Liepāja
European Capital of Culture 2027

Second Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, 14th May 2025

Creative Europe

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Introduction

This report follows the virtual second monitoring meeting held on **14 May 2025** between the Panel and the team of **Liepāja**, one of the two European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2027[1]. Liepāja was designated as European Capital of Culture in August 2022 by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, following the recommendation of the Panel's selection report[2].

The second monitoring report was submitted by the Liepāja 2027 team on 30 April 2025 and formed the basis of this discussion. This report of the second monitoring meeting is addressed to the Liepāja 2027 team and will be published on the European Commission's website[3].

Attendance

The panel members:

- Else Christensen-Redzepovic (Chair)
- Jorge Cerveira Pinto (Rapporteur)
- Diana Čivle (national expert)
- Erni Kask
- Girts Majors (national expert)
- Hrvoje Laurenta
- Jelle Burggraaff
- Matthias Ripp
- Suvi Innilä
- Tanja Mlaker
- Toni Attard

For Liepāja 2027:

- Mayor of Liepāja city
- Chairperson of the Board and CEO of the foundation "Nodibinājums Liepāja 2027"
- Member of the Board in artistic matters and Artistic Director of the foundation "Nodibinājums Liepāja 2027"
- Member of the Board in financial and legal matters of the foundation "Nodibinājums Liepāja 2027"
- Project director
- Creative producer
- Executive producer
- Regional coordinator of Dienvidkurzemes region
- Public involvement project coordinator
- Head of PR and Marketing
- International projects and external Fundraising Specialist

[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] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/latvia-and-portugal

[3] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/latvia-and-portugal

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

Report and Presentation of Liepāja 2027

In advance of the second monitoring meeting, the Liepāja 2027 team submitted its official progress report dated 30 April 2025, outlining developments since the first monitoring meeting held in September 2023. The report was structured along the six monitoring criteria and included updated information on governance, programme development, European partnerships, and community engagement, as well as a presentation of preliminary findings from the baseline study.

During the virtual meeting, the Liepāja 2027 team delivered a comprehensive presentation highlighting key accomplishments and challenges. The Mayor of Liepāja reaffirmed the city's political commitment, while members of the Foundation's leadership and programme team elaborated on various strategic and operational aspects of the project.

The presentation underscored the growing size and capacity of the Liepāja 2027 team, now comprising 19 staff with plans to expand to 37 by 2026, including external producers contracted for project implementation. It emphasised recent programme developments across five thematic lines – *European Dream, Port Paradox, Deliberate Modesty, New Eyes!* and *Creative Foresight* – and offered concrete examples of both local and international collaborations.

The team also introduced a set of risk mitigation strategies, notably in response to political uncertainty, inflation, and infrastructure delays. Particular attention was paid to the project's European dimension, including partnerships with other ECoC cities, international networks, and artists. The presentation touched on their marketing and outreach strategy, including strengthened audience engagement tools and data monitoring platforms.

Discussion

The discussion between the Panel and the Liepāja 2027 team was structured around the six official monitoring criteria established for the European Capital of Culture programme. Drawing on the progress report submitted on 30 April 2025 and the presentation delivered during the meeting on 14 May, the Panel posed a series of questions to assess the city's advancement since the first monitoring phase in September 2023. Particular attention was paid to areas where the Panel had previously issued recommendations, including programme consolidation, team capacity, international partnerships, and outreach strategies. The Liepāja 2027 team responded in detail, providing updates on ongoing activities, clarifications regarding strategic and operational decisions, and reflections on emerging challenges. The exchanges under each criterion are summarised below, capturing the main questions raised by the Panel and the responses provided by the Liepāja team.

