



Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2025 in Slovenia

**The Expert Panel's report
Selection Stage**

**Virtual Meeting
December 2020**

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***Virtual Meeting
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edited by

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Introduction

This is the report of the expert panel (the “panel”) for the selection phase of the competition for the European Capital of Culture in 2025 in Slovenia. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985.

The Ministry of Culture of Slovenia (the “Ministry”) acts as the managing authority (the “managing authority”) of the competition, which is governed by Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”)¹ and by the “Rules of procedure – Competition for the European Capital of Culture 2025 in Slovenia” (the “rules”) adopted by the Ministry and published on its website.²

A panel of 12 independent experts was established for the selection process, in line with Article 2 of the Rules. Ten members were appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies (European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions). The two Slovenian members of the panel were appointed by the Ministry.

The competition takes place in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection.

Pre-selection round

The managing authority issued a call for applications in February 2019. Six applications were submitted by the closing date of 31 December 2019 by: Kranj, Lendava, Ljubljana, Nova Gorica, Piran, Ptuj.

The panel met in Ljubljana on 25-27 February 2020 for the pre-selection meeting. The panel recommended inviting four cities (Ljubljana, Nova Gorica, Piran and Ptuj) to progress to the final selection stage. The panel’s report is published on the website of the Commission.³

The Ministry accepted the panel’s recommendation and invited the four cities to submit revised applications with a deadline of 24 November 2020.

All cities submitted their revised applications (“bid-books”) by the deadline.

A delegation of the panel (Sylvia Amann, Barbara Rovere, Jiri Suchanek and Agnieszka Wlazel) took part in online city visits on 11-15 December 2020. They were accompanied by observers from the managing authority and the European Commission. The delegation reported back to the panel at the selection meeting.

¹ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG

² https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MK/Javne-objave/Javni-razpisi/EPK-2025/bec4bab7d6/EPK_2025_Besedilo_razpisa_slo.pdf (in Slovenian)

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/sites/default/files/ecoc-2025-preselection-report-slovenia.pdf>

Panel Meeting

The panel met online on 16-18 December 2020. Representatives of the managing authority and the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers took no part in the panel's deliberations or decision. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality. On 16 December, the panel confirmed Cristina Farinha as its Chair and Igor Saksida as Vice-chair.

At the selection hearings on 16-18 December, each candidate city presented its case (in 45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (in 75 minutes).

The Chair of the panel announced online the panel's recommendation at a press conference after the meeting on 18 December 2020 in the presence of the Slovene Minister of Culture, Mr Vasko Simoniti, and the Head of the Representation of the European Commission in Slovenia.

National context

2025 will be the second time Slovenia hosts the "European Capital of Culture" after Maribor in 2012. The criteria for an ECoC have changed considerably since then. They now embrace a deeper and wider scope of the role of culture in the city and European development. A particular new requirement is for a city to have a formal cultural strategy including the ECoC project. This ensures that the ECoC is an element in the progress of a city and not a one-off event. It therefore enhances the importance of sustainable legacy. The selection of an ECoC is based on the programme specifically set out for the ECoC year in the bid-book and not the current cultural offer in a city.

The panel recognised the bids as ambitious, reflecting different situations in their respective areas and demonstrating a considerable development between proposals at pre-selection stage and those at the final selection. The panel noted that most cities have used the opportunity of the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies as well as the role of culture in their overall socio-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition. The panel encourages all candidates to continue with the development and implementation of their strategies.

Assessments of the candidates

In their 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 in Article 5, as reflected in the call for submission of applications:

- Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city,
- Cultural and artistic content,
- European dimension,
- Outreach,
- Management,
- Capacity to deliver.

The panel emphasises that its assessments of the candidates were based on the proposed programme set out in the bid-book and presentation session. A city's history, its recent and current policies, and its cultural offer may form a basis for a programme but play no part in the selection process. In the commentaries that follow, the panel notes the main elements of its discussions during the selection meeting. In the case of the selected city, specific recommendations are made, in order to assist it in the implementation of the ECoC.

Ljubljana

Ljubljana presented the final selection's bid book under the motto "**Wireless**". The bid has expanded its topical focus due to the onset of the pandemic: while retaining the original central question on how culture and creative industries can contribute to managing a broad range of present and future urban challenges, the bid introduces new focal points, in particular: how to increase the resilience of the cultural and creative sector, what is the role of culture in a state of emergency. Ljubljana sees the concept of solidarity as critical for shaping appropriate responses to the aforementioned challenges.

A local cultural strategy is in place for the timeframe to 2023, and appropriate guidelines for the period until 2027 are formulated. The strategy's goals, however, are very broad, and it is not entirely clear how they are to be implemented and what the expected impact is. The strategy includes a chapter on crisis management in culture that has already been partly applied in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which is positive.

In the bid, Ljubljana self-identifies as carrying the responsibility for the evolution and preservation of the cultural sector at the national level. Furthermore, the long-term objectives of the bid state the ambition to develop Ljubljana into a cultural and creative industries knowledge and training hub for the entire surrounding urban area, the national level and the Western Balkans region (for instance, through projects such as "Academy of Management" and "RegLab"). However, while this intention in itself is positive, it is not sufficiently clear how this very ambitious goal is to be achieved. Moreover, the activities do not appear integrated with the ongoing and envisaged national-level strategic initiatives that could provide opportunities for synergistic effects.

