Trenčín
European Capital of Culture 2026

Third Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, 20 November 2025

Creative Europe

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Introduction

This report follows the online monitoring meeting on 20 November 2025 between the Expert panel for the selection and monitoring of European Capitals of Culture, hereinafter referred to as "the panel", and the Trenčín 2026 team, one of the two designated European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2026[1].

Trenčín 2026 was nominated as European Capital of Culture on 8 February 2022 by the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic based on the panel selection report[2]. The first two monitoring meetings took place online on 20 September 2022 and 2 July 2024. The panel's reports can be accessed on the European Commission website[3].

The present report is addressed to the Trenčín 2026 organisation and will be published on the European Commission's website.

Attendance

The panel members:
Toni Attard
Csaba Borboly
Jelle Burggraaff
Else Christensen-Redzepovic (Rapporteur)
Suvi Innilä
Erni Kask
Hrvoje Laurenta
Tanja Mlaker
Matthias Ripp (Chair)

For Trenčín 2026:
CEO Trenčín 2026, Head of the Outreach Department
Chief Dramaturg of the Project Trenčín 2026
Head of the Monitoring Department
Head of the Finance Department
Head of the Marketing and PR
Head of the European Dimension and International Relations
Monitoring Report Editor
Mayor of Trenčín
Vice-Mayor of Trenčín

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

[1] The European Capitals of Culture action is governed by Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union for the titles 2020 to 2033. The Decision provides for three formal monitoring meetings between designated cities and the panel. See: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG
[2] Selection Report - European Capital of Culture 2026, Slovakia - Culture and Creativity
[3] Oulu and Trenčín - Culture and Creativity

Report and presentation from Trenčín 2026

Prior to the third and final online monitoring meeting, the Trenčín2026 team submitted a written progress report. The report was structured around the six criteria of the ECoC action and presented the major developments since the last monitoring report. This report provided essential updates on the status of flagship projects, governance structure, funding, cultural programming, and community outreach, while addressing questions raised during previous monitoring meetings.

The meeting followed the established format, with an opening by the chair of the panel. This was followed by a presentation by the Trenčín2026 covering the progress report period from June 2024 to June 2025, with additional information on progress up until the 3rd monitoring meeting. Since the last monitoring meeting, the project has moved from planning to accelerated delivery, with the majority of programme activities contracted and underway, governance and management structures strengthened, and key legacy mechanisms consolidated at city level.

Trenčín2026 is embedded in a broader long-term transformation agenda, linking cultural development to public space renewal, community participation, sustainability, and European cooperation. Preparations for the title year have advanced significantly, including the opening ceremony planned for 13-15 February 2026, strengthened European partnerships, expanded outreach and capacity-building programmes, and a robust monitoring and evaluation framework extending beyond 2026.

The report documents both progress achieved and readiness for the final delivery phase, while outlining how the title year is positioned to generate lasting cultural, social, and governance impacts for the city and region.

In the opening address, the mayor underlined the European Capital of Culture in Trenčín as part of a long-term and sustainable development trajectory extending beyond the title year. The title has enabled the city to further embed European values and openness in the city on a lasting basis. Appreciation was expressed to the European Commission and the panel for this opportunity to carry the ECoC title, alongside acknowledgement of the remarkable work carried out by the Trenčín 2026 team.

The exchange with the panel focused on readiness for delivery, legacy planning, the European dimension, financial and organisational arrangements, infrastructure status, and engagement with local communities. Given the proximity of the title year, the discussion took on a clearly operational character.

After the presentation, a questions and answer session between the panel and the Trenčín 2026 team followed.

Discussion

General question by the panel:

- The panel invited the team to reflect on their most pressing challenges at this late stage. The team referred to administrative complexity linked to public procurement, ongoing work to identify suitable venues for programme delivery, and limited

accommodation capacity in the city. These issues were described as part of the final preparation phase currently being managed.