Contribution to long-term cultural strategy

- The Panel inquired about the mechanisms facilitating regional cooperation, particularly with the municipalities of South Kurzeme and Kuldīga. The Liepāja 2027 team explained that formal agreements have been established with these municipalities, and regular meetings are conducted at both political and operational levels to ensure coordinated cultural development efforts.
- Regarding participatory budgeting and NGO support, the Panel asked how these initiatives contribute to the long-term cultural strategy. The team reported that the participatory budgeting scheme has been launched to involve citizens directly in cultural decision-making processes, and the NGO Incubator programme continues to support local cultural organisations, aiming to foster a sustainable and active civil society.
- The Panel sought clarification on the evaluation framework, specifically the selection of the Latvian Academy of Culture to lead the multi-year evaluation process. The team confirmed this partnership and described the adoption of a formative, theory-of-change approach. They acknowledged the extensive number of indicators initially proposed and indicated that efforts are underway to streamline these metrics to focus on key outcomes.
- Questions were raised about the legacy strategy post-2027. The Liepāja 2027 team stated that while a consolidated legacy framework has not yet been finalised, various initiatives, such as cultural education programs and infrastructure improvements, are intended to have lasting impacts. They mentioned ongoing discussions to develop mechanisms for institutional learning and skills transfer beyond the ECoC year.
- The Panel asked about the relationship between the ECoC activities and Liepāja's 400th anniversary celebrations in 2025. The team explained that certain anniversary events are being implemented under the ECoC umbrella, serving as pilot projects for audience engagement and operational readiness, while maintaining distinct identities and objectives for each initiative.
- Finally, the Panel inquired about the alignment of ECoC activities with broader urban and regional strategies, particularly in education and digitalisation. The team referred to platforms like "Ukstiņš. Lifelong Learning!" and collaborations with the Digital Innovation Hub in Kuldīga as examples of integrating cultural initiatives with educational and technological development goals.

Cultural and artistic content

- The Panel inquired about the progress in developing the five thematic lines: *European Dream*, *Port Paradox*, *Deliberate Modesty*, *New Eyes!*, and *Creative Foresight*. The Liepāja 2027 team explained that these lines have been further refined to ensure coherence with the overarching concept of (un)rest. They highlighted that each thematic line now includes flagship projects designed to embody the specific themes and engage diverse audiences.

- Questions were raised regarding the involvement of local and international artists in the programme. The team reported that open calls have been launched to attract a wide range of artists, and partnerships have been established with cultural

institutions across Europe. They emphasised ongoing collaborations with the French Institute in Latvia, as well as participation in networks such as CreArt, to facilitate artist exchanges and joint projects.

- The Panel sought clarification on how the programme ensures community involvement and inclusivity. The Liepāja 2027 team described initiatives like the "Neighbourliness" platform, which encourages local communities to participate in cultural activities. They also mentioned educational programmes and workshops aimed at engaging youth and underrepresented groups in the cultural scene.

- Regarding the implementation timeline, the Panel asked about the scheduling and coordination of events leading up to 2027. The team outlined a phased approach, with pilot projects and smaller events planned for 2025 and 2026 to test concepts and build momentum. They assured that a detailed calendar is being developed to ensure a balanced and continuous flow of cultural activities throughout the ECoC year.

- The Panel inquired about the decision-making process for artistic content and the autonomy of the artistic team. The Liepāja 2027 team confirmed that the artistic board operates independently, with clear guidelines to maintain artistic integrity while aligning with the overall objectives of the ECoC programme.

European dimension

- The Panel inquired about the development of international partnerships and collaborations that enhance the European dimension of the programme. The Liepāja 2027 team reported that they have established partnerships with various European cultural institutions and networks. Notably, a memorandum of cooperation was signed with the French Institute in Latvia, aiming to facilitate long-term collaboration and cultural exchange. Additionally, the team highlighted their participation in the CreArt network, which supports artist mobility and joint projects across Europe.

- The Panel sought clarification on how European themes and narratives are integrated into the programme's content. The team explained that the overarching concept of (un)rest is explored through five thematic lines - *European Dream*, *Port Paradox*, *Deliberate Modesty*, *New Eyes!*, and *Creative Foresight* - each addressing contemporary European issues such as migration, identity, and sustainability. These themes are designed to resonate with both local and European audiences, fostering a shared cultural dialogue.

