



Liepāja European Capital of Culture 2027

First Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, September 2023

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EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting on 5 September 2023 between the Panel and the team of Liepāja, one of the two European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2027. Liepāja was designated as European Capital of Culture in August 2022 by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia on the basis of recommendation in the Panel's selection report¹. This report of the first monitoring meeting is addressed to the Liepāja 2027 team and will also be published on the European Commission's website².

Attendance

The Panel members:

Toni Attard
Jelle Burggraaff
Else Christensen-Redzepovic
Diana Čivle (national expert)
Marilyn Gaughan Reddan
Goda Giedraityte (chair)
Suvi Innilä (rapporteur)
Anne Karjalainen (excused)
Hrvoje Laurenta
Girts Majors (national expert)
Jorge Cerveira Pinto
Rossella Tarantino

For Liepāja 2027:

Mayor of Liepāja
Chair of the board of Foundation Liepāja2027
Member of the board of Foundation Liepāja2027 in artistic matters
Member of the board of Foundation Liepāja2027 in financial and legal matters
Public relations and marketing director
Regional cooperation coordinator
Public participation manager in working on strengthening the NGO sector, volunteer projects, audience widening, accessibility issues
Public participation manager in strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation issues
Fundraising officer
Office administrator and partner coordinator

Also in attendance were observers from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture) and the Ministry for Culture of the Republic of Latvia.

¹<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/latvia-and-portugal>

²<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/latvia-and-portugal>

Report and presentation from Liepāja 2027

In advance of the meeting, Liepāja 2027 submitted a progress report under the name *Report to the Panel of the European Commission*. The report reflected the process since the city of Liepāja was recommended as European Capital of Culture 2027 in May 2022. The report was structured around the six selection criteria and the comments and recommendations presented by the Panel in its selection report.

After receiving the title, in compliance with the legislation in effect in the Republic of Latvia, a separate legal entity, the foundation 'Nodibinājums Liepāja 2027', was established. The preparations for delivering the ECoC programme have also started all over the region, which has a population of over 120 000 inhabitants. According to the report, receiving the title has already caused many positive effects, such as encouraging several local organisations to begin implementing their plans, which would otherwise have been implemented at a slower pace or would not have happened at all.

Concerning monitoring and evaluation, the report outlines that the team has focused on reviewing the indicators for the long-term impacts of Liepāja 2027. Involvement of experts has helped to create a monitoring matrix and a precise monitoring system.

Regarding the artistic programme, the team has carefully reviewed the contents of the projects presented in the bid and organised several workshops with expert groups. The aim was to further develop the projects and to strengthen their connection with the concept of (un)rest. During this process, some changes have been made with special attention paid to target audiences. Also flagships of the thematic stands were identified, in response to the Panel's recommendation.

In relation to the European dimension, the report states that the team has actively participated in the processes related to other European Capitals of Culture, as well as in the meetings of relevant international networks. It also mentions that the European dimension will be a special focus in the next stage of preparing the culture programme.

After receiving the title, a protocol of intent was signed among the three main partners: the City of Liepāja, the South Kurzeme Municipality, and the Kuldīga Municipality regarding actions of project delivery. There have also been negotiations with several ministries regarding their possible involvement in the project. One of the most important partners is the Ministry of Culture, which continues working on the implementation of the funding assignment programme as planned for the years 2025 to 2027.

In the autumn 2023, a working group of Liepāja city departments and regions will start working on the implementation of specific projects. The governments of the city and the regions are also working steadily on the realisation of infrastructure projects.

The Board of Liepāja 2027 will be established in the autumn 2023, in collaboration with the patron of Liepāja 2027, i.e. the President of the Republic of Latvia. The board will be established as an umbrella organisation.

Regarding the decision-making process on programming, and in compliance with legal provisions, another board was already established, composed of three people: the chair of the board, the board member on artistic matters, and the board member on legal and financial matters.

Immediately after establishing the Foundation, the board announced an international open competition for six positions. The Foundation currently has ten employees and in addition contracts with various experts.

