



Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2026 in Slovakia

The Expert Panel's report

Selection Stage

Hybrid Meeting, December 2021

European Capital of Culture Expert Panel

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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 2026 in Slovakia. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985.

The Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic (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 2026 in Slovakia” (the “rules”) adopted by the Ministry and published on its website.²

A panel of independent experts was established for the selection process, in line with Article 2 of the Rules. Two members of the panel were appointed by the Ministry, while the other ten members were appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies (European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions). One position in the panel is vacant.

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

Pre-selection round

The managing authority issued a call for applications on 17 December 2019. Eight applications were submitted by the closing date of 15 December 2020 by: Banská Bystrica, Hlohovec, Martin, Nitra, Prešov, Trenčín, Trnava and Žilina.

The panel met on 2-5 February 2021 for the pre-selection meeting. It recommended inviting the three bidding cities of Nitra, Trenčín and Žilina 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 three cities to submit revised applications with a deadline of 2 November 2021.

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

¹ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG (in English)

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014D0445&from=EN> (in Slovak)

² https://www.culture.gov.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Final_EN_gm_sp_suggestions2_rop2_upd.pdf (in English)

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/sites/default/files/2021-03/ecoc-2026-slovakia-preselection-report.pdf>

A delegation of three members of the panel took part in city visits on 6-8 December 2021. They were accompanied by observers from the managing authority and the European Commission. The delegation reported back to the panel at the selection meeting.

Panel Meeting

The panel met partially in presence and partially online on 9-10 December 2021. Two members of the panel were excused for professional and personal reasons. 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. The panel confirmed Ms. Paulina Florjanowicz as its Chair and elected Mr. Jozef Kovalcik as Vice-chair, in replacement of Mr. Jan Sudzina (excused). Ms. Dessislava Gavrilova was elected by the panel as rapporteur.

At the selection hearings on 9 and 10 December 2021, each candidate city presented its case (in 45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (in 75 minutes).

The Chair of the panel announced the panel's recommendation at an ECoC announcement event, livestreamed, after the meeting on 10th of December 2021 in the presence of the Slovak Minister of Culture, Ms. Natália Milanová, and the Head of the Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia, Mr. Ladislav Miko.

National context

2026 will be the second time Slovakia will host the "European Capital of Culture" after Kosice in 2013. 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 the particular situations in their respective cities and regions. It welcomed the development of the bidding proposals between the pre-selection and the selection stages. The panel appreciates that the three cities have used the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies, to further involve their citizens in the cultural process, and to strengthen the role of culture in their overall socio-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition. The panel saw as potentially problematic the fact that, according to Slovak law, the city and the region need to approve the budget allocation year by year, which potentially could cause delays and obstacles to the ECoC preparation. It is advisable that the selected city develops strategies to prevent this from happening.

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 the 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.

I. Nitra

Nitra presented its final selection bid under the title “Breaking Point”. Conceptually built around the themes of “Breaking the silence”, “Breaking the cycle” and “Breaking the ground”, the bid was bringing the pre-selection proposal a step further.

The programme proposed in the bid was aiming to achieve a set of goals: that citizens become conscious and proud part of a wider European story; that society engages in healthy dialogue; that Nitra becomes an attractive city with a vision and with citizens who care; that culture is decentralised, uniting the region into a cooperative, synergic, liveable, and fun space; and that citizens become active creators who live sustainably. All this, together with a strong European dimension, is expected to impact the city and make in particular its children want to build their lives there.

1. Contribution to the long term strategy

- The Strategy for the Development of Culture and Creative Industries in Nitra for 2021-2031 (NK31) was approved by the city council on 10 December 2020. This is in line with the requirement in the Decision 445/2014/EU.
- Plans for monitoring and evaluation have been put in place, which is a plus.
- The legacy of the possible Nitra 2026 ECoC is seen by the bidding team in transforming its people to become more open-minded, more inclusive and more European as

well as in changing the whole surrounding region, with the view to stopping brain drain. In that way, Nitra could be a good example for other cities in Europe who also have the same challenges.

