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Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2030 in Cyprus

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The Expert Panel's report pre-selection stage

Creative Europe

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Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2030 in Cyprus

The Expert Panel's report

Pre-Selection Stage

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Contents

Introduction 5

Panel Meeting 6

Next Steps 6

Thanks 6

Assessment of the candidates 7

Agia Napa 7
Contribution to the long-term strategy 8
Cultural and artistic content 8
European dimension 9
Outreach 9
Management 10
Capacity to deliver 10
Conclusion 11

Kourion 11
Contribution to the long-term strategy 11
Cultural and artistic content 12
European dimension 13
Outreach 13
Management 14
Capacity to deliver 14
Conclusion 15

Larnaka 15
Contribution to the long-term strategy 16
Cultural and artistic content 16
European dimension 17
Outreach 18
Management 18
Capacity to deliver 19
Conclusion 20
Recommendations 20

Lemesos 21
Contribution to the long-term strategy 21
Cultural and artistic content 22
European dimension 22
Outreach 23
Management 23
Capacity to deliver 24
Conclusion 25
Recommendations 25

Nicosia 25
Contribution to the long-term strategy 26
Cultural and artistic content 26
European dimension 27
Outreach 27

Management 28
Capacity to deliver 28
Conclusion 29

General recommendations 29

General 30

Contribution to the Long-term Strategy 31

Cultural and Artistic Programme 31

European Dimension 32

Outreach 32

Management 33

Capacity to Deliver 33

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 in 2030 in Cyprus. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985. The title "European Capital of Culture" has previously been awarded to one city in Cyprus, namely Pafos in 2017.

The Deputy Ministry of Culture of Cyprus (the "Ministry") acts as the managing authority of the competition, which is governed by the Decision n°445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the "Decision") as amended by Decision (EU) 2017/1545, and by the CALL FOR SUBMISSION OF APPLICATIONS FOR THE UNION ACTION "EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE" FOR THE YEAR 2030 IN CYPRUS adopted by the Ministry and published on its website together with the corresponding call for submission of applications.

In line with Article 2 of the Rules of procedure, a panel of twelve independent experts was established for the selection process. Ten panel members were appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies (European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions). Two members of the panel were appointed by the Deputy Ministry of Culture.

The competition takes place in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection. The Ministry issued a call for applications on 27 November 2023. Five applications were submitted by the closing date of 16 December 2024: Agia Napa, Kourion, Larnaka, Lemesos and Nicosia.

Panel Meeting

The panel members met in Nicosia 25-27 February, 2025. One panel member was excused for professional reasons. The panel elected Toni Attard as its chair and Athena Aristotelous-Cleridou as its vice-chair. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality and gave it to the Ministry ahead of the pre-selection hearings. Representatives of the Ministry and of the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers took no part in the panel's deliberations or decision.

At the pre-selection hearings on 25-26 February each candidate city, in alphabetical order, presented its case (30 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (60 minutes). The panel deliberations took place on 26-27 February.

At a press meeting on 27 February, the chair of the panel announced the panel's recommendation that the Ministry invites the following cities to submit revised bids for the final selection (in alphabetical order): **Larnaka and Lemesos**.

Next Steps

The Ministry will arrange for the formal approval of the shortlist based on the recommendations included in this report (Article 8 of the Decision). It will then issue an

invitation to the cities named on the approved shortlist to submit revised applications for the final selection.

The shortlisted cities are encouraged to take into account the panel's assessments and recommendations in this report.

The deadline for the submission of revised applications is 3 November 2025. The final selection meeting is scheduled to take place in Nicosia on 10/11 December 2025.

Two to four members of the panel will pay a one-day visit to the shortlisted cities just before the final selection meeting (8/9 December 2025), in order to obtain more background information on the respective bids. Representatives of the Ministry and the European Commission will accompany the panel members as observers.

Thanks

The panel members would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in this pre-selection phase of the competition. In particular, the panel noted that all cities have used the opportunity of the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies as well as the role of culture and Europe in their overall social-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition. The panel encourages all candidate cities, including the ones that are not recommended for the short-list, to continue with the development and implementation of their respective cultural strategies.

The panel wishes to thank all five candidates and everyone who contributed to their bids, the European Commission for its advice and the Deputy Ministry of Culture for its excellent administration.

Assessment 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.

It was not clear to the panel if all candidate cities had fully completed the formal approval of their cultural strategy at city council level. One of the most important features in Decision 445/2014/EU, governing the ECoC action from the 2020 titles on, is the requirement that cities have a formal and explicit cultural strategy. This is to ensure that the ECoC is grounded on a medium-term transformation of the city and its cultural life. The panel would also like to remind the candidates proceeding to the final selection, that the strategy should cover the ECoC year and include specific plans for sustaining cultural activities beyond the ECoC year.

In the commentaries that follow, the panel notes the main elements of their findings during the pre-selection phase. In reference to successive cities, specific and common recommendations are made, in order to assist them in the preparation of their final bid books.

The panel emphasises that its assessments of the candidates were based on the bid book and on the cities' presentation sessions during the pre-selection meeting. 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 relevant for the selection process. The panel's assessment and recommendation for the shortlist are also based on the analysis of the capacity of all candidate cities to make the required steps in order to win the ECoC title in the following months until the final selection meeting.

Agia Napa

The theme of the bid, **Hybrids – A Multidimensional Artscape**, emphasises the blending of diverse cultural, natural, and technological elements to foster a vibrant cultural landscape. Agia Napa aims to redefine itself beyond its current status as a tourist destination through leveraging its historical assets, such as the Venetian-era Agia Napa Monastery and local traditions, alongside contemporary cultural expressions thus creating a more balanced and sustainable identity. The bid focuses on cultural revitalization, promoting human rights and social inclusivity, and fostering unity on an island divided by historical conflict.

The Agia Napa Municipality is deeply interconnected with the broader Famagusta region – including the occupied area of Famagusta and the Municipality of Famagusta. Agia Napa plans to actively involve its surrounding areas in the ECoC thus reflecting cultural synergy of the broader Famagusta region. This expanded reach enables the design of an inclusive program that transcends Agia Napa's boundaries, incorporating diverse cultural perspectives from surrounding communities. The regional collaboration also strengthens Agia Napa's role in uniting Famagusta. The Famagusta region, consisting of 9 communities and 2 municipalities, covers a population of 55,000 inhabitants.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- A cultural strategy was voted on six months ago, though no specific date for the vote was provided. While the strategy does not appear to have a specific duration,

the panel welcomes its intention to extend beyond the title year. The distinction between the cultural strategy and the ECoC strategy is not entirely clear.

- There is a clear connection between the city's social and economic development and the integration of culture and creative industries into this process. An integrated approach is outlined, with examples of collaboration both regionally and between various institutions, such as strategic regional partnerships and the EMU with several relevant organisations.
- A description of how the ECoC aligns with the city's cultural strategy as a transformative catalyst for achieving the city's long-term vision is provided, and supported with several project examples.
- The anticipated long-term impact is thoroughly described, with project examples provided to illustrate the expected outcomes.
- Monitoring and evaluation plans for pre-selection are well outlined, with evaluation to be conducted by an already approached company and baseline studies scheduled before 2029. The panel inquired about ensuring coherence, given the academic research on the 5Es (*Empathize, Extract, Enhance, Engage,* and *Envision)*. The team confirmed that a monitoring and evaluation methodology is being developed, adhering to EU guidelines.

