



FROM PREPARATIONS UNTIL THE OPENING OF THE EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE TREŇČÍN 2026

A Selection of the First Research Findings

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DATA26 Research and Evaluation Team | Trenčín 2026 – European Capital of Culture

FOREWORD BY THE DIRECTOR OF TRENČÍN 2026

When Trenčín entered the competition for the title of European Capital of Culture, our ambition was never limited to organising a single year of cultural events. We saw it as a development opportunity – a way of rethinking the city through culture. A way of reflecting on its public spaces, communities, creativity, trust between people, and on how a city can transform itself from within.

This report marks an important milestone in that process. It does not offer final conclusions; rather, it presents an initial set of evidence, signals, and questions that help us better understand the changes taking place in the city. The report highlights not only the impact of the opening weekend and the first effects of the title year – particularly the years of preparation that preceded it – but also the broader context: how culture shapes social connections, strengthens the sense of belonging, influences the quality of place, and builds confidence within the creative sector. This report carries another important meaning. It confirms that public investment in culture should be measured not only through the number of events or attendance figures, but also through what is more difficult to capture – relationships, trust, and the ability to imagine a better future for the city.

This conviction shaped not only the programme and investments of the project, but also the dramaturgy of the opening ceremony, Manifest Trenčín 2026. In many ways, the ceremony became an artistic expression of the values that

this report now explores through data. We did not open the title year with a “spectacle” built around the representation of the city, but rather with a “manifesto of humanity” – a story about relationships, memory, curiosity, solidarity, and shared space.

The dramaturgy of the ceremony consciously worked with themes that also appear in this report: social cohesion was reflected in the motif of generations, volunteers, and the collective European finale; the relationship to place and identity in the imagery of the stone heart, the reference to the inscription on the rock, the city’s fashion heritage, and the dialogue between historical and contemporary voices; inclusion and plurality in the connection of traditional culture, underground culture, sport, contemporary art, and voices that do not usually stand side by side; the relationship between culture and public space in the use of the entire city as a stage – from the castle to the inner courtyards of urban neighbourhoods; and the idea of culture as a common good, articulated in the Manifesto.

Some of the hypotheses we articulated through artistic language during the opening weekend are now beginning to take on their first empirical contours. An interesting dialogue thus emerges between dramaturgy and research – art anticipated something, while data helps us explore whether and how it is reflected in the life of the city.



KEY MESSAGES

This report offers an initial overview of what Trenčín 2026 has brought in the period before and immediately after the opening of the European Capital of Culture. The evidence presented here is preliminary and will be substantially expanded and deepened throughout 2026 and 2027. Even at this early stage, however, five clear patterns are emerging.

Key Message 1: Trenčín opened up to the world – and the world responded.

More than 51,000 unique visitors attended the opening weekend, mainly from the Trenčín region, but also from the Czech Republic, Austria, Germany, and other countries. According to audience survey findings, satisfaction with the event was high. The city demonstrated its ability to host a major European cultural event. The challenge now is to sustain this momentum and build on it not only throughout the title year, but also in the long term.

Key Message 2: Culture strengthens social ties, but social cohesion is developing unevenly.

Trust among residents is growing, and in Trenčín it currently exceeds the national average in Slovakia. The volunteer programme helps build social connections and a sense of civic belonging. At the same time, trust towards people of different faiths or from other countries has declined year-on-year and remains significantly lower than trust towards people in one's immediate surroundings. Culture cannot address this challenge on its own; it must be part of a broader local commitment to inclusion.

Key Message 3: Residents want to engage more in culture.

The main barriers to participation in cultural events in Trenčín are neither lack of interest nor ticket prices. Rather, they are informational and psychological: people do not always know what is happening, nor do they always feel that cultural life is meant for them. Improving communication and reducing the sense of distance between residents and cultural events could significantly broaden participation.

Key Message 4: The ECoC title expands the existing cultural ecosystem.

Almost one third of cultural and creative enterprises in the region are based in Trenčín, with strong representation in architecture and design. This sector was not created by the ECoC title; it already existed beforehand. However, capacity constraints – particularly in financing, operating costs, and management skills – continue to limit its development. Programmes such as Runway, Garáž, and grant schemes directly address these gaps.

Key Message 5: Where people live in Trenčín shapes how they experience the city – and this has implications for public policy.

Differences in how residents perceive the city are linked more strongly to the neighbourhood they live in than to age or gender. This pattern appears consistently across data on placemaking, life satisfaction, and trust. It suggests that investments in local areas – including community spaces, cultural infrastructure, and neighbourhood-based programmes – can have a measurable impact on quality of life. These findings require further analysis through our ongoing studies.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

What This Report Presents

This document presents a very early, preliminary overview of selected findings from the research and evaluation work of the DATA26 team. It covers the preparatory phase of the Trenčín 2026 ECoC project from 2023 to February 2026 and also includes the first research evidence from the opening weekend, which took place from 13 to 15 February 2026.

The report contains data that was available to the research team and sufficiently processed at the time of writing. Its purpose is to provide a clear, evidence-based picture of the situation at the beginning of the ECoC period, rather than to evaluate the project's overall performance or draw final conclusions. At this stage, the report presents findings in three main areas of impact: 1. communities, 2. the cultural and creative industries, and 3. placemaking.

What This Report Does Not Include

This is not the final evaluation of the Trenčín 2026 project. The DATA26 team and Creative institute Trenčín, n. o., will publish further findings together with the final evaluation report in 2027

– within twelve months of the implementation of the ECoC
– with the aim of providing a comprehensive assessment of its impacts. Many of the indicators monitored within DATA26 have not yet been fully analysed, and some findings will only become meaningful when compared with data from later stages of the year.

These results should therefore not be interpreted as a final judgement on the ECoC project. Rather, they represent initial insights into emerging patterns and trends, shared in the spirit of transparency and continuous learning.

EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE: CONTEXT

The European Capital of Culture title is a prestigious European designation awarded on the basis of a programme application approved by the European Union. It is not only about events and activities; it is a multi-year development process intended to have an impact on the cultural, social, and economic life of the city and the region.

These broader societal impacts are subject to mandatory monitoring and evaluation. In the case of Trenčín, this work is carried out by the DATA26 team – four researchers working in collaboration with a Citizens' Council composed of twenty members representing the public, as well as a Scientific Council of eight members representing Slovak and international universities and research institutions.

The key binding document for the implementation of the ECoC title is the Bidbook, which defines the vision, objectives, programme structure, and intended impacts of the Trenčín

Data Collection Methods Used in This Report

The evidence presented in this report draws on multiple sources, each described in the relevant section. These include: a representative survey of Trenčín residents conducted in two waves (2024 and 2025, n = 600 each year); an audience survey carried out during and shortly after the opening weekend (both in person and online); anonymised and aggregated mobile network data from Telekom related to the opening ceremony; focus groups with volunteers; focus groups and biographical interviews with cultural professionals who participated in educational programmes; and an ethnographic observational study conducted by the DATA26 team and student researchers during the opening weekend.

Additional data sources include anonymised and aggregated mobile network datasets capturing the presence of tourist visitors across the wider area of Trenčín beyond individual events, official tourism accommodation statistics (guest numbers and overnight stays), and communication and marketing analyses such as website traffic and media monitoring outputs. Mobile network data is derived from the spatial and temporal activity of active SIM cards and represents estimated visitor flows rather than registered accommodation figures. These data make it possible to consistently measure patterns of visitor movement across time and geography while remaining fully compliant with data protection standards.

Each method has its own strengths and limitations, which are noted where relevant. The combination of methods is intentional: it allows the team to triangulate findings across different types of evidence and capture both what the quantitative data shows and what emerges from qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups. At the same time, several ongoing research studies – including the ethnography of city districts and the biographical study of residents – are not yet included in this report due to their complexity and scope.