- Questions were raised regarding strategies to engage audiences from other European countries. The Liepāja 2027 team indicated plans to implement targeted marketing campaigns and collaborative projects that appeal to international visitors. They also mentioned the development of multilingual promotional materials and the organisation of events that coincide with major European cultural calendars to attract a broader audience.

- The Panel asked about the project's involvement in broader European cultural networks. The team confirmed active participation in several networks, including the European Capitals of Culture network, which facilitates knowledge exchange and joint initiatives among current and former titleholders. Such involvement is intended to enhance the project's visibility and integration within the European cultural landscape.

Outreach

- The Panel inquired about the mechanisms in place to foster community engagement and participation in the Liepāja 2027 programme. The Liepāja 2027 team highlighted the launch of the "Neighbourliness" platform, designed to encourage local communities to actively participate in cultural activities. They also mentioned educational programmes and workshops aimed at engaging youth and underrepresented groups in the cultural scene.

- Questions were raised regarding the recruitment and involvement of volunteers in the programme. The team reported that a volunteer programme has been initiated to involve citizens in various aspects of event organisation and guest hospitality. They emphasised the importance of volunteer contributions to the success of the ECoC events and the goal of fostering a sense of ownership among participants.

- The Panel sought clarification on how the programme ensures digital accessibility and inclusion for diverse audiences. The Liepāja 2027 team described efforts to improve digital accessibility, including the development of multilingual promotional materials and online platforms to reach a broader audience. They acknowledged the need for targeted investments to reach different demographic groups, such as seniors and rural residents, and to support meaningful citizen engagement through digital means.

- Regarding youth engagement, the Panel asked about specific initiatives targeting young people. The team referred to the establishment of a Youth Programme featuring educational and creative activities to actively involve young participants in the cultural development of Liepāja. They also mentioned collaborations with educational institutions to integrate cultural activities into the curriculum.

- The Panel inquired about mechanisms for collecting feedback and evaluating the effectiveness of outreach initiatives. The Liepāja 2027 team indicated that surveys and studies have been conducted to assess public awareness and participation levels. They noted that findings from these evaluations are used to inform and adjust outreach strategies to better meet community needs.

Management

- The Panel inquired about the current organisational structure of the Liepāja 2027 Foundation and plans for future staffing. The Liepāja 2027 team reported that the Foundation currently employs 19 staff members and plans to expand to 37 by 2026.

This expansion includes the recruitment of external producers and specialists to support project implementation across various programme lines.

- Questions were raised regarding the governance model and decision-making processes within the Foundation. The team explained that the Foundation operates under a Board structure, with designated members responsible for artistic, financial, and legal matters. They emphasised that the Board provides strategic oversight, while operational decisions are delegated to the respective departments and project leads.

- The Panel sought clarification on the financial management systems in place to ensure transparency and accountability. The Liepāja 2027 team stated that they have implemented robust financial controls and reporting mechanisms, including regular audits and compliance with national regulations. They also mentioned ongoing coordination with the Ministry of Culture to align funding streams and ensure timely disbursement of resources.

- The Panel expressed concern regarding the current programme budget shortfall compared to the bid-book projection. The team acknowledged that this gap may affect the number and scale of open calls and noted that some partner-led bid-book projects may not be delivered. Panel members emphasised the need to avoid reductions in the international scope of the programme and urged the team to prioritise sponsorship acquisition and programme consolidation by the end of 2025.

- Regarding risk management, the Panel asked about strategies to mitigate potential challenges, such as political changes or economic fluctuations. The team acknowledged these risks and indicated that they have developed contingency plans, including scenario analyses and flexible budgeting, to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. They also highlighted efforts to build strong relationships with stakeholders to maintain project stability.

- The Panel inquired about initiatives to enhance the capacity of the team and stakeholders involved in the project. The Liepāja 2027 team described ongoing training programmes and workshops aimed at developing skills in project management, cultural programming, and community engagement. They also mentioned collaborations with educational institutions to foster knowledge exchange and professional development.

Capacity to deliver

- The Panel inquired about the status of infrastructure projects critical to the ECoC programme. The Liepāja 2027 team reported that reconstruction works at the former Liepājas Metalurgs steel plant have commenced, aiming to transform it into an environmentally friendly industrial park. Construction of new streets and a power grid is expected to be completed by December 31, 2025, facilitating public access and attracting businesses to the area.