Cultural and artistic content

- The artistic concept *Hybrids – A Multidimensional Artscape* manifests the vision that in 2030, Agia Napa emerges as a vibrant, multidimensional Artscape, a hybrid community where history, art, performance, technology, and sustainability intertwine to forge a lasting cultural legacy. Although the panel appreciated the clear and poetic description of the artistic vision, the vision was considered rather local in nature.
- The artistic strategy for AgiaNapa2030 centres on the 5Es: *Empathize, Extract, Enhance, Engage,* and *Envision*. The panel considered the programme strategy well structured and coherent.
- The overall programme is solid presenting 32 projects including *Opening* and *Closing*. Project descriptions with several interesting ideas list local and international partners, coordinators, locations and the year of action, and they cover several cultural fields.
- Based on the bid, extensive efforts were made to involve local artists and cultural organisations. However, the bid does not present specific examples how this has impacted the programme nor the extent of participation.
- The panel found the combination of local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions well presented including examples.

European dimension

- Agia Napa provides convincing examples such as the Festival of Ideas, Confluence: Weaving Together the Threads of Europe, Municipalities of Mellieha (Malta), Tartu (Estonia), International Shadow Puppet Festival, and Poetic Debate in Verse, demonstrating an understanding of promoting cultural diversity.

- The common aspects of European cultures, heritage, and history are clearly described, with references to local tangible and intangible heritage, and emphasise European integration and current European themes.

- The scope and quality of activities featuring European artists, cooperation with operators or cities in different countries, is clearly visible with several specific cooperation projects briefly outlined. However, transnational partnership engagement is not convincingly developed.

- The strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international public is well articulated, with clear examples such as proposed festivals and art residency programmes. However, further clarification is needed on how these events will specifically engage diverse European communities.

- Cooperation with other ECoCs has been initiated, and several concrete plans are described, which is adequate for this stage of the competition

Outreach

- According to the bid, the local population and civil society have been involved through open forums, workshops and public consultations. However, the panel would have liked to know more details about the number of participants and meetings, method of participation and the sectors and organisations which were involved.

- The panel considered the description of the involvement of marginalised groups adequate for this stage and appreciated the specific examples concerning e.g. the migrant communities.

- The plans for audience development including youth and school involvement have been sufficiently described together with concrete project ideas.

Management

- The cultural budget for 2024 is 1,5 million Euros and remains unaffected by the ECoC. The operating budget is 9,45 million Euros, with the city contributing 19%, the national level 63%, EU 10% and the private sector contributing 7.9%. While there were concerns about the low operating budget for the large number of proposed projects, suggesting that more analysis is needed to align the projects with their costs, the budget is otherwise considered realistic given the size of the city.

- Financial commitments are stated to have been secured, but it remains unclear whether a formal voting process has taken place

- The budget allocation has a reasonably fair balance, with 65.6% dedicated to the programme, a high 19.6% for marketing and communication, and a rather low 14.8% for wages, overheads and administration.

- The sponsorship strategy, along with the EU funding approach, is adequately outlined at this point in the process.

- The panel raised concerns about the efficiency of the governance structure, which places the Artistic Director and CEO on the same level, relying on the Board as the final decision-making authority. However, they were assured that this would not unduly slow down processes, as the Board could make decisions quickly if necessary.

- The contingency plan could have been more elaborately fleshed out.

- The marketing and communication strategy is considered suitable at this stage and the plans to highlight the ECoC as a European Union action are adequately described.

Capacity to deliver

- Based on the bid the strong local support has been formalized through unanimous council decisions to allocate resources and approve budgets specifically for the preparation and implementation of the bid. However, the panel was lacking information of formal support from other partners.

- Agia Napa's existing cultural infrastructure provides a strong foundation for hosting the ECoC 2030. The city has a diverse range of venues, including the Thalassa Municipal Museum. The international airport of Larnaka is located 30-40 minutes' drive from Agia Napa. Due to the large tourism industry the city has adequate infrastructure to host the title in terms of accommodation. During peak season, Agia Napa's accommodations can host over 20,000 visitors.

- A substantial infrastructure improvement plan includes projects such as the development of an Urban Multifunctional Park, which are designed to improve the city's capacity to host cultural events, enhance public spaces, and support sustainable tourism practices. However, the panel was not convinced that the indoor venues will be sufficient for covering the all-year-round activities.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that Agia Napa not be shortlisted for the title of European Capital of Culture for Cyprus 2030. While Agia Napa's bid presented several strengths, including a solid cultural and artistic vision and clear plans for regional collaboration, the cultural and artistic concept was rather local in nature. The panel appreciated the theme of cultural revitalisation, blending history with contemporary expressions, and the active involvement of surrounding areas. However, the bid lacked detail and clarity in several key areas. Despite strong local support, it did not fully convince the panel of its capacity to deliver a sustainable, long-term cultural transformation at the European level.

Kourion

The theme of the bid, **A City Yet to Be**, represents Kourion's transformation from a historic landmark into a cultural epicentre where the past, present, and future intersect. The bid aims to weave a cohesive community identity and to embrace innovative cultural expressions. Guided by three fundamental values - Cultural Connectivity, Inclusive Engagement, and Sustainable Transformation - Kourion 2030 seeks to create a cultural renaissance that is uniquely Mediterranean yet deeply aligned with European ideals of solidarity, cooperation, and inclusivity. The bid also aims to revive heritage, empower communities, celebrate innovation and build resilience.

The municipality of Kourion, covering a total of 35,000 inhabitants, was established recently, in 2024, through governance reforms which merged nine distinct communities together. Each of the communities contributes unique cultural and historical elements, richly shaped by both internal migration and immigration and a shared history uniting them. Kourion plans to incorporate the surrounding region and villages in its ECoC initiative. In addition, the Council of Mayors of the Limassol district has formally decided to work together if a city from this region wins the title.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- A cultural strategy for the newly established municipality consisting of 9 villages and lasting from 2025-2034 was adopted unanimously on 11 November 2024
- Kourion's plan to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors by fostering long-term connections between the cultural, economic, and social spheres is compelling. It includes the integration of cultural objectives into urban planning, with the Marios Tokas Museum and Community Media Hub designated to serve as long-term cultural spaces.
- The plan for capacity building, education, and cultural tourism to ensure the sustainable development of the city's cultural infrastructure and its integration into broader social and economic strategies is convincing.
- The description of how the ECoC aligns with the city's cultural strategy and works as a launchpad for achieving the city's long-term vision is provided, and supported with several project examples.
- With the creation of a cultural hub supported by new museums and cultural routes the envisaged long-term cultural, social and economic impact of the title on Kourion is promising. This is expected to effectively revitalise public spaces and significantly contribute to the city's transformation.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the title on the candidate city are well-defined, though they primarily rely on quantitative KPIs. A detailed strategy, aligned with global programmes such as the SDGs and UNESCO Culture 2030 Strategy, has been established. Monitoring and evaluation will be carried out in collaboration with external expertise.

Cultural and artistic content

- The concept of Kourion 2030 programme *A City Yet to Be* encapsulates the vision of co-creation, transformation and unity through a vibrant cultural future. The programme is divided under three interconnected artistic pathways, subthemes: *Currents of History, Spaces of Possibility* and *Embracing Imperfections*. Although the panel considered the concept of a new city exciting and well rooted in the local challenges, they found it slightly constructed and in parts not coherently connected to the overall strategy.