Contribution to long-term cultural strategy

- The panel enquired whether the city departments will take over the Institute for Participation and the Culture Living Lab after 2026. Asked how these structures will be sustained after 2026, the team stated that continuation is expected through the Norwegian funds and other cooperative resources. Confidence was expressed regarding future financial arrangements, while specific programme allocations were not detailed at this stage.
- The panel also sought clarification on monitoring and evaluation beyond the title year. The team outlined a framework secured until the end of 2027, including longitudinal research and a large representative residents' survey planned for 2027. These activities will be delivered by an internal team of four researchers supported by a scientific board of eight academic members, with responsibility for the economic impact study resting with the scientific board. Evaluation was described as a tool to inform future strategic decisions, particularly in relation to participation and placemaking.
- Questions were raised about the practical use of environmental and accessibility tools. The team explained that green cultural production manuals are mandatory for main producers, while accessibility guidelines are provided as inspiration. It was also confirmed that green production requirements apply to private operators selected to manage spaces on the Fiesta Bridge.
- Green placemaking was addressed as a marker of the long-term strategy. The team explained that work is ongoing and currently focused on preparing a dedicated capacity-building programme planned for launch in summer 2026 as part of the legacy phase, alongside programme strands that already address nature-related topics.

Cultural and artistic content

- In discussing artistic quality assurance, the panel asked how standards are maintained when the implementation of projects is delegated. The team explained that responsibility lies with central artistic leadership, supported by an expert curatorial team including more than ten international curators, as well as additional contracted curators. The e-grant system was presented as a key internal mechanism requiring detailed project plans and budgets from implementers before approval.
- The opening ceremony was discussed in detail. The panel invited the team to elaborate on the risks identified. The team described the opening as a complex undertaking involving challenges related to engaging residents, managing a three-day format, and coordinating multiple locations and contributors. Preparation is being led by a dedicated team, supported by ongoing dialogue with local businesses and other stakeholders.
- When asked to compare the final programme with the selection bidbook, the team stated that approximately 90 percent of the bidbook programme will be delivered and that the core elements which contributed to winning the title remaining intact.
- Capacity-building was examined by the panel in relation to programme delivery. The team described the RUNWAY initiative as a programme running already for three years with different elements targeting cultural and creative industries. Participants develop strategic skills for their own organisations, outcomes are

monitored, and the programme has already led to cross-border cooperation with Czech Republic. Additional capacity-building initiatives were highlighted through the learning exchange with Bodø, involving municipal staff from different departments and strengthening skills for international collaboration and project delivery.

- Clarification was also provided on the programming budget. The team confirmed that a total of 16.6 million EUR is allocated to programming, including 10.4 million EUR for 2026 and 6.2 million EUR spent between 2020 and 2025. Funding for 2027 was described as an additional expense and dependent on the outcome of an EEA funding application.

European dimension

- In response to questions about which specific actions have been undertaken to strengthen and finalise European and international partnerships since the previous monitoring meeting, the team explained that a dedicated European dimension role has now been appointed and that contracts with direct implementers such as artists and cultural organisations have been finalised. All projects were confirmed to include international partners, largely in line with the original bid.
- When asked about the development of new European collaborations, the team referred to additional partnerships established during the preparation phase, including cooperation with other European Capitals of Culture, festivals and major European cultural institutions.
- The panel explored how the European dimension is implemented through artistic formats. In reply, the team presented the Artist in Residence programme as a key instrument, including the opening of a residency house, an open call selecting artists from ten countries, quarterly future calls, and plans for an additional residency strand at the castle focusing on expert curating and heritage-related themes.
- Opportunities for further international cooperation and mobility were also discussed. The team referred to plans enabling local artists to present their work abroad and to a budget intended to support international cooperation and co-financing, subject to confirmation.
- The panel enquired about the level of Hungarian cultural participation within the Destination All-Inclusive framework, to which the team responded that that several Hungarian artists and partners are involved in the programme, without providing specific examples during the meeting.
- When asked how Europe will be made tangible and relevant for local residents, the team explained that European cultural exchange is relatively new in the local context. The Trenčín team argued that it facilitated encounters between residents and international artists supported by translation, consistent reference to the European dimension in communication materials, and free access to all events to reduce barriers to participation.