- The panel sees the planned Open Data portal and the GIS portal that is to house and disseminate Nitra 2026 monitoring raw data and results as an appropriate tool and a good element in the bid.
- Data collection at local authority level is planned, which is positively seen by the panel as a potential legacy for the city.
- More particularly, the fact that the data for the GIS platform will be partially gathered automatically in the GIS platform (e.g. visitor counters) and partially be introduced by citizens through specific apps (emotions, opinions of events, etc.) or by employees of the municipality is quite interesting. The data will then be evaluated by the evaluation team of the association and by the partner university.
- Core needs have been analysed, which is a good starting point, and the data strategy and basic plans such as moving from paper storage into digital storage is realistic. Contrastingly, the most innovative methods such as plans for the 3D model of the city and storytelling capture techniques are at an exploratory stage and are to be further developed.
- The panel appreciates the idea to use the Visegrad Fund in order to finance evaluations in all V4 countries, as it has the potential to reiterate the Visegrad format.

2. Cultural and artistic content

- The overall artistic vision of the proposed bid is “to make Nitra a Breaking Point – a place where the dysfunctional is broken down, replanted and put together into something healthy and resilient. Where the energy makes Nitra’s cultivation gene break into action and our challenges break through our limitations to become opportunities.”
- The proposed programme is well thematically structured, and is built upon six principles: Openness, Participation, Sincerity, Synthesis, Ubiquity, and Edginess.
- Several of the projects have the potential to be attractive to the local community, which the panel sees as a positive element in the bid, as this is a good way to ensure the project’s ownership at local level.
- Several projects are history-based, and aim to question the way the past is being interpreted. The panel appreciates this attempt, but it remains unclear, however, from what standpoint this re-interpretation of the past is expected to take place, and how it will be contextualised.
- The bid does not always manage to convincingly argue how a series of artistic events that run under the rubric of “flagship projects” will indeed be perceived by the audience as such, and not as simply a collection of several smaller individual projects.

3. European dimension

- Identity, Dialogue and Breaking the Ground are the three “jabs” the team describes as necessary to produce the necessary changes in Nitra to make its people more active, more honest and more self-reflective, and its culture more inclusive. The integration of the European Green Deal as a topic into the programme, as well as the links to Next Generation Europe are seen as adding an important European dimension.
- However, despite such ambitions with a clear European resonance, the panel assesses the individual projects included in the programme, though intrinsically valuable, as too locally oriented and lacking a clear thematic line that tackles issues of European relevance. The expectation that carrying work together with European partners contributes per se to a strong European dimension of the ECoC cultural programme is hard to justify.
- It was also hard for the panel to see which were the projects that had the potential to attract broad interest from different ends of Europe.
- The conviction of the bidding team that themes of European relevance, such as sustainable agriculture (an important element in the bid, in line with the European Green Deal), or the participation of international artists, such as the Japanese artist of the Torn apart project, will automatically attract international audiences is questionable. The expectation that the participative projects developed by international artists working with a local audience will attract international attention does not convince the panel either: there is indeed a long way to go from being aware of the qualities of an artistic project to convincing a broad international audience to come and visit Nitra.

4. Outreach

- The final selection bid brings a step further the integration of marginalised groups after the pre-selection evaluation pointed out the need to do so. Activities that reach out directly to the Roma community, for example, are now included. This is a positive development.
- The individual projects mentioned, however, do not constitute a well-articulated strategy for addressing different minorities.
- The extensive definition of target groups of the bid activities leaves room for improvement. Content addressing specific parts of the population, like, for example, those not yet interested in culture, ask for further development.
- Further, there appears to be a lack of input from multiple generations - beyond the very clear involvement of the generational demographic represented by this young and highly motivated team.
- The bid proposes many valuable topics, and many projects proposed remain very interesting for the local community. It also includes some interesting projects aimed at younger audiences, which the panel finds as quite relevant.

- On a less positive note, the proposed programme did not offer enough to all possible target groups, such as e.g. teenagers with little interest in high art and intellectual topics. It fails to convince that approaching such a group is appropriately attempted.

