

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

December 2024

The Expert Panel's report

Pre-selection stage

Edited by

Toni Attard, Jelle Burggraaff, Else Christensen-Redzepovic (Vice-Chair), Goda Giedraityte, Suvi Innilä, Anna Karjalainen, Hrvoje Laurenta (Chair), Jorge Cerveira Pinto, Marilyn Gaughan Reddan
Rossella Tarantino (Rapporteur)

Creative Europe

Disclaimer

This document has been prepared for the European Commission. However, it only reflects the views of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate Culture, Creativity and Sport
Unit D2
E-mail:eac-unite-D2@ec.europa.eu

European Commission
B-1049 Brussels
© European Union, 2024

CONTENTS

Introduction 4
Panel meeting 4
Next steps 5
Thanks 5
Assessments of the candidates 6
- **LVIV** 7
  - Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city 7
  - Cultural and artistic content 8
  - European dimension 8
  - Outreach 9
  - Management 10
  - Capacity to deliver 11
  - Conclusion 11
- NIKŠIĆ 12
  - Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city 12
  - Cultural and artistic content 13
  - European dimension 14
  - Outreach 14
  - Management 15
  - Capacity to deliver 16
  - Conclusion 16

General recommendations 17
Contribution to the long-term strategy 18
Cultural and artistic content 18
European dimension 19
Outreach 20
Management 21
Capacity to deliver 21
Signed 22

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 2030 title between cities in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries or potential candidates for EU membership. The European Commission (the "Commission") is the managing authority of the competition, which is governed by:

- Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 as amended by Decision (EU) 2017/1545 (the "Decision") and
- the "Rules of procedure in relation with call for submission of applications EAC/P01/2023 – Competition of the European Capital of Culture in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries and potential candidates participating in Creative Europe", issued by the European Commission and posted on its website in November 2023[1].

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

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

The Commission issued a call for applications (EAC/P01/2023) on 17 November 2023[2]. Two applications were submitted by the closing date of 16 October 2024 by the cities of Lviv in Ukraine and Nikšić in Montenegro.

Panel meeting

The panel met online on 16 December 2024. The panel elected Hrvoje Laurenta as its chair and Else Christensen-Redzepovic as its vice-chair. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality.

Representatives from the European Commission attended the online pre-selection meeting as observers. The observers took no part in the panel's deliberations and decision.

[1] Rules of Procedure - Call for submission of applications EAC/P01/2023 - Culture and Creativity

[2] Call for submission of applications for the union action "European Capital of Culture" for the year 2030 for cities in efta/eea countries, in candidate countries and in potential candidates for eu membership - eac/p01/2023 - Culture and Creativity

At the meeting, the panel discussed both applications. Following the discussions and a vote, the panel recommended that the European Commission shortlist the two candidates, **LVIV** and **NIKŠIĆ,** for the final selection stage.

Next steps

Based on this report, the European Commission will invite these two cities to submit revised applications for the final selection. The panel draws the candidates' attention that their bid book at final selection must be based on the selection questionnaire (and not the pre-selection questionnaire) included in Annex 1 of the call mentioned above.

In their final bid books, the shortlisted cities are invited to take into account the panel´s assessments and recommendations included in this report.

The deadline for submission of the final applications from both cities will be indicated by the European Commission to both candidates on the same day.

The final selection meeting, which will include a hearing with the two applicants, will take place in Brussels in September or October 2025 (the precise date will be announced on the same day to both candidates).

In competitions between cities in Member States, two to four panel members pay a one-day visit to each shortlisted candidate, immediately before the final selection meeting. The Rules of procedure for the competition between cities in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries and potential candidates do not mention the possibility of such visits.

The panel invites the Commission to explore, including with both Lviv and Nikšić, whether all conditions are met to organise in situ visits just prior to the final selection meeting in September/October. The visits would aim at helping the panel gain a better understanding of the pre-selected cities and at providing useful background information, but they do not form part of the formal decision-making process by the panel.

Thanks

The panel thanks both bidding cities and everyone who contributed to their bids. In particular, the panel congratulates both cities for having used the opportunity of the bidding process to plan, devise or reinforce cultural strategies in their cities as well as the role of culture - and Europe - in their overall socio-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition. The panel encourages both bidding cities to continue developing and implementing such strategies regardless of the ultimate outcome of the competition.