- In total 44 projects are described under the three artistic pathways. The project initiators and partner organisations are listed for the whole programme, not specified for each artistic pathway or project. The panel appreciated the clear structure of the programme, as well as the range and diversity of the activities including several interesting and relevant project ideas. However, overall the programme lacked coherence.

- The panel appreciated the strong involvement of local artists and cultural organisations in the preparation of the bid, e.g. through open calls and co-design workshops. In total 150 project proposals have been received through an open call and included in the presented programme. However, a clear selection criteria have not been outlined. Aso a more detailed and clear strategy for the further development of the programme was lacking.

- The capacity to combine local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions has clearly been demonstrated for example by new approaches to heritage interpretation using digital means like VR. The approach to use cultural heritage as a catalyst for innovation in this approach has been well described and drafted.

European dimension

- Kourion´s vision of culture as a dynamic force for unity, dialogue, and mutual understanding is a good point of departure for ensuring a true European dimension. The creation of a new city, made up of diverse smaller places with common European heritage and history, is a strong narrative, relevant for Europe.

- Activities highlighting the common aspects of European cultures, heritage, and history are evident in the bid. For example, the Cultural Circular Green Route relates to the heritage of Kourion to similar European cultural practices. There is also a positive aspect in the use of digital tools, as seen in the Flow of Time project. The bid successfully incorporates European themes alongside its strong focus on integration and participatory processes.

- Kourion's plans for activities featuring European artists, cooperation with operators and cities in different countries, and transnational partnerships are still at a very early stage of development and mainly concentrated in the Mediterranean region. The proposed activities and cooperation are visible, but specific information, such

as which European partners will be part of projects, collaborations, and partnerships, is missing.

- While Kourion describes how they plan to reach out to European audiences, limited details are provided. This makes the assessment of the effectiveness of the plan difficult and therefore is considered unconvincing.

- Cooperation with other ECoCs on specific project levels is in its infancy, which is a weakness. At present, only preliminary connections such as with Culture Next and some input from Leeuwarden 2018 and Eleusis 2023 have taken place.

Outreach

- According to the bid, involvement of the local population and civil society is an essential part of preparing the application and implementing the action. Community engagement is deeply rooted in the Kourion 2030 bid, guided also by the Cultural Development Strategy 2025-2034. Four specialised working groups have been established, each dedicated to a unique aspect of cultural development, in addition to community workshops supporting local initiatives. However, the panel would have liked to learn more about the number of people and organisations involved, as well as of the activities, especially considering that the ECoC process started only in April 2024.

- The panel welcomes the idea of Kourion 2030 Unity Council, including representatives from marginalised communities (people with disabilities, migrants, economically disadvantaged individuals) and aiming to ensure inclusivity through shaping cultural programmes. Also, accessibility across all venues and events has been prioritised. Plans also include e.g. multi-sensory experiences, performances including sign language interpreters and captioning, and sensory-friendly adaptations. Youth involvement has been a priority with programmes designed specifically for young generations.

- The audience development strategy is an open invitation for community engagement, centred around storytelling and the arts. Drawing from community workshops such as *Designing a City Yet to Be*, Kourion 2030 is integrating local creativity into future plans, especially through education partnerships that encourage youth participation and partnerships with local schools. The panel appreciated the vision of classrooms as gateways to cultural literacy.

Management

- The cultural budget for the new municipality in 2024 was 407,137 Euros and remains unaffected by the ECoC. The operating budget is 21.380 million Euros, with the municipality contributing 48.88%, the state 30.40%, EU 11.69% and the private sector contributing 9.03%. There are no plans to allocate funds from the annual culture budget to finance the ECoC project.

- The new Kourion Municipality Council unanimously confirmed the endorsement of the Kourion 2030 application. A pluriannual budget proposal has been proposed but not voted on at this point.

- The budget allocation has a good balance, with 66% dedicated to the programme, 15% for marketing and communication, 17% for wages and a contingency of 2%.
- The sponsorship strategy, along with the EU funding approach, is adequately outlined at this point in the process.
- The envisaged governance and delivery structure for the implementation of the action is described well but indicates some risks. Adopting a participatory governance model might not be sufficiently efficient given the nature of an ECoC, where often decisions need to be made quickly.
- The contingency plan is well presented.
- The marketing and communication strategy is based on a concentric model expanding from local to European and International Audiences and well thought through. Includes ambassador programme, diaspora engagement, and digital means. The strategy includes a solid plan to highlight that the ECoC is a EU action.

Capacity to deliver

- Kourion municipality's decision to bid for the European Capital of Culture title was publicly announced in 2023, followed by a formal decision to support the process technically and financially. In addition, the Council of Mayors of the Limassol district has formally decided to work together if a city from the region wins the title. The Kourion Municipal Council's unanimous decision to adopt the Kourion 2025-2034 Cultural Development Strategy in November 2024 reaffirmed its support for the Kourion 2030 bid.
- Kourion has a broad array of cultural venues and event spaces that lay a strong foundation for the European Capital of Culture 2030. E.g. the Kourion amphitheatre has a seating capacity of 3,500 and provides an iconic setting for large-scale performances. Kourion is well positioned for both local and international access, Larnaca International Airport being an hour away, and Paphos International Airport 30 minutes away from Kourion. The Kourion region has a limited accommodation capacity, but plans to complement traditional lodging options with a homestay programme.
- The municipality of Kourion has a network of community centres, libraries, cinemas, public squares, open amphitheatres and parks. The approach for ECoC is to maximise the use of the existing infrastructure, ensuring that all available public spaces contribute to a cohesive and vibrant cultural experience throughout the year. In addition, the Municipality Council has prioritised projects such as the establishment of a music-dedicated Museum, a Makerspace, a Community Media Hub, and a Social History Center, alongside sustainable mobility and educational infrastructure improvements.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that Kourion not be shortlisted for the title of European Capital of Culture 2030. Kourion's bid presents an ambitious vision for cultural transformation, and the panel considered the concept to construct a new city built on diverse, smaller locations

exciting and well-rooted in local challenges. While European collaboration is explained and some potential partners are mentioned, the bid falls short in providing clear and concrete plans for European partnerships and outreach to a broader international audience. The panel commends the strong focus on local engagement, capacity building, education, youth, and cultural tourism, demonstrating a clear commitment to long-term sustainable development. However, the bid does not fully convince the panel that Kourion has yet, the capacity to fully deliver the scale required for a European Capital of Culture.

Larnaka

The theme of the bid, **Common Ground**, reflects a focus on cultural democracy, participation, and redefining community inclusively. It's based on the urgency to work on what togetherness as everyday praxis involves, and to actively and practically redefine the Common Ground.

The main objective of Larnaka's bid for the ECoC 2030 is to redefine the city's identity and restore its self-esteem by leveraging art and culture as motors for radical change and development. Larnaka aims to transform from a "service centre" into a vibrant cultural hub, fostering a sense of community, inclusion, and cultural democracy. The bid seeks to address contemporary challenges, promote mutual understanding, and position Larnaka on the international map as a sustainable, inclusive, and non-discriminatory city.

Larnaka's candidacy for ECoC includes the entire Larnaka Region with a population of 145,000 inhabitants, of which 70,000 live in the city of Larnaka, making it the third largest city in Cyprus. The Larnaka Region comprises five municipalities and 5 commune unions that accounts for 31 communes.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- A cultural strategy has been in place in Larnaka since 2010, extending to 2040. However, a new strategy has been drafted based on substantial community input. It is unclear to the panel exactly when this new strategy was voted on.

