations — is not a given. It requires ongoing negotiation with city funding, operational resilience, and a consistent commitment to the communities these events serve.

The city council’s resolution naming all eight ECoC thematic pillars as official legacy gives the Foundation operational flexibility: it can choose which types of projects to prioritise each year depending on funding and context, while remaining within the sanctioned legacy framework. This is an underappreciated governance achievement — it provides a degree of creative freedom that many legacy organisations lack.

The Exit Festival, historically one of Novi Sad’s most significant cultural brands and a major draw for international visitors, is unlikely to take place in Novi Sad in 2026. This is a notable absence — not just economically, but symbolically. Novi Sad’s cultural identity has been closely associated with Exit for two decades. Its potential departure is worth acknowledging as a fragility in the city’s cultural image.



“Generally the attitude towards culture in Novi Sad is positive and we see upward trends — even though the spending on culture is not that high, most people cannot say ‘you’re putting all the money into culture.’”

— Dula Ribar, Novi Sad ECoC Foundation

SDG Pathway Logic

Stage	What happens
Cultural inputs	Continued legacy programming (Kaleidoscope of Culture; city day events; dual New Year concept); annual budget from city; EU-funded project income
Participation mechanism	Repeated, familiar, annual cultural events create a rhythm of civic participation and social gathering — particularly important during periods of external instability
Intermediate outcomes	Sustained public trust in cultural institutions; culture perceived as a normal part of city life; continued engagement despite external pressures
Urban outcomes	Social resilience and civic continuity; culture as a stabilising force in periods of political and economic uncertainty

CONFIDENCE
Medium-High

Strong narrative evidence from interview; the broader social stability outcome is inferred rather than directly measured. Would benefit from qualitative testimony from event participants in future evaluation.

PATHWAY 3

Culture as Policy Influence Without Formal Power

Impact Domain: Governance, Voice & Participation

SDG 16

Peace & Justice

SDG 8

Decent Work

SDG 11

Sustainable Cities

Emerging pathway: This pathway reflects an approach that is operationally active but whose outcomes are not yet fully visible. The mechanism is clear and intentional; the results will become apparent as the new city strategy is finalised and the UNESCO Creative Cities work develops.

The Novi Sad ECoC Foundation has no formal decision-making authority over the city's cultural policy. The municipal cultural department holds that power. And yet the Foundation is actively shaping cultural policy — through EU-funded advocacy, through its UNESCO Creative Cities role, and through its participation in networks like Culture Next.

Influence Without Authority

The most significant example is an ongoing EU-funded project explicitly focused on policy reform: the Foundation is reviewing Novi Sad's city development plan and proposing changes to better reflect cultural priorities, particularly around creative sectors and media arts. This is formal policy advocacy conducted through the legitimacy of European funding rather than through institutional authority.

The UNESCO Creative Cities (Media Arts) designation provides a second lever. It positions Novi Sad within an international framework that carries its own policy expectations and peer review mechanisms — creating external accountability for the city to develop its media arts ecosystem in ways that the Foundation alone could not mandate.

The timing is significant: the city's cultural strategy is currently being rewritten, and the Foundation hopes it will include more emphasis on creative sectors and new technologies. Whether this happens depends on relationships, advocacy, and the receptiveness of whoever is leading the strategy drafting process — none of which the Foundation controls directly.

“We identify the strategic document of the city — the development plan of Novi Sad — and we are going to implement some changes into that document in order to make it better. Some form of policy advocacy is also what we do.”

— Dula Ribar, Novi Sad ECoC Foundation

SDG Pathway Logic

Stage	What happens
Cultural inputs	EU-funded policy advocacy project; UNESCO Creative Cities (Media Arts) designation; Culture Next and other European network participation
Participation mechanism	External legitimacy (EU funding; UNESCO; peer networks) provides a platform for policy influence that formal institutional authority alone would not allow
Intermediate outcomes	Cultural considerations being incorporated into city development plan revisions; media arts sector gaining visibility and strategic recognition
Urban outcomes	More culturally informed urban policy; potential institutional transformation of the Foundation; creative economy pathways strengthened over time

CONFIDENCE Emerging

Mechanism is clear and active; outcomes depend on the new cultural strategy's content and the Foundation's potential transformation into a public institution. Revisit when strategy is finalised.

3.4 Pathway Typology

Novi Sad's three pathways reflect a coherent and distinctive pattern: impact through continuity, reach, and quiet influence rather than through scale or spectacle. This is the natural character of a legacy organisation operating in a post-title environment — and it is more durable than the alternative.

