



Budweis European Capital of Culture 2028

First Monitoring Meeting

Report by the ECOC Expert Panel

Virtual Meeting, 12th November 2024

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate Culture, Creativity and Sport
Unit D2

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Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting on 12th November 2024 between the panel and the team of Budweis 2028, one of the three European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2028. Budweis was designated as European Capital of Culture on 6 August 2023 by the Ministry of Culture of Czech Republic on the basis of the panel's selection report¹. Its bid book is available on the Budweis 2028 website². This report of the first monitoring meeting is addressed to the Budweis 2028 team and will also be published on the European Commission's website³.

Attendance

The panel members:

Anne Karjalainen
Else Christensen-Redzepovic
Goda Giedraityte (Chair)
Hrvoje Laurenta
Jelle Burggraaff
Jorge Pinto (rapporteur)
Marilyn Gaughan Reddan
Martina Lehmannova (national expert)
Rossella Tarantino
Suvi Innilä
Toni Attard

For Budweis 2028 the participants included the:

Mayor of České Budějovice
CEO / statutory director
Creative director
Strategic director
Int. Relations manager
Outreach manager
Programme manager
Advisor

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

¹<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-08/ecoc-2028-czech-republic-final-selection-report.pdf>

²<https://www.budejovice2028.eu/files/bidbook-web.pdf>

³<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/node/2890>

Report and presentation from Budweis 2028

Prior to the meeting, the Budweis team submitted a written progress report. The report was structured around the six criteria of the ECoC action and presented the major developments since Budweis was designated as European Capital of Culture as well as the main challenges encountered.

The Budweis 2028 team delivered a presentation outlining their progress in terms of the ECoC 2028 project. They began by expressing their enthusiasm for the opportunity to share updates and welcomed feedback from the panel. The presentation emphasised the strides made since being awarded the title, focusing on advancing the cultural strategy, establishing partnerships, and operationalizing the bid book into an actionable implementation plan.

The team detailed their commitment to the theme of "(Perma)Culture," describing it as a guiding principle for fostering sustainable cultural development, community engagement, and artistic innovation. They highlighted the establishment of strategic partnerships at local, national, and European levels as a cornerstone of their approach. Notably, they emphasised their efforts to integrate their initiatives into broader regional strategies, ensuring alignment with the South Bohemian Region's cultural goals.

The presentation also underscored the importance of building connections and empowering individuals through co-creation and capacity-building activities. The team shared examples of pilot projects implemented to test methodologies, engage diverse audiences, and refine their approach. These projects have allowed them to gather insights into the feasibility and sustainability of their plans, contributing to the iterative development of their implementation strategy.

A central component of the presentation was the implementation plan itself, which the team described as a dynamic and evolving document. They articulated how it provided clear milestones for each phase of the ECoC programme while incorporating the recommendations made during the selection process. The team emphasised their commitment to learning and adapting through continuous feedback, which they see as essential to achieving their long-term objectives.

Throughout the presentation, the team showcased their efforts to foster a strong European dimension. They elaborated on their engagement with international partners, highlighting collaborations designed to bring new expertise and opportunities to local cultural organisations. These partnerships, they noted, aim to create a synergy between local and international actors, further embedding Budweis within the European cultural network.

In closing, the Budweis 2028 team reaffirmed their dedication to realizing the vision outlined in their bid book. They described the year ahead as a critical period for addressing challenges, including finalizing recruitment for key roles and ensuring that infrastructure projects remain on track. Despite these hurdles, the team conveyed optimism about their ability to meet these challenges and deliver an impactful ECoC programme that aligns with the principles of (Perma)Culture.