- The long-term strategy aims to empower local artists and connect cultural activities with tourism, design, and sustainability. Central to this approach is the creation of new venues, such as the Arts Centre and Design Centre, which will serve as hubs for innovation and collaboration. While this is convincing, it is less clear how Larnaka's plans will strengthen its cultural and creative sectors through long-term links with the social and economic sectors.

- The Larnaka bid effectively integrates the ECoC action into the city's long-term cultural strategy, with the project acting as a catalyst for transformation. The new governance model and the alignment of the strategy's six main lines with the ECoC programme demonstrate a clear connection.

- The long-term impact of the ECoC title on Larnaka aims to foster creativity, sustainability, and inclusivity while uniting communities and boosting the creative industries. Urban development will focus on a multi-use arts complex and the

Design Centre, positioning Larnaka as a cultural and economic hub. While the emphasis on cultural infrastructure is clear, it poses a potential risk for timely delivery by the ECoC year. Additionally, the impact and changes envisioned in arts and culture beyond infrastructure are less convincingly presented.

- Monitoring and evaluation plans are well outlined for this stage of the competition. The model is data-driven, aligning with the Culture Next Framework and UN SDGs. Using Polyloop for real-time data, it involves local communities, artists, and experts. The evaluation focuses on six core areas, measuring impact on economic growth, infrastructure, governance, cultural image, vibrancy, and social inclusion.

Cultural and artistic content

- The programme concept of Larnaka is *Common Ground*, which is guided by three core values – *Care, Democracy* and *Interdependence* – and evolves through three Central Themes: *We, Larnaka, Europe that corresponds to the People*, and *The Place and the Politics*. The panel found the core concept and vision very strong and relevant, strengthening Larnaka's and Europe's common challenge - togetherness.

- The programme is also structured around two axes: The first axes goes around the main theme *We* and includes programme lines (branches) *We Female, We Less Heard Voices, We Refugees, We the Future*. Each branch presents four project entities. The other axes go around the narrative structure of the year. In addition there is a separate capacity-building programme. Although the panel considered the idea of presenting the programme visually as a palm tree poetic, it found the programme structure and strategy as a whole over-constructed and too complicated.

- The programme is presented through 16 project entities which list exemplary projects - existing and new. Each also presents co-creators' network and indicative partners, including a number of European ones. The panel found many of the presented ideas very interesting and promising, and the range and diversity of the programme convincing, but lacked clarification on how these entities will continue developing their ideas and concepts into actual ECoC projects.

- Larnaka 2030 is based on a participatory design and co-creation process, which also generated the ideas presented in the programme. The panel appreciated the strong involvement of the local cultural and other sectors in the ECoC planning, but also noted that the finalisation of the programme will require a rigorous selection process.

- According to the bid, revisiting the past and Larnaka's heritage through a contemporary perspective and expressions is an integral part in cultivating Common Ground. This is demonstrated by several examples such as archaeological sites becoming venues for contemporary performances, and cutting edge technology used in the Water programme to reconnect with an important part of the heritage, the sea.

European dimension

- Larnaca's plans to promote cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are well addressed. They focus on coexistence and tackling issues like racism and Islamophobia. "Europe Daughter of Phoenix" and "Colonial Europe" foster understanding between Europe and the Middle East, while the New Civic Calendar and the Refugee Cities Network connect local artists with Europe and the Middle East.

- While European cultures, heritage, and integration are highlighted in "Europe Daughter of Phoenix" and "Colonial Europe," and linking Europe's origins with the Middle East, and themes like sustainability, inclusion, and war are addressed in "Land, Water, Our Neighbourhoods" and "We Refugees," the panel would have liked to see more detail on the scope and quality of activities that highlight the common aspects of European cultures, heritage, history, and current European themes.

- The scope and quality of activities featuring European artists and cooperation with operators or cities in different countries is well described, with examples such as the Artists in Residency programme, CARE Festival, and Larnaka BioDesign Festival. Transnational partnership engagement is convincingly developed, including European networks like Culture Next, IETM, the European Festivals Association, as well as institutions from both Europe and the Middle East.

- Larnaka focuses on diverse European issues and community involvement, alongside strong partnerships with local businesses and other ECoCs. However, the strategy to attract a broad European and international audience lacks specific detail.

- Larnaka has convincing links with other ECoCs through active participation in networks like Culture Next. Examples of specific collaboration projects with candidate cities are Leuven 2030 on democracy and cultural democracy, Molenbeek 2030 on Europe's relationship with the Arab world and Namur 2030 on women's and disabled people's empowerment. Cooperation with Niksic 2030 is on cultural democracy and the BioDesign Festival.

Outreach

- According to the bid more than 1,300 people have been actively involved in the process of drafting Larnaka's proposal for the ECoC 2030. This includes local artists, cultural operators, and different communities of the city and the region. The panel was very impressed by the strong and well-planned involvement of the local population and civil society in the ECoC preparations, moving from Co-Creators Meetings to several workgroups.

- Many workgroups have been established for ensuring the participation of marginalised and disadvantaged citizens, such as the Bi-communal workgroup of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots and the Equality and Inclusion workgroup with its subgroups. Also one of the four programme themes, *We*, is all about the traditionally marginalised and disadvantaged groups. The panel was especially

positive about the activities for, with and by children and youth, as well the special workgroup aimed at Digital Nomads.

- The participation of the schools is developed under the Children and Youth workgroup and its various partners. Regarding the audience development strategy, Larnaka 2030 does not approach anybody as an audience. On the contrary, it addresses everybody, regardless of age, gender, religion, ethnicity or other categorizations, as a creator or a farmer of the new Common Ground. Although the panel finds this philosophy intriguing, they would have liked to receive more practical examples on how this comes to reality.

Management

- The cultural budget for 2024 is 996,000 Euros. The city plans to use a small amount of its cultural budget to finance the ECoC budget. The operating budget is 30 million Euros, with the city contributing 25%, the state 50%, the region 5%, EU 7% and the private sector contributing 13%. While the budget is considered realistic for delivering the ambitious programme of Larnaka 2030 the panel raises concerns about the 13% envisioned private sponsorship.

- The capital investment budget of 217.9 million Euros is very high and the panel is uncertain about the city's ability to secure the completion of the infrastructure necessary for the delivery of an ECoC in 2030.

- Financial commitments have been made for the candidacy phase but no financial commitments have been made for the budget in the bid due to structural changes in Cyprus. It is expected that the proposed budget will be voted on in 2025.

- The budget is allocated for 60% to the programme, 18% to marketing and communication, and 22% to wages, overheads and administration. The allocation for wages is considered very high. There is no budget allocation for contingency.

- The sponsorship strategy, along with the EU funding approach, is adequately outlined at this point in the process.

- The panel raised concerns about the efficiency of the governance structure, which places the Artistic Director and CEO on the same level, relying on the Board as the final decision-making authority. However, they were assured that this would not unduly slow down processes, as the Board could make decisions quickly if necessary

- The contingency plan is well worked out.

- The marketing and communication strategy is considered suitable at this stage and the plans to highlight that the ECoC is a European Union action are adequately described.