The strategy for monitoring and evaluation is comprehensive and it will be conducted through a four-part structure that includes an internal team as well as independent external evaluators. The plans contain specific objectives and indicators covering both qualitative and quantitative aspects as well as the ambition to incorporate creative methods (ie. 'experimental data'). The city has already started its monitoring and evaluation process, which is a positive step, and has appropriate plans for dissemination. Although the monitoring and evaluation activity fits into the ECoC management structure, its scope appears overly complex, with four parallel layers of delivery and many opaque items of measurement (e.g. Green Index, Green Culture Index, Europeanness). This makes the evaluation plans a challenging project in itself.

The artistic programme is clearly structured into 6 pillars (Heart of Europe, Love of Movement, Common Home, Technology Pact, Equality Now! and Everyone's University), yet the links between the pillars are not evident and the overarching theme – 'solidarity' – does not become clear. In the panel's view, a coherent artistic vision is not clearly articulated for European audiences. The distribution of the budget between the programme pillars is not entirely justified by adequate descriptions, which contributes to a lack of clarity of the general artistic vision. Moreover, in the European dimension and Outreach sections, additional projects are listed, but it is not evident how they fit the cultural and artistic programme. In the panel's view, some of the programme elements rely too much on less innovative concepts and methodologies (e.g. 19th century approach to history, Museum of Garbage based on trends of the 1970s) and it is not clear how the topic 'wireless' is linked to other programme concepts and projects. Although the 'wireless' concept builds on the city's history, the opinion of the panel is that this connection is not clearly articulated for European audiences.

The European dimension is not developed to its full potential. The positive elements of the international dimension include a high proportion of the proposed projects reflecting European values, the envisaged activities extending beyond Europe to Africa and Asia, celebration of the 40 years of ECoC and the ambition to internationalise the entire Ljubljana urban region. However, the 27 artistic residencies to take place throughout the Ljubljana urban region is a good, but not an innovative way to showcase the diversity of cultures. On the other hand, while the international contacts are many, they appear generic and not specifically linked to the ECoC mission. It is also not clear precisely in what way the partnerships will be mutually enriching and what the international partners will bring to the ECoC projects. The bid does not present a strategy for how Ljubljana intends to use the ECoC to evolve the future of its international relations and the overarching concept of solidarity does not become substantially visible in relation to the European and international dimension. In this regard the bid remains limited mostly to the past rather than turning the focus to the future. The plan to attract European audiences lacks more ambitious and innovative approaches. The bid indicates that only half of the ECoC programme will be co-created and co-produced with European partners and estimates that only half of the programme will be of interest to international audiences. This is a rather low target. Moreover, the envisaged European collaborations seem to focus mostly on Central Europe and the Western Balkans, while the links to other parts of Europe are less developed.

The planned engagement activities appear adequate. The segmentation of target audiences is well conceptualised, using three streams – geographical, organisational and sectoral – to ensure comprehensive coverage. However, the activities seem more cultural-development driven and not connected specifically to the ECoC. While the general directions of audience development are appropriate, the bid-book lacks convincing examples of future actions with specific and diverse audiences. One of the outreach activities includes volunteering, but it is not clear whether the envisaged management mechanisms will be sufficient to ensure adequate execution. The participatory budget for support of local bottom-up cultural initiatives is a valuable element and the outreach activity includes some interesting projects, for instance the 'Gourmet Neighbourhoods – Local Food Self-sufficiency' project. The concept of 'cultural

democracy' is valuable, but does not appear to be sufficiently internalised, as it is visible only in a few projects, but not in the ECoC as a whole.

The overall size of the total operating budget is 62,5 Million EUR and the budget contributions appear to be balanced between the national, regional and local levels. Although the overall budget seems appropriate, a formal commitment from the partner municipalities in the region to provide a financial contribution has not been taken yet. The ECoC delivery structure is a public body, but the governance structure and appointment procedures are not clearly explained. The several councils and their unclear role in the management decision-making structure are problematic. For example, the specific role of the Programme council and the Institute council in the delivery of the ECoC is not clear. The General Director and the Artistic Director are already selected. The total number of personnel is not mentioned. The mechanisms for inclusion of the Ljubljana urban region into the ECoC decision-making are not presented clearly. The bid-book refers to the intention to maintain dialogue with the region and to establish 10 ECoC regional communication and information offices, but those do not feature in the governance organogram. The contingency planning is a weakness as it does not anticipate any high- or medium-risk items, which is unusual. Moreover, no mitigation measures are presented. In the fundraising context, the bid mentions the plan to use COVID-19 recovery funds to cover operating expenditure, which is questionable, since these funds are not fully aligned with ECoC aims. The private funding element is not explained in sufficient detail. A business club is mentioned, which is good though also rather standard. The concept of 'innovative partnerships' is not explained and there is no reference to the central bid theme of solidarity. Wireless as a base for a marketing slogan could work well to draw attention, but it is questionable how it would be able to convey other topical elements of the bid to a wide range of European audiences.

The municipal political support and the strong support of the mayor are evident and represent an asset of the bid. The commitment of the Ljubljana urban region municipalities appears solid. However, the bid underestimates the significance of cooperation with national authorities. It is not sufficiently clear that the municipal capacities are sufficient to achieve the ambitious goals to deliver impacts for the creative and cultural sector at the regional and national levels.