5. Management

- The bid envisages a total budget of 27,5 million Euro to cover the operating expenditures of the ECoC year. This would come from the national Government, a three times lower contribution from the city of Nitra and from the Nitra region, as well as contribution from the regional cities and the EU.
- 61% of the budget would go to cover programme expenditures, 18% for marketing, 19% to cover wages, overhead and administration, and 2% would go to monitoring and evaluation.
- Although the national Government's contribution is slightly disproportionately high, it can be well explained by the local financial conditions. Overall, the budget seems realistic, with an appropriate split between the various expenditure categories.
- The Nitra 2026 Association has been established as a “three-dimensional biomatrix model of organisational structure” that is to ensure efficiency, effectiveness and accountability as well as high quality of the artistic programme and professionalism in the process of implementation of the ECoC.
- The panel saw as a missed opportunity that the association governing and advisory bodies do not yet involve the sponsors and the cultural institutions, but the team assured the panel that they plan to involve them in the advisory board (the cultural institutions) or as members of the association (the sponsors).
- The lack of sufficient experience among the team members in management of large public investment and infrastructure projects was seen by the panel as potentially problematic.
- The panel praised the team for keeping their motivation and engagement despite the difficult circumstances in the last two years.

6. Capacity to deliver

- In November 2020, the Nitra City Council approved the plan to invest 5 million Euro for the preparation and implementation of Nitra 2026. The Nitra Regional Council approved the accession to the Nitra 2026 Association in June 2021 along with their initial financial contribution. Local councils of 14 (out of 15) cities in the Nitra region also approved Memoranda on Cooperation and Support for the candidacy, with intent to join the Association. This shows the local government's commitment to the ECoC bid of Nitra.
- The panel noted the bottom-up approach in developing the bid as a positive feature, but at the same time expressed fears that the necessary administrative capacity needed to run a successful ECoC, along with delivering major infrastructural developments, might not be fully there.

- The complexity of completing projects within a tight and inflexible timeframe - 2 to 3 years for some projects - and the potential impact of delays does not have to be underestimated. The team did not manage to convince the panel that they have a feasible plan B. The potential of uncompleted infrastructural projects on which the programme relies, to harm the smooth realisation of the ECoC and to lower its impact, is strong.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Nitra is not selected.

The overall strategy of the city of Nitra is assessed to be somewhat declarative and lacking precision as to how the “breaking through” concept will be translated in all aspects of the proposed ECoC year programmes. Some aspects of the proposed programmes are not sufficiently precise and well thought through - the declared ambition to challenge well-known historical narratives, for example, is seen as conceptually not sufficiently articulated. The panel was rather disappointed by Nitra’s 2026 projects about archaeology given its potential on this type of heritage. Despite some interesting ideas, the panel judged the programme as too locally oriented, addressing predominantly local issues, with the European dimension of programme perceived as underdeveloped. Having in mind that the ECoC must represent the city, its region, its country and Europe at the same time, the panel felt that the proposed programme is not yet developed enough to reach the requested standards.

The contingency planning when it comes to Covid-19 seems quite developed. It is particularly encouraging to see that the team envisages contingency plans for all projects in the planning phase. It is also encouraging to see that more than 60% of the programming has digital components, given that most probably, Covid-19 is going to be with us for years to come, and that we are just at the doorsteps of the fully digitised world. This is highly commendable.

Recommendation:

The panel recommends that the city of Nitra builds upon the good work already done in the preparation for the ECoC competition. Long lasting connections between the cultural sector and the local economy and the social environment are worth strengthening. Further developing the capacity of the city cultural department to lead monitoring and evaluation of its programmes is encouraged. It is seen by the panel as valuable that the city invests further efforts in order to reach out with its cultural offer to a more socially diverse, not necessarily cultured and elite audience.

II Trenčín

The Trenčín bid in under the slogan “Cultivating Curiosity”, understood as a universal catalyst for cultural change and regeneration, leading to genuine care, responsibility, interest and empathy. Curiosity is seen as an essential tool for Europe, stimulating the first steps to mutual understanding and solidarity. It is “the main precondition to learn and create a creative and flexible environment” in the city and its surrounding region, which can react and address new challenges and contribute to solving existing ones. The vision is to bring the city to its contemporary cultural expression, full of collaboration and co-creation.