2026 project on the city and the region. The European Commission continuously monitors the project's progress from the awarding of the title (2022) through the title year (2026) and one year beyond it (2027). The Bidbook therefore remains an important framework against which the implementation of the project is continuously assessed. So far, the implementation process has been monitored through three interim monitoring reports submitted to the European Commission for evaluation. Based on the positive assessment of these reports, Trenčín received the Melina Mercouri Prize at the beginning of 2026. The European Commission's report stated: „*The Trenčín 2026 team has demonstrated impressive progress and commitment in preparing for the European Capital of Culture year. Through extensive community engagement, strong partnerships, and comprehensive planning, they are well positioned to deliver a successful large-scale event that reflects the city's unique culture and its connection to Europe.*”

1. COMMUNITIES

The chapter on communities brings together evidence on how different groups of people experience the ECoC year – whether as participants in major public events, volunteers, participants in cultural life, or simply as residents living in the city. It asks the following questions: *Is Trenčín 2026 reaching people? Is it changing how they perceive their city and one another?*

1.1a Who Attended the Opening Weekend?

The opening weekend, held from 13 to 15 February 2026, was the first major test for Trenčín 2026 in organising a city-wide event at the scale of both the city and the region. The following findings draw on three sources: an audience satisfaction survey, anonymised mobile network data provided by Telekom, and an ethnographic study described in more detail in section 1.1b. Each of these data sources offers a different perspective and together they help create a more comprehensive picture of the event.

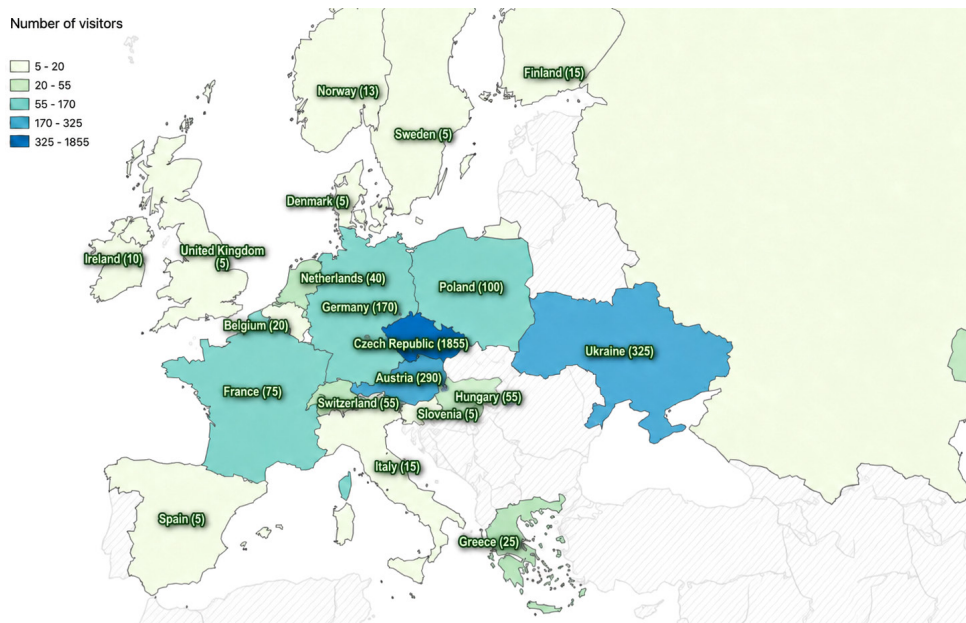
Audience Response to the Opening Weekend and the Evolving Image of the City

Mobile network data shows that **51,216 unique adult visitors** moved through the city centre over the course of the three days, with the majority of visitors (84%) coming from the Trenčín region. The second most significant source of visitors was the Bratislava region (5 %) and subsequently the Žilina region (3 %), while the other regions were represented to a lesser extent. The spatial distribution of visitors within the Trenčín region shows the strongest concentration in Trenčín itself and its immediate surroundings. The highest number of visitors came from Trenčín, with notable representation also from Dubnica nad Váhom, Nová Dubnica, Bánovce nad Bebravou, Trenčianska Turná, and Nové Mesto nad Váhom.

International visitors accounted for **5% of the total number of visitors**. The spatial distribution of international attendance shows that the largest number of foreign visitors came from the Czech Republic, with a total of 1,855 visitors recorded. Other geographically close countries were also strongly represented, particularly Ukraine, Austria, Germany, and Poland. At the same time, the data also captured individual visitors from more distant parts of the world, including Japan, the United States, China, and South Korea, suggesting that the event reached beyond the immediate European context.

min. 51 216¹	5,75/7	56 %	100
adult visitors in the city centre	overall satisfaction	respondents willing to pay for the event	journalists
during the three-day opening weekend (based on mobile network data from Telekom)	among respondents in the audience	average stated amount per person: € 18	from 8 countries

[1] Mobile monitoring data includes only events taking place in the city centre and mobile phone users; some groups (such as children) are therefore not included. For this reason, the total number of visitors was likely higher, particularly when taking into account participating schools and events organised within the Living Neighbourhoods programme.



Graph: International attendance from European countries. Source: Telekom

More than 200 volunteers and over 1,000 performers took part in the opening weekend. The programme also involved children and young people from 19 kindergartens, 10 primary schools, and 14 secondary schools. The event also received significant media attention. Approximately 100 journalists from eight countries covered the opening weekend. In 2025, the number of media outputs related to the opening weekend in Slovak media reached 153. From 1 January to the end of April 2026, a total of

1,058 media outputs were recorded (source: Mediaboard). The online campaign generated high traffic for the website trencin2026.eu. Between 19 January and 15 February 2026, the website recorded 149,688 unique users and a total of 547,255 visits, with an average visit duration of 2 minutes and 11 seconds.

Marketing activities across multiple communication channels contributed to a high level of public visibility. Website traffic trends show sustained growth over time – from 40,693 visits in 2024 to 712,395 in 2025, and 792,456 visits in the first quarter of 2026 – confirming a steady increase in public engagement.

An online survey conducted in April 2025 – one year before the opening weekend – already showed that the ECoC title was improving Trenčín’s national profile: 46% of Slovak

respondents stated that they perceived Trenčín more positively than before, while 39% reported an increased interest in visiting the city. 62% considered visiting the city, with 18% stating that they would definitely travel to Trenčín specifically because of the ECoC title. Since then, marketing communication activities have intensified further.

The number of media outputs has also shown a strong upward trend (see table below). In Slovakia alone, 3,436 media outputs mentioning Trenčín 2026 were recorded throughout 2025. Between 1 January and the end of April 2026, a further 2,833 outputs were recorded. Internationally, an additional 860 media outputs were recorded between 1 August 2025 and 15 April 2026.

After more than 40 years of existence, the European Capital of Culture title has established a strong international brand and visibility. This was also reflected in the high attendance of ambassadors accredited to the Slovak Republic and staff of foreign diplomatic missions (75 participants), including representatives of the European Commission, at the opening weekend. The event was also attended by more than 100 representatives of former, current, and future European Capitals of Culture (EU Member States, EEA countries, candidate countries), as well as representatives from Japan. This level of participation reflects the active international networking carried out by the Creative Institute Trenčín (CIT).

