European Commission

Skopje
European Capital of Culture 2028

Second Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, June 2026

Creative Europe

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Contents

Introduction 5
Attendance 5
Report and presentation from Skopje 2028 6
Discussion 7
Contribution to long-term cultural strategy 8
Cultural and artistic content 8
European dimension 10
Outreach 11
Management 12
Capacity to deliver 13
Conclusions and recommendations 14
Next steps 16

Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting held on 24 June 2026 between the panel of experts and the Skopje 2028 team, one of the three European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2028. Skopje was nominated as the European Capital of Culture 2028 in January 2024 by the European Commission, based on the recommendation included in the panel's selection report[1]and within the framework of a competition open to cities in EFTA/EEA countries, candidate countries and potential candidates.

The second monitoring report with multiple annexes was submitted by the Skopje 2028 team on the 10th of June 2026 and formed the basis for the discussion. This report of the second monitoring meeting is addressed to the Skopje 2028 team and will be published on the European Commission's website[2].

Attendance

The panel members:

Toni Attard

Borboly Csaba

Roberta Ferrarini

Suvi Innilä

Erni Kask

Tanja Mlaker (Chair)

Matthias Ripp

Malgorzata Szablowska (Rapporteur)

For Skopje 2028 the participants included the:

Minister of Culture and Tourism,

Mayor of the City of Skopje,

CEO of Foundation of Skopje ECoC 2028,

COO of Foundation of Skopje ECoC 2028,

Head of Artistic Department

Head of European Dimension and International Cooperation Department

[1] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/resources/document-library/selection-report-european-capital-of-culture-2028-eftaeea-countries-candidate-countries-and-potential-candidates

[2] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/designated-capitals-of-culture/ceske-budejovice-bourges-and-skopje?#bourges

Also in attendance were observer(s) from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture), from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of North Macedonia (EU Affairs section), from the EU Delegation in North Macedonia, and from the Mission of North Macedonia to the European Union.

Report and presentation from Skopje 2028

The panel held its second monitoring meeting with the delivery body of Skopje 2028 to assess progress in the preparation of the European Capital of Culture. The discussion was based on the written report submitted in prior to the meeting with accompanying annexes provided, and the responses given during the meeting.

The team that attended the meeting has been previously made aware of the recommendations made by the panel during the first monitoring meeting in October 2024 and during the in situ visit in May 2025.

The aim of the panel was to assess the strategic and significant progress made in addressing those recommendations.

The mayor opened the presentation by outlining the main points from the submitted report. He began by emphasizing that the city of Skopje is following the recommendations of the panel from previous meetings:

a) the foundation has been established and some of the key positions were recently fulfilled, and the members of the team responsible for implementation of ECoC Skopje 2028 are present in this monitoring meeting;
b) the financial contribution from the city of Skopje, regional municipalities and the national government is confirmed for the period 2026-2029, the city of Skopje and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism both established a dedicated sub-program Skopje – ECoC 2028 to allocate the funding in this period;
c) regarding the artistic and cultural programme it is still under development and will be developed further according to the milestones presented in the progress report while the first open call was an important step to create partnerships with various cultural organizations;
d) Skopje 2028 is fully aware of the importance of the European dimension and will continue to develop European partnerships, focusing on international mobility and the exchange of knowledge and experience across Europe;
e) the ambition of Skopje 2028 is to start a process of long-term transformation of the culture and to make sure that the activities are visible across all ten municipalities of the city, a memorandum signed with all municipalities represents a foundation for an integrated implementation of the ECoC.

During the discussion with the panel the conversation moved largely to the Minister of Culture and Tourism and the team members present.

The panel acknowledges the continued engagement of the delivery body, the city and the national authorities. It also recognises the efforts undertaken in the period since the previous monitoring during in situ visit in May 2025, including organisational restructuring, initial programme development efforts and confirmation of a multiannual public financial commitment.

The establishment of a Foundation as the main delivery structure represents an important step towards aligning the project with the governance model typically required for the implementation of an ECoC.
However, the panel notes that, despite these efforts, progress remains uneven and in several key areas limited. The discussion highlighted substantial gaps between planning, intention and implementation. In particular, several core components of the project remain at a conceptual or transitional stage.

The panel therefore considers that the project is currently at a critical turning point, where immediate and coordinated action is required to move from preparatory work towards structured and effective implementation.

The second monitoring meeting examined the transition from planning to delivery. The panel highlighted that this phase is critical in determining whether the project can achieve full operational readiness timely for the title year 2028.