According to the report, inflation amounts to 22,3% in Latvia. This has led to smaller funding for Liepāja 2027 from local governments in 2022 and 2023 than was estimated at the time of preparing the bid. Despite changes in the amount of financial support, Nodibinājums Liepāja 2027 and its partners have agreed to ensure the delivery of the programme stated in the bid, in its full volume and quality. One of the solutions for this challenge is to focus on raising more external funding.

At the beginning of the meeting, the representatives of the Liepāja 2027 team made a presentation that complemented the written report. The presentation was delivered by the Mayor of Liepāja, the chair of the board and the member of the board of Foundation Liepāja 2027 in artistic matters.

During the presentation, it was emphasised that despite the challenging year due to the world situation, progress has been made and receiving the ECoC title has given new energy to many actors across the region. Changes in the legislation meant that the establishment of the foundation took longer than expected. Now the work is well on the way, and the team is committed to making the ECoC programme an unforgettable experience for all.

Discussion

During the subsequent discussion, the Panel sought clarification on following issues:

Long-term cultural strategy

- The Panel considered the cooperative approach of institutions and grass-root organisations that are partnering with the Liepāja 2027 Foundation very positively. It was, however, not totally clear who, among so many operators, will lead the activities, e.g. in the field of capacity-building. The team explained that they have started with strategies first. Different task areas, for example outreach and monitoring, have their leaders in the Foundation. The roles concerning capacity-building are divided depending on the various activities and the team is working closely with the municipalities on this.

- Responding to a question on how the team plans to measure impact on non-physical visitors, the team explained that the evaluation structure will be divided around five themes. For each theme a leading, responsible partner, such as a research institution or a university, will be selected through a public procurement procedure. The research work on the different topics will start at the beginning of next year with different methods.
- The Panel expressed concerns about the fact that one single entity, i.e. Liepāja 2027, would be in charge of the arrangements for the Liepāja's 400th anniversary in 2025 and the preparation of the ECoC project in 2027, both financially and workwise. The team reaffirmed the importance of Liepāja 2027 as organiser of the anniversary in view of the event serving as a pilot project towards 2027. In addition, the main part of the anniversary budget is included in the Liepāja 2027 budget.

Artistic and cultural programme

- The Panel wanted to have more details about the delivery mechanism of the programme and which are the leading organisations implementing the projects. The team explained that they have been able to properly work with the programme only for a few months, but the main cultural institutions as well as independent sector operators are already involved in the implementation phase. However, further evaluation will have to be made about the projects also in terms of their delivery – to decide for example which projects should be organised by the Foundation, and which, on the other hand, by national and other institutions. The team's estimation is that approximately half of the projects will be implemented by the Foundation.
- Although the report contains examples of how the programme has been made bolder since the selection, as recommended by the Panel in the selection report, the Panel wondered whether that would be enough to attract an international audience. The team responded that what is considered bold in Latvia may not necessarily be seen as bold in other countries in Europe, but added that it was important to follow a step-by-step approach. They also expect further bold aspects to be added to the projects once the curators begin their work.
- More information was requested concerning the curators' role and the relation between the latter and the artistic director. The team clarified how the artistic programme developed in recent months, including the help of expert groups, which gave an external view on the projects and evaluated how the latter could be further developed e.g. in relation to themes and strengths. The artistic team will be further reinforced in 2024. Whereas the curators will work thematically, they will also periodically support the different phases of the projects.
- The Panel appreciated the decision to ensure the delivery of the programme as stated in the bid, "in its full volume and quality", despite the uncertainties concerning the budget. However, the Panel was concerned about how the upcoming open calls will be financed considering the present financial situation. The team responded that the open calls are meant to bring in some new content to the programme and innovative or extravagant aspects to the existing projects, as well

as new ideas. They are mainly international open calls, and approximately 1,4 million Euros has been reserved in the budget for these calls.