Capacity to deliver

- The Municipality of Larnaka made a unanimous decision in April 2022 to bid for the title of ECoC 2030. In October 2022 the city established an independent

company responsible for managing the ECoC bid under the name Larnaka 2030. All the Municipalities of the Larnaka Region participate in the candidacy and the respective Municipal Councils have validated this decision. These municipalities are financing 25% of the Larnaka 2030 budget. Due to the restructuring of municipalities all over Cyprus in July 2024, the municipal authorities were, however, unable to make long term decisions and commitments. Therefore, it is agreed and foreseen that both the City of Larnaka and the municipalities of the region will make an official decision and commitment in 2025 in case Larnaka 2030 makes it to the final selection for ECoC 2030.

- Larnaka has adequate and viable cultural infrastructure, and plans to use the city's urban and natural infrastructure widely. Larnaka is home to the largest airport in the country, only 5 kilometres from the city centre. It also has a commercial and passenger port within the boundaries of the commercial centre and the first Marina of Cyprus in the heart of the city. The absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is solid, as the city has a strong tourism infrastructure - there are 5,817 licensed accommodation beds and in addition 3,706 beds in Airbnb lodgings.

- There is a wide range of ongoing and planned infrastructure projects linked to the ECoC year, both new constructions as well as restorations and redevelopments of existing ones. The largest investment is the New Cultural Complex (Arts Centre, Design Centre, Museum of People). Many developments are planned to finish just before or during the year of the title. The panel therefore missed a plan B in case the schedule would be delayed.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that Larnaka be shortlisted for the title of European Capital of Culture 2030. The bid presents an ambitious and inclusive vision, with a strong focus on cultural democracy, participation, and redefining community inclusively through its 'Common Ground' theme. Larnaka aims to transform from a "service centre" to a vibrant cultural hub, addressing contemporary European issues like sustainability, inclusion, and cultural democracy, while fostering mutual understanding and engaging with global themes. The artistic concept and cultural programme are compelling, integrating local culture with broader European and global narratives. Larnaka's efforts to establish strong connections with European and international networks, partners, and other ECoCs are particularly commendable. While certain areas need further attention, as noted in the recommendations, the overall vision for cultural transformation is convincing. The panel is confident that Larnaka has the capacity to deliver a sustainable, long-term cultural transformation at the European level.

Recommendations

- The panel recommends that, while significant emphasis is placed on cultural infrastructure, the impact and changes anticipated in arts and culture beyond infrastructure should be more clearly articulated in the selection bid. The heavy reliance on cultural infrastructure for delivery presents a substantial risk, which must be addressed in the bid.

- It is recommended that long-term links with the economic and social sectors be further developed for the next round of the competition. In addition, the panel requires a clearer understanding of how the city's identities are integrated into the cultural and artistic programme.

- Given the complexity of the programme structure, the panel advises that it be simplified to enhance communication. The programme could be strengthened by reducing the number of initiatives and ensuring they align more coherently with the four programme lines.

- The panel suggests that a clear process and criteria be established for selecting the final projects for the programme. While the participatory design and co-creation process effectively bring people and ideas together, a robust decision-making mechanism is necessary.

- The panel recommends incorporating a digital dimension into the programme, both in production and communication. Additionally, the strategy for attracting a broader international audience should be further developed.

- The budget presented in the selection bidbook must be formally approved before the selection hearing in December 2025. The panel also advises ensuring a balanced allocation of the budget, with a reasonable percentage reserved for contingency.

Lemesos

The theme of the bid **The Understory** focuses on bringing forward the stories and cultural expressions that thrive in the shadows of the city's rapid urban development and high-rise buildings. It aims to empower, protect, and nurture these hidden narratives into sustainable development. The bid aims to leverage cultural diversity and the city's geographical position as a bridge between Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, enriching its European identity through these connections.

Lemesos wants the ECoC title to help navigate through its urban and social transformations and to address its challenges such as fast-paced development, social inequities, and cultural integration. Overall, Lemesos sees the ECoC title as an irreplaceable tool to achieve cultural advancement, city maturity, and active citizen involvement with Europe on their side.

Lemesos has a population of 130,000 inhabitants making it the second largest city in Cyprus. Lemesos' bid focuses, at least for now, on the Municipality of Lemesos, as another ECoC candidate (Kourion) exists within the same district.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- Lemesos´s Cultural Strategy 2024-2034 was adopted on 28/11/2024.

- The long-term strategy focuses on strengthening the cultural sector by fostering links between culture, the economy, and society. Goals include capacity-building for artists, rethinking public funding, and tackling inequalities. The Lemesos ECoC plans aim to catalyse a more interconnected cultural ecosystem, linking culture with tourism, urban development, and economic growth.

- The bid aligns with the cultural strategy, with both initiatives supporting each other's objectives. An example is the transformation of the Cultural Office into a more inclusive entity, bridging municipal and community efforts. The Cultural Strategy prioritises diversity and funding expansion, with the ECoC acting as a catalyst for these goals. The table clearly outlines how the ECoC targets meet the priorities across the strategy's pillars.

- The long-term impact of Lemesos ECoC is clearly outlined, with a focus on driving growth through accessible public spaces, increased cultural participation, and a rejuvenated city centre. It aims to foster inclusivity, strengthen local and international networks, and support income-generating cultural projects. Urban development will prioritise sustainability, equity, and environmental goals, contributing to the creation of a vibrant cultural ecosystem.

- The monitoring and evaluation strategy tracks the ECoC's impact using creative tools like Vibesensor, Tracking the Sound of Lemesos, and Measuring Stories, in collaboration with NGOs and academic institutions. Annual polls will monitor sector trends, and audience data will be collected. Results will be shared online and inform future strategies. The panel praised the innovative monitoring methods.

Cultural and artistic content

- The programme concept *Understory* highlights hidden and marginalised stories. The concept is connected to urban transformation considering challenges and developments like gentrification. The panel found the artistic concept and vision strong and well based on the city's challenges and identity.

- The programme is divided into four programme lines: *City in therapy, Out there together, Curious fancy failures* and *Imagine a city*. Inclusiveness, interdisciplinarity and sustainability are the core principles of the programme. The programme structure and strategy were considered clear and well presented, albeit in some cases the connections between these could have been stronger.

- In total 23 projects are presented under the programme including the *Opening* and several flagship projects with examples of some local, international or potential partners. There is a strong focus on citizens with attention to capacity building. The panel appreciated the range and diversity of activities and artistic quality of the projects.

- The involvement of the local cultural sector has been very strong. The programme consists of projects and ideas, methodologies and values which were co-created with hundreds of people through an extensive outreach and consultation process. The process involved launching a Targeted Call in Spring 2024, inviting local organisations with experience in multi-level interdisciplinary projects and EU

collaborations to submit their ideas. These proposals were then processed and strengthened in collaboration with the organisations, forming the core of the programme.

- The panel found the idea for combining local heritage and traditional art forms with new innovative and experimental cultural expressions novel and interesting. The bid proposes the use of cultural heritage as a dynamic resource (New Heritage Approach: Heritage as a system) and to combine it with local art forms like folklore and dance. Heritage sites and public places will be used for artistic interventions.

European dimension

- The Lemesos bid promotes cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue through initiatives like Living Peace and 1000 Voices, fostering inclusivity and cross-cultural understanding. These projects effectively address mutual respect and dialogue among European citizens.

- The bid describes the connection between the local and European themes through projects like Outside the Map and CoDE, addressing shared histories and contemporary challenges. These initiatives convincingly highlight common European cultures, heritage, and current issues.