During the meeting, the panel requested evidence on programme maturity, governance capacity and financial execution. Responses confirmed that a significant proportion of the project remains at the planning stage.

Discussion

The panel had prepared a series of questions to clarify the current situation in addition to the progress report.

While the establishment of the foundation represents an important institutional development, the panel noted that the transition from the delivery body established in 2025 to the foundation is still at an early stage of implementation. Discussions during the meeting indicated that governance arrangements, responsibilities, and operational processes are continuing to evolve as the new structure is being further defined and embedded.

In particular, the panel identified that:

- the transfer of competences from previous delivery body to the Foundation is ongoing;
- internal coordination between leadership roles (CEO, COO, head of artistic department) is not yet clearly defined;
- operational procedures, including management, reporting and monitoring systems, are not yet fully established.

The panel also noted that, during the meeting, responses to governance-related questions frequently required clarification or were corrected during follow-up exchanges. This indicates that the internal structure is still under development.

As a result, several operational areas — including programme implementation, financial execution and stakeholder coordination — remain in a preparatory phase.

The panel therefore considers that the project has not yet reached a stable and fully operational stage of delivery, which introduces significant uncertainty regarding the ability to implement the project within the required timeframe.

Contribution to long-term cultural strategy

The panel acknowledges the strengths present in the original concept, which aligns with European cultural priorities and demonstrates intellectual coherence.

However, during the meeting it was confirmed that evaluation systems are still under development and that operational indicators and monitoring frameworks have not yet been fully established.

As a result, the current capacity to assess impact remains limited, and the definition of legacy outcomes is not yet fully clarified.

The panel considers that evaluation must move from concept to implementation within a clearly defined timeframe.

The panel asked specifically in this section about the report that states an Urban Strategy is "under preparation" and that the 10 Creative Hubs are planned for "the near future". The panel asked for the team to give a specific date for the launch of the first Creative Hubs, and to confirm when they plan to adopt the Urban Strategy.

The response was centred around confirming a preliminary stage of entering in the process for creative hubs. Youth Hubs, Universal hall, Fortress Kale, and couple more objects that are expected to be finished in 2027.

The team further noted that in 2028 all these objects will be at their disposal and that the City of Skopje is working on some of them, while others will be realized by the national government.

The team further noted that they are focusing on transforming the first City Hub under their capacity and then they will follow the creative space mapping.

Cultural and artistic content

Programme development was identified by the panel as a key area requiring further consolidation.

During the meeting, the panel sought clarification on progress and milestones. The team indicated that development is still at an early stage. The panel therefore noted that further alignment with the bid framework is required and that the programme structure is highly underdeveloped.

The team presented initial steps towards programme development, including the organisation of an open call in 2026 and the selection of a limited number of projects. However, the panel considers that these steps do not yet constitute a sufficiently developed programme.

The analysis of both the written report and meeting responses indicates that:

- the programme lacks an overarching structure and clear articulation of its components;

- the number of confirmed and developed projects is limited relative to the expected scale of an ECoC;
- the programme is still largely under construction, with further open calls and development phases planned.

The panel notes with particular concern that the timeline for programme consolidation extends into 2027. Given that programme implementation, production and communication require significant preparation time, this timeline presents a substantial risk.

Furthermore, the panel observed that only a limited portion of the original bid book programme appears to be retained. At the same time, new programme concepts are being introduced. During the meeting, responses regarding the relationship between the current programme and the original bid were not sufficiently clear or consistent.

This raises several key issues:

- lack of clarity regarding continuity with the selected bid;
- potential weakening of the original artistic concept;
- absence of a stable programme framework to guide development.

The panel also notes that references to specific projects were limited, and when provided, often linked to initiatives still in development or external funding applications rather than confirmed programme components.

Overall, the panel considers that the programme remains at an early and fragmented stage and does not yet demonstrate the level of maturity, coherence or readiness required to ensure successful delivery.

Breakdown of the programme indicates a strong pipeline but low delivery readiness. This creates a structural imbalance between ambition and feasibility.

During the meeting, the panel asked for confirmation of contracting progress. The team indicated that contracting is ongoing, with completion expected in 2027.

This statement aligns with Annex 8 milestones, which places programme consolidation late in the timeline. The panel considers this to present a high delivery risk.

The panel further notes that a significant number of projects depend on external partnerships, including European collaborators. During the meeting, these partnerships were described as 'in development', without confirmed agreements. This introduces uncertainty not only for the programme delivery but also for the European dimension.