Management

- In its selection report the Panel has already expressed its concern about the very ambitious target of raising 14% of the operating budget from the private sector. As this concern was not addressed in the monitoring report, the Panel wanted to know if the team has a substantial fund-raising plan or sponsorship strategy for the 3,2 million Euro target, and a solid plan B in case the target is not reached. The team responded that the sponsorship strategy is part of the marketing and communication strategy. They emphasised that the level of private funding will depend to a large degree on the programme offering, and that sponsorship may come from large companies with an interest in innovative and technology-based projects that have never been seen in Latvia. Concerning plan B, a decision has been made that the quality of the programme will not be compromised. A strategy to get more European funds has already been developed as a possible source of funding. In addition, there is also an ongoing discussion with the ministry and the other public partners on how to proceed with the programme and financing.
- Asked about the meaning of the “sponsorship projects” mentioned in the report, the team explained that companies are not interested in sponsoring the overall ECoC project, but rather want to be connected with specific projects in the overall programme.
- According to the report, there has been a substantial decrease in the funding made available for the beginning of the Liepāja 2027 process while inflation has been high. The Panel wanted to know how in this situation the team can ensure the delivery of the programme presented in the bid. The team responded that many questions remain unanswered for the time being due to the world situation. This year, it has been possible to move on fully with all partners and projects, despite the challenges. However, this requires balancing between the budgeting of different sectors, and cooperation between the different city departments.
- The Panel wanted to know more about the role of the Board of Liepāja 2027 to be established in the autumn 2023, as well as about the roles of the three managers. The team responded that there will be three boards in total, all with different roles. Unlike what was mentioned in the bid, establishing an advisory board within the Foundation itself was not legally possible, therefore it will be established as an external national board, which has a supportive role and consists of high-level officials such as ministers. There is also a more operational board within the Foundation consisting of the three managers, and thirdly a board of experts. Concerning the upcoming calls for new positions in the team, the hope is to receive interest also internationally.
- Regarding the communication strategy, the team explained that they are still working on the concept, which is not only about the programme and communication, but also about organising the work in a cooperative manner between the different actors of the city and region. Sense of belonging is the most

important aim for communication, and therefore the theme of (un)rest has proven to be strong – it equally combines the city and the region and their inhabitants in a uniting way.

European dimension

- Regarding the European dimension, the Panel reminded the team that this is the *raison d'être* of a European Capital of Culture and should thus permeate all planning processes. The comment in the report that the European dimension will be a special focus in the next stage of preparing the culture programme therefore caused some concern. The team assured that they check the realisation of the European dimension in all the projects and areas. Until now the work has focused on strategic planning, but the next step focuses on the practical level.
- To the Panel's question concerning the status update of the European partners in the artistic programme, the team responded that they will start working on this more actively from next year on. The team will get back to the bid book's partners in the coming months with concrete answers about what will come next. They have a good feeling about the partners listed in the bid, and have met some. Active search for EU fundings has also started, thus strengthening the international dimension of the projects.
- The Panel appreciated the note in the report that the team has expanded cooperation beyond the Northern regions as recommended in the selection report, and was interested in knowing more about the strategy to engage with more partners across Europe. The team responded that the work is currently in progress, and as part of the ongoing evaluation of the projects, they are also considering the most suitable partners for each project. More research will still be made in this prospect, but they aim to extend both the geography and the number of partners. They have also been working with many European networks since the selection, and are also working intensively with the Évora 2027 team.

Outreach

- The Panel wanted to receive more information and practical examples of the engagement strategy and how the work has proceeded especially in terms of the social engagement projects, involving the NGOs and ethnic minorities. The team responded that they have good cooperation with the NGOs' sector, and that work has also started with many of the main partners of the projects. However, the engagement rate is still very low. The team expects that a training, mentoring and development project ("Community whisperers"), starting next year, will improve the situation. The selected 'community whisperers' serve as agents, gateways to different communities. An important aspect in this regard is also the Liepāja 400th anniversary with several engagement actions such as an idea that the inhabitants give birthday presents to the city.
- The Panel had previously underlined the importance of ensuring the inclusion and involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the city, and therefore requested

practical examples of such activities. The team assured that they are solidly thinking about this, and concrete projects include e.g. imprisoned youth. However, there will not be separate projects for different communities, but inclusive programming aims at projects where all groups can take part.

