

Nova Gorica
European Capital of Culture 2025

Third Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, 19th November 2024

Creative Europe

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Contents

Introduction 4
Attendance 4
Report and presentation from Nova Gorica 2025 5
Discussion 5
Contribution to long-term cultural strategy 6
Cultural and artistic content 6
European dimension 7
Outreach 7
Management 8
Capacity to deliver 8
Conclusions and recommendations 8
Melina Mercouri Prize 10

Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting on the 19th of November 2024 between the Expert panel for the selection and monitoring of European Capitals of Culture, hereinafter referred to as the panel, and the European Capital of Culture team of Nova Gorica, one of the two designated European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2025[1].

The city of Nova Gorica was nominated as the European Capital of Culture 2025 in Slovenia on 12th April 2021 by the Ministry of Culture of Slovenia on the basis of the recommendation included in the panel selection report[2]; its bid book is available on the Nova Gorica 2025 website[3].

This report is addressed to the team of Nova Gorica 2025 and the local authority of the city and will be published on the European Commission's website[4].

Attendance

The panel members:

- Else Christensen-Redzepovic
- Goda Giedraityte
- Hrvoje Laurenta
- Jelle Burggraaff
- Jorge Pinto (rapporteur)
- Mateja Lazar (national expert)
- Rossella Tarantino (Chair)
- Suvi Innilä
- Toni Attard

For Nova Gorica, the participants included the:

- Mayor of the City Municipality of Nova Gorica
- Mayor of the Municipality of Gorizia
- CEO GO! 2025
- Head of programme GO! 2025
- CEO EGTC GO
- Assistant director for cross-border cooperation GO! 2025
- Artistic advisor GO! 2025
- Project manager for the implementation of Programme, Outreach and Legacy, GECT GO

[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://ec.europa.eu/culture/sites/default/files/ecoc2025-slovenia-selection-report.pdf

[3] https://www.go2025.eu/03.documenti/bidbook/GO_KNJIGA_ENG_WEB.pdf

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture_en

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

Report and presentation from Nova Gorica 2025

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

During the monitoring meeting, the Nova Gorica team gave a 15-minute presentation outlining their progress and strategy. They emphasised their mission of "Overcoming Borders to Build Unity and Shared Cultural Identity," embodied by their flagship project, the European Platform for the Interpretation of the Century (EPIC), set to launch on Europe Day, May 9, 2025. EPIC aims to explore Europe's histories, and to promote reconciliation, showcasing Nova Gorica's commitment to cultural diversity and solidarity.

The team addressed the challenges in managing cross-border governance due to differing legal frameworks in Slovenia and Italy but noted that collaboration with key stakeholders had streamlined operations.

They also highlighted cultural programming, including projects in theatre, music, gastronomy, and film, with a focus on Slovenian-Italian partnerships. The Opening Ceremony, planned for February 8 (Slovene Cultural Day), 2025, will feature parades, performances, and a preview of the ECoC agenda, live streamed across Europe.

Most of the pledged funds have been secured, along with additional funding from the city and the Slovenian government. Legacy planning focuses on a "Free Cultural Zone" and initiatives to empower youth and promote sustainability, integrated into Nova Gorica's 2030 sustainable urban development strategy and local cultural strategy. Community engagement remains key, with the Borderless Heroes volunteer programme and targeted outreach to vulnerable groups.

The team concluded by expressing gratitude for feedback and reaffirming their commitment to delivering a programme that embodies European unity and leaves a lasting legacy.

Discussion

During the subsequent discussion, the panel sought clarification on aspects related to panel recommendations from the last monitoring report as well as questions arising from the progress report submitted by the ECoC organisers. The questions were structured around the six criteria of the ECoC initiative, allowing the panel to assess how the team was addressing critical elements of their bid.