- The team also mentioned that, in addition to the industrial park development, efforts are underway to enhance cultural infrastructure, including the renovation of

existing venues and the creation of new cultural spaces. These projects are intended to support the diverse range of events planned for the ECoC year and to leave a lasting legacy for the city's cultural landscape.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel welcomed the effort made in preparing the report and presentation and acknowledged the team's transparency in addressing questions of programme scope, financial sustainability, and community involvement. The monitoring report and the virtual discussion reflected a sincere and thoughtful attempt to respond to recommendations made in the first monitoring phase. The overall impression is of a project that has matured significantly in terms of strategic vision, institutional capacity, and thematic articulation, while certain gaps and risks remain.

Since the first monitoring meeting in September 2023, Liepāja 2027 has made measurable progress across several core areas of the ECoC initiative. The structure and size of the Foundation team have grown - for example, two officers recruited for International Project Coordination and for International Relations - with plans in place to scale further ahead of 2027. The artistic programme has been elaborated and refined, with clearer project groupings along the five thematic lines of (un)rest, and greater coherence between content and concept. The Foundation has also taken concrete steps to diversify its implementation model, combining core partner delivery, Foundation-curated productions, and open calls. The selection of the Latvian Academy of Culture to lead a multi-year evaluation process, grounded in a theory-of-change methodology, marks a positive step toward robust impact assessment.

The Panel notes that significant efforts have been made to broaden European partnerships, including active participation in the ECoC network and collaborations with current and future titleholders. However, the visibility and systematic integration of previously identified bid-book partners remains limited, and the European dimension is still not equally embedded across the entire programme. Similarly, while outreach efforts such as the "Neighbourliness" platform and youth engagement initiatives show promise, measurable progress on inclusion targets — especially for underrepresented groups — remains at an early stage.

The Panel also observed that while the Foundation has developed sound internal structures, uncertainty remains regarding the overall timeline for finalising the programme, confirming budgets, and securing key revenue streams. In particular, the continued reliance on an annual municipal budget approval process introduces an element of unpredictability that risks affecting medium-term planning and delivery. The budget gap compared to the original bid-book projection, combined with unclear private sector commitments, continues to pose a material risk. Nonetheless, the Foundation has prepared multiple contingency measures, and political support at the national and municipal levels currently appears stable. The Panel underscores, however, that in the context of the upcoming municipal elections, the continued commitment of the city — both politically and financially — remains essential. This includes providing the necessary clarity and predictability in budgetary

planning to ensure the successful implementation of Liepāja 2027. The alignment between the European Capital of Culture programme and the city's 400th anniversary in 2025 presents a valuable opportunity for visibility and engagement, but also requires careful coordination of resources and clear division of roles to avoid overstretching the team's capacity.

Finally, the Panel appreciates the Foundation's openness in addressing difficult questions, including those related to budget limitations, artistic independence, and political continuity. The strong communication and marketing strategy, along with the maturing curatorial structure, point to a team that is committed to delivering a meaningful, high-quality ECoC year. The next twelve months will be critical to consolidate the programme, confirm partners and funding, and ensure all structural conditions are in place for a successful implementation phase.

The Panel outlines the following recommendations to support the continued development and successful delivery of Liepāja 2027:

1. Consolidate the Programme and Confirm a Timeline
The Panel recommends that the Foundation finalises a clear and consolidated timeline for the completion of the full Liepāja 2027 programme by the end of 2025. This timeline should specify the list of programme projects, identify confirmed partners at local, national, and European levels, and outline key production and delivery milestones. In addition, the budget allocation for each project should be clearly defined.

2. Safeguard the Independence of the Artistic Programme
The Panel reiterates the importance of protecting the independence of the programming and artistic teams. The decision-making structures of the Foundation must ensure that the curators and producers retain autonomy in shaping the artistic vision, and that this independence is not compromised by political or administrative considerations. A clearly defined governance framework that delineates responsibilities across the Board, management, and artistic leadership is essential to support this principle.