- Lemesos has convincing transnational partnerships with European and non-European cultural operators. Partners include Art Explora (FR/UK), Maqamat (LB), and the Schwules Museum (DE). The city participates in several international networks. Further, the city plans to strengthen ties with its twinned cities, including Alexandria (EG), Thessaloniki (GR), and Marseille (FR), as well as engage with Middle Eastern and North African partners to foster cultural exchange and dialogue. Artistic collaboration is less evident.

- The plan to attract European audiences by targeting visitors already in Cyprus is realistic. The focus is on encouraging them to extend their stay through projects like "Outside the Map" and "Lemesos Design Days," fostering cross-European connections. This links to the marketing strategy, positioning Lemesos as a cultural destination. Large-scale events and local collaborations create a dynamic programme, enhanced by digital initiatives like "The Performance Shop" for ongoing engagement.

- Lemesos has built close links with various ECoCs on themes like migration, peacebuilding, and sustainability. Partnerships with Liepāja 2027 and Lublin 2029 focus on youth empowerment and environmental engagement through projects like Water Stories and Outside the Map. Cooperation with Leuven 2030, Namur 2030, and Molenbeek 2030 centres on inclusivity, decolonisation, accessibility, design, and co-creation, while Lviv 2030 and Nikšić 2030 focus on war, peace, and cultural identity.

Outreach

- According to the bid nearly 1300 persons have been reached out through 117 sessions with various groups since spring 2023 as part of the Lemesos 2030 preparations. The outreach actions began with a call *Imagine a City*, a call that

eventually inspired and became one of the programme lines. The panel was very impressed by the extensive involvement of the local population and civil society in the ECoC preparations, including meetings and consultations, open and mobile offices, cultural mapping and trajectories workgroup.

- Several marginalised and disadvantaged groups, such as disabled and underprivileged immigrants or ethnic minorities, have been identified and addressed in either existing cultural programmes or planned ECoC projects such as *Citizen of all Citizens*. More minority groups and marginalised communities like the elderly, unaccompanied migrant children and homeless people are planned to be on focus later as the process goes forward. There are also many examples of youth focused activities. Although accessibility is addressed in the bid, the panel would have liked to learn more about the concrete measures on ensuring sustainable accessibility in different forms.

- The audience development plans address various audience groups with examples of projects and other methods. The proposal is to integrate culture more into daily life and decentralised cultural programmes. Also, schools have actively been involved in the bidding process.

Management

- The cultural budget for 2023 is 1.810 million Euros. The annual cultural budget will not be used to finance the Lemasos ECoC. The operating budget is 26 million Euros, with the city contributing 27%, the state 57%, EU 6% and the private sector contributing 10%. The budget is considered realistic for delivering the ambitious programme of Lemesos 2030.

- The capital investments budget at 60,500 million Euros seems realistic. All planned infrastructure has been voted on.

- Financial commitments of 7 million Euros from the city of Lemesos have been made on 28.11.2024. Final commitments from the State are still pending but the state´s contribution will not exceed 60% of the overall operating budget.

- The budget allocation has 73% of the budget dedicated to the programme, 12% for marketing and communication, and 15% for wages, overheads and administration. There is no budget allocation for contingency.

- The sponsorship strategy, along with the EU funding approach, is adequately outlined at this point in the process.

- The panel raised concerns about the efficiency of the governance structure, which places the Artistic Director and CEO on the same level, relying on the Board as the final decision-making authority. However, they were assured that this would not unduly slow down processes, as the board could make decisions quickly if necessary.

- The contingency plan is excellently worked out.

- The marketing and communication strategy is considered suitable at this stage and the plans to highlight that ECoC is a European Union action are adequately described.

Capacity to deliver

- In November 2022 the Municipal Council made a decision about the establishment of the independent organisation 'Lemesos 2030 European Capital of Culture Candidate City' to take on the implementation of a bidding process for the ECoC title. Two years later the Municipal Council also voted and committed to fund the ECoC with 7 million Euros between 2026 and 2031 and a target of 3 million Euros for culture in the city's budget for 2031 to ensure legacy.

- Lemesos has adequate cultural infrastructure, which it aims to develop in terms of accessibility and new flexible and adaptable forms of usage, also in collaboration with different cultural stakeholders. The city is located in-between the two international airports of Cyprus, Larnaca and Paphos, and thus reachable within an hour from both by car and bus. Although Lemesos is not the number one tourist destination of Cyprus, its absorption capacity is high - there are 3,500 rooms in Lemesos which offer around 10,000 beds.

- There are many infrastructure projects planned, both cultural and other. The Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP) of Lemesos includes a series of measures aimed at improving mobility, such as creation of exclusive bus lanes and improvement of the pedestrian network, planned to be implemented in the next four years. Besides renovation and extension of some existing cultural venues, new ones are planned to be built as part of the ECoC process. Two of the most costly projects on cultural infrastructure are the Epaminoda parcel and the renovation and extension of the Municipal Art Gallery.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that Lemesos be shortlisted for the title of European Capital of Culture 2030. The bid presents a strong vision, focusing on inclusivity, sustainability, and intercultural dialogue. It aligns well with the city's long-term cultural strategy and addresses urban challenges through programmes like "The Understory." A clear commitment to involving local communities, with an extensive outreach strategy and a focus on inclusivity and accessibility, represents a strong aspect of the bid. European and international partnerships are well developed, and common European themes are well integrated into the programmes, strengthening the bid's European dimension. While some improvements are recommended under the criteria assessments, the overall vision and collaborative approach make Lemesos a strong contender for the title. The panel is convinced that Lemesos has the capacity to deliver a sustainable, long-term cultural transformation at the European level and become a significant cultural hub within Europe.

Recommendations

- The panel recommends that project descriptions be clear and concrete, with an indication of the project's status and the involvement of both local and international partners.

- It is recommended by the panel to further develop plans that integrate local heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative, and experimental cultural expressions, including concrete examples.

- A clearer presentation of the planned European artistic collaborations is advised by the panel, ensuring alignment with the requirements outlined in the selection questionnaire.

- To ensure accessibility, the panel suggests specifying the actions that will be undertaken, particularly focusing on the commitment to using innovative approaches to promote and practise inclusivity.

- The panel advises revising the budget to allocate a reasonable percentage for contingency.

Nicosia

The theme of the bid **A culture compass for Europe** emphasises broad European connectivity through various cultural exchanges and collaborations. The focus is on healing the wounds of others and acting as a culture compass, which is both a local and a European topic. Nicosia wants to be the European Capital of Culture to strengthen its role as a regional culture hub, bridging Europe and its southeastern neighbours, and to deepen cultural integration and dialogue.

Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, has 250,000 inhabitants making it the largest city in Cyprus. It wants to use the ECoC for connecting with the surrounding areas, in Cyprus as well as further.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The Nicosia cultural strategy serves as a compass for Nicosia 2030. It focuses on supporting young artists, talent development, and cross-border collaborations, such as the Molenbeek partnership for electronic music incubators. The strategy integrates culture with tourism, public engagement, and education, while promoting traditional culture through festivals. Furthermore, the strategy emphasises inclusivity, diversity, and sustainability, blending cultural heritage with modern production. However, its duration and approval status remain unclear.

- The strategy focuses on supporting young artists, fostering cross-border collaborations, and integrating culture with tourism and education, while also promoting traditional culture through festivals. However, it would benefit from stronger connections with businesses and more defined plans for infrastructure development.

- The bidbook presents the cultural strategy as a guiding framework for Nicosia2030. However, with limited details provided, it is unclear how the Nicosia2030 project aligns and integrates with the overall cultural strategy.