Pathway Type	What it means in Novi Sad
Participation & Decentralisation	Culture embedded in neighbourhoods rather than concentrated in the centre; inclusion through geography
Continuity & Civic Stability	Consistent programming as a form of social infrastructure during uncertain times
Policy Influence Without Authority	Shaping the city's cultural direction through European networks and advocacy rather than institutional power

Section 4 — What This Means for Culture in Novi Sad

Using this profile to strengthen practice, policy, and positioning

4.1 What This Profile Tells You

The legacy is real and should be named confidently. The upward trend in citizen participation, the decentralisation of cultural activity, and the continued delivery of legacy programmes are genuine achievements. They are not dramatic — but they are durable. This profile gives the Foundation language to articulate that durability in a way that is credible to city officials, funders, and peers.

The 2022 data is your strongest asset — use it strategically. The title year metrics (1.5M attendees, 4,000+ activities, 4.9/5 satisfaction, €110M infrastructure) are exceptional. This profile places them in context as a baseline, not a ceiling. The post-title trajectory — sustained participation, continued programming — is the evidence that the investment delivered lasting change rather than a one-year spike.

The strategic inflection point requires attention. The new cultural strategy and potential institutional transformation are the decisions that will most shape the next five years. This profile's policy influence pathway directly supports the case for the Foundation's continued and expanded role.

4.2 How You Can Use This Profile

City budget and strategy conversations

The three pathways provide clear, SDG-aligned language for conversations with the municipality. Rather than defending cultural spend in cultural terms, the Foundation can point to: sustained participation increases (inclusion), neighbourhood-level activity (urban sustainability), and policy reform contributions (governance). The quantitative signals — particularly the budget breakdown and participation data — support the case without requiring unavailable data.

European and UNESCO network positioning

The policy influence pathway and the UNESCO Creative Cities designation are the Foundation's most distinctive assets in European contexts. This profile frames these clearly and in SDG-aligned terms, making it directly useful for European funding bids, network reports, and peer exchanges.

Communications and visibility

Dula noted the usefulness of being able to show city officials “where Novi Sad stands” in comparison to other cities. This profile, alongside the Culture Next dashboard and qualitative framework, begins to provide that comparison — not as a ranking, but as a picture of how Novi Sad's approach and context differ meaningfully from other legacy, candidate, and post-bid cities in the network.

Monitoring and evaluation development

The most immediate evaluation gap is post-2022 tracking data. A practical next step would be agreeing a small set of annually collectable indicators (potentially from the Culture Next Framework) with the municipal cultural department — even if imperfect — to maintain a continuous picture beyond the title year. The qualitative pathway framework provides a structure for this.

4.3 Learning for Other Legacy Cities

- The city council resolution naming all ECoC themes as legacy is a replicable governance mechanism — it provides operational flexibility without requiring annual political negotiation.
- Operating with limited formal authority is not unusual for legacy organisations. The key is finding legitimate external platforms (EU funding, UNESCO, peer networks) that provide influence independent of the institutional hierarchy.
- The risk of ‘evaluation fatigue’ is real in the post-title period. Keeping evaluation light and embedded in ongoing activities — rather than a separate reporting burden — is the most sustainable approach.
- The exit of a major cultural brand (Exit Festival) from a city creates a reputational gap that programming alone cannot fill. Legacy organisations should consider how to address the image dimension of such losses proactively.

4.4 Suggested Next Steps

Area	Action
Quantitative tracking	Agree a minimal annual indicator set with the municipal cultural department — participation figures, event numbers, basic budget data — to maintain post-2022 continuity
Policy influence	Document the policy advocacy project process as it develops; this will be strong SDG 16 evidence and is currently only described qualitatively
New strategy engagement	Use this profile’s policy pathway framing in conversations with strategy drafters — it provides an evidence-based case for creative sector inclusion
Institutional transformation	As the Foundation-to-institution transition develops, use this profile to articulate the value case for continued and expanded scope
Peer learning	Share the decentralisation approach (dual New Year concept; neighbourhood programming) with Culture Next candidate cities planning legacy structures
Next review	Revisit this profile once the new cultural strategy is published and the institutional transformation decision is made (anticipated 2026–2027)

About Culture Next

Culture Next supports cities to better understand, articulate, and evidence the role of culture in sustainable urban development, using a qualitative impact framework aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. culturenext.eu

Methodology note

This profile draws on a structured conversation with Dula Ribar (Novi Sad ECoC Foundation) in January 2026, supplemented by the Culture Next Framework Indicator Data (Novi Sad, 2024) and the ECoC 2022 evaluation report. SDG mapping is applied by Culture Next as an interpretive layer. Quantitative data from the title year (2022) is the most complete available; post-title data availability is noted explicitly. Data is used as contextual signal only and is explicitly non-comparative.