



Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2026 in Finland

The Expert Panel's report Pre-Selection Stage

**Helsinki
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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 2026 in Finland. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985. The title “European Capital of Culture” has previously been awarded to two cities in Finland, namely Helsinki in 2000 and Turku in 2011.

The Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland (the “Ministry”) acts as the managing authority of the competition, which is governed by Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”)¹ and by the “Rules of Procedure – Competition for the European Capital of Culture 2026 in Finland” (the “Rules”) – adopted by the Ministry and published on its website².

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

The competition takes place in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection. The Ministry issued a call for applications on 2 April 2019. Three applications were submitted by the closing date of 5 May 2020 by:

Tampere, Savonlinna, Oulu.

Panel meeting

The panel members met online, joining in from 10 countries on 16 and 23-24 June, 2020. It was the first ever online preselection meeting as the COVID-19 related travelling restrictions still in place at the time made it impossible for a majority of panel’s members to be physically present in Helsinki. The panel elected Jiri Suchanek as its chair and Riitta Vanhatalo as its vice-chair. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality and sent it to the Ministry in advance. Representatives of the Ministry 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 23 June, each candidate city, in reverse alphabetical order, presented its case (30 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (60 minutes).

At a press conference on 24 June 2020, the chair of the panel announced (via telephone connection) the panel’s recommendation that the Ministry invites the following cities to submit revised bids for the final selection (in alphabetical order):

Oulu, Savonlinna, Tampere.

It is important to note that the panel took into account the extraordinary context in which the bid books had been prepared due to the lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the lockdown seriously limited the competing teams’ possibilities of engaging the citizens and local stakeholders and, most notably, establishing European and international

¹ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG (in English)
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FI/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014D0445&from=EN> (in Finnish)

² https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/12954142/en_Rules+of+Procedure.pdf/f9e9ade0-8731-5c3c-82d1-3a1581dd4ef4/en_Rules+of+Procedure.pdf (in English)

partnerships. These dimensions are expected to be much strengthened during the final selection phase. It is expected that the pandemic will leave a long-lasting impact on the cultural sector, which needs to change substantially from within and adapt to the new situation. It is also expected that all three preselected cities focus on both practicalities and the artistic vision of their projects in the time after COVID-19. Similarly, budget plans included in the bids are expected to be revised and confirmed. The expectations regarding the national budget contribution risk being overestimated and they need to be further discussed and reviewed.

Next steps

The Ministry 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 cities named on the approved shortlist to submit revised applications for the final selection.

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

The deadline for the submission of revised applications is 23 April 2021.

The final selection meeting is scheduled to take place in Helsinki most probably in early June 2021.

Two to four members of the panel will pay a one-day visit to the shortlisted cities just before the final selection meeting, in order to obtain more background information on the respective bids. Representatives of the European Commission and the Ministry 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. In particular, the panel noted that all cities have used the opportunity of the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies as well as the role of culture and Europe in their overall social-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition. The panel encourages all three cities to continue with the development and implementation of their respective cultural strategies.

The panel thanks all three bidding candidates and everyone who contributed to their bids, the European Commission for its advice and the Ministry for its excellent administration, including the IT team.

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 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 in Article 5:

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

It was not clear for the panel if all candidate cities had fully completed the formal approval of their cultural strategy at city council level. One of the most important features in Decision 445/2014/EU, governing the ECoC action from the 2020 titles on, is the requirement that cities have a formal and explicit cultural strategy. This is to ensure that the ECoC is grounded in a medium-term transformation of the city and its cultural life rather than in a one-off festival.

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

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

Tampere

The theme of the bid submitted by the city of Tampere and the surrounding Pirkanmaa region is "Quality by Equality" and the ambition is to promote equality through cultural sustainability. The concept is inspired by the notion that Tampere was at the forefront of the industrialization and equality movement. The panel finds the main theme "equality" ambitious and relevant but complex to implement. In the panel's view, the bid would be stronger if the discussions Tampere wants to have were to be nourished by cultural and artistic means, not only on local but also at European level.