- Nicosia aims to become a regional cultural hub, increase tourism, and foster international cultural exchange. While the vision is ambitious, the bid lacks specific details on how these objectives will be achieved and implemented.

- A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework is planned, aligning with UNESCO and EU guidelines, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, KPIs, and independent monitoring. However, the monitoring and evaluation plan appears inconsistent with the strategy and overall approach to the programme.

Cultural and artistic content

- The artistic concept of Nicosia 2030 is a combination of three concepts: *'échoumen ksénous' (we have guests)*, describing the intention to introduce Europe and the world to Cypriots and share Europe and the world with Cypriots; *Urban + Rural* and *Garden of the future*, referring to the grassroot approach to outreach actions for schools. The panel found the artistic concept and structure underdeveloped for the pre-selection phase.

- Under each of the three sub-concepts or programme pillars, a range of productions and objectives are described, based on a set of cultural genres, such as theatre, dance, literature and music. The strategy has been to identify existing successful festivals and other recurring events, and those with 'successful recipes' have been programmed for Nicosia 2030 to further expand. In the lack of descriptions of specific ECoC projects, the panel found it difficult to evaluate the artistic quality of the programme.

- The question about the involvement of local artists and cultural organisations in the conception and implementation of the cultural programme was not answered in the bid as a separate question, but elsewhere in the bid it was mentioned, that group consultations have been organised to address challenges and opportunities both for sector specific culture professionals and Nicosia Municipality culture institutions.

- The question how the cultural programme will combine local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions also remained unanswered, making it impossible for the panel to assess this properly.

European dimension

- The activities intended to promote the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue, and greater mutual understanding between European citizens are not clearly described.

- Activities highlighting the common aspects of European cultures, heritage, and history, as well as European integration and current European themes, have not been clearly listed for the panel to properly assess.

- The scope and quality of activities featuring European artists, cooperation with operators or cities in different countries, and transnational partnerships are

described in very broad terms, with only some specific cooperation partners named.

- A strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international public is not presented, although aspects of this are addressed in the marketing section of the bid.

- Plans to develop links between the Nicosia2030 cultural programme and the cultural programmes of other cities holding the European Capital of Culture title are missing.

Outreach

- According to the bid, the local population and civil society have been involved in the preparation of the application through consultations, stakeholder meetings, focus groups, workshops, and questionnaires with local stakeholders, and through working with collectives of active citizens. The bid aspires to create opportunities for the whole local population and civil society to participate.

- One of the networks mentioned as a channel for leveraging active community is the Nicosia Scouts Council, which has also been a key partner engaging young people. The panel was positive about the many ideas and methods used to engage children and youth. However, the plans concerning other special groups, e.g. the disadvantaged and marginalised people were underdeveloped.

- The panel appreciated the active engagement of schools, both in the consultations and as the first outreach project. However, the audience development strategy was missing from the bid.

Management

- The cultural budget for 2024 is 2.08 million Euros and remains unaffected by the ECoC project. The operating budget is 8.264 million Euros, with the city contributing 27% and the state 73%. Given the size of the city, the budget is considered very low, raising doubts about whether Nicosia will have the capacity to deliver a European Capital of Culture with a strong European dimension on such a limited budget.

- The municipality of Nicosia has agreed to the budget for 2025-2027, but not beyond. It remains unclear whether a formal voting process has taken place to secure the budget.

- The budget allocation is reasonably well balanced, with 67% dedicated to the programme, 12% for marketing and communication, and 16% for wages. A contingency of 5% has been set aside.

- The outlined approach for attracting private sponsorships, along with an EU funding strategy, appears realistic and suitable for this stage of the competition, leveraging strong artistic programming and established relationships.

- The sponsorship strategy, along with the EU funding approach, is adequately outlined at this stage of the process.
- The contingency plan identifies strengths and weaknesses and offers clear mitigation measures.
- The marketing and communication strategy includes a comprehensive plan with a focus on digital projects and educational activities. However, the European dimension and European visibility could be more strongly represented in the plan. Overall, the marketing and communication strategy is considered adequate and suitable at this stage.
- The plans to highlight the ECoC as a European Union initiative are well described.

Capacity to deliver

- All political parties elected to the Nicosia Municipality Council together with the Mayor of Nicosia unanimously agreed back in 2013 to start working in 2030. That political support was confirmed in 2023 when it was decided for Nicosia for Art to be the organiser for Nicosia 2030. This political support for Nicosia District's candidacy also comes from the other four Municipalities of the District and 66 out of the 88 Communities. However, information about the form or date of these decisions has not been specified.
- The City of Nicosia is home to several cultural institutions, including museums, theatres, art galleries, cultural centers, and libraries. While these infrastructures vary in standard and capacity, Nicosia 2030 aims to enhance and activate them through the cultural programme. The closest international airport is located in Larnaca, which is 45 minutes' drive from Nicosia. The absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is not very high, consisting of 805 rooms and 1,600 beds.
- The Municipality of Nicosia has made large infrastructural investments in recent years, but still has plans for several new and renovation projects of cultural and urban infrastructure. Plans include a 'cultural circuit' that connects venues such as the Famagusta Gate, NiMAC (Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre), and a new modular contemporary art museum. There is also a plan to develop the cultural venues in the rural area.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that Nicosia not be shortlisted for the title of European Capital of Culture 2030. While the bid presents an ambitious vision to transform Nicosia into a regional cultural hub, it lacks sufficient detail and clarity in key areas. The artistic content lacks structure, with no clear integration of local heritage with innovative expressions. From the way the bid was presented a strong integration and foundation with the relevant stakeholders was not clearly visible. The European dimension is unclear with very few concrete cooperation agreements in place. The budget is considered very low for the proposed scope, raising concerns about Nicosia's ability to deliver a European-scale transformation. While the sponsorship and EU funding strategies are realistic, the bid

lacks a clear plan to attract a broad European and international public. Overall, the bid does not convincingly demonstrate Nicosia's capacity to deliver a successful ECoC.

General recommendations

The following recommendations apply to both shortlisted candidates.

There is a considerable step-change between the pre-selection and final selection bid books. Therefore, it is strongly advised that both shortlisted cities substantially develop their bids for the final selection to meet the required quality level of a European Capital of Culture.

The panel expects significant progress in the final bid books to fully meet the **objectives and six criteria of the European Capital of Culture Action** as outlined in the Decision, reflecting the panel's recommendations. Reviewing the panel's comments for all candidate cities in the assessments above may also prove useful.

Studying the evaluations of recent European Capitals of Culture (since 2013) and the monitoring reports of recently designated ECoCs will provide valuable insight. These are available on the European Commission website.

The panel also urges the Deputy Ministry of Culture to promptly indicate the State financing share for the ECoC 2030 as this information is crucial for the candidates to make accurate plans moving forward.

General

In the panel's view, given the global challenges of recent years, a new approach is needed to align culture and major year-long events with this changing world, particularly new procedures and expectations. This applies to all levels of operation, from artistic expression to administrative work. A more comprehensive contingency plan with suitable alternatives should be an integral part of long-term planning for the ECoC. This presents a significant challenge, but also an opportunity to rethink and establish sustainable cultural models.

The final bid book essentially becomes, **de facto, a contract for the designated city**, outlining the artistic vision, objectives, projects, directions, financing, and management of the programme. Close adherence to the bid book is a key factor when the panel makes a recommendation to the Commission regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri prize after the monitoring phase.