The panel also observes that financial allocations at project level remain indicative, with limited confirmation of co-financing structures. This raises concerns about the feasibility of scaling projects to the level required for an European Capital of Culture.

In addition, there is limited evidence of differentiation between flagship projects and smaller initiatives, making it difficult to assess overall programme balance.

The panel concludes that the programme remains conceptually strong but operationally severely underdeveloped.

European dimension

The European dimension requires further articulation and operational definition in order to be fully embedded within the programme framework.

While the team referred to broader themes such as solidarity, shared historical experiences, and general European cooperation, these elements were presented primarily at a conceptual level. Further work is therefore needed to translate these concepts into a more clearly defined programme approach and structured set of activities.

The panel specifically requested concrete examples of European dimension in practice, including projects, partnerships or collaborative mechanisms. The responses provided did not demonstrate:

- confirmed European co-production projects;
- structured and ongoing partnerships with European cultural operators;
- integration of European collaboration within the programme architecture.

Some references were made to discussions with other ECoC cities and potential future cooperation. However, these remain in a developmental phase and are not yet translated into confirmed actions.

The team stated:

- The European dimension will be based on:
  - the concept of "solidarity" (linked to the 1963 earthquake);
  - international cooperation and exchange.

- Early collaborations include:
  - other ECoC's (e.g. Novi Sad, Nova Gorica),
  - cultural institutions and universities.

- Plans include conferences, artistic collaborations, and mobility programmes. The team is aware of the necessity for capacity building and knowledge exchange with other ECoC's.

The panel requested concrete examples of existing partnerships.

The team responded noting that some memoranda of cooperation have been signed but also admitted that activities remain at this stage in planning and development phase and offered to inform the panel separately about the future steps.

The panel notes that European dimension remains conceptual and underdeveloped. Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence of structured partnerships or deliverable projects at this stage.

The panel also notes that the European dimension appears to be interpreted primarily as a thematic or narrative concept, rather than an operational framework embedded within programme delivery.

This approach is not sufficient to meet the expectations of the ECoC action, which requires:

- active collaboration across borders;
- shared production and artistic exchange;
- clear contribution to European cultural dialogue.

The panel therefore considers that the European dimension requires substantial development, both strategically and operationally, and must be embedded within the programme as a core structural element.

Outreach

The panel asked about confirmation whether an audience development strategy exists and asked for identification of priority target groups.
The team confirmed that at this stage there is no formal audience development strategy currently in place.

- As Skopje is a multi-ethnical city the focus groups will include:
    - Roma communities,
    - Various ethnic groups, for example Albanian,
    - People with disabilities,
    - Young people.
- Plans include digital tools and audience tracking systems to be developed in collaboration with private stakeholders.

The panel concludes that the audience development is not structured or compliant with ECoC requirements.

The panel acknowledges that cultural participation and inclusion are recognised as priority areas within the programme.

At the same time, a structured and formal audience development strategy is not yet in place and would benefit from further development to ensure a more systematic approach to participation and inclusion.

During the meeting, responses to questions on audience development focused primarily on:

- plans for digital platforms,
- tools for tracking participation,
- communication channels.

The panel explicitly noted that these elements relate more to marketing or monitoring tools, rather than to a strategic approach to audience development.
In particular, the panel did not receive evidence of:

- clearly defined priority audience groups,
- baseline analysis of cultural participation,
- targeted engagement strategies,
- measurable objectives or expected outcomes.

When asked to provide specific examples, responses referred to general inclusivity and diversity without identifying concrete actions, methodologies or expected impact.

The panel therefore considers that audience development remains at a conceptual level and lacks strategic clarity. Given that widening participation is an important objective of the ECoC action, this represents a significant gap. The panel welcomes the efforts of Skopje 2028 to reflect the multi-ethnical cultural life of the city and urges the team to make formal agreements with different communities including clear budget commitments for projects to ensure a wide participation.

Management

The panel acknowledges the establishment of the Foundation as an important step towards the development of an appropriate governance structure.

At the same time, governance arrangements are still in transition and would benefit from further clarification to ensure a more coherent and fully operational framework.
During the meeting, it became evident that:

- roles and responsibilities within the leadership structure are not yet fully stabilised;
- lines of accountability between the Foundation, the City of Skopje and national authorities are not yet clearly defined;
- coordination between management, artistic leadership and institutional stakeholders requires further development.