Several challenges directly linked with the field of culture are identified in the bid, such as the lack of spaces for artists, the inability of the city to successfully apply for EU grants, an audience insufficiently engaged, as well as the lack of integration of a culturally diverse community. The wider notion of nature is addressed in principle, but it is translated only in a limited (and not always very innovative) way into the proposed artistic and cultural programme. The cultural strategy is being developed and it is clear that in general the ECoC project expands the city's ambitions and broadens the perspectives of a regional cultural development, which is sound. However, the ECoC's impact on the city's and region's long-term cultural development is not clearly presented. The regional involvement is promising, though it should be further developed at the governance level in order to explore potential legacy impacts. Moreover, it is not clear to the panel if and when the cultural strategy for the

city was formally adopted, so the second bid book should make explicit the formulation and approval of this strategy.

The capacity building has several good elements but lacks a focus on ECoC specific issues and needs; as an example, no support to the internationalization of the cultural sectors' work is visible.

The three levels identified for monitoring and evaluation are appropriate and having formative self-assessments by organisations against ECoC objectives and in relation to the anticipated change mechanisms is a very good approach. However, the evaluation strategy requires further elaboration, especially in terms of gathering baseline data and setting up clearer indicators relevant to the ECoC proposal (e.g. to define and measure impact on 'equality'). The panel notes that the self-assessment tool is a good and forward-looking approach.

The programme is aligned in four core lines: Public Sauna – dealing with open spaces for culture and inviting all as equal participants in the artistic co-creation process; Revolutions – aiming at overcoming inequalities, the term being widely defined and covering a large spectrum from industrial to gender; Wisdom of Trees – dedicated to cultural sustainability and stressing the importance of nature in life and using it as inspiration for arts; and Village Hopping – dedicated to moving identities and praising the quality of rural culture and its traditional ways of artistic expression. Ecological concerns are a high priority in the strategy, but they are not yet incorporated in the bid, apart from the need to produce more renewable energy and convince newcomers of the benefits derived from a life close to nature. The ambition to use the programme to build resilience and to challenge the idea of mega-events and develop sustainable productions instead, are plausible, but it is unclear at the moment how such a programme would fulfil the needs of the European Capital of Culture scope. In general, the panel found that the programme structure, including its regional flagships, was clear with potential for relevant artistic vision and topics European-wise.

The "Quality by Equality" concept has per se a European resonance. However, there is still a need to create a strategy aiming to translate this concept into individual projects that will be able to get understanding from and kindle interest of a wider European audience. The concept mentioned in the bid of a "global" solidarity remains so far only a keyword, which needs considerable further reflection related to the main equality topic brought forward by the city of Tampere.

Strong relations with other ECoC cities are already established, which is positive but only a first step. Cooperation with Russia is a potentially interesting element of the bid, to be, however, further developed. In the panel's view, the current proposal is too much focused on local and regional elements and activities e.g. promoting European cultural diversity or highlighting (current or past) common themes, are not yet developed. In the panel's view, the bid's European dimension is therefore underdeveloped at this stage.

The ECoC application was approved by the Tampere City Council whilst the other 19 municipalities of the region that originally supported the idea of the bid have until the autumn 2020 to decide about their commitment. The panel expects this final decision to be presented in the final bid book. In terms of the ability to host big events, Tampere has both the required organisational experience and adequate infrastructures. Accessibility of the city is also satisfactory.

Outreach is quite well presented. Several convincing examples of the involvement of the local population, civil society and university in the preparation of the application are provided. However, it is not yet clear how the diverse communities living in Tampere and the region will be involved in the implementation of the ECoC. It is crucial that the team, in line with the bid's main slogan, reflects further on the diverse groups they want to target and that a

common participatory work is started to create true innovation in artistic expression. These groups should be identified Europe-wide (to reflect the European element of the ECoC project), along with precisely tailored means to engage them. So far, the bid's keyword of co-creation is not translated into practice. The concepts of equality and diversity are not yet duly translated into the outreach strategy. The ideas identified to develop the audience development strategy are a good starting point, but they still require further elaboration.

The management structure is not clear - notably lacking a design of the organisational structure, especially in regard to the team responsible for monitoring and evaluation. Capital investment seems overestimated and it is not clear whether there is a direct relation with the ECoC project. The expectations regarding the national budget contribution risk to be overestimated and need to be further discussed and reviewed. Overall, the practical part of the bid is still underdeveloped, and it is not easy to determine how the concept of quality by equality translates into management actions and structure.