Conclusion

The panel considers that the Ljubljana candidacy has improved since the pre-selection stage. On the other hand, the candidacy has also been altered to an extent in its fundamental objectives so as to take account of the new circumstances and the panel's recommendation in the pre-selection report.

The bid is ambitious overall, but loses focus due to an overly complex thematic approach. Key topics differ across different parts of the bid-book - there are too many and not all of them come through with sufficient clarity. The panel would like to note that 'solidarity' is an extremely relevant concept, even more in times of pandemic and will remain so post-COVID. However, how it is developed conceptually and made visible in the implementation is critical to function as an ECoC theme. The panel considers that this topic is well-chosen to be addressed by a national capital city. However, while the goodwill is evident, the concept in the final bid-book does not appear entirely thought

through as a transversal dimension of the programme with applications at the local, national, European and worldwide levels.

The management structure raises some concerns regarding the opportunities of the Ljubljana Urban Region municipalities to impact the ECoC decision-making. In general, the panel finds that this bid proposal lacks components to make the necessary impact at the European level, beyond the scope of the local and potentially the regional contexts.

Nova Gorica

Under the leitmotif of **"Go! Borderless"**, Nova Gorica wants to grow together with its Italian bordering city Gorizia as if they were one. The bid explores the concept of borders from multiple dimensions, including an exchange of their stories as border cities with other similar border areas in Europe. The very core of the Go! Borderless concept is highly relevant for Europe in the context of pandemic-induced re-installment of borders in Europe.

In the pre-selection phase, the city had already approved a cultural strategy stretching from 2019 until 2023 that forms the base of the bid and establishes long-term guidelines for the local cultural policies for the next period's cultural strategy (2024-2028). In the selection phase, important steps have been made in the development of a first joint cross-border strategy for the two cities, linked to an accompanying budget with its strategic goals defined. The panel sees this as a very positive development, all the more so because the ECoC is meaningfully integrated within these objectives, which seem appropriate, realistic, legacy-oriented and include environmental goals. Both of the two cities' municipal administrations have approved the draft strategy that is waiting to be discussed in both councils now. The evaluation and monitoring plans are realistic and have been significantly strengthened since the pre-selection phase. The cross-border challenge to obtain and compare data identified by the team will be addressed. This is the right starting point for evaluation and monitoring. The indicators are sound and relevant, but seem more related to the cultural strategy goals than the ECoC. In addition, qualitative indicators related to the "GO! Borderless" concept and values should be further developed. Some of the indicators are also too vague at this stage, without quantitative targets or fixed measures (e.g. "decrease of digital divide across socio-economic and age lines", "increase of multilingualism", "new technological/sustainable solutions offered by local companies", "new creative and knowledge-based jobs"). The capacity-building programme for the cultural and creative sector is substantial and includes interesting initiatives such as the "GONG" project and "The Experience Factor", but its operationalisation is not sufficiently clear yet. Lastly, the panel appreciates that the bid has actively connected with the Pilot cities programme of Agenda 21 for Culture.

The cultural and artistic programme is structured around the EPICenter, a cross-border space and concept for making visible the borderless concept. From there, three rays reach out: 1/ "GO! Green"; 2/ "GO! Share"; 3/ "GO! Europe". Each consists of a flagship project and 4 project clusters. The artistic vision of the cultural and artistic programme is to create a new cultural ecosystem, a new sense and culture of being one city in two countries. The bid aims to connect the stories of the two bordering cities with those of other border areas around Europe. The panel considers it a strong, appealing and

important concept for an ECoC that contains relevance for other border region areas in general. The panel also welcomes that the concept has evolved from the physical and political borders into fresh directions. The proposed projects explore the concept of borders in many new contexts, for instance in the fields of mental health (border between sanity and insanity), management ("borderless budget"), rural development (border between urban, peri-urban and rural), governance (border between local, regional, national and European), art and civilisation (border between nature and art), technology (border between science and art), military (war fronts as borders) and demographics (borders between generations). Finally, the ECoC links the concept of borders and divisions to the concept of identity and identity fluidity through the reconciliation strategies such as "understanding the pain of the other", which links the concept of borders to many other contemporary discourses such as gender. In this sense, the bid shows a strong intellectual validity, which is a critical development since the pre-selection stage. The panel encourages the team to continue defining the concept of "GO! Borderless" and appreciates the "Go! Green" strand that will make green aspects visible.

The programme features an attractive and unique flagship project, namely the "EPICentre", which together with related programmes aiming to develop storylines that include different perspectives have the potential to make an important European impact. This is a welcome and necessary goal according to the panel. From an artistic point of view, the cultural and artistic programme could become even more ambitious and move into a more concrete, innovative and daring direction. Lastly, the panel appreciates that 50% of the programme budget has been allocated for future projects (which will have to correspond to the overall ECoC concept), leaving room for international calls for extra content.

The European dimension of the bid is well developed. The bid is a joint Slovene – Italian ECoC endeavour and in this sense sets a precedent and elevates the concept of "GO! Borderless" to a higher level, thus increasing the relevance of the message. The bid includes many international partners and other ECoCs, but the focus of the international partners seems to be put more on Central Europe. Since the pre-selection phase, further research has been conducted on similar and relevant border cities in Europe, which further contextualises the overall concept. Collaboration on the programme level needs, however, to be developed further. In addition, the multilingual aspect of the bid is well developed and implemented, and brings due attention to the European linguistic diversity. Sufficient and relevant elements highlighting religious diversity and multiculturalism are embedded into the programme as well, as is illustrated by e.g. the promising "Little Jerusalem" project.