Discussion

During the subsequent discussion, the panel sought clarification on aspects related to panel recommendations from the final selection 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 opened the dialogue with the Budweis team, by inquiring about how the implementation plan related to the original bid book, specifically asking whether the new plan risked deviating from the initial objectives or creating entirely new strategies. The Budweis 2028 team reassured the panel that the implementation plan directly operationalised the bid book and remained fully aligned with its vision and goals. They emphasised that the plan was developed as a structured roadmap to translate the bid's objectives into actionable steps while incorporating recommendations from the selection panel. The team stated that this iterative approach ensured clarity and adaptability as they navigate the complexities of the ECoC programme.
- The panel inquired about how the implementation plan addressed recommendations from the selection report. The team provided examples, showing how these were integrated into the plan, such as prioritizing European partnerships and engaging underrepresented communities through thematic and outreach strategies. Describing the plan as a "living document," they highlighted its adaptability to feedback and challenges while maintaining alignment with the bid's vision. Addressing concerns about "reinventing the wheel," the team clarified that the plan operationalised the bid's concepts without creating new strategies, evolving them into actionable, measurable components.
- A specific question was raised about how the team planned to measure ambitious targets, such as attracting "1.32 million new visitors" or ensuring "every second Czech citizen knows Budweis is the ECoC." The team explained that baseline studies, initially scheduled for 2024, had been postponed to early 2025 to ensure the collection of reliable and meaningful data. They outlined their collaboration with local tourism organisations and other regional stakeholders to gather and analyse data on visitor numbers, public awareness, and other key performance indicators. This data will be used to track progress, identify gaps, and make informed adjustments to their strategies.
- The panel expressed interest in how the team was planning for the programme's legacy and its contribution to the city's long-term cultural development. The team highlighted that their programme was rooted in the principles of sustainability and capacity building, which they believed would leave a lasting impact beyond 2028. Legacy planning involves not only creating a vibrant cultural calendar for the ECoC year but also establishing a framework for continued cultural activities, infrastructure use, and local stakeholder engagement. The implementation plan includes milestones for legacy-oriented projects, such as strengthening partnerships with local cultural organisations to ensure their sustainability and relevance after the ECoC year.

- The team elaborated on the alignment of their cultural strategy with regional and national plans. They emphasised that the South Bohemian Region's cultural goals had been integrated into the ECoC framework, ensuring that Budweis 2028 was not an isolated initiative but a key driver for broader regional cultural development. The programme also aligns with national cultural strategies, enabling synergies in funding, policy support, and stakeholder engagement.
- When asked about how they were monitoring and evaluating progress toward long-term goals, the team explained their use of the Theory of Change framework. This approach helps identify key inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes needed to achieve the desired long-term impact. The team has also established a system of regular reviews and stakeholder consultations to ensure that the implementation plan remains on track and responsive to emerging challenges and opportunities.

Cultural and artistic content

- The panel began by asking how the team was incorporating lessons learned from the pilot projects into the future development of the programme. The Budweis 2028 team elaborated on how the pilot projects served as critical testing grounds for methodologies, logistics, and partner capacities. They described using the "Perma Matrix" evaluation framework to align each project with the overarching principles of (Perma)Culture. This process has revealed valuable insights, such as the need to address regional mobility challenges and barriers to participation. For example, pilot projects involving regional partners highlighted logistic issues in transporting audiences and performers, which the team plans to resolve by enhancing transport links and refining project designs.
- The panel inquired about the flexibility of the programme to adapt to new learnings. The team emphasised that their programme was designed as a dynamic process, allowing for adjustments based on feedback from pilot projects. They noted that this iterative approach not only strengthened project delivery but also fostered innovation by encouraging co-creation and experimentation with partners.
- The panel asked about the artistic vision of the programme and how it reflected the values of (Perma)Culture. The team detailed their three thematic pillars — CARE, CONNECT, and CREATE — as the guiding framework for the artistic programme. Each pillar supports specific objectives, such as accessibility and inclusion under CARE, strengthening local and European connections under CONNECT, and fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration under CREATE. The team highlighted projects that brought these themes to life, such as cultural events promoting biodiversity, collaborative workshops with European artists, and initiatives to integrate art into urban and natural spaces.
- When questioned about the plans for upcoming open calls for projects, the team provided an overview of their objectives. They aim to address overlooked areas (referred to as "blind spots" by the team) in the programme, particularly by engaging communities that have been underrepresented in cultural initiatives, such as Roma and Ukrainian populations. Criteria for the open calls will prioritise projects that demonstrate artistic boldness, foster international partnerships, and align with the ECoC's long-term goals. Additionally, the team intends to use these calls to strengthen the involvement of regional and local cultural organisations, ensuring that smaller institutions have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the programme.