In addition, detailed information on governance bodies — including board composition, decision-making processes and oversight mechanisms — was not yet fully available. During the meeting it was confirmed that several key positions remain to be filled.

The panel observed that responses to governance questions often required clarification or adjustment during the discussion, indicating that the structure is still evolving.

Overall, governance arrangements are not yet sufficiently developed to support stable and effective project delivery. The panel also emphasizes the alignment between local and national government as a prerequisite for a successful delivery.

The panel observed that the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the City of Skopje have improved their collaboration significantly since the in situ visit in May 2025 and they consider the ECoC Skopje 2028 as their joint responsibility. Given the current state of the

implementation, it is crucial that the authorities keep their strong partnership to secure further progress and delivery of the ECoC.

The panel has been further informed that the national Government has approved a total contribution of €20 million for the ECoC programme, to be allocated over four years as follows:

- 2026: €1 million
- 2027: €5 million
- 2028: €9 million
- 2029: €5 million

In addition to this approved funding, the Ministry indicated that further support will be provided for national cultural institutions, including several institutions based in Skopje, to focus on international cooperation during the European Capital of Culture Skopje 2028. An estimated additional budget of €10 million is expected to be invested through this program line.

Regarding the 2026 contribution, the Minister confirmed that the allocation of €1 million has already been approved. However, the funds have not yet been transferred due to an ongoing budget rebalance process. It was clarified that while the 2026 budget was approved, the specific allocation for the ECoC programme had not initially been included and therefore requires a formal adjustment. The transfer is expected to be completed by the end of July. The Ministry expressed confidence that the approved contribution will be transferred and did not indicate any risk that the funding would be withheld. This late payment is a specific situation for 2026, for the next years the contribution of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism is expected to be transferred timely.

In parallel with the programme funding, several major capital investment projects were also confirmed by the Minister as planned or underway, including:

- Rebuilding the Universal Hall – updated investment of approximately €20 million, expected delivery by the end of 2027.
- Renewal of the House of Culture 'October 11' in the municipality Gazi Baba – investment of approximately €2 million.
- New cultural centre within the Municipality of Aerodrom.
- Renovation of the Fortress Kale, including the renewal and extension of the museums.

The Minister has confirmed that these investments are expected to contribute to the wider cultural infrastructure supporting the ECoC programme and its long-term legacy.
The City of Skopje also established a dedicated sub-programme with the allocated funding of 20 million Euros.

Capacity to deliver

The Skopje 2028 European Capital of Culture has a political and financial support from the City of Skopje, the national Government with a clear financial commitment from the

Ministry of Culture and Tourism and regional municipalities. While this support provides an important foundation for delivery, the panel notes that the effectiveness of these commitments will depend on their translation into stable operational structures, solid collaboration with cultural actors and institutions, including international partnerships, and timely implementation.

The major investments in infrastructure are already confirmed, but the planning of these projects is not specifically defined in the second monitoring report. The panel expects the Foundation to make a formal risk assessment.

A governance framework has been established to support transparency, accountability, stakeholder participation, and programme delivery. The Foundation has now assumed primary responsibility for implementation.

The panel acknowledges that several challenges have already affected programme development, including funding delays, leadership changes, and organisational restructuring. In response, work is underway to strengthen risk management through the development of a formal risk register linked to key milestones and performance indicators. The panel considers this to be a necessary measure and encourages its rapid implementation to support the identification, monitoring, and mitigation of political, financial, administrative, infrastructural, and programme-related risks. Continued attention to these issues will be essential for strengthening delivery capacity and ensuring that the programme can be implemented successfully and achieve its intended long-term legacy.

Conclusions and recommendations

Having reviewed the progress report, accompanying annexes, and the outcome of the monitoring meeting, the panel remains seriously concerned about the overall level of preparedness for the delivery of the European Capital of Culture programme in 2028.

The panel acknowledges that a series of political changes and governance transitions have significantly affected the establishment and operationalisation of the delivery structures envisaged in the bid book. While these circumstances provide important context, the panel notes that substantial delays have accumulated across several key areas of implementation.

At this stage, the panel is not sufficiently reassured that the necessary governance, management and programming frameworks are already solid enough to ensure the successful delivery of the title year. The pace of progress observed to date does not correspond to the urgency required given the proximity of 2028.

The panel therefore considers that immediate and decisive action is required to accelerate implementation. Without significant progress in the coming months, there is a considerable risk that the objectives outlined in the legal base for the European Capital of Culture will not be realised.