The engagement actions and plans are well incorporated into the cultural and artistic programme, with the inclusion of local cultural institutions, artists and universities being clearly visible in the preparatory and implementation phase of the bid. The bid includes specific audience development projects and the main target groups are both well identified and relevant, namely young people, cross-border audiences and national minorities. The audience development towards the cross-border audiences can serve as a good testing lab for other border cities in Europe. The panel recognises the awareness of the bid for the importance of inclusion and accessibility that is addressed in a convincing

way. It also appreciates that the language courses as well as language cafes used for fighting social exclusion were already offered online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The delivery team from both Nova Gorica and Gorizia is a strong asset. The deployment modalities of the already existing "European Grouping of Territorial Collaboration (EGTC)" - suggested as a management tool during the pre-selection phase - became fully visible and justified in the final phase of the selection. The management and governance structures are sound to maintain a clear independence within the EGTC structure and ensure the legacy. Another strong point in this regard is the presence of a Legacy Manager in the management team. The joint approach to artistic decision-making, with a Programme Director leading a programme team of four senior managers, seems to function well as this is how the team has worked together from the very beginning. But this collective approach could limit a more refined artistic vision. The panel also welcomes the solid conducted screening of possibilities for EU funding. The ECoC can rely on long-lasting experience with EU funding and related teams are in place. The proposed budget, with a total operating expenditure of € 23,000,000, and the amount of the city contribution, raised since pre-selection to a total of € 5,000,000, are sound. The risks assessment seems too optimistic and mitigation strategies are not fully in place yet - this relates also to the EPICentre project. Lastly, concerning marketing, the ideas concerning the GO-GO brand need further reflection to reflect well the bid's intentions in different cultural contexts.

The capacity to deliver appears strong. The bid benefits from a broad and solid political support. The municipal council of Nova Gorica has unanimously voted in favour of the city's participation in the bidding process and has tripled its envisaged financial contribution compared to the pre-selection phase. The mayors of both cities have signed a collaboration agreement and work together on a cross border cultural strategy. Wider regional support for the bid is illustrated by the formal and financial contribution of 13 Slovenian and 27 Italian municipalities and the region Friuli Venezia Giulia. The capacity to deliver heavily depends upon the successful and timely construction of the EPICentre though.

Conclusion

The panel acknowledges the significant development of the central bid theme "GO! Borderless" along multiple dimensions since the pre-selection stage and considers it is now ready for translation into a compelling European narrative that explores borders and trans border life in communities around Europe. The theme of the bid has also been well transposed into the individual projects of the programme.

The bid is well rooted in the city's specific political, cultural and geographical context and is integrated within the objectives of the joint cultural strategy developed with the bordering city of Gorizia in Italy. The participatory approach, with clear and relevant target groups and interesting initiatives around capacity building, are important assets of the bid. The capacity to deliver is overall strong, with political and financial support from the local, regional and national levels of governance. The chosen management structure is sound and embedded in the already existing European Grouping of Territorial Collaboration (EGTC) structure, experienced in delivering projects in both cities. The

ECoC plans can clearly contribute to regional and cross border cultural development as well as wider relevant European debates.

Piran

Under the leitmotif of **"Wave of Change"**, Piran proposes to become part of a transformation process that turns Europe into a place ready to reconfigure its relationship with the environment. The bid involves the four coastal municipalities of Piran, Izola, Koper and Ankaran, which in recent years have already cooperated systematically in various fields. The bid addresses the relationship between culture, climate and the environment at the local, European and international levels and wants to bring the European Green Deal to life through arts and culture.

A municipal cultural strategy was already approved in December 2017 and revised in December 2019. In addition, between 2019 and 2020, a first coordinated joint cultural strategy for the four municipalities – the "Kultura.PIKA Strategy" – has been designed and discussed. Although the participatory and decision-making steps for implementation of this strategy have been clearly outlined in the bid, the exact support of the relevant stakeholders at this stage remains unclear. This is of concern, as the feasibility of the PI2025 programme and, with that, its long-term impacts heavily depend upon the successful implementation of this strategy. In addition, although the common strategy identifies various challenges and dangers that need to be answered by a strategic cooperation between the municipalities, the panel notices that an integrated strategy for ecology, reflecting the main theme of the bid, is lacking. The bid proposes an adequate evaluation and monitoring base with an appropriate envisaged timeline. Nevertheless, in some aspects, the monitoring and evaluation activities are not completely convincing. Firstly, the listed indicators are more linked to city development than to the ECoC project and they lack specific targets. Secondly, the complex work of the Evaluation Task Force and the involvement of the four municipalities is not described in sufficient detail. From a legacy point of view, the Tlakovec capacity building programme addressing the needs of a new generation of cultural leaders by providing training to the Istrian cultural sector, is very promising. The panel also welcomes that this programme already started in 2020 and considers the themes of the workshops well chosen.