- The panel also asked about the balance between projects led by the Budweis 2028 team and those managed by external partners. The team outlined their three-tiered structure for project management: core projects directly organised by the Budweis 2028 team, co-created projects with local and regional partners, and independent initiatives led entirely by external organisations. They emphasised that 70% of the programme was intended to be delivered by external partners, a strategy aimed at building capacity within the local cultural ecosystem and ensuring sustainability beyond 2028. Capacity-building programmes and co-creation workshops have already been implemented to prepare partners for these roles.
- The discussion moved to the role of the Panel of Independent Programme Experts (PIPE) in shaping the artistic programme. The team explained that the PIPE provided both strategic and operational recommendations to ensure the programme maintained high artistic standards and aligned with the ECoC's objectives. The experts, drawn from diverse cultural sectors, review projects, propose adjustments, and contribute to the artistic vision. This independent layer of oversight ensures that the programme remains innovative and impactful while addressing the specific needs of Budweis and its surrounding region.
- In response to a follow-up question about the meaning attributed to co-creation and the involvement of PIPE in the relevant process, the team detailed their efforts to involve local communities, cultural organisations, and European partners in the development phase of the projects. This collaborative approach ensures that the programme reflects the aspirations and needs of all stakeholders, contributing to a shared sense of ownership and pride in the ECoC initiative and its long-term objectives. Additionally, PIPE members are not involved in the co-creation process, in order to avoid any conflicts of interest.
- The panel raised concerns about how the programme planned to incorporate sustainability into its artistic content. The team responded by highlighting initiatives that directly aligned with (Perma)Culture's focus on sustainability. Examples include public art installations that emphasise environmental themes, projects promoting biodiversity, and collaborations with environmental scientists to merge ecological and cultural narratives. These efforts aim to position Budweis as a leading example of sustainable cultural development.

European dimension

- The panel opened the discussion by questioning how the Budweis 2028 team had engaged the European and international partners outlined in their bid. The team responded by highlighting their efforts to integrate these partners into the planning and execution of the cultural programme. They explained that many of the listed partners were actively contributing to project design and impact evaluation, ensuring that the European dimension remained a cornerstone of the initiative. For example, European collaborators are advising on cultural mobility projects and audience engagement strategies to foster transnational connections.
- The panel raised concerns about whether these collaborations were creating meaningful impacts on the local cultural landscape. The team acknowledged that many local organisations lacked experience in international projects, presenting a challenge in bridging these partnerships effectively. To address this, they have initiated capacity-building programmes designed to equip local cultural actors with the skills and confidence needed to collaborate on a European scale. These

initiatives include workshops, mentorship opportunities, and knowledge-sharing sessions with experienced European cultural institutions.

- When asked about specific collaborations with Bourges and Skopje, the team elaborated on their plans to formalise these relationships. They described ongoing discussions to develop a common framework for cooperation, including thematic focuses and shared objectives. A memorandum of understanding is expected to be signed in 2025, followed by joint projects emphasising mutual exchange and shared cultural narratives.
- The panel then probed into how the ECoC title was being used to foster broader European partnerships. The team explained that they were leveraging the visibility of the title to engage new European partners, with a particular focus on establishing connections with other ECoC cities. These relationships aim to facilitate the exchange of good practices and resources, enhancing the programme's capacity to deliver on its European dimension. Collaborative projects with former and future ECoCs are also being explored.
- The panel inquired about how the programme ensured the involvement of European artists and organisations in its artistic content. The team provided examples of ongoing collaborations, such as workshops with artists from various European countries and joint exhibitions that reflect shared cultural themes. These initiatives are designed to bring European perspectives into the local cultural scene, fostering a dialogue between local and international artists. The team emphasised that these collaborations also aimed to inspire local audiences, introducing them to diverse cultural expressions from across Europe.
- Further questions were raised about the challenges of maintaining a strong European dimension in a region with limited international experience. The team acknowledged these difficulties and outlined their approach to overcoming them. In addition to capacity-building efforts, they are working closely with local stakeholders to promote the benefits of European partnerships. For instance, they are facilitating networking events and co-creation workshops where local and European actors can meet, share ideas, and develop joint projects.
- The panel also sought clarification on how European partnerships were being integrated into programme evaluation and legacy planning. The team explained that European partners were contributing to the design of monitoring frameworks, ensuring that the programme's outcomes align with European values and priorities. They are also involved in discussions about the programme's long-term impact, helping to define legacy goals that extend beyond 2028. This includes fostering a culture of international collaboration within the region, with the hope that local organisations will continue to engage with European partners in the years to come.
- Finally, the panel asked how the team plans to measure the progress of developing a strong European Dimension in the programme. The team outlined their approach, which includes tracking the number and quality of partnerships, the diversity of European artists involved, and audience feedback on transnational projects. They are also developing indicators to assess the impact of European collaborations on local cultural organisations.