Capacity to deliver

- As the status summary of infrastructure projects shows that half of the projects are expected to be finished only in 2027, the Panel wanted to receive more information on the timelines for expected completion in 2027 and whether there is a plan B in case of any delays. The team recognises that the programme needs to be delivered in any case, whether or not the infrastructure projects are ready, and events can be relocated if necessary. Much depends on the EU funding which is needed for delivering these projects. Concerning the library, there are discussions on whether to construct a new building or renovate an existing one. Concerning the theatre, the location has already been confirmed, and the next step will be to organise a sketch competition. All infrastructure projects are moving forward, although the timeline is still under scrutiny.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel appreciates the progress made so far by Liepāja2027 despite the challenges caused by the war situation and high inflation. The Panel also positively acknowledges the strong commitment to Liepāja2027 from the city, regional and national partners.

However, the Panel wishes to draw attention to the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The Panel would like to receive an updated governance scheme by end November 2023 to better understand the decision-making roles of the different boards. Furthermore, an updated organigramme is requested in order to specify the different roles of the managers, teams and curators, as well as a recruitment plan for the next years to pinpoint the professionals expected in the various areas. It would be recommendable to consider re-naming two of the three different boards in order to avoid confusion, with e.g. such words as delegation or council. The Panel would also like to emphasise the importance of having a clear understanding within the organisation about who is the person making the final decision when things go wrong, i.e. where a more distributed decision-making model may not work.

Recommendation 2: While understanding that times have been economically challenging and unpredictable, and appreciating the strong will to continue the progress as planned, the Panel urges the team to set a clear timeline on when precisely the financial situation needs to be re-evaluated and decisions about necessary (mainly programmatic) adjustments need to be made. It is also important to ensure that the Liepāja's 400th anniversary is not consuming resources (both financial and human) away from the ECoC event even though some projects can be realised in synergy.

Recommendation 3: Concerning the international partners, the Panel reiterates that the starting point should be the ones listed in the bid. They should be contacted as a matter of urgency, before going forward with any new plans. The Panel would also like to recommend the team to reinforce the international dimension e.g. by having a dedicated person for this area.

Recommendation 4: The Panel encourages the team to work on establishing more cooperation partnerships across the European continent, especially with European cultural networks. Such partnerships could result in European conferences, meetings and workshops taking place in Liepāja in the next years up to and including the ECoC year and thereby strengthening the European dimension of the ECoC. The European cultural networks are also a great source of capacity-building for local and regional cultural organisations, institutions and professionals, and can help in finding project partners.

Recommendation 5: Understanding that the present team has only been in place for a few months, and that many processes are on their way, the Panel would however like to stress the importance of strengthening the project management as well as the international capacities within the team. Curators with international experience might also help widening the planning perspective from a local and regional to a more international level.

Recommendation 6: The Panel appreciates the work done to make the programme bolder as recommended by the Panel in its selection report. However, as the team itself also noted, what is bold and innovative in the region, is not necessarily so for a larger European audience. The Panel would like to remind that the programme of the European Capital of Culture must be innovative, creatively challenging and provocative towards new formats and innovations in the European cultural sector, and aim to attract a wider European audience.

Recommendation 7: Considering that the evaluation studies will be conducted by a wide range of organisations, the Panel recommends the team to pay special attention to the coordination work of the different studies, both for the data collection and for the coverage of all the topics.

Recommendation 8: The Panel considers that the schedule planned for launching the outreach programme, i.e. starting only next year, is rather late, and would therefore recommend starting as soon as possible and to integrate the communities in the decision-making processes as well.

Recommendation 9: Regarding the infrastructure projects, the Panel recommends the team to develop a more concrete and clear plan B for those projects that are at risk of not being completed on time.

Next steps

The Panel remains available for questions and advice, through the Commission services.

The Commission will call for a second monitoring meeting in the spring 2025 and a third and final meeting in the autumn 2026. At the end of the third monitoring meeting, the Panel will make a recommendation to the Commission on whether to grant the Melina Mercouri Prize to Liepāja 2027.

The Panel would like to thank the Mayor of Liepāja and the Liepāja2027 team for a very informative discussion, and looks forward to the next developments of their European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending Panel's members