The cultural and artistic programme has been further developed from the pre-selection phase and is now composed of four programme segments: 1/ "The Cultural Embassy for Climate Crisis"; 2/ "Lost and Found"; 3/ "Connect and Care"; 4/ "Salt and Sea". Each of these programme segments consists of projects and clusters of projects, which are identified on the "RE:CONCEPT" that illustrate the interaction between arts, ecology and audiences. The artistic vision for the cultural and artistic programme is to draw attention to the climate crisis through arts and culture, while the bid wants to foster social and community-based conversations on the environment, climate issues, social resilience and cohesion. The panel values that Piran has chosen this most pressing topic as its central theme and sees its immediate European and global resonance. It is also of the opinion that this vision has been clearly transposed into the first and fourth segments of the cultural and artistic programme, but feels it lacks sufficient visibility in the rest of the programme, projects and the overall ECoC implementation processes.

In addition, the wide scope of the “Wave of Change” slogan makes it difficult to identify a clear message of the ECoC. The projects at times are rather generally described, with budgets that still need to be elaborated with the project partners. This makes it difficult for the panel to judge different projects’ importance in the programme or understand how they will be implemented from an operational point of view. Though the cultural and artistic programme contains interesting initiatives, the contemporary relevance of a number of other projects is questionable. On the other hand, the panel considers the links between arts and science and the orientation towards contemporary creation as positive elements of the cultural and artistic programme. The same applies for “RE:CONCEPT”, which is an interesting way to link and present interaction between the programme. Finally, the bid clearly recognises the importance of providing a digital programme, as it is illustrated by the great number of projects that will be also accessible online. On the other hand, while the bid lists the number of people that the team has engaged with in the development of the cultural and artistic programme, the exact extent of the involvement of the local artistic community and the regional cultural institutions in this development process remains unclear. Linked to this, the panel has doubts about the extent to which the cultural and artistic programme is embedded in the local needs and heritage of Piran and partner municipalities.

With 512 international partners, the European dimension has been well elaborated. 90% of the projects will involve international partners and those listed, including from the ecological and tech fields, are sound and viable. The connections with future and past ECoCs are also well elaborated. The aim to create a network of ECoCs wishing to collaborate on resilient ECoC standards is interesting in this regard. Furthermore, the panel appreciates the cooperation the bid wants to establish with European Science Capitals and European Green Capitals, which is in line with the theme of the bid. It also welcomes the cross-border Istrian collaboration that has been set up with Rijeka 2020, Trieste, Muggia and the Croatian part of Istria as well as the cooperation that is envisioned with Venice and the Region of Veneto. In general, the ideas to connect with all these and other partners are sound, but common initiatives remain rather generic. The cultural dynamics and diversity that is present in this region, with mixed identities, is not clearly incorporated into the cultural programme. While the aim to bring the European Green Deal to life through cultural actions by local citizens is noble, awareness of state-of-the art in other parts of Europe and globally seems lacking.

Concerning outreach, the programme includes ample community-focused participatory projects. Yet, a clear underlying outreach methodology seems missing. On the other hand, the transversal axis “Re:CONCEPT” forms a sound base for civic engagement, while the audience development activities will be supported and complemented by an Audience Development Plan. The panel welcomes that this topic has already been raised as a key subject of discussion as part of the Tlakovec capacity-building programme. The Association for culture and education, PiNA, is a valuable partner in setting up a volunteering system. In addition, the panel welcomes the future open calls that will be managed by young people and citizen groups. The Wave@Monfort project, which in particular also focuses on young people, seems to be infrastructure orientated. Moreover, there is a lack of sufficient information concerning this capital investment, its future planning and programme. Projects in general are considered as growing instead as one-off events, which is an approach the panel appreciates. Lastly, the panel notices and

welcomes the gender dimension that is taken into account very seriously throughout the projects proposed in the bid.

The proposed budget with a total operating expenditure of € 26,690,000 is sound and the commitment of the four municipalities of € 12,015,000 in the pre-selection phase has remained unchanged. The percentage of the operating expenditure allotted to "wages, overheads and administration", i.e. 21.07%, is unusually high and the management plans show some serious weaknesses. The contingency planning is superficial and lacks detail. The management structure envisages a great number of director functions and board structures, while the relationship between these boards remains vague. The autonomy of the Artistic Director is uncertain as this position is placed under the CEO. On the other hand, the presence of Italian and Croatian partners in the board and the foreseen position of a Sustainability Manager are important assets of the management structure. The panel is concerned that the bid might underestimate the risks and challenges in achieving the envisaged environmental change, as this process needs to go hand in hand with a behavioural change. In light of the above, a call to action is missing in the marketing strategy. Lastly, the target audiences are developed in a generic way that results in the marketing plan not having included environmentally conscious audiences for example.

The panel has concerns about the capacity to deliver due to the lack of production capacity in the region; a topic that does not seem to be covered by the Tlakovec capacity-building programme. To overcome this problem, a high number of staff in the production and artistic teams is listed. Although these teams can assist the 58% of projects that are outsourced, it is unclear whether this strategy increases the overall production capacity of the region in the long term. Lastly, the plans to sufficiently upgrade key infrastructure necessary for the delivery of the ECoC, in line with an environmental friendly approach like in the case of the "Wave@Monfort" project, are not convincing enough.

Conclusion

Piran presented an interesting bid that aims to draw attention to the topic of climate change mitigation through arts and culture. The panel appreciates the choice for addressing this pressing issue as a central theme for the ECoC bid and welcomes the established links between arts and science in this regard. A joint cultural strategy, the Kultura.PIKA strategy, has been developed for the implementation of the ECoC. Yet, the exact support for this strategy at this stage remains unclear. This causes concerns about whether the ECoC stands on solid ground.