The panel also thanks the European Commission for its advice and excellent administration of the competition.

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 outlined in Article 5 of the Decision:

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

One of the most important features in Decision 445/2014/EU, governing the ECoC action for the 2020-2033 titles, is the requirement that cities have a formal and explicit cultural strategy. This requirement is to ensure that the ECoC is grounded in a medium-term transformation of the city and its cultural life. The panel would therefore like to remind the candidates proceeding to the final selection, that the strategy should cover the ECoC year and include plans for sustaining cultural activities beyond the ECoC year.

The European dimension is the *raison d'être* of a European Capital of Culture and must be at the heart of a bid. Both candidate cities will need to work intensely at capturing better the European dimension in their bids.

The panel emphasises that its assessments of the two candidates is based on their respective bid books. 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 criteria in the selection process.

In the commentaries that follow, the panel notes the main elements of their findings during the pre-selection phase. The panel offers common and city specific recommendations, to assist both applicants in the preparation of their final bids.

LVIV

Lviv, located in Western Ukraine with a population of 783,000, boasts the highest concentration of architectural monuments in the country, with its historical centre being part of the UNESCO World Heritage list since 1998. The city can also leverage on a vibrant cultural scene, hosting over 50 festivals annually and holding the title of UNESCO City of Literature since 2015. Since 2017, Lviv's cultural strategy has driven an extensive restoration of its heritage and fostered innovative cultural practices, actively involving the community and cultural scene. The bid emphasises the city's resilience and cultural vitality, even amid the ongoing war.

Lviv's bid is built around the concept "Responsibility to Be," reflecting its commitment to face uncertainty and hardships through a strong cultural project that takes the responsibility for the future, by preserving, healing, and envisioning what lies ahead. The bid gives the opportunity for the city to make Ukrainian culture visible as an integral part of Europe's rich cultural diversity. The bid was put forward by the City of Lviv along with 16 suburban areas that are part of the newly built Lviv Community.

Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city

- A cultural strategy is in place covering the years from 2017 until 2025. It is the first instance of cultural planning in Ukraine at city level. A new strategy, covering the 2025-2032 period, is currently in development and is expected to be voted on in early 2025. The framework demonstrates a clear and commendable alignment of the cultural plans with other urban and strategic plans, although there is room to further emphasise these cross-references and strengthen the integration of cultural, economic, and social sectors over the long term.
- The plan to enhance the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors is clearly fleshed out, presenting a comprehensive and diverse platform of strategic actions.
- The ECoC project is clearly included in the strategy, but the links between the strategy priorities and the Lviv ECoC 2030 goals should be further developed in the final bid. Specifically, the final proposal should elaborate on how the "culture of care" intertwines with the "care for culture".
- Long-term cultural, social, and economic impacts are outlined in a robust manner, with the urban development impact to be detailed in the second round of the competition.
- The monitoring and evaluation plans are well worked out for this stage, though it is not clear who will lead and conduct the evaluation. In the final bid, the panel expects clarity on this aspect. It is suggested as well to start the monitoring activities much earlier than indicated, in order to enable a thorough understanding of the baseline conditions and of the impact of the ECoC year all along the way.

Cultural and artistic content

- The artistic vision of the bid is built around the theme "Responsibility to Be", which is translated into three programme lines (Responsibility to Be in memory, to Be in the moment and to Be in the future). The concept is well rooted in the present needs and aspirations of the city and its people, while it uniquely integrates memory, diversity, and future-oriented projects.
- The programme is solid and clearly structured; its 21 projects are well outlined. Some of them are intriguing, aligning culture with psychological resilience and thus providing a fresh approach to post-crisis recovery.
- One of the programme lines is focussed on the rich existing network of festivals Lviv can boast. While the intention to showcase Lviv's rich cultural landscape of festivals is understandable, the programme for the year is required to feature projects that have been specifically designed for the European Capital of Culture. Thus, at the final selection stage, the panel recommends reimagining the existing events, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and forging new international cultural partnerships to offer something new and unique for the ECoC year.
- Generally speaking, the establishment of new collaborations with European artists and cultural organisations could be beneficial in the development of the final programme as a way to bring fresh perspectives and to strengthen the European dimension of the bid. Furthermore, the panel recommends placing more emphasis on the needs of the city's evolving demography, including single mothers, children, refugees, people with disabilities, and war survivors, engaging them in participatory initiatives.
- The response to combining heritage with modern art forms is solid but could benefit from more detailed examples.
- The city has involved local artists and cultural organisations in a very clear and constructive way in the elaboration of the programme. The panel welcomes the plans for open calls, which should be directly linked to the programme to reinforce the cohesive narrative of the bid.