Outreach

- The panel began by asking how the team was engaging underrepresented communities, such as the Roma and Ukrainian populations, as well as individuals with disabilities. The Budweis 2028 team described their efforts to collaborate with Roma organisations through targeted capacity-building initiatives and co-creation projects. These efforts aim to foster trust and ensure active participation from these communities. For instance, specific cultural projects are being developed to celebrate Roma heritage and promote inclusion through artistic expression. Additionally, the team is working closely with organisations specialising in disability advocacy to create accessible cultural experiences, ensuring that people with disabilities can fully engage with the programme.
- When questioned about audience development strategies, the team acknowledged the need for more robust planning to reach diverse demographics. They highlighted the “Audience Amplifier Programme”, which focuses on training cultural organisations to enhance audience engagement techniques. This initiative includes workshops on accessibility, tailored outreach campaigns, and methods to gather feedback from underrepresented groups.
- The panel inquired about the digital outreach strategy and its alignment with the marketing plan. The team explained that the digital strategy was in its developmental stages, but would play a critical role in reaching both national and international audiences. Each project will include a digital component to ensure accessibility for remote and tech-savvy participants. Efforts are also being made to improve the region’s digital infrastructure, such as implementing user-friendly ticketing systems and creating online platforms to share programme content with wider audiences. The team acknowledged the challenges of addressing digital skill gaps in the region and detailed plans to provide training and resources to local organisations.
- The panel sought clarification on how the team measured the effectiveness of their outreach initiatives. The team described their evaluation framework, which combines baseline studies, audience surveys, and feedback loops from individual projects. These tools will allow them to assess how well the programme resonates with different audience segments and identify areas for improvement. For example, feedback from pilot projects has already informed adjustments to project design, ensuring better alignment with audience needs.
- Further questions were raised about open calls for community-driven projects and how these would ensure engagement with underrepresented groups. The team explained that they had already launched a pilot open call to test the application and selection process. This approach allowed them to gather valuable insights into community priorities and the challenges faced by smaller organisations. The next round of open calls will focus on two main areas: one targeting soft skills development for community groups and another prioritising artistic projects that engage specific communities. To increase accessibility, the team is working on simplifying the application process and providing guidance to potential applicants.
- The panel asked how the network of 28 cultural centres – 28 HOUSES in the region was being utilised to strengthen outreach efforts. The team highlighted this network as a key resource for reaching communities that might otherwise be disconnected from cultural initiatives. These centres serve as hubs for workshops, exhibitions, and performances, enabling decentralised access to the ECoC programme.

- The discussion also touched on how outreach initiatives aligned with the (Perma)Culture theme. The team provided examples of projects that integrated cultural and environmental elements, such as outdoor exhibitions in natural spaces and workshops that combined traditional crafts with modern ecological practices.
- Lastly, the panel inquired about how feedback from the outreach initiatives would be integrated into future programme development. The team explained that they were adopting a systematic approach to audience feedback, incorporating insights from surveys, focus groups, and direct interactions with participants. This data will be used to refine project designs, improve accessibility, and ensure that the programme continues to meet the needs of diverse audiences.

Management

- The panel raised multiple concerns regarding the delays in recruiting key personnel, particularly the CEO and Managing Director, and questioned how this was affecting the overall programme delivery. The team acknowledged the challenges, attributing the delays to public perceptions of instability within the organisation. They reassured the panel that recruitment processes for these roles were already underway, with open calls launched for the Marketing and Financial Manager positions and additional calls for the Head of Delivery planned following the appointment of the Managing Director. They emphasised that addressing these gaps was a top priority to stabilise governance and ensure smooth implementation.
- The panel further probed into the distinctions between the roles of the CEO and the Managing Director, questioning whether the team had clarified the responsibilities and reporting lines for these key positions. The team admitted that there had been some ambiguity during the bid phase but assured the panel that these roles were now clearly defined, with the CEO focusing on strategic leadership and external representation, while the Managing Director handles day-to-day operations and project management.
- The panel expressed concerns about the team's capacity to manage such a complex initiative with ongoing staffing gaps, particularly in light of the upcoming marketing strategy development. The team acknowledged these difficulties and described interim measures taken to distribute responsibilities among existing staff and external consultants. Despite these challenges, they stressed their commitment to delivering a robust marketing plan that integrates with both the digital outreach strategy and audience engagement efforts.
- In addition, the panel inquired about how the organisation was addressing internal stability and fostering a positive perception of its working environment to attract qualified professionals. The team explained that they were actively engaging stakeholders and local partners to demonstrate their commitment to the ECoC project and ensure transparency in decision-making. They highlighted their intention to build a resilient organisational culture through clear communication, professional development opportunities, and fostering team cohesion.