The structure of the programme is clear and the form and diversity of the projects are promising. Yet, the content of the programme is underdeveloped and the artistic vision corresponding to the overall aim is not sufficiently visible throughout all four programme segments. The wide scope of the theme "Wave of Change" makes it hard to identify a clear narrative for a local, national and European audience. The high number of international partners is very positive. The extent of the involvement of the local artistic and cultural institutions in the development of the programme is less evident though, while doubts about the regional production capacity remain. In general, the panel feels

the overall theme of “Wave of Change” and the related contribution to Europe-wide debates remains vague.

Ptuj

The Ptuj candidacy under the title **“Ptuj, City of Timeless Transformations”** proposes to achieve a revitalisation of the city by means of a fresh reinterpretation of its cultural heritage and advancing infrastructural development. The evolution of the bid since the pre-selection stage has been significantly impacted due to the altered situation of the candidate city in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The local cultural strategy has been adopted for the period until 2023, with guidelines extending until 2025. However, the strategy demonstrates a limited long-term vision and only presents very broad strategic objectives with very little information on how those objectives are to be achieved and what the expected impacts are. On a more positive note, the strategy mentions important elements e.g. creativity, innovation and sustainability. Capacity building considerations for the cultural and creative sector are present. For instance, the Academy of Change as a capacity-building tool is a good approach worth implementing, but its operational plans and impact targets are not detailed enough. The ECoC monitoring and evaluation plans are underdeveloped. While the budget for the monitoring and evaluation activities is high, the budgetary framework is not complemented by appropriate operative and methodological objectives and framework. Indicators and quantifiable targets are missing. The monitoring and evaluation activities are planned for external execution by a specialised partner institution, which is a legitimate approach. However, the process for establishing and managing this envisaged partnership is undetailed.

The cultural and artistic programme is generally underdeveloped, predominantly local with some regional elements. Nevertheless, the Carnival topic is relevant and linked to a strong European network. The bid also presents some interesting proposals from the field of literature and archaeology, and several other pertinent projects that feature strong international artists and institutions. The participation of the local stakeholders in development of the bid programme appears good but the extent of involvement of NGOs and artists is unclear. The artistic vision is described generally and lacks refinement. The programme is largely based on existing activities, rather than being a programme put together specifically for the ECoC, and involves mostly public sector institutions. The programme furthermore does not demonstrate convincingly the capacity for combining cultural heritage with new and creative art forms. There is a general concern that the project budget is very underestimated and the timeframe for programme implementation is insufficient for thorough execution of the envisaged programme activities.

The European dimension of the bid is underdeveloped and the bid appears more regional and cross-border in character. The city does not appear to utilise their currently available networks to the full extent and the panel could not identify evident attempts at building new international partnerships specifically for the delivery of the ECoC. The bid demonstrates limited relations with other ECoCs and unrealised potential for peer learning from other cities. From the topical perspective, the bid lacks a clear focus in European themes. Well-being, social equality, climate change and artificial intelligence are mentioned, but lack coherence with the European dimension and the cultural

programme. The diversity of cultures in Europe is not very visible in the proposed programme, perhaps only at the cross-border level. Some international partners from the city's cultural institutions are mentioned. However, it appears that they were not explored for the sake of ECoC, but that they represent existing partnerships and networks.

Outreach is based upon a bottom-up approach with stakeholders and citizens through thematic consultations. However, the bid-book does not provide information about the scale of the activities in terms of numbers (e.g. participating individuals and organisations, both public and private, profit and non-profit). Furthermore, there is no evidence of continued outreach processes from the pre-selection phase. The audience development strategy is not formed yet and has not progressed significantly since the pre-selection stage. A positive element is the planned involvement of volunteers in the implementation of the ECoC and the awareness of the significance of supporting local volunteer and amateur organisations from the field of culture. Another positive element is the commitment to inclusive accessibility policy.

The most striking change in the management chapter is the overall reduction in the total operating budget from 21,75 Million EUR at pre-selection stage to 9,2 Million EUR at final selection stage due to new budgetary priorities in the wake of the pandemic. The city contribution has been reduced drastically from 5,85 Million to only 1,6 Million EUR to cover operating expenses until 2025. As a result, the overall operating budget (including the financial contribution of the City) is quite modest for the implementation of an event of the scale and scope of an ECoC. No regional budgetary contribution is evident and the contingency planning is missing. The delivery structure will be an independent public institution. However, the bid-book does not present an organogram of the envisaged management structure, nor does it specify the details of the management appointment procedures. There is no indication about the recruitment plans and the envisaged skills of the personnel. It also seems that the management structure still includes the regional cooperation element, which is not in line with the settings in the bid. The EU funding strategy is unclear. The marketing strategy is lacking overall. The marketing slogan reflects local promotional ambitions but does not link to the broader European narrative of the ECoC. The transformation topic as a communication tool is interesting and has the potential for relevance at the European level, but has not been developed into a nuanced narrative for a range of target audiences. The "Old city, new experiences" slogan might raise interest of the general audiences.

The COVID-19 situation has significantly altered the capacity of the candidate city to deliver the ECoC programme. While the interest to host the ECoC remains, the ability of the municipality to commit to the mobilisation of the necessary resources has been reduced. The regional political support for the bid in the second stage remains unclear. In terms of infrastructure, the situation remains unchanged, with solid traffic infrastructure to support the arrival of tourists, but the capacity to host numbers of guests beyond the current level is not clear.