1. Contribution to the long term strategy

- Livable City – Unique TRENČÍN si TY 2021 – 2030 with an outlook to 2040 (Cultural Strategy) was unanimously approved by the city council on 10 March 2021. This is in line with the requirement in the Decision 445/2014/EU.
- The proposed long-term strategy is complex and “thick” of programmes and measures that, if executed as planned, have the potential to leave a strong legacy in Trenčín. It aims at demonstrating how a small city in Central Europe can become open, cultivate culture and creativity and rise to become a true European city where people from Europe and from Slovakia are happy to live and visit.
- By connecting people through culture across Europe and encouraging them to co-create and co-decide their future, the strategic aim is to empower the citizens to build a sustainable and meaningful life in which they can find happiness and fulfilment. The ECoC title is seen as aiding this process, and strengthening the legacy. The panel welcomes the clear linkages between the ECoC project, its overall concept and the strategy in place.
- The proposed monitoring and evaluation plans are well developed, with the Living Lab as their key element. It foresees a wealth of impact indicators, although baseline data is not gathered yet, which makes the quantification of change difficult until closer to the event date. Work is underway however to standardise the available material, to better understand its value. Dedicated specialists are to be appointed in order to progress this further, as the team does not have the expertise among its members.
- The Culture Living Lab envisages an independent research team, with related challenges, such as the time required to set it up at the university. However, universities are key partners and deans across different faculties, as well as the Rector, are key supporters of the process. The standardisation of data is another challenge, but NGOs are all keen to help - they have started sharing their numbers, and there is a huge interest in improving data storage and data analysis for the sector.
- The concept of the "cultural ambassadors" is a valuable and innovative element of the cultural strategy put forward by the bidding team.
- It is seen as a positive feature that the ECoC project is only one part of the city's vision, surely the central one, but not the only one. The fact that the city has a Plan B, namely to apply to the UNESCO creative cities list and to attempt to become the Slovak capital of culture, is a sign of the sustainability for the city's strategy for positive culture-centred transformation.

Recommendation:

It is important that the city prioritises setting up baselines as soon as possible, so that the evaluation programme can capture its capacity to deliver change. The bidding team should make sure they maintain the momentum regarding the value of a strong evaluation framework and data sharing mechanisms, as they develop it further. Swift expert's appointment should be prioritised, to help refine the M&E technical issues, and structure the respective efforts.

2. Cultural and artistic content

- The cultural and artistic programme aims to express with innovative artistic means the true authenticity and contemporary identity of Trenčín, offering at the same time a deep understanding of its roots, heritage, potential, and future needs. It is to contribute to turning Trenčín into a European, vibrant, and sustainable city with diverse, exciting cultural offerings and accessible creative opportunities for all.
- The panel considers that the cultural and artistic programme is well structured – it envisages three strands divided into six thematic lines (#cityMatters, #communityMatters, etc.) with more than a hundred projects aligned under them.
- The panel sees it as a positive element that within this structure space will be left to the Artistic Director, aided by the experience of the team in working on cultural work production, to impact the programme development and secure high quality.
- The vision developed in the programme is clearly reflected in each chapter of the bid-book, which constitutes a key strength of the application, as it shows a strong overall coherence.
- The transversal aspect of the programme is also highly appreciated by the panel. The fact that during the Q&A session the team demonstrated a thorough knowledge of all aspects of the programme is a key credibility-enhancing factor.
- The programme development process was thoroughly bottom-up, with 3.700 meetings with citizens, artists and cultural workers being carried through, which is an excellent way to ensure ownership of the ECoC project locally and a good starting-point for legacy.
- The panel sees significant progress in developing the programme between the 1st and 2nd stages of the bid, and it appreciates how its recommendations after the first round in this respect have been taken into account.
- The increase in the programme budget by more than 100% between the two stages of the competition gives more credibility to the overall programme development, as there is now stronger consistency between the cultural and artistic ambitions and available financial resources.
- The panel appreciates the approach to artistic programme development, aimed at making different communities work together (such as the church, the army, etc.), and thus develop quality projects of wide and diverse appeal.
- The bid's take on cultural heritage is also particularly good – aiming at changing the community's approach to cultural heritage, and at allowing heritage to be seen through contemporary lenses.
- The cultural and artistic programme includes a clear vision of legacy. The most important project for the team and citizens alike, in terms of legacy, is the Fiesta Bridge. It is meant to give new creative space for artists and new location for the inhabitants to experience art and culture and different events, and it would surely allure attention from the

visitors of Trenčín, as it is located in the very vicinity of the city centre – the equivalent of the Eiffel Tower for Trenčín, one might say.