The panel has doubts about the general direction of the communication and marketing strategy. At the moment, the main focus is on promoting the city, whereas a clear European narrative is missing. Furthermore, the strategy described in the bid book is to be based on digital means, but no details have been presented on how it would work.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Tampere proceeds to the final selection phase.

The bid has strong elements, but there are several major shortcomings that need to be overcome in the final round.

Whilst interesting per se and having potentially a strong European resonance, the concept of "quality by equality" should be better explained, in particular how it is rooted in the local context and needs, instead of being used as a very general motto that sometimes seems to the panel too much deprived of a concrete substance. The concept of the bid needs to be translated into the cultural and artistic programme in a practical and concrete way, not only in a theoretical alignment. There is a need for a clear and strong message to be formulated, which will be communicated and understood by audiences coming from across Europe. For that, a strategy aiming at building European partnerships, and not limited to ECoC cities, must be developed.

The panel appreciates the incorporation of the six objectives of the ECoC in the evaluation and monitoring of the proposed programme with a number of interesting initiatives such as the Graffiti Workshops for Elderly. The strong cooperation with local artists and cultural operators in developing the cultural programme is another asset of the bid.

The bid is presented as a joint initiative between the city of Tampere and the region of Pirkanmaa, which is positive. However, a clear regional dimension (in line with the main theme of the bid) is still to be developed. The panel encourages the bidding team to conduct a deeper research and look more closely into the city and the region's potential.

The panel has also concerns regarding the management structure and the communication and marketing strategy. On a positive side, there is a very solid cultural infrastructure already in place and the city has clearly the organizational capacity to host an event of the scale and scope of an ECoC.

Savonlinna

The bid led by Savonlinna is a joint effort of the four provinces included in the Savonia and Karelia regions. It is presented under the motto "The Saimaa Phenomenon" and draws attention to the unique natural and cultural identity of the regions where Savonlinna and the four provinces are located.

The bid is strongly rooted in local heritage and tradition. It is focused on rural culture as an inspiration for new forms of art and communication, and strongly connected with the local community and surrounding nature. The aim is to use ECoC to make culture a more important element of the city's (and regions') strategy, with Savonlinna being considered as an enabler for the cultural scene.

The visible change expected from the ECoC title in Savonlinna and adjacent provinces is to make the region more liveable and populated.

However, in the view of the panel, the expectations seem extremely ambitious to be achieved only with an ECoC project. Indeed, the challenges the bid book addresses include regional diversification and the increased exclusion and loneliness of people. The ECoC project is also intended to tackle issues such as migration of young people to larger urban areas and an aging population, which are common to most European societies. The panel was left with the impression that some of these ambitions were overestimated.

The city's cultural strategy has been rightly approved in March 2020 alongside the Cultural Strategy of Cooperation in Eastern Finland.

The monitoring and evaluation plan is described to a certain extent. Reference is made to baseline research, such as SROI and current levels of engagement. However, preliminary surveys do not seem to have investigated the reasons why people refrain from participation in cultural activities. The panel considers that additional consideration needs to be given to existing data and best ways of building on it to strengthen future evaluation. It is also unclear whether monitoring and evaluation refer to the cultural strategy as a whole or to the ECoC project specifically.

The capacity-building programme is mostly related to the implementation of the cultural strategy, so it only partly supports the direct delivery of the ECoC project.

The three pillars that the concept of the bid is based on are: Eastern Joy - highlighting the regions' history and culture; Power of Water - promoting the relationship between art and culture on the one hand, and water and nature on the other; Connecting Bridges - building equal opportunities and inspirational cooperation. The core structure of the programme has been prepared and is still being developed with the involvement of numerous local artists, which is a positive element. On a less positive note, the programme devotes very little space to contemporary creation. The team, strongly supported by the Mayor of Savonlinna, is committed to go on with their project regardless of whether they win the ECoC title or not. According to the panel, the "Saimaa Capitals of Culture" (included in the overall ECoC programme), with events planned in the years 2022-2025, can be considered to have an interesting potential for capacity building, providing it is developed further with such a goal in mind and is presented with greater details at final selection. On the other hand, these Saimaa Capitals could drain resources and audiences' interest, so this aspect needs to be carefully developed. Nevertheless, despite the big plans for the Saimaa Capital of Culture events, the panel advises to focus on the programme of the ECoC year itself.