3. Reinforce the European Dimension Across the Entire Programme
The Panel observes that the European dimension, while present in some flagship initiatives, is not yet strongly and consistently embedded across the full breadth of the programme. The team is encouraged to systematically revisit the partnerships listed in the original bid book, ensuring that those collaborations are activated wherever feasible. A comprehensive mapping of current international partnerships - including partner names, countries of origin, and roles in the programme - should be developed. Moreover, the European dimension should be given more priority and to be integrated not only into large-scale events but also across smaller projects and community-level activities.

4. Define Revenue Targets and Diversify Income Sources
In light of the approximately €1.9 million gap between the current programme budget and the original bid-book projection, the Panel urges the team to set specific targets for private sponsorship and other income sources by the end of 2025. Clear communication regarding the status of current sponsorship negotiations and in-kind contributions will strengthen confidence in the programme's financial foundation. The Panel also encourages the early

confirmation of at least one major private sponsor, which can enhance visibility and catalyse further support from the private sector.

5. Clarify Budget Reallocation and Programme Adjustments
The Panel requests that the Foundation provides greater clarity regarding how it intends to manage the current budget gap and the implications for programme delivery. It remains unclear whether reductions in funding will be applied evenly across projects, or whether some projects - particularly those originally proposed in the bid book - will be deprioritised or cancelled.

6. Strengthen Team Capacity and Onboarding
With the team expected to nearly double by 2026, the Panel recommends that the Foundation implement a structured onboarding process for new staff to ensure that they are fully integrated and operational no later than mid-2026. Particular attention should be paid to building internal expertise in international cultural project management, including training in partnership coordination, production workflows, and legal and financial compliance. Lessons learned from other ECoC teams in similar contexts should be actively applied.

7. Clarify the Role and Number of External Producers
The Panel notes that a significant proportion of the Liepāja 2027 programme and projects produced by Liepāja 2027, will be delivered through external producers, yet the number, scope, and responsibilities of these producers remain undefined. The Foundation is advised to provide a clearer overview of its outsourcing model, including how many project teams are expected to be contracted, what selection procedures will be used, and how the Foundation will ensure coherence and quality control across externally produced events.

8. Expand and Measure Outreach, Especially for Underrepresented Groups
The Panel acknowledges the positive development of initiatives such as the "Neighbourliness" platform, the Youth Programme, and the ambassador scheme. However, it recommends the definition of measurable inclusion targets, especially for underrepresented groups such as ethnic minorities, migrants, seniors, and residents in rural areas. The mechanisms for collecting community feedback and assessing outreach effectiveness should be strengthened. Furthermore, the roles of community "whisperers" and programme ambassadors should be clarified, particularly in terms of whether they contribute to decision-making or serve in a purely promotional capacity.

9. Accelerate Legacy Planning
Although several initiatives with potential long-term impact are underway - such as cultural education efforts, NGO incubators, and infrastructure upgrades - the Panel notes that a consolidated legacy strategy has not yet been sufficiently articulated. The Foundation is therefore encouraged to prepare a structured legacy framework before the next monitoring meeting, outlining how the knowledge, networks, and capacities developed during the ECoC process will be sustained beyond 2027. This framework should include mechanisms for institutional learning, civic participation, and cultural policy alignment at the city and regional levels.

10. Maintain Political Continuity and Risk Preparedness

Given the forthcoming municipal elections and ongoing macroeconomic pressures, the Panel commends the team's risk-awareness and recommends the continued development of adapted contingency planning. This includes sustained engagement with political stakeholders, regular scenario planning for potential co-financing disruptions, early warning mechanisms and proactive communication strategies to reaffirm the relevance and public value of the Liepāja 2027 programme. The Foundation should remain prepared to navigate political leadership transitions and ensure that public and political support will remain strong throughout the implementation period.

Next steps

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

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

The Panel would like to thank the Mayor of Liepāja and the Liepāja 2027 team for a very informative discussion and looks forward to the next developments of their European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending Panel's members