Recommendation:

If there can be one recommendation on this excellent programme proposal of the competent bidding team, it would be to aim at uniqueness, as well as protect the provocative dimension of some of the artistic projects that will make the bone and flesh of the ECoC year.

Regarding the performance in a WWII memorial site where a mass murder took place, the panel invites the city to be extremely mindful about the event to organise there, taking into account all the sensitive aspects that might transpire.

3. European dimension

- The panel appreciates the development of the European dimension of the Trenčín bid between the pre-selection and final selection phases.
- The current bid shows a genuine European dimension, permeating the whole bid and made credible by the quality of the presentation. All the proposed projects involve international partners, which is impressive.
- An interesting tale on an aspect of the European dimension is the topic of military presence in the city and its influence on city's life – a topic that is relevant to many cities across Europe. The team plans to further explore it and has already established contacts with two cities in similar situations: Narva in Estonia and Pilsen in the Czech Republic.
- The European dimension is articulated by the team in terms of allowing Trenčín's citizens and people from the region to live out in 2026 the European dimension in their daily lives. Aspects of it are felt already now – in the increased “appetite” for internationalisation, in the work of the local community and artists who express the urge to connect beyond the local and the Slovak, and through the strengthened curiosity to learn new things from elsewhere in the world.
- The panel appreciates the ambition of the team to involve volunteers from as diverse European countries as possible within its Volunteering (“Voluntraining”) programme. The Trenčín team is already working on that with Galway and Novi Sad, and is developing its international ‘online volunteers’ plan.

Recommendation:

The panel recommends that – when it comes to the theme of the military heritage of the city - the ECoC programme is not limited to cities of the former Eastern bloc with former military presence but also to those in Western Europe (e.g. those that had American military bases), or those who are still today home to military units. It is interesting to investigate how the presence of the military influences cities' culture and social mosaic.

4. Management

- The Trenčín bid foresees an overall budget of 31,49 million Euro to cover the operating expenditures. This has been increased, compared to the first bid, in order to better fund programming and streamline management costs.
- The budget would come from the national Government (15 million Euro expected), the city (5,42 million Euro), the region (5 million Euro), the EU (3,02 million Euro), and the rest from other public and private sources.
- 71% of the budget would go to cover programme expenditure, 14 % - promotion and marketing, 11% would go for wages, overhead and administration.
- With the national Government contribution being relatively high, which is a common feature of the three bids of the ECoC competition finalist cities, and is conditioned by local specificities of the public finances allocation and availability, the budget is realistic.
- The organisational structure that is to carry out the ECoC is well designed, and it features mechanisms ensuring good working relationships with the city and Ministry.
- The financing of the ECoC seems to be well ensured, with the part invested by the city – at 18% - relatively low. Several of the envisaged infrastructure projects are already underway, which is a good basis for a smooth development.
- The marketing strategy as planned by Trenčín 2026 is good. The use of social media in marketing is well articulated, featuring innovative ways of being active on those platforms. The European dimension in the local marketing (Signs in the city of Trenčín) featuring multiple European languages, is also a strong aspect of the marketing plans.

Recommendation:

The panel recommends that the team of Trenčín keeps abreast with the fast development in the digital sphere, and that they involve experts possessing cutting-edge knowledge and expertise on how best to utilise the digital world in terms of production, audience development and delivery of an ECoC in the digitally marked post-Covid era.

5. Outreach

- The panel sees the outreach plans articulated in the bid-book as well defined, targeting diverse groups, including disadvantaged ones, in an original and transversal way.
- A key element of this endeavour is the Garage programme, which started already in 2021 (this is extremely positive) and is supposed to continue well beyond the ECoC year (also a plus in the candidacy).
- The programme proposes an interdisciplinary approach towards attracting diverse audiences. Its travelling aspect ensures that audiences from different social and economic backgrounds are reached. The programme is already popular, and widespread requests for it to visit remote parts of the city are already coming in. A range of participants in the Garage programme subsequently became culture ambassadors, and are now very involved with the ECoC project, which shows the multiplication potential of the programme. The project is becoming a catalyst for people's broad engagement - generating trust and demonstrating that participating in a meaningful cultural activity has widespread benefits.