The European dimension is basically limited to Nordic countries, the Baltic Sea region and Russia. The specifics of being a border region between east and west are emphasized. These

links should be further developed and integrated onto the cultural and artistic programme for the next step.

The rest of Europe is not fully represented in the pre-selection bid. Moreover, it is the view of the panel that the European dimension requires much more than just partnerships. It requires presenting a clear narrative contributing to strengthening European values by means of arts and culture. The culture and specific type of life in the city are strongly connected in the programme, and the message to Europe is that this way of life inspired by nature is attractive. The team articulated very strongly how Saimaa should not be considered just a tourist destination, but as a way of life, which is a powerful message. However, this statement has not yet been translated into clear European artistic concepts and topics.

The Savonlinna City Council and city boards of other co-bidding cities have voted to support their participation in the ECoC application, and so did the boards of the regional authorities, which is sound. The exact level of financial contribution is to be decided in the near future and the panel expects to receive all the necessary details in the final bid book. The city plans to use all existing infrastructures and develop new capital projects where necessary. New exhibition spaces are planned, though it should be clarified whether they are related with the ECoC project or not. At the moment the capacity to deliver a project of such a large scope as ECoC is more a concept than a proven fact and the panel would expect a more detailed and convincing description in the final bid.

The bid book was prepared in clear collaboration with cultural institutions across provincial borders. The panel considers the Bridge Builders team, as well as the ambassadors, as a good way of facilitating relations between different stakeholders in the four provinces. Moreover, the "We guarantee" scholarship scheme is promising, but would need a more detailed description about how it would work. Although there are some basic audience development ideas, this aspect needs to be further developed in relation not only to the cultural strategy goals but also more specifically to the ECoC goals.

The budget planned for the ECoC year is not very high, but the planned national contribution seems realistic. The expected level of EU funding (i.e. 6 million EUR) is ambitious but feasible. However, a clarification is needed on how the cost of staff working with cultural and event productions will be settled. The panel is also concerned that the costs related to the successive Saimaa Capital of Culture years might jeopardise the budget of the actual ECoC year in 2026.

In terms of management, the panel appreciates the plan to include a regional coordinator for the second round. However, the administrative structure regarding the relations between the bidding cities and the partners of the ECoC is rather vague and the governance and organisational structures should be further developed to ensure participation in the decision-making. The role of the Artistic Director is unclear.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Savonlinna proceeds to the final selection stage.

The panel considers the proposal interesting and with a lot of potential, especially the strong civic engagement, the cooperation between the cities involved and the committed team, as well as the rich and vivid cultural heritage of the region covered. The actual theme of "Saimaa Phenomenon" is however very generic and not clearly explained and therefore its relevance for Europe is lacking at the moment.

The monitoring and evaluation strategy needs to be further developed in relation to the specific ECoC project to ensure that clearer strands of baseline data are collected and approaches to new data collection are clearly outlined.

The bid is focused on the rehabilitation of the bidding municipalities but the broader European narrative is missing. The panel felt that the ECoC project was considered as a tool to attract more visitors, but not necessarily as a tool to attract and diversify international cultural participation or to propose an alternative tourism model.

The European dimension chapter is underdeveloped. It needs to include partners from across Europe, not just Scandinavia and the Baltics and must connect more clearly to the core concept of the programme.

As it stands, the bid requires a clearer focus on the message it wants to deliver to the rest of Europe and the world. This part needs to be strengthened.

The capacity to deliver also requires a more convincing description, especially in terms of the cultural infrastructure in place, as well as the ability to organise large events.

Oulu

The bid of Oulu is centred around the concept of “Cultural Climate Change”, which is a word play emphasizing the need to reinforce the role of culture in the city’s and the region’s development, as well as the contribution culture can bring to the fight against climate change. The goal of the bid is to reconnect people, dispersed in today’s world overtaken by technology and speed of life.

The new cultural strategy of Oulu, covering the period 2020-2030, was approved by the City Council in January 2020. The basic concept of the strategy is the need for more diverse economic structures and soft sources of development, not only in the field of culture. The vision of both, the cultural strategy and the bid of Oulu 2020, is Cultural Climate Change. The core values of the bid are courage, fairness and responsibility. The panel felt however, that a reference to environmental sustainability was missing.

The structure of the bid corresponds well with the five main challenges the city faces at the moment, which are related with the too serious attitude of local people, the lack of balance in the use of social and health funds, the depopulation of rural areas, an aging society and the wish to bring some wildness into everyday life.