Contribution to long-term cultural strategy

- The panel began by asking about the main challenges the project was confronted with. The team acknowledged the significant challenges of working within two distinct legal frameworks in Slovenia and Italy and different institutional players. These issues complicate planning and infrastructure development but have also spurred innovative problem-solving.
- Baseline data collection for evaluation was another critical area of discussion. The team reported substantial progress on the Italian side, where data collection is largely complete. However, efforts to consolidate data from Slovenian sources are ongoing due to the lack of a unified cross-border repository. They conducted a cross-border survey involving 700 participants to investigate cultural participation, perceptions of cross-border issues, and demographic factors. Initial results revealed significant differences between the two cross-border communities, particularly in cultural consumption and generational attitudes. For example, younger participants highlighted a need for more inclusive and modern cultural spaces. The team acknowledged gaps in their data collection and outlined plans to complete and analyse these findings.
- The discussion of legacy focused on the integration of the ECoC's goals into the city's broader 2030 strategy. The team detailed their vision of transforming the symbolic border between Nova Gorica and Gorizia into a shared cultural space that fosters dialogue, reconciliation, and European values. Specific legacy projects include the creation of sustainable cultural venues and capacity-building initiatives to empower young people with skills that align with sustainability and cultural innovation.
- In response to the panel's question about ECoC legacy and the *X Center* and *Free Cultural Zone* projects, the team emphasised their importance to the city's long-term cultural strategy, adding that the *X Center* was planned as a permanent cultural hub, with options after the ECoC year including integration into a public institute or continuation under the GO! 2025 institution. The *Free Cultural Zone* project aims to promote cross-border collaboration through shared cultural spaces, with administrative challenges being managed by an inter-ministerial board.

Cultural and artistic content

- The panel sought details on Nova Gorica's cultural programming, particularly the results of the rounds of open calls for cross-border projects. The team reported that 56 projects had been selected in two open calls, emphasising the diversity of themes and disciplines they represent. These include multilingual theater, music, film, and gastronomy. A dozen of those were included in the official programme, following the criteria of compatibility and added value. A standout initiative is a cross-border culinary project that celebrates shared traditions while promoting sustainable food practices. Another highlight is a traveling film festival that brings cinematic works to audiences in underrepresented areas, ensuring that the ECoC programme reaches diverse communities.
- The Opening Ceremony, scheduled for February 8, 2025, was discussed at length. The event will begin with a symbolic parade between the train stations of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, representing the unity of the two cities. This will be followed by

official ceremonies featuring speeches and performances throughout the day. In the evening, a special programme will provide a "teaser" of the broader ECoC agenda, showcasing upcoming events and projects. The team emphasised their plans to live-stream the ceremony to reach European and international audiences, underlining the symbolic importance of the event as a moment of unity and collaboration.

- Regarding the *"GO 2025"* and the *"GO 2025 and Friends"* programmes, the team explained that they both aligned with the objectives of fostering cross-border collaboration and further engaging local and international audiences. The *"GO 2025 and Friends"* programme can be seen as a sub-brand to include additional events and projects that expand the cultural offerings beyond the core programme. This approach ensures greater inclusivity by integrating regional stakeholders and initiatives that might otherwise lack national or cross-border support. While distinct in branding and scope, both programmes are complementary, with *"GO 2025 and Friends"* enhancing the visibility and reach of the ECoC year, especially in the broader regional context.

European dimension

- The panel expressed concerns about the limited references to European artists and organisations in the submitted progress report. In response, the team clarified that all projects involved European collaboration, with approximately 400 partners engaged at local, regional, and international levels. They highlighted key partnerships, such as their collaboration with the French Institute, which has facilitated the inclusion of artists from across Europe. The team also noted their efforts to expand beyond Europe by involving artists from Africa and Middle East, especially by hosting the Biennale of young artists of Europe and Mediterranean.

- The discussion also covered Nova Gorica's efforts to attract European audiences. The team described promotional activities conducted with national tourist boards in Slovenia and Italy, as well as their participation in high-profile events like the Frankfurt Book Fair and ITB Berlin. They organised events at embassies in cities such as Madrid, Paris and Milan, leveraging these opportunities to promote the ECoC theme of "Go Borderless." Furthermore, they hosted 15 press tours and collaborated with the Slovenian national tourist organisation to bring journalists to the region, ensuring wide media coverage of the programme.

Outreach

- Questions on outreach focused on how Nova Gorica and Gorizia engaged non-audiences and socially vulnerable groups. The team explained that they began with audience segmentation to identify groups typically excluded from cultural activities. Tailored programmes were then developed to address the specific needs and interests of these groups. For example, they conducted workshops with 2,000 young people, collecting their ideas and insights to shape co-created programmes. This approach allowed participants to directly influence the programmes while fostering a sense of ownership and inclusion.

- The "Borderless Heroes" volunteer programme was another key focus. The team reported that 20 volunteers had already been recruited, with plans to increase this number to 100 in the next months. The programme includes cross-border participants and is designed to involve elderly volunteers as well as youth through Erasmus+ initiatives. Volunteers are being integrated into all aspects of the ECoC programme, from monitoring and logistics to direct support for artistic events and their involvement is envisioned in the main events as well as in the partner initiatives..