European dimension

- The bid addresses European themes such as well-being, mental health, and migration, while giving adequate evidence on how it intends to highlight the common European cultural heritage and historical aspects. However, the panel recommends further aligning Lviv's narrative with broader European challenges to enhance its relevance and resonance across Europe and to harness mutual understanding between European citizens.

- The panel welcomes the intention of Lviv to ensure that 85% of the cultural and artistic programme will be created and implemented together with European and international partners. The panel looks forward to seeing detailed plans for the accurate selection of European artists, cultural organisations, and networks to partner with to amplify the European ambition of the programme and offer new perspectives.
- Furthermore, the panel recommends elaborating further on the "responsibility" of representing and working with the Ukrainian cultural scene, enhancing the extensive network of Ukrainian diaspora of artists.
- The bid highlights existing connections with former, current, and future European Capitals of Culture, particularly focusing on collaborations with Polish ECoCs. For the final bid book, the panel suggests expanding cooperation with ECoCs beyond the region, identifying shared projects and exchanging insights and experiences. This could be particularly important to elaborate alternative scenarios.
- The strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international audience has some promising elements like the "Ukraine Unmuted" days in the ECoCs leading up to 2030. Yet, in the final bid, it requires further refinement, with higher engagement of the Ukrainian diaspora as cultural ambassadors and with an attractive digital delivery plan of the programme.

Outreach

- The bid provides evidence of the significant efforts undertaken by the city to mobilise civil society and the cultural scene in the ECoC preparation, including specific research to identify the cultural needs of the population. The bid presents as well how it intends to engage the local citizens in the planned ECoC projects. The panel welcomes the described wide and broad participation.
- The bid identifies a broad spectrum of marginalised and disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities (representing 10% of the population), low-income people, elderly people, LGBTQIA+ communities, people with mental health issues, and single mothers. Attention is paid to accessibility both in terms of physical space and information access, with a large portion of events planned to be free and hosted in public spaces. This is valued by the panel. Yet, in the final bid, the panel recommends developing a comprehensive strategy that extends beyond the individual projects to directly engage the diverse groups in the ECoC programme and to fulfil the widespread desire for participation in local projects that emerged in the research conducted.
- The audience-development strategy prioritises capacity building and monitoring tools. While these are valuable components, given the current context of war and the urgent need to address societal challenges, the panel recommends further refining the strategy to focus on major barriers to cultural engagement and effective approaches to overcome them.

- Programmes targeting primary and secondary schools are listed, along with plans to involve volunteers. However, a robust strategy to give voice to and empower younger generations remains underdeveloped. For the final bid book, the panel encourages presenting more concrete plans in this area, drawing on the insights and experiences gained from Lviv's designation as the European Youth Capital in 2025.

Management

- Over the past five years, Lviv's annual cultural budget has remained notably high, accounting for 4.6% of the city's total budget, despite the ongoing challenges and hardships resulting from the war. This trend and the plans to further increase this share to 7.6–8% have positively impressed the panel.
- The ECoC operating budget amounts to 40 million euro. Out of this, 75% is planned to be covered by the public sector and 25% by the private sector. The main part of the public contribution (17 million euro) is expected from the city, while 5 million euro are planned to come from the national Government, 3 million euro from the region, and 3 million euro from other non-specified sources. The public authorities have not yet voted on their financial commitments. For the final bid, the panel expects evidence that all the anticipated contributions are secured.
- The private sector is expected to contribute 10 million euro. While this target is highly ambitious, the city has benefited from the generosity of various international public and private partners in the present circumstances. Nevertheless, the panel recommends developing a comprehensive sponsorship plan to secure funding in the early stages as well.
- The breakdown of the operational costs is sound, with 72% of the budget allocated to the programme.
- The capital infrastructure plan is relatively modest, with an overall budget of 7.5 million euro. The corresponding contributions are expected to be confirmed in the second round.
- The Cultural Strategy Institute, a municipal non-profit organisation established in 2017 to draft and monitor the city's cultural strategy, will be responsible for delivering the programme. This institute is also leading the bidding process. It is not clear if the proposed agency will address both the current operations of the Institute and manage the ECoC delivery. The final bid should provide clarity on this matter, along with details about the roles and composition of the advisory boards and steering committee.
- The contingency analysis with plans for addressing challenges is well worked through. The bid presents two alternative ECoC delivery plans to address different potential scenarios: a hybrid or digital programme delivery and the possibility of spreading Lviv's programme across other ECoCs ("Nomadic culture in exile" programme). The panel