Year	2022	2023	2024	2025	JANUARY– APRIL 2026
Number of media outputs*	700	1,191	1,727	3,175	2,584
Number of media outputs**	521	838	1,504	3,436	2,833

*based on the following keywords: European Capital of Culture

**based on the following keywords: European Capital of Culture, Trenčín 2026, Creative Institute Trenčín

Satisfaction and Visitor Experiences During the Opening Weekend Events

The audience survey was conducted during the opening weekend using a combination of online, tablet, paper, and QR-code data collection methods. The findings are supplemented by anonymised and aggregated mobile network data provided by Telekom. As the representativeness of the sample was not controlled, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than fully representative. This section works only with responses from the Slovak-language version of the questionnaire, although several dozen responses were also collected in English and Ukrainian.

Women accounted for almost two thirds of respondents in the survey sample. The average age of respondents was 40 years. The survey primarily captured local and regional audiences, especially visitors from the Trenčín region, which is also confirmed by Telekom data.

Overall satisfaction with the opening weekend was high, reaching 5.75 out of 7 (on a scale where 7 indicates complete satisfaction). Visitors rated the quality of the event, its organisation, and staff most positively. Lower ratings were given to practical aspects of the visit, particularly parking and public transport. The findings therefore suggest that both the programme itself and the delivery of the event were perceived very positively, while

transport and visitor infrastructure remain areas with greater potential for improvement. For 75% of respondents, the opening weekend increased the likelihood that they would visit Trenčín again in the future.

What Visitors Said: Open Responses

Open responses from the satisfaction survey reveal what made the opening weekend meaningful for its visitors. The themes that emerged most strongly were:

- Atmosphere and sense of togetherness. The most frequently mentioned positive aspect was the exceptional atmosphere – described as warm, emotionally powerful, and characterised by a collective sense of celebration. Residents said they had never experienced such crowds in their city before.
- Artistic programme. The Manifest gala programme was described as visually impressive, emotionally moving, and symbolically meaningful. The spatial distribution of events across the city – including the use of the castle, historic streets, and surrounding public spaces – was widely praised.
- Local pride and visibility. Many respondents said that the opening weekend strengthened their sense of pride in Trenčín and gave them hope about what the year could bring.
- Active participation. Volunteers described their involvement

as one of the defining experiences of the weekend – a theme explored in more detail in section 1.3 of this chapter

Hlavné oblasti kritickej spätnej väzby boli: ťažkosti s prístupom
The main areas of critical feedback included difficulties accessing up-to-date programme information, some coordination gaps between events, sound issues during the Manifest programme, and unmet expectations regarding the food zones and the Saturday programme at the castle. These findings provide important lessons that the organising team can build on in planning future events.

1.1.b Ethnographic Study of the Opening Weekend

Numbers tell us how many people attended. Ethnography tells us what the experience actually felt like – for those at the front of the crowd and those at its edges; for the volunteer who spent hours on their feet and for the elderly woman watching the programme from a doorway; for the child who asked a question no one expected.

The DATA26 research team conducted an ethnographic observational study throughout all three days of the opening weekend. Nineteen students from the partner Comenius University Bratislava worked alongside senior researchers and were assigned to parallel events across the city – from the official opening ceremony at Mierové námestie and the carnival parade through the city centre to Living Neighbourhoods gatherings in Sihoť, Dlhé Hony, and Juh, as well as a hockey match, poetry readings, exhibitions, and late-night concerts. Each observer kept detailed field notes documenting not only what happened, but also how people moved, gathered, reacted, and connected with one another.

Based on more than 160 hours of observation across thirteen locations, the study found that cultural participation during the opening weekend took many different forms. Alongside the large crowds gathered around the main stage, the weekend also created quieter but equally meaningful moments: a neighbourhood playground gradually filling with residents bringing food and lighting fires together; a poetry reading so full that people formed an impromptu community in the corridor outside the venue; or a mother telling her daughter at the end of Saturday evening that, in forty years of living in the city, she had never seen such a crowd – and that her daughter should remember it.

The ethnographic study also captured experiences that traditional evaluation tools usually overlook, which is precisely what makes it distinctive: a passer-by stopping for two minutes at the edge of a concert in the park before continuing their day;

a hockey fan resisting the cultural intervention inserted into the match; or an elderly woman telling a volunteer that the festival money should first have been used to repair the railway station. These voices, too, are part of the story of Trenčín 2026.

„There's not a soul here. Am I in the right place? [...] Twenty minutes pass and three women arrive. [...] Half an hour later, people gradually begin to join. The most striking is a woman on a bicycle with a basket at the front. She greets everyone and immediately starts helping to prepare the space. More people arrive. Parents, grandparents, children. So many children! Everyone brings something. [...] I can smell smoke. The fire pits have been lit. This is the final detail the place needed. A little warmth and more light“.

Field observation, HRYbik playground, Sihoť housing estate, 13 February 2026

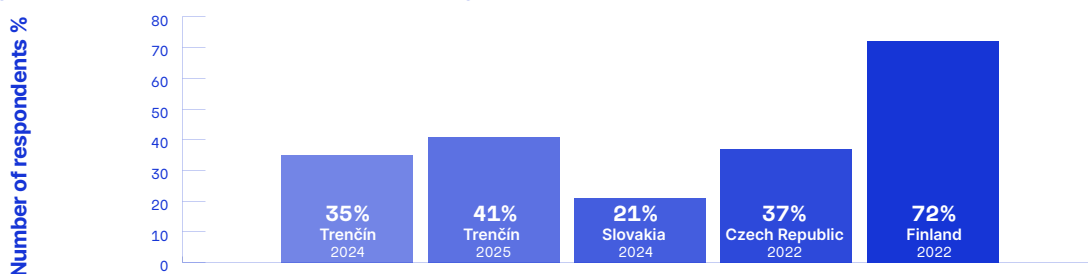
1.2 Social Cohesion

One of the main objectives of the ECoC project is to connect people, encourage openness and interest in what is happening in the city, and strengthen people's relationship with the place where they live. For this reason, social cohesion was monitored through two waves of the Trenčín Resident Survey (2024 and 2025, n = 600 each year) as an important indicator of the extent to which residents feel part of the community, trust one another and public institutions, and are willing to engage in the shared life of the city.

Social cohesion is understood as a multidimensional concept encompassing trust, solidarity, and a sense of belonging, as well as concrete forms of participation in public life, including civic engagement and volunteering. The research is based on the assumption that culture can strengthen social cohesion by creating opportunities for encounter, relationship-building, and trust. The analysis distinguishes between the horizontal dimension of cohesion – relationships between people – and the vertical dimension, meaning the relationship between citizens and institutions.

Trust Among Residents Is Increasing and Exceeds the National Level in Slovakia

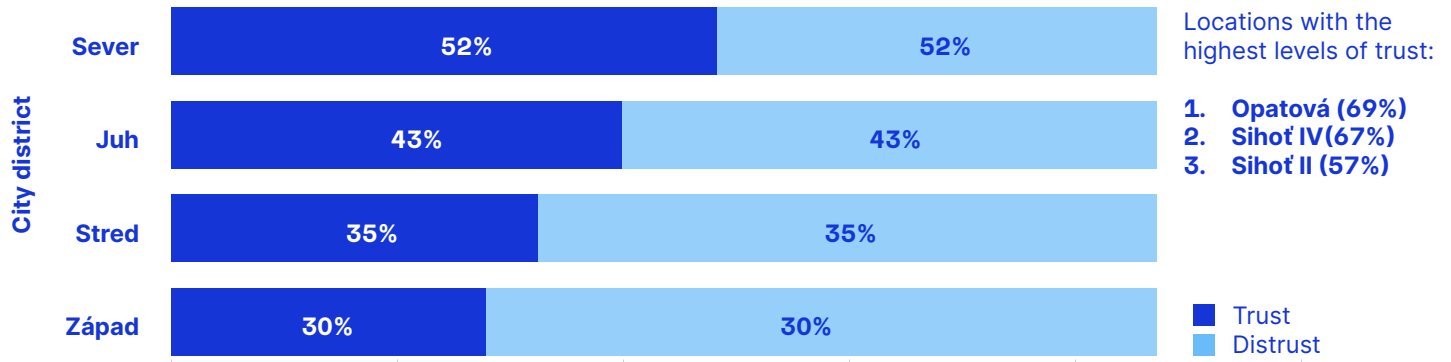
The findings on interpersonal trust suggest that residents of Trenčín are slightly more trusting towards people they meet for the first time than they were in the past. The proportion of respondents who agreed that most people can be trusted increased from 35% in 2024 to 41% in 2025. Trenčín therefore scores above the overall level of trust in Slovakia and, in 2025, also above the level recorded in the Czech Republic. However, it still remains significantly below countries with consistently high levels of trust, such as Finland.