- A key strength of the Garage project is its sustainability - the community is taking the lead in developing it, while being granted the freedom to decide how to implement it. While being rooted in the historical context of the soviet era dissident garage art, the project was also a major media success at local, as well as national and international levels.

6. Capacity to deliver

- The political support on local and regional levels is very strong.
- The capacity building plans outlined in the bid-book are vast and impressive, with over 60% of the projects featuring capacity-building elements. They address in a convincing way the concerns raised at the preselection phase about the limited availability of skilled people in the cultural field in the city of Trenčín.
- The panel positively takes note that already during the candidacy period many professionals have moved back or newly came to Trenčín or intends to develop projects with Trenčín. With the possible nomination, the expectation is that this phenomenon will be even strengthened.
- In addition, the team has already identified new creative professionals and organisations from the region who are ready to take part in the project.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the city of Trenčín is selected to become a European Capital of Culture in Slovakia in 2026.

The bid of the city of Trenčín impresses as being conceptually strong and very well structured.

The proposed cultural strategy is well grounded in the needs of the city, the region and its people, and has the potential to leave an important legacy in Trenčín. In its core it demonstrates how through culture, open-mindedness, and collaboration, a small city in Central Europe can become truly European, a city where people are happy to live and to visit.

The proposed cultural and artistic programme is conceptually strong, relevant, and well structured, where each part contributes to a coherent global message. Still, the programme is not rigid, but driven by the ambition to bring the highest possible artistic quality, while making different communities work together, thus developing quality projects of wide and diverse appeal.

The proposed programmes demonstrate an innate and genuine European dimension, which grows naturally from the international collaborations, interwoven in each project.

The organisational structure that is to carry out the ECoC is well designed, and a strong team has been brought together, which impresses with its professionalism. Finances are secured, with the involvement of the public and private sectors.

The approach to outreach described in the bid impresses with its clarity. A wide range of diverse groups, including disadvantaged ones, are being targeted in an original and transversal way.

The bid enjoys strong political support on local and regional level. With a professional core team already there and the impressive capacity building plans, with over 60% of the projects featuring capacity-building measures, there is no doubt that the city has the capacity to carry the ECoC preparations through.

III Žilina

The Žilina bid continues to be under the theme of “Window of Opportunity”. It covers the Beskids Euroregion and includes the partner cities of Bielsko-Biala in Poland and Frýdek-Místek in the Czech Republic. It aims at capturing the tense but also potentially fruitful situation of this cross-border and intends to build on its challenges and potentials.

The concept is still based on three main elements: Future's Factories, Flow of Nature, and Borderless Identities.

1. Contribution to the long term strategy

- The city of Žilina started the preparation of its cultural strategy along with the launch of the ECoC candidacy process in 2020. The city council adopted the strategy on 20 September 2021. This is in line with the requirement in the Decision 445/2014/EU.
- The team identifies as the greatest deficiency in the cultural policy the brain drain, the deficient working conditions for the creatives, the not sufficient audience for culture, particularly in the region, and the weak European dimension of the current cultural offer. The desired legacy of the ECoC year is to fix those deficiencies.
- The cultural strategy of the city of Žilina is in place, but the panel sees the absence of a regional strategy for culture for the whole Beskids Euroregion as a weakness of the proposed strategic approach, because the bid is entirely built on this cross-border element.
- Plans for monitoring and evaluation are put forward, but, at this decisive stage, they are still undeveloped, with only two ways of monitoring proposed, and with lack of clarity regarding what the baseline data that the team would aim to gather as a basis for evaluation is and how it will be collected.
- The way the city intends to collect data for the evaluation is seen by the panel as less than satisfactory.
- There is already a good level of collaboration on monitoring and evaluation between the team and the universities, and a memorandum of understanding is being signed, which is a positive development.