The participation in culture is not as high as would be expected. As a response to this relatively low level of cultural participation, the aim of the ECoC project is to try and embrace all disadvantaged groups, who do not feel to be part of the cultural community right now. National and ethnic minorities as well as the indigenous community living in the area are also targeted.

There is a thorough analysis of the city’s and region’s upsides and downsides. Assuring baseline evaluation is another good starting point, allowing for credible monitoring and better adjustment of the programme to the actual needs. The concept drawn on the results of the preliminary evaluation – cultural climate change – is interesting; however, at this stage it is not clearly translated into the cultural and artistic programme.

The capacity-building programme seems a bit narrow, not going beyond business elements, whereas it should cover other topics and skills of the whole cultural sector. A clear mapping and strategy for the cultural and creative industries is also lacking.

The programme is built around three pillars: Wild City - celebrating the wildness of creative spirit; Cool Contrasts - revisiting opposites as a strong feature of Northern life and every

European community; and Brave Hinterland - showcasing stories of life on the edge and at the edge of Europe. Each pillar includes flagship project ideas involving both local and foreign artists (but mainly from Nordic and Baltic countries). The programme structure is clear, yet the pillar of Wild City needs to be further elaborated, if the programme wants to live up to its title. The panel considers that the project proposals presented in the bid book are fresh and intriguing, so they form a good base for future developments.

The bid raises a very important question about the combination of arts and technology, which is particularly relevant for Oulu, as the city can boast important tech labs achievements. Digital means have proven to be extremely useful in recent times of the pandemic, yet it has become even more visible that "physical" isolation is not a sustainable way of life. These findings should be further analysed and woven into the programme ideas to make them more concrete and accurate. The artistic vision is to create a movement stretching from the Arctic hinterland throughout Europe. Exploiting the possibilities of modern technology not only to create art, but also to build virtual audiences is a strong aspect of the bid.

The unique cultural heritage of the region, such as tar, is included in two programme lines, yet it can be exploited much more, as it has a strong potential to attract an international audience.

It is to be noted that the involvement of the Saami community is a very important element of the bid, however it should be further explored, and this community should not just be considered as a target group but as real co-creators of the bid.

The European dimension builds on two important themes: Culture Change and Climate Change, which are important topics on a European but also global level. However, those aspects are not yet clearly translated into a European narrative. No solid international partnerships have been established. Most contacts come from neighbouring Russia and Sweden, but they are not yet explored to their full potential.

A strategy on how to involve local cultural institutions in international relations still needs to be developed. At the same time and on a more positive note, the message for the young people around Europe is defined: "you can do what you want from where you are". This requires, however, some more elaboration. The panel appreciates the idea of a European call for proposals and considers that there are many ideas with a potential for a strong international cooperation (such as Festival Wild Camp, Tar Wharf to Seven Seas or E75 Highway).

The involvement of the cultural sector, civil society and university in the preparation of the application and the planned implementation of the project is a strength. The bid includes some good prospects for audience development as the city has already several programmes in this regard. Therefore, there is a need for developing new actions in line with the ECoC mission and vision. The will to create the first ECoC communication strategy targeting children is very promising.

The bid seems to have strong political support from the local levels. However, the involvement of the regional government is not clear at this stage of the competition and needs further clarification at final selection.

The bid includes a plan to revitalize all cultural sites in the area and to involve 32 municipalities, but this is not yet exploited and visible in the programme. Budgetary contributions envisaged by the city are ambitious and require reconfirmation due to the COVID-19 crisis.

The expectations regarding the national contribution seem overestimated. The breakdown of the budget expenditure features a very high "other" item line, and it is not clear what type of costs this line includes. On top of this, there is a calculation mistake as all costs sum up to more than 100%, requiring further clarification.

The city's budget for culture has been decreasing despite negotiations taking place. The current crisis might create further pressure on the financing of culture. There is therefore a need for elaborating a clear risk assessment and mitigation measures in this regard.

The organisational structure presented in the bid is unclear; the relationship between the artistic director and the CEO is still to be decided. Due to the participatory development of the bid book, the panel considers that it is worth exploring new management models, which may help continue the participatory process.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Oulu proceeds to the final selection phase.