Conclusion

The panel wishes to stress that the bid tackles an important topic (cultural heritage and archaeology), which is a commendable effort. Moreover, in the second bid-book it proposes a new narrative angle, namely the role of cultural heritage in times of crisis, which could be developed into an interesting approach for illustrating the social and economic value of cultural heritage and forging a new perception of the role of cultural heritage in human awareness. The panel strongly encourages Ptuj to continue with the efforts in this direction. However, the activities should build on state-of-the-art and sufficient resources should be available for the execution of the envisaged plans.

Nevertheless, given the drastically reduced commitment to mobilise the necessary resources, the capacity of the city to deliver a successful ECoC has become unconvincing. The panel found that while the bid supports the delivery of local plans, it has not been worked out sufficiently for the articulation and implementation of a cultural and artistic programme that can make an impact at the European level.

The Panel's Decision

The panel was presented with four different bids from significantly diverse cities, including the national capital, and each with its own interpretations of the ECoC criteria. The bids tackled issues of great urgency for Europe and the world at large. All bids had both strengths and weaknesses. The panel was looking, according to Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council, at the programme specifically designed for the ECoC year and with a strong European dimension.

After the presentations, the panel debated the merits of each city against the six criteria and then in the final discussion the applications were weighed up against each other.

Each panel member weighed his/her own interpretation of the criteria against the four cities with their bid-books, presentations, questions and answers, complemented by the feedback from the online city visits.

The panel, by voting, reached consent on a single candidate.

Accordingly, the panel recommends the Ministry of Culture to designate, as the 2025 European Capital of Culture in Slovenia, the city of **Nova Gorica**.

Designation

This report has been sent to the managing authority and the European Commission. Both will publish it on their websites. In accordance with Article 11 of the Decision, the Ministry will proceed to the designation of the ECoC 2025 in Slovenia based on the recommendation contained in this report. It will then inform the European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions. This formal designation enables Nova Gorica to use the title "European Capital of Culture 2025".

Melina Mercouri Prize

The panel recommends that the European Commission award the Melina Mercouri Prize to the designated city on the basis of this report. The payment of the €1,5m Prize is however deferred until 2025, in line with Article 14 of the Decision. It is conditional. The ECoC Expert panel will make a further recommendation to the European Commission in late 2024 at the end of the monitoring process on whether to make the payment.

The conditions for the payment are as follows (Article 14):

- The ECoC honours its commitments made in the application;
- It complies with the criteria;
- It takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports;
- There has been no substantial change to the programme and strategy set out in the bid-book;
- The budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-level programme and at a level consistent with the bid-book;
- The independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
- The European Dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final programme;
- The marketing and communications strategy and material clearly reflect it is a European Union action;
- Plans for monitoring and evaluation are in place.

Reputation of an ECoC

A city awarded the ECoC title receives considerable international attention from the selection recommendation extending well beyond the ECoC year. It has a responsibility to uphold the reputation of the ECoC brand for the benefit of those previous titleholders and future ones. City administrations should be aware that decisions taken (and not just in the cultural sector) might attract formal media and social media attention far beyond what they are used to handling. This adds a special and new aspect to decision taking in the city over a wide full range of issues much beyond culture only.

The monitoring phase

Once an ECoC has been designated, it enters the "Monitoring Phase" (Article 13 of the Decision). Under the auspices of the European Commission, the panel will work with the ECoC to ensure the quality of the ECoC brand and to offer advice and experience.

The **bid-book** at final selection becomes the *de facto* contract between the designated city, on the one hand, and its own citizens, the Expert panel, the Ministry and the European Commission, on the other hand. It has an important role in the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize. The panel will expect a close alignment with the bid-book during the preparation phase and during the ECoC year. Significant variations from the bid-book should be discussed with the panel, through the Commission, in advance of decisions being made.

There are three formal monitoring checkpoints (normally autumn 2021, mid 2023 and autumn 2024) when the ECoC will meet with the panel under the auspices of the Commission. Prior to each meeting the European Commission will invite the ECoC to provide progress reports. The Commission, after consultation with the panel, will indicate areas that specifically need to be addressed in the reports.

In addition, the panel may decide, with the agreement of the European Commission, to visit the city to observe progress.

The panel's reports after all three meetings will be published on the Commission's website. The ECoC may decide to publish its own progress reports in the interest of transparency.

The panel's recommendations

The designated ECoC now moves to a transition period from a set-up suited to a bid campaign to the more formal ECoC delivery structure that is independent of local city administration. The panel expects Nova Gorica to develop cooperation with other bidding cities and the wider artistic and cultural community in Slovenia. The ECoC in Slovenia in 2025 provides a national opportunity, which will reflect internationally not only on Nova Gorica but also on the country as a whole.

The panel will expect the first progress report in autumn 2021 to take into account the recommendations and comments in the assessment of the bid as well as the recommendations below.