Graph: Comparison of General Interpersonal Trust – Trenčín vs. Slovakia, Czech Republic, Finland
Source: DATA26, Trenčín Resident Survey 2024 and 2025 (n = 600) – data for Trenčín; DEKK Institute, Sources of [Dis]Trust – data for Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Finland.

The level of general interpersonal trust towards people residents meet for the first time varies across city districts. The highest level was recorded in the Sever district, where 52% of respondents expressed trust, while the lowest was recorded in the Západ district, where trust was expressed by 30% of respondents. The areas with the highest levels

of trust – particularly Opatová, Sihoť IV, and Sihoť II – also overlap with locations where the Living Neighbourhoods programme is being implemented. This finding may suggest the importance of local relationships and community life; however, it does not yet allow us to draw conclusions about the programme’s direct impact on levels of trust.

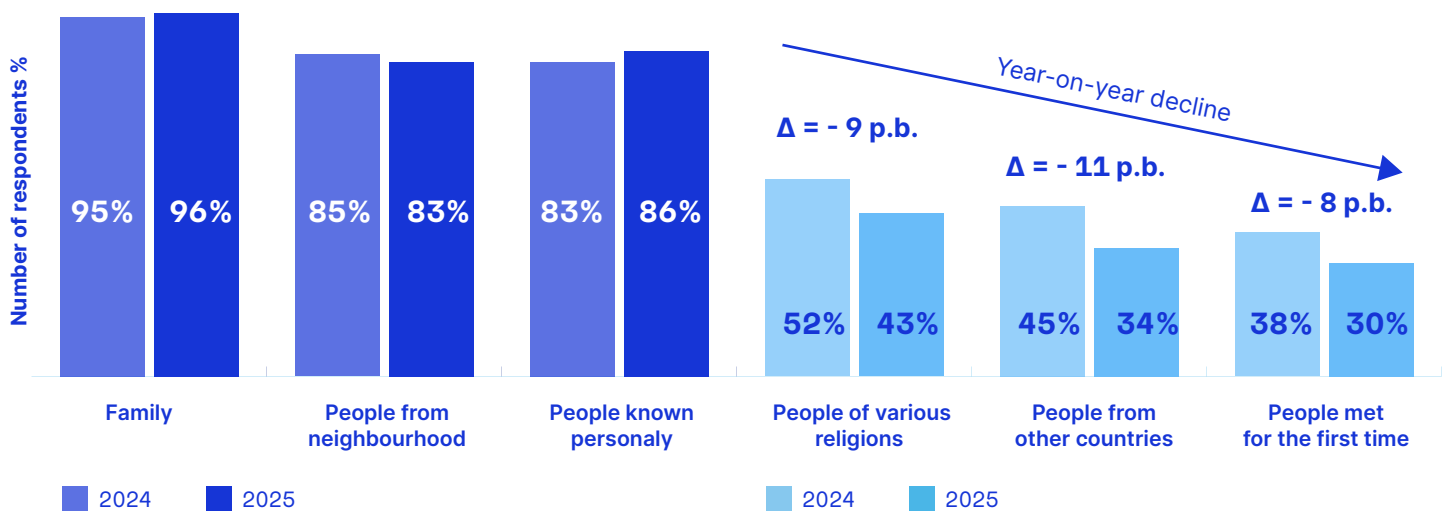


Graph: Interpersonal trust by city districts, Trenčín 2025
Source: DATA26, Trenčín Resident Survey 2025 (n = 600)

Horizontal Trust: Trust in Close Relationships Remains Consistently High, While Trust Towards Other Groups Is Declining

In terms of horizontal trust, residents of Trenčín place the greatest trust in people from their immediate surroundings, especially family members, neighbours, and people they know personally. This level of trust

remained consistently high between 2024 and 2025. Lower levels of trust are expressed towards people outside these close social circles – particularly people of different religions, people from other countries, and people residents encounter for the first time. Trust towards these groups declined slightly year-on-year, which is important to monitor, especially in relation to the inclusion goals of the Trenčín 2026 project.

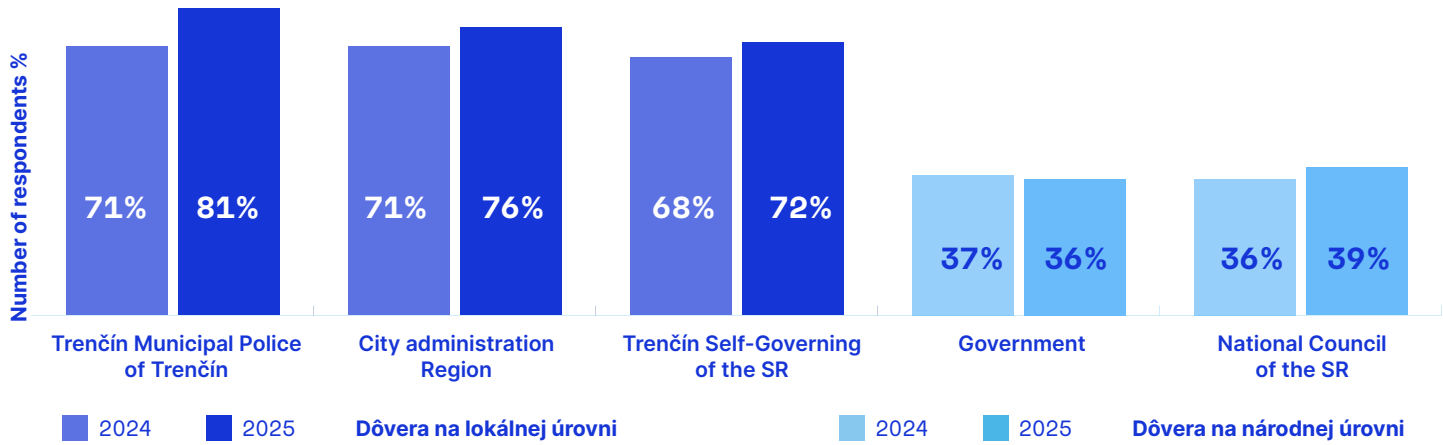


Graph: Year-on-year comparison of horizontal trust, 2024 vs. 2025
Source: DATA26, Trenčín Resident Survey 2024 a 2025 (n = 600)

Vertical Trust: Residents Trust Local Institutions More Than National Ones

In terms of vertical trust, a clear difference emerges between the local and national levels. Residents of Trenčín place greater trust in local and regional institutions than in institutions at the national level. Between 2024 and 2025,

trust increased particularly in the Trenčín Municipal Police and the city administration – institutions with which residents have the most direct contact. Trust in the Government of the Slovak Republic and the National Council of the Slovak Republic remains significantly lower and changed only minimally.