Outreach

- The panel sought clarification on the recruitment, training and deployment of community leaders, as well as representation of the title year across different communities. The team confirmed that more than fifty community leaders have already participated in an initial phase, with further training planned to focus on event management, organisational skills and networking. The approach combines hands-on methods, partly online delivery, and tailoring to different interests.
- Participatory budgeting involving primary schools was discussed as a legacy measure. The team confirmed that it is now embedded as a permanent part of the

city budget, engaging around 2000 pupils each year as part of ongoing civic education.

- The panel asked how the atmosphere was in the city ahead of the opening. The team described it as positive to neutral, supported by strong political backing, open dialogue with different groups, and marketing data indicating limited negative sentiment. It was also stated that programme decisions have remained protected from political intervention.

Management

- The panel asked how the funding gap linked to limited private and EU support has been addressed. The team outlined that two full-time staff are now dedicated to fundraising, that approximately EUR one million is expected from private sector partners, and that several grant schemes are being pursued, including international and EU-related funding opportunities.
- The Panel discussed the change in leadership roles and its consequences within the Panel. Where the team responded that the changes are experienced positively within the organisation
- The panel asked about the measures in place to support staff wellbeing. The team described team-building activities, internal sharing practices aimed at strengthening cohesion across a large organisation, close interaction with volunteers and residents, and the use of short-term goals to support motivation in a high-pressure environment.

Capacity to deliver

- The readiness of the city´s infrastructure readiness was discussed in some detail. The team stated that most public construction projects will be completed by the end of 2025, with the exception of the Fiesta Bridge. Some projects are delivered by external partners and others will start after the opening.
- Questions on the durability of local and regional interconnections and political continuity were addressed, and it was confirmed that cooperation will be maintained despite upcoming elections
- In the concluding remarks, the mayor of Trenčín reiterated his confidence in the delivery team, acknowledged the scale and complexity of the task, and emphasised intergenerational cooperation and collective commitment.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Trenčín 2026 team has demonstrated impressive progress and dedication in preparing for the European Capital of Culture year. Through extensive community engagement, robust partnerships, and comprehensive planning, they are well-positioned for a successful event that reflects the city's unique culture and its connections with Europe. The panel's recommendations are intended to further support these efforts, helping Trenčín 2026 to maximise the impact of their programme. The panel is confident that with continued focus and collaboration, Trenčín 2026 will deliver a memorable and inspiring ECoC year for both Trenčín and Europe. To support the work for the coming months, the panel wishes to make the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Reaffirm freedom of expression and artistic freedom as non-negotiable European values by retaining curatorial autonomy through the arm's length principle.

Recommendation 2: Secure long-term funding for legacy structures through confirmed mechanisms and clear post-2026 ownership and governance.

Recommendation 3: Use the visibility and momentum of the title year to further strengthen and consolidate private fundraising efforts.

Recommendation 4: Prepare for the impact of delayed infrastructure on visitor and resident experience and manage this proactively.

Recommendation 5: Continue to deepen and broaden European partnerships during the title year and beyond.

Recommendation 6: Maintain clear and consistent visibility of the European dimension and Union action across all communication and marketing materials.

Recommendation 7: Consolidate participatory school projects as a permanent procedure.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen the link between monitoring, evaluation and legacy planning.

Recommendation 9: Continue capacity-building across sectors as a long-term investment.

Melina Mercouri Prize

Based on the report submitted by Trenčín 2026 as well as the hearing with the Trenčín 2026 team, the panel considers that the conditions regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize, as specified in Article 14 of Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, are met. Consequently, the panel is pleased to propose to the European Commission that Trenčín receive the Melina Mercouri prize.

The panel would like to remind the Trenčín 2026 team that, in line with Article 14, its marketing and communication strategy and its communication material have to clearly reflect the fact that the European Capital of Culture is a Union action, as well as that, in line with Article 16 of the same Decision, it will have to draw up its own evaluation report of the results of its ECoC year and transmit it to the European Commission by 31 December 2027

The panel would like to thank the Trenčín 2026 team for a very informative and interesting meeting and looks forward to a successful realisation of the Trenčín 2026 European Capital of Culture project in 2026.

(Signed) all attending panel's members