- The annual Culture Forum mentioned in the bid is seen by the panel as offering a welcomed fixed deadline that may help coordinate timeframes as this is the time university teams know they must share results.
- Still, it remains unclear whether and how the universities in three countries will align deliverables, and the complex governance structure for evaluation is somewhat concerning.
- The expectation stated in the bid-book that Žilina will attract 1 million visitors during the ECoC year is perceived as unrealistic, given that the region is now and will remain by 2026 hard to reach by public and other transport.

2. Cultural and artistic content

- Cross-border cooperation is in the centre of the bid's design and duly reflected in the cultural and artistic programme, with projects taking place in the three countries concerned.
- However, while the proposed programme features some very interesting project ideas and potential partners, the panel assesses it as too fragmented and lacking a clear common programmatic line.
- Most artistic projects take place in a single country, with only marginal connection to the other two cities, thus adding up to a collection of (often good) projects, rather than one clear programme concept. This might be partially because the geographic dispersion of the three cities is unfortunately limiting the possibilities for joint programme development.
- The panel perceived a strong top-down approach in the proposed programme design, rather than the more desired bottom-up and transversal one. As a result, the programme is perceived at potentially attracting an educated public, with limited audience development potential.
- The panel was positively impressed by some potentially interesting projects - such as the train travelling from Bulgaria to Finland with artists on board, but in the panel's view, they remained conceptually and logistically underdeveloped, and rather exclusive.
- The number of projects envisaged in the programme is very high, showing real ambition. This however raises concerns about how a high-quality realisation will be ensured, given the available financial and human resources, and the need to secure audience attention.
- Some of the artists involved in the proposed programme are internationally well known, but most of the time to a more narrow audience, which may limit the programme's overall appeal to a wider international audience.
- The Manifesto identifying eleven key values and principles is seen as a valuable tool, aiding the internal monitoring and evaluation process. It remains less clear however, what is unique to Žilina's ECoC-artistic vision in these otherwise broad and frequently promoted values.

3. European dimension

- The European dimension aspect of the project has been developed since the pre-selection phase, with connecting widely with other ECoCs and candidate cities, as well as with networks and partners from across the old continent. The panel recognizes this as a positive development though it considered there was still some room for further development.
- The whole concept is based on cross-border cooperation between three territories in three different EU Member States. This has a strong European Dimension per se, which the panel welcomes as a very positive endeavour. This is indeed an interesting way to create a sense of belonging to a common cultural area among citizens at a grass-root level.
- However, the panel had the impression from the bid-book and the hearing that the making of this cross-border cooperation was detrimental to a wider cooperation with partners from beyond the three countries concerned.
- The question how the ordinary people in the streets of Žilina and the region will feel more European as a result of the ECoC, and how the connection to Europe of the city and region will be changed, remained only vaguely answered. The expectation that by simply developing the local culture, and getting people from Europe to come and see it, will make citizens feel more European, is somewhat naive.
- The artistic qualities expected to attract a wide national and international audience – authentic, participative, site-specific, and niche projects – leave room for doubt about how effectively a wide international audience will be attracted.

4. Outreach

- The panel welcomed Žilina 2026's efforts to take in account disadvantaged groups and their ambition to make all cultural institutions fully accessible to wheelchairs.
- On a less positive tone, the projects around the Roma population utilise a rather top-down approach, failing to include Roma people as active actors in their elaboration. This was seen as a missed opportunity as the region features several cultural institutions dedicated to Roma culture.

5. Management

- The city proposes a budget of 29,96 million Euro to cover the operating expenditures of the ECoC preparation. This is an increase of 8,5 million Euro, compared to the first bid.
- Similar to the other two bidding cities, Žilina expects 15 million Euro from the national Government. It plans to invest 6 million Euro from the city, 4 million Euro from the Žilina self-governing region, 3,86 million Euro from the partner cities and regions, and 1,1 million Euro from the EU.
- 67% of the budget would go to cover operating expenditure, 13% would go to promotion and marketing, and 18% to wages, overhead, evaluation and administration.