The panel acknowledges the efforts made after the in situ visit in May 2025. However, the project remains at a critical stage of development.

Progress across key areas is uneven, and several core components — including programme, governance and operational capacity — are not yet sufficiently developed.

The panel is particularly concerned that:

- the programme lacks sufficient maturity and structure with limited European dimension;
- governance remains in transition;
- operational readiness is limited.

Given the timeframe, the panel has serious concerns regarding the feasibility of delivering the project as planned.

The panel underlines that these concerns bear directly on the conditions for the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize set out in Article 14 of Decision 445/2014/EU. In particular, the current state of the European dimension (condition c), the fact that the confirmed public budget has not yet been transferred to the delivery body (condition a), and the absence of an operational monitoring and evaluation framework (condition e) are the conditions on which the panel's eventual recommendation on the Prize will principally depend. The panel expects demonstrable progress on each before the third monitoring meeting.

Recommendation 1: The panel recommends that the City of Skopje formally reaffirms its full political and financial commitment to delivering the European Capital of Culture in 2028, notwithstanding the challenges identified during this monitoring exercise.

Recommendation 2: The panel suggests clarifying the governance framework by ensuring a clear division of responsibilities between governance and management structures, safeguarding the operational independence of the Foundation.

Recommendation 3: The panel recommends that the Foundation accelerates key recruitments through transparent and competitive open calls. Particular attention should be given to attracting expertise for international collaboration and ensuring that the organisation is equipped with the necessary capacities to deliver a programme of European significance.

Recommendation 4: The panel requests greater clarity on the programme budget and detailed allocations for programme lines such as public calls, international cooperation projects, flagship productions, opening and closing events and legacy initiatives.

Recommendation 5: The panel encourages the team to ensure that the project leaders and partners referenced in the bid book are still actively and transparently engaged in programme development and implementation.

Recommendation 6: The panel recommends the team to develop a comprehensive audience development strategy that sets clear objectives, target groups, participation goals and monitoring mechanisms. The strategy should give attention to accessibility, inclusion, community participation and long-term cultural engagement beyond the title year.

Recommendation 7: The team should maintain a balanced programme by ensuring that national cultural institutions play a constructive role within the programme without

dominating it. Significant space should be preserved for independent artists, local cultural organisations, community-led initiatives, emerging practitioners and international partners, thereby reflecting the diversity and plurality of the cultural sector.

Recommendation 8: The panel recommends that the team embeds the European dimension as a transversal priority across all areas of development, including artistic programming, partnerships, governance, audience engagement, communications, capacity building and legacy planning. The European dimension should be visible not only through international collaborations but also through the themes, values, networks and exchanges that underpin the programme.

Next steps

Given the current situation, the panel considers that it will be important to carry out an in situ visit to Skopje in January 2027. Such a visit should offer a three-dimensional understanding of the ongoing progress one year before the opening, provide an opportunity to engage directly with the city, the delivery team and crucial stakeholders, and allow the panel to offer further guidance and support where appropriate.

The panel wants to ensure that the progress can accelerate by demanding an additional update in December 2026. This update should include more detailed description of the programme including European dimension and budget specification, the evaluation and monitoring plan, the audience development plan and the risk assessment with mitigation measures.

The panel remains available for questions and advice, through the Commission services, and encourages the team to share any relevant information before the requested update. As it is planned right now, the Commission will call for a third and final monitoring meeting in the second half of 2027. 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 Skopje[3].

The conditions for the payment of the Prize are specified in Article 14 of Decision 445/2014/EU:

"The prize money shall be paid by the end of March of the year of the title, provided that the designated city concerned continues to honour the commitments it made at the application stage, complies with the criteria, and takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports.

The commitments made at the application stage shall be deemed to have been honoured by the designated city where no substantial change has been made to the programme and the strategy between the application stage and the year of the title, in particular where:

(a) the budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-quality cultural programme in line with the application and the criteria;
(b) the independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;

[3] The conditions for the payment of the Prize are specified in Article 14 of Decision 445/2014/EU.

(c) the European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final version of the cultural programme;
(d) the marketing and communication strategy and the communication material used by the designated city clearly reflects the fact that the action is a Union action;
(e) the plans for the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the title on the designated city are in place."

The panel would like to thank the Mayor of Skopje, the Minister of Culture and Tourism and the Skopje 2028 team for an informative discussion and looks forward to the next developments of their European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending panel's members