encourages the city to deepen further the risks analysis and to develop these options in detail, with particular focus on financial considerations and insights from previous ECoC and large-scale event experiences.

- The marketing and communication plans are well worked-out for the pre-selection stage.

Capacity to deliver

- The bid is supported by letters from the Mayor of Lviv, the Governor of the Region and the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. For the final round of the competition, the panel requires evidence that the bid and proposed budgets have been voted on by the supporting public authorities.
- The city can rely on a wide provision of cultural infrastructures that have the capacity to host the European Capital of Culture event. A 7.5-million-euro plan for a number of infrastructure projects is also provided, aimed to create new cultural hubs and workshops.
- The city can rely on international railway, bus, and road connections, while the local airport is temporarily closed. The city also has an extensive accommodation capacity that could host 2.5 million tourists, but, at present, the hospitality asset is used for humanitarian and rehabilitation purposes.

Conclusion

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

The cultural programme is clearly articulated around the concept “Responsibility to be”, which is firmly rooted in the current needs and desires of the city to confront uncertainty and hardships through a strong cultural project that takes the responsibility, by preserving, healing, and envisioning a new future. The programme sets the commendable objective to ensure the involvement of European partners in 85% of the cultural programme. Tangible progress toward this objective is expected to ensure Lviv’s narrative aligns with broader European challenges and to introduce fresh perspectives, with particular reference to existing events. The bid demonstrates strong involvement from civil society and provides clear examples of projects designed to mobilise a broad spectrum of marginalised groups. The panel encourages further development of the audience engagement plan to address Lviv’s unique societal challenges and to prioritise youth empowerment, leveraging the experience of Lviv 2025 as the European Capital of Youth.

The strategic framework is well-conceived, and the capacity-building initiatives are well designed, while stronger links between the goals of the ECoC project and the broader cultural strategy are expected. The financial plans are solid, with the city demonstrating its commitment to maintaining the cultural budget despite the ongoing conflict.

The panel appreciates the comprehensive contingency plan, as well as the proposed alternative delivery approaches for the ECoC programme. For the final phase, it is highly recommended to develop these options in detail, focusing on their feasibility and costs, highlighting the Ukrainian diaspora, and drawing insights from previous ECoC experiences.

NIKŠIĆ

Nikšić is a historically industrial city in the heart of Montenegro, with a population of 66.000 inhabitants (the second largest city in the country).

Located at the crossroads of historical routes connecting the West, the East and the Mediterranean, the city also stands presently at the crossroads between an industrial past and an uncertain future. Relying on a lively alternative cultural scene, particularly vibrant in 1990s, and leveraging the city's industrial and cultural heritage, the candidacy is seen as an opportunity to reposition Nikšić as a regional cultural hub, while aligning its development with Montenegro's broader national strategies, particularly its goal of acceding the European Union by 2030. The bid revolves around the concept of the "Open City", inspired by the radial-concentric urban plan of Nikšić from the mid-19th century and Richard Sennett's theory of "open cities". Central to this concept is the vision of a city as an open system — constantly evolving through its receptiveness to diverse voices and many interconnections.

The city aims to include all the Montenegro towns in the ECoC bid, though no formal agreement has been signed so far.

Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city

- Nikšić's cultural strategy aims to position the city as the digital hub for Montenegro and the Western Balkans. The plan is closely aligned with national strategies, putting the emphasis on digital innovation, closer regional and European connections, and alternative cultural sectors. The panel appreciates that the cultural strategy was approved in September 2024 by the city council and that it provides a comprehensive roadmap for cultural development up to 2030.
- The bid is well integrated into the city's cultural strategy, presenting clear connections between the priority sectors of the cultural development programme and the ECoC projects. In the final round, further elaboration is expected to explain *how* these projects will contribute to the implementation of the strategy.
- The cultural strategy outlines a long-term vision and provides realistic examples of cultural, social, and economic impacts. Yet, it lacks sufficient detail on how cultural initiatives will be sustained beyond 2030. Concrete plans for legacy projects are expected in the final bid.
- The plans to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors are well designed, aimed to address the needs of the cultural scene, like the limited capacity in

cultural production or the underdeveloped international cooperation. More information is expected on the specific measures to attract talents and ensure the long-term sustainability of the cultural sector in the city, even beyond 2030.

- The plans for monitoring and evaluation are sound for this stage. While the idea to establish the "Culturometer 2030" as an independent organisation tasked with overseeing monitoring and evaluation is promising, the reliance on a plethora of research institutions could jeopardise the efficiency and value of the evaluation process. For the final selection stage, the panel would expect clarity on how the partners involved in monitoring and evaluation will work together and who will have the final say and responsibility.

Cultural and artistic content

- The artistic vision is built around the theme "Re:connect" to address the feeling of disconnection and isolation that is affecting Montenegrin society and is also mounting across Europe. The theme has promising prospects and relevance locally and European wise; yet its connection with the concept of "Open City" is to be explored further in order to better understand the message the project intends to convey.
- The programme is unfolded into three programme lines (Roots, Streets, Networks) and three corresponding principles (Shared Identity, Unity, and Evolution), seven clusters and a robust horizontal capacity-building element ("Open Minds"). Although the panel considers the programme to be rich and well formulated for this stage, it is of the opinion that its lay-out is over complicated and therefore recommends simplifying it to ensure a more coherent artistic narrative.
- The programme includes 36 projects complemented by eight capacity-building projects. The capacity-building programme is solid and promising in terms of sustainability; in the final bid, further details on its beneficiaries and on its connection with the House of Digital Revolution are expected. In addition, with reference to the capacity-building programme, the panel recommends strengthening the visitor experience, clearly articulating what audiences will see and experience.
- The programme seems to be deeply rooted in the historical context of the city and very well connected with the city's cultural plan. The projects are well detailed, and partnerships are quite diverse and satisfactory for this stage of the competition. For the final phase, the panel recommends further developing the programme's ambition through a bolder artistic curation and closer cooperation with European artists and organisations and paying higher attention to the active involvement of minorities and marginalised communities.
- The cultural programme includes a mix of innovative projects and traditional events, based on a strong crossover with cultural heritage and technology.

- The panel welcomes the wide involvement of the local artists and cultural organisations in the design of the programme as well as the plans to engage them in the implementation phase.

European dimension

- There is a good exploration of the European dimension in terms of topics that are relatable for Europe and that promote cultural diversity and highlight the European common heritage. The final bid should further elaborate on how the proposed initiatives will tangibly promote greater mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue.
- The planned cooperation with European cultural operators and cities is sound for this stage. Yet, for the final selection round, the panel recommends forging new partnerships, above all with artists and cultural operators across Europe, also beyond the planned proportion of "over 50%" indicated in the bid, to extend the project's reach and impact in terms of mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue and to better integrate local narratives with broader European themes.
- Links with other past, future, and candidate ECoCs are broad and deep, based on an impressive list of tangible cooperation projects on themes of common interest.
- The overall strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international audience is very detailed, although its financial feasibility should be further explored in the final stage.