Graph: Year-on-year comparison of vertical trust, 2024 vs. 2025
Source: DATA26. Trenčín Resident Survey 2024 a 2025 (n = 600)

1.3 Volunteering Programme

Between July 2025 and March 2026, the DATA26 team conducted five focus groups involving 30 participants with active experience in the Trenčín 2026 volunteering programme. The aim of the focus groups was not statistical generalisation, but rather a deeper understanding of how participants perceive the programme and what real

impact it has on their lives. The following section summarises the results of the analysis and their interpretation: the volunteering programme is not merely a cultural activity linked to the title year, but functions as a form of social infrastructure – creating bonds between people, strengthening their connection to the city, and fulfilling roles that have a direct impact on the quality of life of participating residents.

5	30	63 %	20 %
focus groups	unique participants	women	participants aged 65+
July 2025 - March 2026	active volunteers	37% men	participants aged 25-65: 70% participants under 24: 10%

Motivations for joining the volunteering programme

- Being part of the exceptional Trenčín 2026 project – not as a spectator, but as a contributor
- Being useful and contributing to the city
- Meeting new people and building connections
- Gaining access to cultural experiences that would otherwise be inaccessible
- Building a stronger sense of belonging in Trenčín or discovering the city in new ways

Impact of the programme on participants' lives

- Expanded social networks and new friendships
- A deeper sense of pride in their work and in their city
- Personal growth: confidence, communication, and leadership skills
- A stronger relationship with the city – its spaces, history, and people
- Improved quality of life

Inclusion in Practice

The volunteering programme is one of the clearest examples of how inclusion is put into practice within the ECoC project. It brings together residents who would not normally share the same social space – seniors, young people, people returning to Trenčín after years spent elsewhere in Slovakia or abroad, as well as people who arrived in the city from other countries under very different circumstances. For many participants, active involvement became something more than simply carrying out volunteer tasks. This is illustrated by two stories shared during the focus groups.

The first is the story of a Ukrainian refugee who joined the programme with a practical goal: improving her Slovak language skills. Over time, however, active participation in the volunteering programme brought her something deeper – a sense of rootedness and belonging, which she herself describes as feeling at home in a city where she has lived for only a few years.

„I have been living in Trenčín for three and a half years because of the war. I came here to improve my Slovak – and Trenčín has become a kind of home for me.“

The second story comes from a woman who grew up in Trenčín, spent twenty years living in another city, and recently returned. Volunteering allowed her to rediscover her hometown in a new way: to enter places she would never normally see as a visitor and connect them with childhood memories. The result was a powerful emotional experience, which she describes as forming a new bond with the city she comes from.

„For the first time in my life, I entered that synagogue. As a child, I always walked past it with my parents – but I had never been inside. And an even more special moment was being able to walk through spaces that are normally closed to the public.“

Volunteering as Infrastructure for Active Ageing

Older participants – approximately one fifth of focus group participants – spoke with particular intensity about what participation in the programme meant to them. Volunteering provides something that ageing and retirement from active working life can gradually diminish: a sense of self-worth, meaningful use of time, and an active role in the life of the city. According to the volunteering programme manager, some older female volunteers not only carried out assigned tasks, but also organised their own activities and shared their skills with others. The programme therefore does not function as a social service for older people, but rather as a form of infrastructure for active ageing.

Trenčín, like most Slovak cities, faces the challenge of an ageing population. The proportion of residents aged over 65 has been increasing over the long term, creating growing demand for the meaningful inclusion of older people in public life. A programme that responds to this need organically – through culture, community, and a sense of belonging – represents both a socially valuable and institutionally low-threshold response to this demographic trend.

Young People and the Anchoring Effect

Several of the younger participants (aged 19–35) who took part in the focus groups are among those returning to Trenčín – or considering returning – after years of studying or working in Brno, Prague, or elsewhere abroad. For them, volunteering does not function merely as a leisure activity, but as something more substantial: it provides a sense of grounding. It offers concrete social networks, meaningful involvement in the life of the city, and the feeling that Trenčín is a community to which they belong. One participant described volunteering as a way of reconnecting with the region after years away – through building relationships and becoming involved in the Trenčín 2026 project, which he felt had genuine significance for the city. From this perspective, the volunteer programme can be understood as part of a broader ecosystem that makes Trenčín an attractive place to live – a city that offers opportunities not only to those who already live there or return to it, but also to those arriving for the first time.



2. Cultural Participation

Participation in cultural life in Trenčín takes many different forms. Based on the 2024 Trenčín Resident Survey (n = 600), five profiles of cultural participation were identified. These profiles show that residents differ not only in the extent of their engagement in culture, but also in the forms this

participation takes – including attendance at events, reading, sport, community activities, and the use of digital media. These profiles range from highly active and community-oriented residents to occasional participants, less engaged older residents, and audiences of traditional institutional culture.

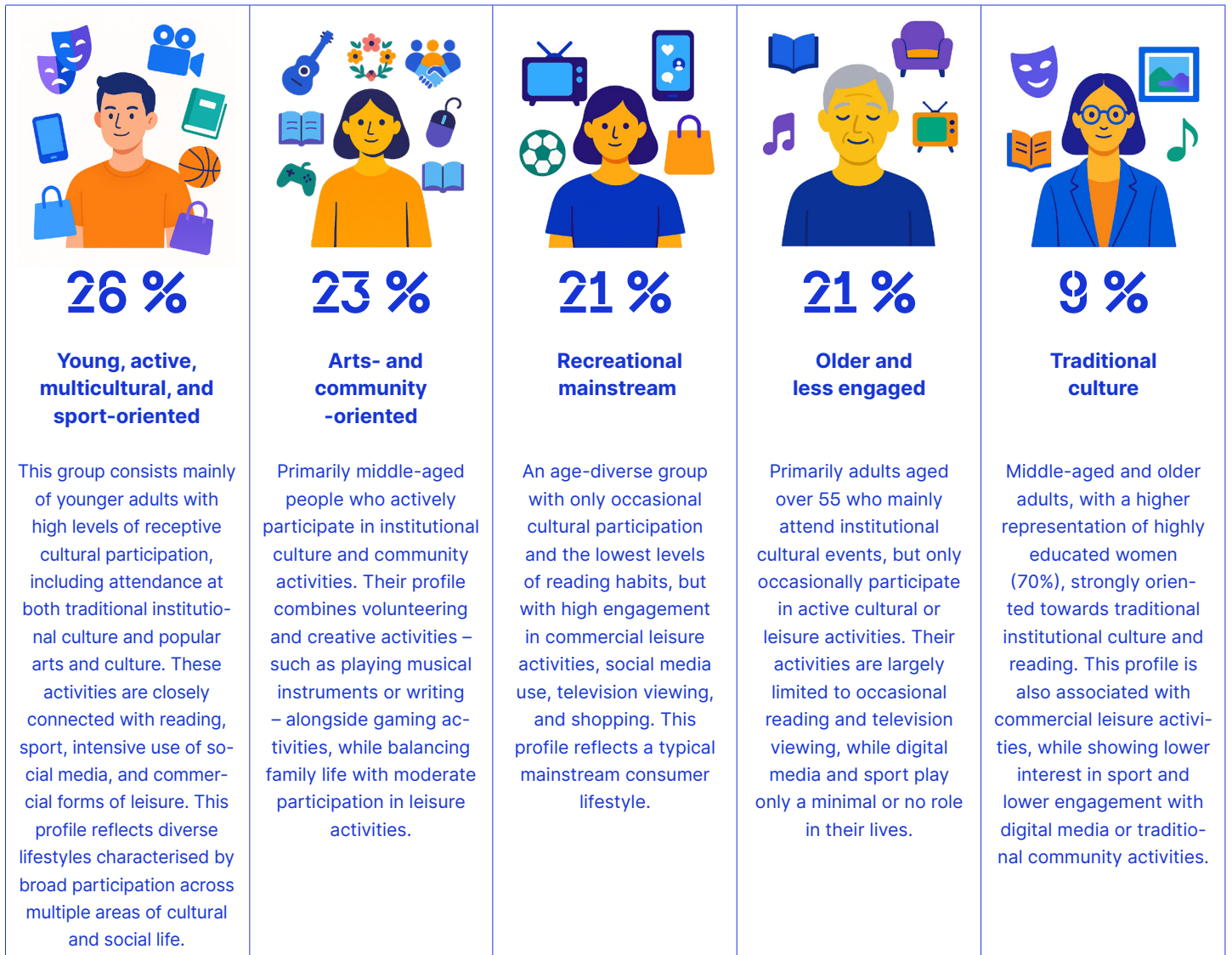


Figure: Profiles of Cultural Participation – Trenčín 2024. Source: DATA26. Trenčín Resident Survey 2024 (n = 600)

Understanding this diversity is important when designing cultural programmes and communication strategies. Different groups of residents have different habits, interests, and levels of willingness to participate. A single universal approach is therefore unlikely to work for everyone.