Capacity to deliver

- The panel sought clarification on the city's approach to ensuring infrastructure readiness by 2028, given its importance to the overall success of the ECoC initiative. The team reported that, while all major infrastructure projects were currently on track, they were exploring alternative solutions to mitigate potential delays. These include prioritising temporary venues and leveraging existing spaces for cultural events if necessary.
- Concerns were raised about the city's capacity to accommodate the expected increase in visitors, especially in terms of lodging and transportation infrastructure. The team acknowledged these challenges and emphasised their collaboration with local and regional authorities to expand accommodation options and improve transport links. Specific initiatives include enhancing the city's bus network and exploring partnerships with neighbouring regions to provide additional lodging capacity.
- The panel asked how the team plans to integrate sustainable practices into infrastructure development, aligning with the overarching (Perma)Culture theme. The team assured the panel that sustainability was a core principle guiding their approach. For example, they are incorporating eco-friendly designs in new construction projects and working with urban planners to improve the city's environmental footprint. They highlighted plans to use infrastructure improvements as an opportunity to showcase Budweis as a model for sustainable urban development.
- Finally, the panel inquired about the timeline for completing key infrastructure projects and how these milestones were being monitored. The team outlined their phased approach, which includes regular evaluations to ensure projects remain on schedule and within budget. They also emphasised their coordination with national and regional stakeholders to align these efforts with broader development initiatives, ensuring long-term benefits beyond 2028.

Conclusions and recommendations

The panel commends the Budweis 2028 team for their commitment and dedication to delivering an ambitious ECoC programme. The presentation and subsequent open and frank discussions demonstrated a clear alignment with the principles outlined in the bid book, showcasing thoughtful planning and innovative approaches to cultural development. The team's progress in operationalising the bid book into a detailed implementation plan, fostering European partnerships, and engaging local stakeholders is noteworthy. Their efforts to incorporate the panel's recommendations and address challenges with adaptability reflect a strong commitment to the programme's success.

However, the panel wishes to draw attention to the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** The Budweis 2028 team has made significant progress in developing an implementation plan. The focus should now be on delivering the planned projects and achieving measurable results, while ensuring resources remain balanced across all priorities. This includes translating plans into tangible actions, engaging stakeholders effectively, and demonstrating clear progress toward the programme's objectives.

- **Recommendation 2:** Initiate, as soon as possible, comprehensive baseline studies to provide data for monitoring and evaluating progress on overlooked areas. This data should directly inform programming and strategic adjustments, if required, ensuring alignment with the programme's long-term objectives.
- **Recommendation 3:** The Budweis 2028 team should enhance its efforts to engage underrepresented communities through targeted capacity-building and co-creation projects.
- **Recommendation 4:** Deepen collaborations with European and international stakeholders to ensure a robust European dimension in the programme. The team should leverage opportunities such as the upcoming meeting between ECoC 2028 cities to formalise partnerships, exchange good practices, and develop transnational projects that align with the programme's themes.
- **Recommendation 5:** Create a comprehensive marketing and communication plan that translates the (Perma)Culture concept into accessible and compelling language. This plan should include a strong international cultural tourism component, targeting international audiences while enhancing digital outreach strategies to integrate tech-savvy participants and improve accessibility. Additionally, this will support the development of a comprehensive fundraising plan to secure private financial contributions, presently missing.
- **Recommendation 6:** The team must stabilise governance by finalising the recruitment of key leadership roles, such as the CEO and Managing Director, and clearly defining their responsibilities. This should be formalized into an organigram to ensure reporting lines and responsibilities. The team should be recruited as presented in the staffing plan in the report. Additionally, benchmarking salaries and offering competitive conditions will help attract top talent and foster a positive working environment.
- **Recommendation 7:** Continuously monitor the readiness of infrastructure projects while developing backup plans for potential delays. Enhance local accommodation and transportation options to manage increased visitor numbers, integrating sustainable practices in line with the (Perma)Culture themes.
- **Recommendation 8:** Simplify and enhance the internal reporting system to improve communication with stakeholders and citizens. Adopt systematic feedback loops to ensure audience and community insights are integrated into future programme development.

The panel encourages the Budweis 2028 team to address these recommendations with urgency and focus. The team should now scale up their efforts, start implementation of proposed programmes, and communicate their progress effectively to stakeholders.

Next steps

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

The Commission will call for a second monitoring meeting in the spring 2026 and the third and final meeting in the autumn 2027. At the end of the third monitoring meeting, the

panel will make a recommendation to the Commission on whether to grant the Melina Mercouri Prize to Budweis 2028.

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

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

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

- (a) the budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-quality cultural programme in line with the application and the criteria;
- (b) the independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
- (c) the European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final version of the cultural programme;
- (d) the marketing and communication strategy and the communication material used by the designated city clearly reflects the fact that the action is a Union action;
- (e) the plans for the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the title on the designated city are in place."

The panel would like to thank the Budweis 2028 team for a very informative and open discussion and looks forward to the next developments of the European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending panel's members