Outreach

- The bid gives evidence of a wide-reaching campaign to raise the interest of the local population in the bidding process. Likewise, plans for further citizens involvement in the implementation phase are diverse and well detailed, ranging from grants for community projects to a volunteering platform.
- Outreach initiatives include plans to involve disadvantaged groups such as the Roma community, people with disabilities, elderly people or youth belonging to marginalised groups. Yet, the bid lacks a detailed strategy for engaging economically disadvantaged communities and other underrepresented groups, such as the LGBTQIA+ communities. In the final bid, it will be important to ensure a clear inclusion of all these marginalised groups in the programme.
- Youth empowerment is the central focus of the audience engagement strategy, reflecting the city's commitment to raise the very low participation of young generations in cultural activities. While this intention is highly commendable, the plan overlooks other non-traditional audiences, like economically, socially, and culturally vulnerable groups. The panel thus recommends a further refinement of the audience

engagement plan to identify these "disconnected groups" and to remove the specific barriers to cultural access and participation.

Management

- The city had a budget for culture of around 2,35 million euro in 2023; this is almost a doubling over five years (from 1,43 million euro in 2019). There are plans for raising it significantly after 2030 up to 3,1 million euro, bringing its share to an ambitious target of 8% of the overall budget.
- The ECoC operating budget amounts to 40 million euro. Out of this, 92,5% is to be covered by the public sector and 7.5% by the private sector. The public budget is covered by the national Government and the city with a contribution corresponding respectively to 25 and 10 million euro, while EU funds are supposed to provide 2 million euro. The decision to adopt the total amount of funding has not been formalised with the public authorities at city and State levels. Formal commitments based on a multi-year financial agreement are expected after the decision over the title. Yet, for the final selection phase, the panel needs clear deliberations from the various public authorities on multi-year funding.
- The fundraising strategy to seek support from the private sector is well worked out for this stage, as well as the fundraising plan from EU programmes. The panel expects to see detailed plans for the sponsor model in the final bid book.
- The operating expenditures are well balanced, with a high percentage (73%) of the budget earmarked to the cultural programme.
- The budget for capital expenditure is sound, with the funding of the majority of infrastructure projects already decided upon. Yet, the capital expenditure budget prospects are not aligned with the list of the envisioned cultural infrastructures. For the final selection round, the panel requests clarification on this matter and evidence that the funding for cultural infrastructure investments is secure.
- The establishment of a Foundation is planned for the delivery of the ECoC. The organisational structure, which envisions a pivotal role for the CEO but lacks inter-connections between the different areas and functions, is not very clear for the panel. Additionally, the governance scheme is not well defined. For the final selection stage, more clarity is sought on the designation and role of the Artistic Council vis-à-vis the Artistic Director and on the interconnections between the different areas, while the governance scheme should explain how the Foundation will relate with the diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, cultural actors, and international partners.
- The marketing and communication strategy is well formulated for this stage of the competition. It will need to be further elaborated on for the final selection round, in particular as far as the international aspects are concerned.

- The bid lacks detailed plans for managing and operational risks. The panel would like to see considerations on this matter in the final bid book.

Capacity to deliver

- The panel valued the fact that on 28 December 2023, the City Council unanimously adopted the decision on the city's candidacy. In October 2024, the Government of Montenegro adopted an "Information on supporting for the Nikšić ECoC 2030 project". For the final round of the competition, the panel needs assurance that the bid and proposed budgets have been voted for at City and Government levels.
- The bid provides evidence that the city has adequate cultural venues to host the ECoC events. A detailed list of cultural infrastructural projects with budgets and timelines is presented, with all projects envisioned to be completed before 2030. As noted above, there is however some discrepancy in the table prospecting the new cultural investments, which is expected to be clarified in the second round.
- The panel considers that Nikšić´s assets in terms of transport are good, with three airports - including in Dubrovnik - that are from 45 to 90 minutes' drive distance. The accommodation capacity in the city is relatively limited but can be complemented by a wide provision of hospitality facilities in surrounding cities within a radius of 100 km, connected to Nikšić by a good road system.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Nikšić proceed to the final selection phase.

The ECoC programme is firmly aligned with the city's cultural strategy, which aims to reposition Nikšić as a regional digital hub and which is closely related to Montenegro's ambition to enter the European Union by 2030. The plans to strengthen the cultural and creative sectors are well designed, while more specific measures are expected to ensure long-term sustainability.

The artistic vision is deeply rooted in the theme "Re:connect", which addresses the mounting feeling of disconnection among citizens both locally and across Europe. However, clarity is sought on how this theme ties into the broader concept of "Open City." The programme is well grounded in the historical context of the city, featuring well-developed projects and a robust capacity-building component, while a simplified programme structure and bolder artistic curation are recommended for the final bid. The European dimension is well explored through relevant topics, tangible and vast connections with other ECoCs, and the partnerships built so far.