- The panel observed a heavy reliance on subcontractors for outreach activities and highlighted the limited size of the outreach team. The team explained their ongoing efforts to strengthen this area. By leveraging external expertise and local networks, they aim to enhance outreach and ensure the inclusivity of their programming.

Management

- The panel expressed concerns about the small size of Nova Gorica's core team, noting it as one of the smallest among recent ECoCs. In response, Nova Gorica acknowledged this limitation but highlighted their workforce of 53 full-time employees and external contractors, with plans to expand to 65 by 2025. They emphasised partnerships with regional institutions, such as the national theatre, to bolster capacity for managing artistic and logistical aspects of the programme. Despite these challenges, the team expressed confidence in their ability to deliver the ECoC programme, citing the resilience and adaptability of their governance structure.

Capacity to deliver

- The panel's concerns about Nova Gorica's capacity to deliver were addressed with detailed explanations of their financial strategy and resource management. Nearly all public funds promised during the bidding phase have been secured, and an additional amount of 4.6 million Euros has already been obtained. However, negotiations are ongoing for an additional funding to support emerging programme needs.

- The team outlined efforts to manage costs effectively, monitor inflation, and secure sponsorships to ensure financial stability.

- The programme's reliance on strong partnerships with cultural and regional institutions bolsters its capacity to deliver high-quality events and projects, while the engagement of community members in roles such as event monitoring and logistics ensures grassroots involvement in the delivery strategy.

Conclusions and recommendations

The final monitoring meeting for Nova Gorica 2025 demonstrated significant progress across key areas, with the city showing determination and resilience in addressing the

challenges inherent in its cross-border context. The programme's overarching theme of "Overcoming Borders to Build Unity and Shared Cultural Identity" remains a defining feature, and its integration into both the cultural programming and long-term strategy reflects a strong commitment to European values.

The cultural and artistic programme has developed well, showcasing a rich and varied offering that aligns with the ECoC's objectives. The programme reflects a thoughtful balance of local and European dimensions, fostering cross-border collaboration and inclusivity. Its appeal to a broad audience ensures its potential to leave a significant cultural impact, not only for Nova Gorica and Gorizia but also for the wider European community.

However, several challenges persist. The complexities of navigating two legal and administrative systems continue to affect operations, while the small size of the core team raises concerns about capacity to deliver a programme of this scale. Efforts to integrate European collaborations more visibly and attract broader international audiences also require ongoing attention.

To support the work for the coming months, the panel wishes to make the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Nova Gorica should prioritise enhancing the visibility of European partnerships and collaborations within its programme. This includes clearly documenting and showcasing the involvement of European artists and organisations and leveraging existing networks to attract broader international audiences.

Recommendation 2: The team should continue expanding its workforce, with a focus on integrating roles for outreach and volunteer management into the core team. Especially the number of volunteers must be properly assessed considering the ambitious plan for their extensive involvement. Contingency plans should be refined to address potential vulnerabilities, including staff turnover and burnout.

Recommendation 3: The team should focus on finalising ongoing negotiations for additional resources and prioritise utilising the confirmed budget effectively.

Recommendation 4: Establishing a robust timeline for evaluation deliverables and dissemination is essential. The monitoring and evaluation framework should align with legacy planning, focusing on measuring the ECoC's impact and drawing lessons for future cross-border initiatives.

Recommendation 5: Nova Gorica should continue expanding outreach efforts, particularly to engage non-audiences and marginalised groups. Developing guidelines for inclusivity and accessibility will ensure that these efforts contribute meaningfully to the programme's legacy.

Recommendation 6: The legacy plan should include detailed and actionable steps for maintaining cultural infrastructure, such as the proposed Free Cultural Zone. Building a governance model for legacy activities and integrating them into the city's broader 2030 strategy will ensure the long-term impact of the ECoC programme.

Melina Mercouri Prize

Based on the report submitted as well as the hearing with the Nova Gorica 2025 team, the panel considers that the conditions regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize, as specified in Article 14 of Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, are met. Consequently, the panel is pleased to propose to the European Commission that Nova Gorica 2025 receives the Melina Mercouri prize.

The panel would like to remind Nova Gorica 2025 that, in line with Article 14, its marketing and communication strategy and its communication material have to clearly reflect the fact that the European Capital of Culture is a Union action, as well as that, in line with Article 16 of the same Decision, it will have to draw up its own evaluation report of the results of its ECoC year and transmit it to the European Commission by 31 December 2026.

The panel would like to thank Nova Gorica 2025 for a very informative and interesting meeting and looks forward to a successful realisation of Nova Gorica European Capital of Culture project in 2025.

(Signed) all attending panel's members