Motivation to Participate in Cultural Events

Findings from both waves of the Trenčín Resident Survey (2024 and 2025) show that people are motivated to

attend cultural events primarily for experiential and social reasons: entertainment, memorable experiences, spending time with family or friends, and meeting new people. Less prominent were instrumental motivations such as professional development, education, or connections to the cultural and creative sector. This pattern appears consistently across both years and suggests that programmes built around accessibility, a welcoming atmosphere, and shared social experiences may be more effective in reaching broader audiences.



Figure: Profiles of Cultural Participation— Trenčín 2024. Source: DATA26. Trenčín Resident Survey 2024 (n = 600)

Barriers to Cultural Participation

The findings suggest that the main barriers to participation in cultural events in Trenčín are informational, psychological, and motivational. An important role is played by whether people know about events, whether they feel comfortable and confident enough to attend, and whether they perceive

personal value in participating. The issue is therefore not primarily one of ticket prices or transport, but rather how to better reach people and show them that cultural events are accessible, welcoming, and meaningful for them as well.

More information
about cultural events

More visible
personal benefits
from participation

Better mental well-being
and self-confidence

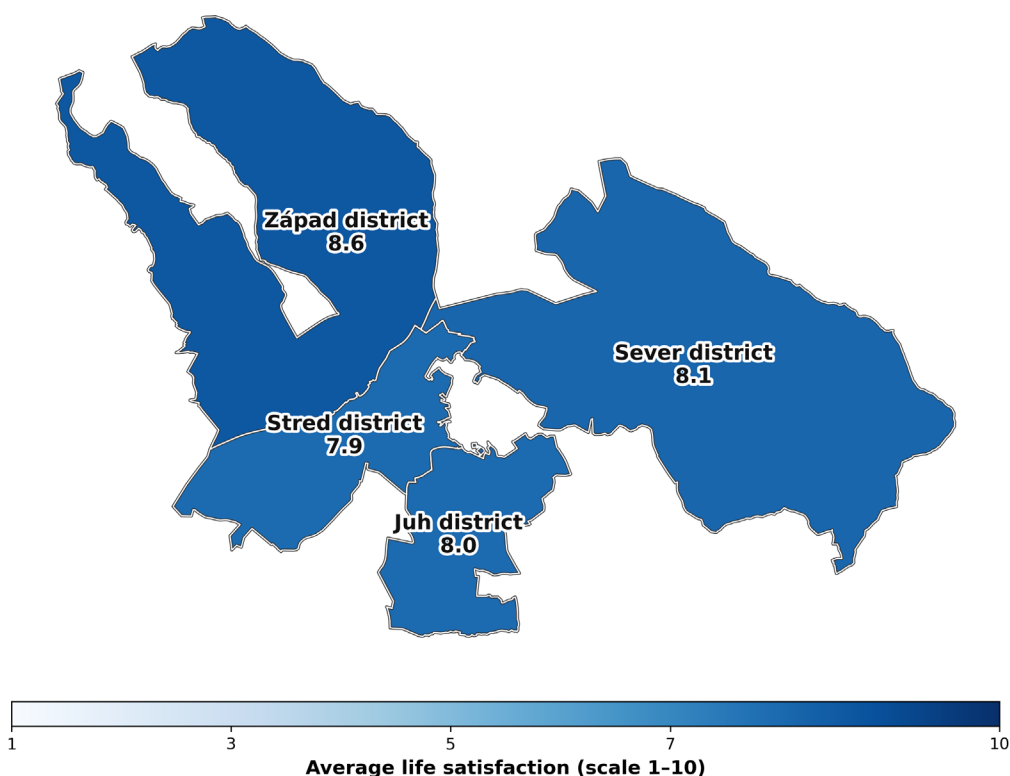
Figure: Barriers to cultural Participation, 2025
Source: DATA26. Trenčín Resident Survey 2025 (n = 600)

3. Satisfaction of Trenčín Residents With Their Lives

Residents of Trenčín report relatively high levels of life satisfaction. In the 2025 Trenčín Resident Survey, the average life satisfaction score reached 7.71 out of 10, exceeding the Slovak national average of 7.3 reported by the OECD for 2024. In the Slovak context, this suggests slightly higher levels of life satisfaction in Trenčín. At the same time, there remains room for improvement in certain areas of life.

As with other dimensions examined in this report, differences in life satisfaction are most strongly associated with city districts. In 2025, the Juh district recorded the highest overall life satisfaction, with above-average scores across several areas: income and work, education, environment, civic participation, work-life balance, safety, and cultural participation. The Západ district, which recorded higher scores in 2024, shifted towards lower values in 2025. Although these shifts are relatively small in absolute terms, their consistency across multiple indicators makes them important to monitor throughout the ECoC year.

Average Life Satisfaction in Trenčín by City District (2024)



Average Life Satisfaction in Trenčín by City District (2025)



Figure: Average life satisfaction by city district, 2024 and 2025
Source: DATA26. Trenčín Resident Survey 2024 a 2025 (n = 600)



2. CULTURAL AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Trenčín entered the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) year with an already established cultural and creative sector. The city is already a natural centre of a vibrant and active cultural and creative sector that existed long before the title was awarded. A thorough understanding of the condition and structure of this environment is essential for assessing what

the ECoC year can realistically achieve – and what forms of systemic support are needed to ensure that the cultural and creative industries in the city and region emerge from the project stronger and with the potential for long-term, sustainable development.

1 859		575		7,9 %		57 %	
cultural and creative industry entities		cultural and creative industry entities in the Trenčín district		all enterprises		micro-enterprises	
In the Trenčín Region (2024)		31% of the total number all regional		cultural and creative entities are based in Trenčín		with fewer than 10 employees	