The bid demonstrates a comprehensive campaign to engage the local population in the candidacy process, with a welcomed focus on youth empowerment. The panel recommends further refining the plans to effectively engage other marginalised and vulnerable groups,

removing specific barriers to cultural access and participation, thereby enhancing the bid's overarching goal of "Re:connection".

The financial plans are detailed and well balanced, with ambitious goals to be formally confirmed in the final bid. The limited accommodation capacity of the city can be supplemented in surrounding areas. The panel advises a more detailed risk analysis with corresponding mitigation plans.

General recommendations

The following recommendations apply to both shortlisted candidates.

The final bid book needs to be far more coherent and concrete than the one at the pre-selection phase and hence needs to reflect a considerable step-change from the pre-selection phase. The final selection phase offers an opportunity for shortlisted candidates to develop and consolidate bids and to improve the level of quality throughout, paying particular attention to the attractiveness of the cultural and artistic programme and to a higher European relevance.

The panel expects significant progress in the final bid books to reflect the expanded **six criteria in the Decision** and the recommendations of the panel. 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 website.[3]

General

It is important to underline that the final selection bid book becomes, *de facto*, a contract for the city winning the ECoC title. It sets out the artistic vision and the key objectives, projects, directions, national and international partners, 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 European Commission regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri prize.

It is the responsibility of the panel (which functions as both the selection and subsequent monitoring panel) to safeguard the European Capital of Culture brand. Candidates should be aware that with the level of international attention now being given to ECoCs, policy decisions over a wide area (not just in the area of culture) may affect the reputation of the city, and in turn the image of the European Capital of Culture Action. The panel expects the ECoC

[3] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/european-capitals-of-culture

candidate cities to take all possible steps to minimise negative and potentially harmful international and national issues connected to their city.

The panel also recommends that all those attending the hearing at the final selection stage should be active participants in either the presentation and/or subsequent questions and answers session.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

A formally approved city cultural strategy needs to be in place before submitting the final bid book. Bidding cities must clearly indicate the priorities of the cultural strategy that are connected to their ECoC project, its target outcomes, and impacts and how resources will be changed over the next few years. The expected legacy of the ECoC should be clearly described.

An ECoC is a transformational opportunity for a city, but it is not a panacea for every city challenge. The pre-selection bid books set out in general terms the objectives of why a city seeks the ECoC title, but for the final bid book objectives should be more concrete and realistic. The panel expects to see a very clear link from the objectives to the programme vision, themes, activities, and through monitoring and evaluation, to the outcomes in the subsequent legacy.

The evaluation section of the bid books should indicate clearly planned research and processes for establishing baseline data as well as for developing indicators of success. Monitoring and evaluation should go beyond mere statistics and data gathering. The final bid book should focus on the priority objectives for the ECoC (rather than those for the entire cultural strategy). The European dimension, being the *raison d'être* of a European Capital of Culture, must permeate the bid and run like a red thread throughout the bid book from the objectives to the strategies, the programme, outreach, and communication to the legacy and not just be explained separately in the European dimension criteria section.

Capacity building should encompass all areas connected to the delivery of an ECoC from the cultural professionals and staff delivering the ECoC over civil servants in the municipalities, the hospitality and tourism sector and other relevant services in the city. The cultural and creative sectors (CCS) 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 CCS.

Cultural and artistic content

The focus of the final selection is the cultural and artistic programme between 2026-2030 and in particular, the ECoC year of 2030. The panel recommends both cities to have an open-minded and daring artistic approach and not be afraid of new, experimental ideas.

For both shortlisted cities, the artistic vision of the programme must be reinforced, with a further elaboration of the challenges relevant both locally and European-wide and with

significant cultural cooperation and partnership at EU and international level. Consistency between the vision underpinning the programme and all other elements of the bid must be ensured. Innovation and originality are required not only in theory but also – even more importantly – in practice. 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.