- The proposed budget is realistic, and can well cover the proposed activities.
- The governance structure of the delivery organisation is articulated and documents are being prepared for the future NGO to be established. The financing is being secured and a budget developed. Programmes and budget are logically tied together.
- Measures to mitigate the risks of Covid-19 such as shifting from physical to digital programming, offering a de-concentrated programme, alternative tourism in nature, etc., are envisaged, which is positive.
- In particular, some programme segments already offer a refreshing approach to a digital future in terms of research, international cooperation and co-creation, with examples of specific projects (e.g. Screen Age). They leave, however, room for further development, as they do not cover all aspects of the programme.
- The marketing plans in the context of the inter-regional context of this bid are complex and challenging. As an example, the envisaged “Marketing Alliance” is entirely conditioned on the ECoC project, as the Beskids Regional concept does not really exist as a brand for the time being but was all established through the ECoC proposal development process.
- There is no dedicated funding and no previous reference points / no brand, so these are key challenges that will not be addressed without the ECoC providing a common goal.

6. Capacity to deliver

- The city of Žilina has the political and financial support necessary to implement the ECoC project, which is the first precondition to a successful ECoC delivery.
- The candidacy entails a combined offer of the three cities in the Beskids region, which makes it an ambitious, but also a complex and difficult project.
- Given the poor public transport infrastructure between the three cities, the view of the panel is that connecting programmes and audiences remains a challenge.
- The panel takes note of the planned improvements in connectivity between the three main cities involved mentioned in the bid (e.g. talks with the Slovak railway company, a new highway that is to be open by 2026, connecting Poland and Slovakia) and recognizes that they will somewhat ease this problem.
- The local airport is also an asset in terms of international visitors’ transportation.
- Part of the cultural infrastructure projects are planned to be developed late into the ECoC preparation process (e.g. the reconstruction of one of the main venues for the project, the Hangar, which is to begin in 2025), which raises the panel’s concerns about the feasibility of their timely completion. Such possible infrastructure disruptions may potentially endanger the realisation of (part of) the artistic programme, and could add unnecessary stress to the team in the decisive final phase of the ECoC preparation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Žilina is not selected.

The Žilina 2026 team has put forward an ambitious project, featuring strong involvement of three cities in three different countries (Slovakia, Poland and Czech Republic). However, this very aspect of the proposed programme's design is also its main weakness. While the ECoC is meant to feature the culture of a city in a regional context, Žilina 2026 puts the focus first and foremost on the triangle formed by the three cities that – despite being situated in the same Beskids region – do not naturally form a unity.

Cross-border cooperation is in the centre of the bid's design, with emphasis put on the collaborations between the three cities in the three neighbouring countries that are central for the bids design. This is an interesting attempt to invigorate a sense of community within a broad region spreading across three countries. Putting this “triangulated” cross-border cooperation in the centre of the bid has proven however detrimental to a wider cooperation with partners from broader Europe.

The city has secured the necessary political and financial support, and created the structures that are to carry the ECoC preparation through. At the same time, the necessary conditions for the successful realisation of this project have not been entirely put in place by the moment of the final selection, as has been in detail articulated above.

Recommendation:

The panel recommends that the city of Žilina continues as much as possible to build upon the good work already done in the preparation for the ECoC competition. Sustainable capacity building in the field of culture and consistent efforts to add an international and European dimension to the cultural offer of the city, as well as well-designed outreach actions will inevitably raise the quality of life of people living in Žilina and the region. The foundations for that are already laid during the ECoC bidding process.

The Panel's Decision

The panel was presented with three different bids from significantly diverse cities 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 three bids had their 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.

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 three cities with their bid-books, presentations, questions and answers, complemented by the feedback from the city visits.

The panel reached a unanimous decision to recommend to the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic to designate Trenčín as European Capital of Culture in Slovakia in 2026.

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 2026 in Slovakia 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 Trenčín to use the title “European Capital of Culture 2026”.

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 1,5 million Euro Prize is however deferred until 2026, 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 2025 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 continues to honour 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, in particular:
 - 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 2022, mid 2024 and autumn 2025) 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 Trenčín to develop cooperation with other bidding cities and the wider artistic and cultural community in Slovakia. The ECoC in Slovakia in 2026 provides a national opportunity, which will reflect internationally not only on Trenčín but also on the country as a whole.

The panel will expect the first progress report in autumn 2022 to take into account the recommendations and comments in the assessment of the bid, as stated above.

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 the three 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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