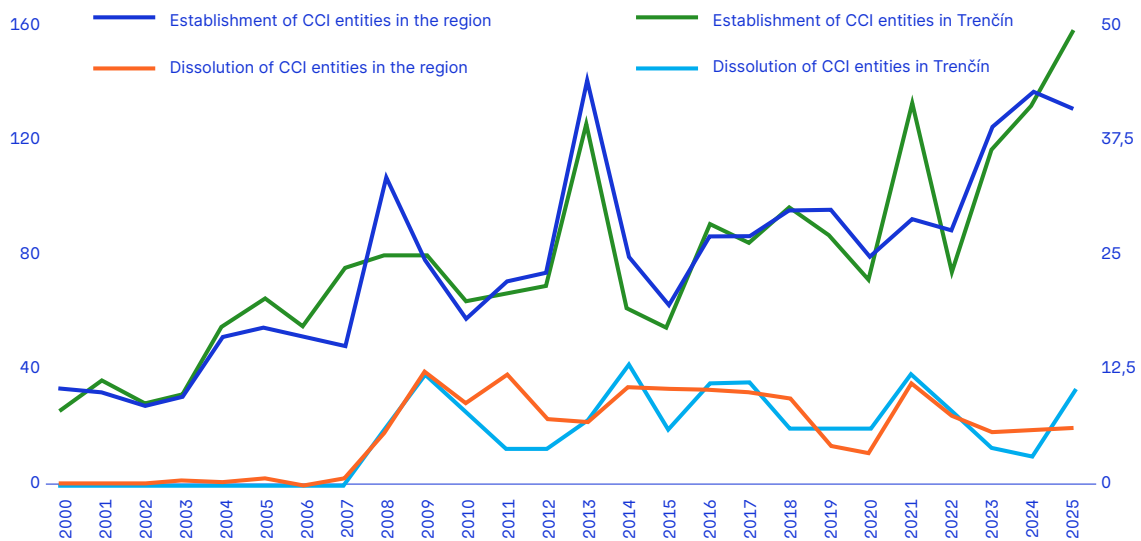
Almost one third of all cultural and creative enterprises in the Trenčín Region are based in the city itself, confirming Trenčín’s role as a regional creative hub. The core of the sector consists of museums, theatres, performing arts, and cultural heritage institutions, alongside a strong creative industries layer dominated by architecture (39% of all regional architectural firms are based in Trenčín), design (36%), and advertising. A large group of entities – primarily in computer programming – sits on the edge of the definition of cultural and creative industries and may somewhat inflate the size of the sector. The figures should therefore be interpreted with this methodological caveat in mind.

Most entities are micro-enterprises or sole traders: 57% employ fewer than 10 people and 7% are single-person businesses. This structure is typical of creative sectors worldwide, but it also means that the sector’s resilience is inherently fragile. Small teams without financial reserves have limited capacity to absorb shocks

– whether economic downturns, funding cuts, or instability in support mechanisms, all of which affected the sector in 2025..

Development Over Time: Growth, Crisis, and Recovery

Activity in the cultural and creative industries (CCI) in the Trenčín Region and the Trenčín district grew significantly following Slovakia’s accession to the EU in 2004, before being disrupted by the financial crisis in 2008. The sector later recovered, but experienced another sharp decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2022, stable growth has resumed. However, data from 2025 point to a possible new slowdown linked to a less stable business environment and disruptions to national-level support mechanisms for the sector. The ECoC year is therefore unfolding at a time when the creative sector remains structurally fragile, making continued monitoring particularly important.



Graph: Development of companies in the cultural and creative industries: comparison of the Trenčín Region and the Trenčín district, 2000–2025. Source: DATA26 analysis based on Finstat data

The Voice of the Cultural and Creative Industries: Barriers to Development

Understanding the barriers faced by local actors in the cultural and creative industries is essential for planning future investment effectively. As part of the capacity-building

Lack of accessible funding	3.37 / 5 · 45% rated this 4–5 out of 5
High development costs	3.27 / 5 · 41% rated this 4–5 out of 5
Lack of management expertise	3.17 / 5 · 34% rated this 4–5 out of 5
Difficulty finding qualified staff	2.89 / 5 · ~25% rate 4–5 out of 5
Technological support	2.51 / 5 · rated as the least critical

The data presented in the chart provides important insight into the hierarchy of barriers affecting the development of the local cultural and creative sector. The message is clear: financial and managerial constraints are the dominant challenges. Nearly half of respondents identified access to funding as a major issue, while similarly high shares pointed to high development costs and gaps in management expertise. Technological and informational barriers, although relevant for some respondents, were not identified as primary obstacles.

In response, Trenčín 2026 – in cooperation with the city and the Trenčín Self-Governing Region – launched grant schemes supporting culture and the creative industries for organisations based in the region and projects implemented either in the city of Trenčín (Europe for the City) or across the wider region (Europe for the Region). In 2025, €100,000 was allocated to the Europe for the City programme (supporting 24 projects) and another €100,000 to Europe for the Region (28 supported projects). In 2026, funding for Europe for the Region increased to €150,000, while Europe for the City again received €100,000. A total of 68 projects were supported in 2026 alone (40 within Europe for the Region and 28 within Europe for the City). Across both years, this represents 120 grants awarded to support the cultural and creative sector.

Educational activities delivered through the Runway and Garage programmes directly address the second and third most significant barriers identified by respondents – lack of management skills and high development costs – as participation in the courses is free of charge. By building capacities and strengthening networks, these programmes have the potential to increase the resilience of the sector. An example from ongoing evaluation work comes from a cohort that completed the Runway programme in spring 2024. To assess longer-term impacts, interviews were conducted one year after programme completion, between June and July 2025. Eleven former participants took part in the research (2 men and 9 women aged between 24 and 50). Evaluation of additional cohorts is ongoing, although at the time of writing the results had not yet been sufficiently processed.

Preliminary thematic analysis of the first wave of interviews suggests that educational programmes for cultural

programmes Runway and Garage, a survey was conducted among 170 CCI professionals. Respondents came from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, with 52% based in Trenčín or the Trenčín Region. The largest group (46%) came from the cultural core sector (museums, theatres, and cultural organisations), while 31% represented the cultural industries and 10% the creative industries.

professionals, such as Runway, generate long-term effects extending beyond the educational content itself. A key outcome is the creation and maintenance of professional networks among participants. These networks continue to function over time, although differently from during the programme itself. The intensive sense of community gradually evolves into more practically oriented collaboration. Participants primarily draw on these contacts when facing specific professional situations – for example when seeking work opportunities, project partners, or expert support.

From a public policy perspective, this is significant because the programme generates not only short-term educational outcomes, but also long-term “social capital” that strengthens the resilience and professional capacity of individuals working in the cultural and creative sector. The findings also point to inequalities in impact. Participants from smaller towns and rural areas have fewer opportunities to actively maintain and develop these networks, particularly due to limited opportunities for in-person meetings and collaboration. This means that the programme’s benefits are not distributed evenly across the territory.

Programmes of this kind therefore matter not only as educational initiatives, but also as tools for developing the wider cultural and creative ecosystem. To strengthen their long-term impact, it is important to:

- create opportunities for continued networking after programme completion,
- support regional formats of collaboration outside larger cities,
- work systematically with alumni networks as long-term development resources.

Educational programmes for the cultural and creative sector can function as catalysts – developing skills, strengthening participants’ confidence, and above all creating networks that continue to support participants over the long term. These networks represent a tangible contribution to the functioning and stability of the cultural sector in the region.

What Can Still Be Done for the Cultural and Creative Sector

- The ECoC does not build the creative sector from scratch – it works with an already existing and relatively strong foundation. The task is therefore not to create capacities, but to expand and strengthen them.
- Networks created through educational programmes are already showing longer-term effects. One year after completing informal training programmes, graduates continue to maintain and actively use professional relationships formed during the programmes – although participants based outside larger cities have fewer opportunities to sustain these networks through in-person contact.
- The typology of the cultural and creative industries in Trenčín, based on secondary data analysis, revealed the strong position of the creative industries (compared to the cultural industries and the cultural core), particularly in the

fields of architecture and design. The design sector includes a broad range of activities – from interior design and graphic design to industrial and fashion design – suggesting a continuing local specialisation in these fields. This concentration of creative talent represents a significant competitive advantage that the city could make more strategic use of in strengthening both economic development and its international profile beyond 2026.

- At the same time, micro-enterprises represent both a strength and a vulnerability of the local cultural and creative sector. Partnership networks, strong and accessible shared infrastructure, and continued capacity support should therefore be understood as structural needs of the sector rather than optional forms of support for the cultural and creative industries in Trenčín.