In the final selection bid book, candidates must address all questions in the final selection questionnaire, included in Annex 1 of the call for applications. For the next and final stage of the competition, the panel expects a considerably more developed section on the proposed artistic vision, cultural and artistic programme, and the European dimension.

The panel has a responsibility to protect the long-term brand of the European Capital of Culture programme. With the level of international attention now given to ECoCs, policy decisions across a broad range (not just cultural) may affect the city's reputation and, by extension, the ECoC image. The panel expects candidates to be aware of this and take proactive steps to minimise negative international and national perceptions through policy changes, rather than relying on marketing or public relations efforts.

The panel would like to remind candidates of the correct formulation of the European Capital of Culture title, which must not be referred to as "Capital of Culture" or any similar terms. It is important that the title is correctly used when communicating about the initiative to avoid confusion.

Candidates progressing to the second stage should ensure their bid books include the following, in line with the final selection questionnaire:

- Clear commitments from all candidacy partners, demonstrated through projects and budget allocations.
- Clear project outlines, with named and committed local, national, EU, and international partners.
- A strong European dimension throughout the bid.
- Clearly developed outreach models.
- A clear organisational structure, including decision-making processes.
- A clear budget breakdown, with distinctions between operational and capital expenditure.

Contribution to the Long-term Strategy

A formally approved city cultural strategy must be in place before submitting the final bid book. The panel expects the final bid books to focus more tightly on the priorities of the cultural strategy that relate to the ECoC project, its target outcomes, and how resources will evolve over the coming years. The cultural strategy should address the action plan and include plans for sustaining cultural activities beyond the title year. The expected legacy of the ECoC should also be clearly described.

An ECoC represents a transformational opportunity for a city. The pre-selection bid books generally outline why a city is seeking the title. These objectives should be clearly stated, as there is a tendency to perceive the ECoC as a panacea for every urban challenge. A critical area requiring further elaboration is the expected visible change in the urban landscape. The panel expects a more focused explanation of how the programme vision, themes, and activities will link to outcomes, and how monitoring and evaluation will contribute to long-term legacy. There is substantial literature and research available for cities to explore the cultural, urban development, and social benefits of an ECoC.

The evaluation section of the bid book should receive more attention in the final phase, particularly in relation to research for baseline data. The panel expects to see ECoC-

specific success indicators. However, the monitoring and evaluation section should focus on priority objectives rather than merely compiling statistics and data. One priority should clearly address how the ECoC will meet the European dimension criterion.

Capacity building should be comprehensive, considering the needs of all cultural players as well as the hospitality industry. The cultural and creative sectors (CCS) should be integrated into the cultural and artistic programme, and linked to a mapping and needs analysis of the sector.

Cultural and Artistic Programme

The final selection will focus on the operating programme from 2025 (when the ECoC will be formally designated) and especially the ECoC year in 2030. The panel recommends an open-minded and daring artistic approach, embracing new and experimental ideas. The vision presented in the bids could benefit from deeper consideration to clarify unique elements that specifically tie the concept to the city, rather than presenting a generic concept applicable to any European city. Consistency between the selected vision and all other elements of the bid must be ensured. Innovation and originality should be pursued not just in theory, but in practice. The panel expects more details on the programme, its projects, and partners, differentiating between those who have committed to firm participation and those who are still potential partners. ECoC programmes typically cover a wide range of art forms, including creative interventions in social issues. The budget should be outlined for each major project to give the panel an understanding of the balance between projects in the programme.

The panel recommends a more focused approach to digital cultural content as an integral part of the programme, rather than just relying on social media promotions. Additionally, more attention should be given to the sustainability of the projects—culturally, ecologically, socially, and economically—to ensure the legacy of the ECoC is substantial.

European Dimension

The panel urges both cities to revisit this criterion carefully. While some cities made promising initial approaches, the proposals failed to fully engage with the challenges. Merely marketing a city in Europe is not a strong interpretation of the European dimension. An ECoC provides a city with the opportunity to promote itself internationally, but this is only half the story.

Developing European cooperation requires strategic partnerships with artists, cultural organisations, and institutions across Europe. These relationships should extend beyond former and future ECoCs, existing European cultural networks, or twin cities.

The European dimension has a two-way direction. It’s about presenting the city’s contribution to European cultural diversity, but equally important is broadening the understanding of the city’s citizens about the diversity of European cultures and linking through cultural and other projects with citizens in other countries. The panel expects to see how the European dimension is concretely reflected in the cultural and artistic programme, with a focus on learning from other cultures. This is what primarily differentiates an ECoC from a national city of culture.

The panel expects to see a significantly increased focus on European partnerships, including co-productions, co-curations, conferences, networking, and visiting artists. Recent ECoCs have included European and international partners in more than half of their projects. Cities should encourage their cultural operators to engage actively in European cultural networks.

One key element of the European dimension is the ability to attract visitors from across Europe and beyond. The programme should be attractive and distinct from the typical tourist offers of the city or region. The panel advises candidates to carefully consider a strategic communication plan that aligns with the cultural and artistic programme and an international marketing vision.

Outreach

The audience development strategy should be much further developed in the final bid books, including both online and offline measures and channels for all identified target groups. The final bid books should approach audience development from a long-term, strategic perspective. Special attention should be paid to reaching harder-to-reach audiences, such as minorities, the elderly, people with disabilities, the LGBT+ community, and others outside city centres or temporarily in the city.

The panel expects candidates to show how the audience development strategies of the main cultural organisations—independent operators and NGOs—relate to the ECoC programme.

Management

New times of uncertainty demand new approaches to management. Special attention should be given to risk assessment in the final bid book, including a thorough analysis of the potential impacts of global challenges during the preparation and implementation phases.

Regarding management models, the panel recommends learning from other ECoCs' experiences while avoiding the direct adoption of pre-existing models. The delivery team will play a critical role, and the cities should clearly outline the best model for ensuring the quality and independence of the artistic management of the project. Recruitment processes and staffing arrangements from 2025 to 2030 should be well-defined, including plans for secondments, interns, and volunteers.

Marketing for an ECoC should go beyond standard information dissemination to include a compelling narrative of European importance. It is vital that marketing communicates the city’s European message, aligned with the artistic vision, rather than focusing solely on city branding.

Capacity to Deliver

Candidates should confirm that their bid book, including the overall vision, concept, and financial commitments, has formal approval from the mayor, city (and county/region, if

applicable) councils, and all political parties. The panel also recommends that candidates and national governments have a shared understanding of the financial contributions.

Candidates are reminded that an ECoC requires a special programme for the year, in addition to the normal cultural offering. The panel expects detailed information on managerial capacity, both in the city and region, to manage a programme of such depth and range. Capacity building should align with local and regional development plans and be planned comprehensively. Cities should also plan strong capacity-building programmes to meet the scope of the ECoC, as it exceeds current local capacities. If projects are planned to be funded through competitive EU programmes, such as Creative Europe, this should be clearly indicated.

Information on urban development, infrastructure programmes, cultural heritage restoration projects, and new cultural venues is useful at pre-selection, but the final selection should focus on projects that directly impact the ECoC programme. Candidates should provide a timeline and realistic estimate for completion of these projects.

The final bid books should clearly indicate how these capital projects will be managed, including management structures, state-of-play regarding EU ESI Funds, timelines, and public procurement details.

Signed

Athena Aristotelous-Cleridou (Vice-chair)

Toni Attard (Chair)

Jelle Burggraaff

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March 2025