The panel felt that the bid had the makings of a promising cultural offer. The concept of cultural climate change is interesting and has a real European potential, but it needs further conceptual investigation, so that it is turned into one that carries a clearly positive message.

The evaluation plan is very important and well described in the bid, and assuring baseline data is a strong asset. However, even more in-depth research into the city potential, heritage and arts background is recommended. This will allow for the further development of the cultural and artistic programme, so it becomes bolder and more innovative. The combination of arts, technologies and nature is interesting, yet it requires elaboration. Also, the issue of climate sustainability is not sufficiently elaborated in the programme. Overall, the panel considers that the project proposals presented in the bid book are fresh and intriguing, so they form a good base for future developments. The panel appreciates involvement of the local cultural scene in the development of the programme.

An important aspect of the programme is to involve all marginalized groups in the process of creation. However, too little is known of the practical solutions to be applied in order to achieve this aim.

The team must put a lot of effort in making the programme truly international. At the current stage, the bid lacks a strong European dimension.

Recommendations

The following recommendations apply to all three shortlisted candidates.

The panel considers it necessary that all shortlisted cities develop their bids for the final selection in order to reach the required level of quality of such a demanding project as the European Capital of Culture. There is a considerable step-change between proposals at pre-selection stage and those at final selection. The panel expects significant progress in the final bid books to reflect the recommendations of the panel.

The shortlisted candidates are advised to continue studying carefully the **six criteria in the Decision** and the specific comments to all candidates in the assessments above.

A study of the evaluations of recent ECoCs (since 2013) and monitoring reports of recently designated ECoCs may also be of value. These are available on the European Commission's ECoC web page.

General

In the last couple of months, Europe and the world suddenly entered into the new reality of the pandemic. It created major confusion, anxiety, fear and limitations. Yet, many new opportunities of expression emerged and certain tools or methods, which had been either forgotten (quality time at home) or were underdeveloped (like video conferences or distant learning), proved to be useful in this world of uncertainty. In the panel's view, there is a need for a new approach to align culture and major yearlong events with this new world, notably new procedures and expectations. This refers to every level of operation, from artistic expression to administrative work. A more elaborated contingency plan with due alternatives should be an integral part of such long-term planning as the ECoC. This is a great challenge for us all, also for the bidding cities, but equally - an opportunity to reflect on new and sustainable culture models.

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

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

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

ECoC and cultural strategy

A formally approved city cultural strategy needs to be in place before submitting the final bid book. The panel will expect a tighter focus in the bid books of the final round: cities should indicate the priorities of the cultural strategy that are connected to the ECoC project, its target outcomes and how resources will be changed over the next few years. The expected legacy of the ECoC should also be envisaged.

The final bids should be significantly refreshed – change of concepts should also be considered. There should be a narrative coming from something meaningful for the city concerned with an elaborated aspect of storytelling, not just professional use of the latest trends. Teams should focus on their own potential and translate it into a narrative attractive to both local and European audiences.

An ECoC is a transformational opportunity for a city. The pre-selection bid books set out in general terms the objectives of why a city is seeking the title. The objectives should be clearly put, as there is a tendency to perceive ECoC as a panacea for every city challenge. An important aspect that requires elaboration is the expected visible change in the urban

landscape. The panel would expect a more focused (and shorter) explanation, which can link to the programme vision, themes, activities, and through monitoring and evaluation, to the outcomes in the subsequent legacy. There is considerable literature and research available for cities to see the range of cultural, urban development and social benefits of an ECoC.

The evaluation sections of the bid books should be given more attention in the second phase (especially research in order to establish baseline data) and the panel expects to receive ECoC indicators of success.

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

European dimension

The panel felt that this criterion was considerably underdeveloped. At this stage, the proposals are too much looking at their domestic audiences and from a domestic perspective. International cooperation, if it exists, is focused on Scandinavian countries, Baltic countries and Russia.

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

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

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

One of the elements of the European dimension criterion for the ECoC title is the ability to attract visitors from the rest of Europe and beyond. The programme has to have its attraction and that is why it is something else than the usual tourist offers of the city and region. The panel would expect to see these attracting programme ideas in the final selection's bid for ECoC 2026. The panel advises to thoroughly consider building a strategic communication plan for the ECoC project as well as to make a connection between the programme and an international marketing vision.