The panel strongly encourages the two final candidate cities to forge significant partnerships with artists, cultural institutions, and networks both within the EU and globally. ECoC programmes normally cover a wide range of art forms and include the increasing development of creative interventions in social issues. An approximate but at the same time realistic budget should be shown for each major project for the panel to understand the relative balance of projects in the programme and to give evidence of the feasibility of the ambitious programmes the two cities are expected to present.

The panel recommends a more focused and detailed approach to digital cultural content and delivery (not just social media promotions and interactions) as integral parts of the programmes. Furthermore, careful attention should be given to explaining the sustainability of projects and activities – culturally, ecologically, socially, and economically – so as to ensure the substantial legacy of the ECoC.

European dimension

The European dimension being the *raison d'être* of an ECoC, the panel expects to find Europe at the heart of all final bids and permeated throughout the cultural and artistic programmes. The panel expects to see a continuous focus on European partnerships: co-productions, co-curations, conferences, networking as well as artist residences. Cities should encourage their cultural operators to be active participants in European cultural networks.

Although with a promising approach to this criterion, so far the two pre-selected cities have focused their European cooperation mainly on the neighbouring countries and on networking with ECoC or twinning cities. The international cooperation strategy cannot be limited to relations with other, former and future ECoCs, existing European cultural networks or twin cities. Both cities need to further develop the international strategy by forging actual partnership with artists as well as cultural organisations and institutions and to extend its geographical scope throughout Europe and even other continents.

An ECoC enables a city to promote itself internationally but that is only half of the story. Becoming the ECoC means becoming the representative of diverse European cultural expressions. The panel therefore would like to see a deepening and widening of the cultural and artistic programme and actions that ensures an embracing European dimension that goes much beyond reinforcing the cities' visibility and relations within the respective countries and/or neighbouring regions.

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 important to clearly demonstrate how the European dimension is translated into concrete projects in the cultural and artistic programme. 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.

One of the elements of the European dimension criterion for the ECoC title is the ability to involve a wide audience from the rest of Europe and beyond, both in the designated city as well as digitally. The programme therefore must contain innovative and bold elements of high international standards that go beyond the usual tourist offers for the city and region. The panel expects to see such extraordinarily attractive programme segments in the final bid book for both cities.

Emphasis should be paid to the production and delivery of an elaborate digital programme, able to lure and engage European and international audiences. A strong connection must be sought between the digital outreach delivery plan, the cultural and artistic programme, and the strategic international communication plan.

Outreach

The audience development strategy for the ECoC is expected to be much further developed in the final bid books, including online and offline measures and channels for all identified target groups.

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, LGBTQIA+ communities, the elderly, people with a disability, people living outside the city centres or temporarily living in the city, refugees, people living at the edge of poverty and/or with a very low education level, etc.).

The panel would expect to learn how the audience development policies of the main cultural organisations including independent operators and NGOs relate to the ECoC programme.

Cooperation with schools must be further developed and the strategic approach that illustrates how schools are linked to the ECoC project (not just current practices) must be described in more detail. The role and contribution of universities (beyond the engagement in evaluation) needs to be consolidated in the final bid books.

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 and deeper analysis of the impacts expected for the preparation and implementation phase of the ECoC related to the ongoing pandemic, economic and geo-political crisis focussing on the main issues to be addressed in the years to 2030.

Regarding governance and management models, the panel recommends learning from the experiences of other ECoCs models and adapting best practices to the local and national situation.

The delivery team plays a key role in all ECoCs. The cities should address in a clear and well-informed way the best model to guarantee the quality and independence of the artistic management of the project.

The recruitment processes and planned staffing arrangements from 2026 to 2030 (and beyond for legacy) should be outlined including secondments, internships, and volunteers.

The communication strategy must more clearly set out how to target European and international media. 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 the 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.

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 Council, and all supporting authorities. The institutional support is fundamental also to ensure the legacy of the project.

The panel also recommends that the candidates show evidence of the level of the financial contribution they can realistically expect from their respective national Government.

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 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 the 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).

Signed

Toni Attard
Jelle Burggraaff
Else Christensen-Redzepovic (Vice-Chair)
Goda Giedraityte
Suvi Innilä
Anna Karjalainen
Hrvoje Laurenta (Chair)
Jorge Cerveira Pinto
Marilyn Gaughan Reddan
Rossella Tarantino (Rapporteur)