The recommendations refer to the content of the proposed programme:

Cultural strategy

- The work continues on the development and implementation of the cultural strategy and further arrangements are made for integration between policy areas (culture / urban development / innovation and creative industries / education) in the cross-border context. All documents are published to ensure transparency.
- The ECoC 2025 impact assessment is detailed with monitoring tactics, the baseline figures are defined and first attempts to outline the specific targets are made. KPIs include European sources of information like Eurostat, for example.
- The capacity building is intraregional, cross-sectoral and cross-border and runs with the view of a successful implementation of all ECoC aspects, as well as sustainability and long-term legacy. The topic of agile and flexible strategic planning is included in the capacity building topics to prepare the teams for unexpected events.

Cultural and artistic content

- The artistic elements of the cultural programme are further developed and connected with the ECoC narrative in order to improve the overall artistic quality of the ECoC programme.
- The borderless narrative along the various dimensions as outlined in this city bid evaluation report is further strengthened and made clearly visible in the cultural and artistic programme.
- Innovative, experimental and digital programme elements are strengthened to ensure the ECoC 2025 meets the needs of the 21st century, paying attention also to principles of environmental sustainability.
- A procedure for selecting the remaining part of the programme is developed, clearly communicated and implemented. Newly developed content has coherent and clear artistic outlook and European importance in line with the ECoC vision and mission.
- Appropriate facilitation mechanisms including decision-making and conflict resolution principles are developed to support EPICentre mission and multi perspective narrative.

European dimension

- The scope and quality of activities promoting the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue, and greater mutual understanding between European citizens as well as highlighting the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history are secured, deepened and developed.
- The cooperation and communication with partners from across Europe, including a wide range of the ECoC titleholders, as well as partnerships with other continents are developed and strengthened; particular attention is dedicated to European and Extra-European border regions that could contribute to and benefit from the Nova Gorica ECoC activities and findings.
- Further development is needed to ensure Europe wide collaborations, extending beyond a focus on Central Europe, to provide new contexts for developing the European dimension to the full.
- Actions to generate an interest in other parts of Europe are strategically developed and promoted.

Outreach

- Work continues to ensure social innovation and meaningful participation in line with the ECoC mission and vision.
- The ECoC audience development strategies and plans for local, regional and international audiences are developed. A special focus to be dedicated to reach out to European and international audiences.

- Both audience development and community engagement are included in capacity building activities involving all relevant partners.

Management

- Information about the Nova Gorica 2025 organisation and its statutes, as well as the ECoC implementation strategies are publicly available.
- An early appointment of the Programme director, with his/her independent role, is needed and his/her high-level position needs to be secured to ensure a collective approach to artistic decision making has a firm structure from the very beginning.
- The envisaged ECoC department is set up within the EGTS structure and efficient organisational procedures are created in order to successfully deliver this demanding project. Sustainable and effective mechanisms for delivery of an extensive cultural programme with partners demonstrating different levels of expertise (especially in the "EPICentre" flagship) are developed.
- The ownership of strategic areas and spaces is clearly defined and clear information on what will be integrated and what will not be included in the programme is communicated.
- The contingency planning is refined and operationalised, including the management of the "EPICentre" project.
- The strategies and copyright issues of the "Go! Borderless" concept, including authorship rights of related merchandise and services, are developed and publicly communicated.
- The communication message (including a European dimension) is clearly articulated for use by the ECoC team and other relevant partners and stakeholders.
- The proposed communication elements which include "GO!" features are carefully considered from the point of view of conveying intended messages to a variety of European audiences.
- Issues of security related to the pandemic, post-pandemic, mass events and threats of terrorism are addressed.
- Issues of data protection are addressed and clearly communicated.
- The sensitivity towards environmental impact is demonstrated.

Capacity to deliver

- A program of ensuring continued support of political stakeholders at local, regional, national and international level is developed and implemented.

- The accommodation and transport capacities, also those in the region, are reviewed and potential weaknesses addressed to fully support participation (of diverse public) in all elements of the ECoC programme.

The bid-book sets out several actions to be taken in before 2025 – these time frames should be met. Experience has shown that successful ECoCs use the first year after selection to establish all the governance, management and administration structures and systems. This essential role needs to run concurrently with the first stage of the project in 2021. Recommendations in this section are based on the experience of previous ECoCs.

The panel would expect:

- The relationship between the Supervisory Council, other fora / councils and the staff of the Nova Gorica 2025 organisation to be clearly delineated and made public.
- The senior staff is recruited through open competitions.
- The General Director issues, with the approval of the Supervisory Board, financial regulations for the Nova Gorica 2025 organization:
 - An external organisation is appointed to undertake annual audits and to approve the annual accounts of the organization.
 - Arrangements are made for the publication of the Annual Accounts and the Annual Report to ensure transparency.
- Internal management and administrative processes are in place. These will include human resources, legal aspects (e.g. project contract arrangements, data privacy, and intellectual property rights), the criteria and systems for calls for projects, the marketing and branding strategy.
- An internal communications strategy is developed and implemented. This covers communications within the Nova Gorica 2025 organization, between the organization and the city (and regional) administration, between the organisation and the Ministry of Culture and between the organisation and the European Commission.
- A detailed staffing plan up to 2025 including involvement of volunteers is created.
- The organization ensures that in all its (on- and offline) marketing and communications there is recognition that the ECoC is a European Union action.

Thanks

The panel members would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in this selection phase of the competition. The panel thanks all bidding candidates and everyone who contributed to their bids; the European Commission for its advice and the managing authority for its excellent administration. The panel encourages all cities to continue with the development and implementation of their respective cultural strategies.

Signed

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