Cultural and artistic programme

The focus of the final selection is the operating programme between 2021, when the ECoC will be formally designated and, in particular, the ECoC year of 2026. The panel recommends the three cities to have an open minded and daring artistic approach and not be afraid of new,

experimental ideas. For the moment, the visions included in the bids are still rather unclear and require deeper consideration. Furthermore, there must be consistency between the vision selected and all other elements of the bid. Innovation is required not only in theory but also – even more importantly – in practice. It is possible to bring originality into the programme, also without turning to provocative projects. The panel will expect to see more details on the programme, its projects and partners. Indeed, the cities should set out more clearly not only their artistic vision, but also the programme and projects; differentiating between partners who have indicated firm interest and those who are still only potential or possible partners. ECoC programmes normally cover a wide range of art forms and include the increasing development of creative interventions in social issues. An approximate budget should be shown for each major project for the panel to understand the relative balance of projects in the programme.

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

Capacity to deliver

Candidates should re-confirm that their bid book, including the overall vision and concept and the financial commitments, have the formal approval of the mayor, the city (and county/region if appropriate) councils and all political parties. The panel also recommends that all candidates have common understanding and expectations regarding the financial contribution from the Government.

None of the shortlisted cities has convincingly explained their capacity to manage large cultural events. Candidates are reminded that the criterion for an ECoC requires a special programme for the year in addition to the normal cultural offer. The panel expects more information on the managerial capacity in the city/region to manage a programme of the depth and range of an ECoC. Capacity building should not be confused with the implementation of the cultural strategy, but it should be in accordance with local and regional development plans. The cities should also plan strong capacity building programmes as ECoC's scope goes beyond current local capacities. If projects are planned to be funded from competitive EU programmes (e.g. Creative Europe), this should be indicated.

Information on urban development and infrastructure programmes, cultural heritage restoration projects and new cultural premises is useful as background and context at pre-selection. The final selection will focus on those infrastructural projects that directly impact the ECoC programme activities (e.g. a new cultural centre in a restored building that becomes a focal point for community arts projects contained in the programme). A timeline for these projects and the realistic estimate of completion should be given.

The final bid books should clearly indicate how those potential capital projects would be managed (management structures, state-of-play related to the EU ESI-Funds such as the connection with the relevant Operational Programme, timeline and public procurement).

Outreach

The panel appreciates some ideas for audience development, which are already visible, but a strategic approach (in relation to ECoC and not just current practices) is missing, especially in reference to capacity building.

A special focus should be dedicated to those audiences that are more difficult to reach but crucial for a new “cultural climate” in an ECoC city (e.g. minorities, the elderly, disabled, people outside of city centres or temporarily in the city etc.). The bid books should approach audience development from a long-term and strategic perspective, using both online and offline measures.

The role and contribution of universities (except engagement in evaluation) was underplayed in most of the pre-selection bid books.

On the other hand, the involvement of schools is a strong aspect of all three bids, as the three cities seem to have already in place programmes connecting pupils with culture.

Management

New times of uncertainty require new approaches in management, too.

Special attention needs to be dedicated to the risk assessment in the final bid book. This section should include a thorough analysis of the impacts expected for the preparation and implementation phase of the ECoC related to the ongoing pandemic and economic crisis focussing on the main issues to be addressed in 2021 and 2022.

At the pre-selection stage, the panel decided to refrain from detailed assessment of the budget on all levels (city, regional, governmental) as we are in a very unstable situation and all figures will have to be revisited. The same applies to EU funds and mitigating the risks: it is impossible to assess these aspects at the moment, because the economic situation is very dynamic and subject to change. The panel found the risk assessment analysis of all three bids rather weak at the pre-selection stage and expects significant improvement

For this, the panel expects the three shortlisted cities, which all plan in their pre-selection bid books a considerable level of capital expenditure, to carefully investigate whether it is actually feasible.

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

The General and Artistic/Cultural Directors play a key role in all ECoCs. The selection, preferably through an open international call, of these posts before the candidates’ appearance at the final selection meeting, will be to their advantage. This is especially important for the Artistic Director as the artistic vision is already set out in the bid book. The same applies if a candidate proposes a collective artistic leadership. It is acknowledged that the appointments may be conditional on the outcome of the competition.

The recruitment processes and planned staffing arrangements from 2021 to 2026 should be outlined including secondments, interns and volunteers.

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

Signed

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