3. PLACEMAKING

Placemaking and the study of its impacts ask a simple yet challenging question: How do people feel in the city where they live? And how is culture connected to people's perception of place? The DATA26 placemaking research draws on two waves of the resident survey, Q-sort methodology with participants at public events in 2024 and 2025, and mapping of life satisfaction across city districts.

How Residents Perceive the City

The most consistent finding emerging from the placemaking data is that the city district in which residents live is the strongest predictor of how they evaluate the city across almost all observed dimensions – from atmosphere and vitality to mobility, cultural events, and the overall attractiveness of the city. Differences related to age and gender are significantly smaller and less consistent.

In 2025, the Juh district recorded the highest scores across most placemaking dimensions, including perceptions of atmosphere, vitality, cultural events, and the overall attractiveness of Trenčín. The Stred district also improved year-on-year. This may reflect the presence and expanding programme offer of the Hviezda cultural and creative centre, although this interpretation should be treated cautiously. Changes to the physical environment – such as public space regeneration in the city centre – may have had an equal or even stronger influence, and this requires further research.

The Západ district, which was among the highest-rated parts of the city in 2024, recorded declines across several

indicators in 2025. Although these shifts are relatively small, their consistency is noteworthy. Together with findings related to trust and life satisfaction, this suggests that the district deserves particular attention during the second half of the ECoC year – both in terms of programming and investment in community infrastructure. Based on the currently processed data, it is not yet possible to determine the exact reasons behind this shift. The finding therefore requires further investigation into the factors that may be influencing how residents of this district perceive Trenčín.

What Residents Need from the Place Where They live

At the Korzo Palackého event in 2024 (61 participants) and Korzo Soblahovská event in 2025 (78 participants), visitors were invited to rank statements describing what makes Trenčín a good place to live – from the “least important” to the “most important” attributes. The results provide direct insight into residents’ priorities and show a high degree of consistency across both years.

Safety and cleanliness emerged as the most important qualities, consistently ranking at the top. Green spaces, walkability, and pleasant spaces for rest and recreation were also identified as highly important. When attention is given to these aspects, they can significantly improve people’s experience of the city. The importance attached to urban sustainability increased between 2024 and 2025, reflecting growing expectations that the city should pursue a stronger environmental strategy.

2024 (N= 61)								
Most important								Least important
Safe	Clean	Walkable	Friendly	Fun	Useful	Neighbourly	Continuity	Spiritual
	Green	Active	Pleasant walk	Historic	Convenient	Special	Celebratory	
		Cooperative	Relaxing	Welcoming	Connected	Pride		
		Sustainable	Diverse	Accessible	Interactive	Real		
			Attractive	Indigenous	Charming			
			Stewardship	Vital	Proximity			
				Readable				



Figure: Descriptive findings from the placemaking analysis using the Q-method.

When residents are asked directly to describe their city, they most often describe Trenčín as pedestrian-friendly, pleasant for walking, historic, green, and people-friendly. These are genuine strengths of the city. The challenge is that these qualities are not experienced equally across all city districts, and some residents – particularly those living in the Západ district – experience them less strongly than others.

ECoC and Perceptions of the City

As many as 72% of respondents in the opening weekend satisfaction survey agreed that the event improved their overall perception of Trenčín. This is a remarkable early finding and confirms the results of the nationwide survey conducted in April 2025, in which 46% of Slovak respondents reported a more positive perception of Trenčín thanks to the ECoC title.

These are perceptual effects, and it will be important to continue monitoring them over time in order to assess whether they translate into longer-term changes in how residents perceive their city and how visitors perceive Trenčín as a destination. Nevertheless, these are encouraging early signals that the ECoC is already reshaping the image of the city – both for those who live there and for those who come to experience it.

National-level data collected in April 2025 suggests that the European Capital of Culture title has already contributed to a measurable shift in the city's image. Almost half of respondents (46%) reported a more positive perception of Trenčín, while 39% expressed greater interest in visiting the city. Notably, 62% said they were considering a visit, and 18% stated that they would definitely travel to Trenčín specifically because of its ECoC status. Ongoing monitoring will show whether these intentions translate into sustained visitor behaviour.

Investment in the City's Image

Náklady na otvárací víkend predstavujú z pohľadu verejnej
 From a public policy perspective, the costs associated with the opening weekend represent a targeted investment in building the brand of the city and region, strengthening their reputation, and supporting their long-term economic sustainability. In an environment where cities compete for visitors, talent, and investment, the ability to create a strong and credible image is a key asset – and one of the most difficult to achieve.

The opening weekend of Trenčín 2026 fulfilled this role to a measurable extent. The event attracted tens of thousands of visitors, generated more than one thousand media outputs within a short period of time, and significantly increased traffic across the project's digital channels. At the same time, 72% of visitors reported an improved perception of the city, while 75% stated that the event increased the likelihood of them visiting Trenčín again.

These indicators suggest that the opening weekend functioned as an accelerator of the city's brand – an intervention capable of concentrating public attention, reshaping perceptions, and creating conditions for further economic and social impacts within a relatively short timeframe. In this sense, the investment has a multiplier effect: its value is not limited to the event itself, but unfolds gradually through increased visitor numbers, stronger interest in the city, a more dynamic local business environment, and greater attractiveness for both residents and external audiences.

The cost structure presented below should therefore be understood in this broader context. From an accounting perspective, these are expenditures related to the delivery of the event itself; from a strategic perspective, however, they represent investment in the wider ecosystem of marketing, communication, and place branding for both the city and the region.

Category	Category description	Amount (€ thousand) EURO
Organisation of the cultural event	Delivery of the opening weekend by Raiman Production, s. r. o., selected through public procurement	893
Artistic fees	Fees for performances during the opening weekend	430
Lighting and laser effects	Castle light and laser show and drone show	250
Renal costs	Rental of venues, parking areas, technical equipment and event infrastructure	233
Marketing and promotion	Advertising, promotional materials and printing services	128
Catering	Refreshments for guests and performers	99
Staffing	External staff capacities, temporary contractors and volunteer coordinators	96
Production and operational delivery	Production capacities, installation and dismantling works, preparatory and clean-up works, material and energy consumption, insurance	94
Accommodation	Accommodation of official guests and performers	40
Safety and public mobility	Management of parking, crossings and visitor movement safety	38
Transport	Shuttle services and guest transport	23
Total		2.324

Opening weekend expenditure reflects the accounting status as of 30 April 2026.

Tourism Development Before and After the Opening Weekend

Official tourism indicators from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic suggest that the increased visibility of Trenčín is beginning to translate into measurable growth in visitor numbers. During the first two months of 2026, accommodation statistics for the city of Trenčín recorded 7,025 guests, compared to 6,029 during the same period in 2025 – representing an increase of 16.5%. The number of overnight stays increased from 10,945 to 12,252, an increase of 11.9%. These changes occurred within a stable accommodation base of 48 establishments offering 2,154 beds, suggesting that the growth reflects increased demand rather than expanded accommodation capacity.

Mobile network data from Q4 2025 and Q1 2026 provides additional insight into visitor behaviour beyond official accommodation statistics. The data distinguishes between day visitors – those staying in the city for at least two hours without an overnight stay – and tourists identified through patterns of overnight presence, including visitors staying with friends or relatives outside official accommodation facilities. The findings show that same-day visitation remains strongly regional, with 43.68% of domestic day visitors coming from the Trenčín Region itself. This confirms Trenčín's current role as a short-distance destination serving its surrounding region.

International visitor patterns further reinforce this regional profile. Among foreign day visitors, the largest group came from the Czech Republic (51.51%), followed by Austria (10.09%), Germany (6.28%), and Poland (5.45%). A similar pattern appears among overnight visitors, where neighbouring countries account for the majority of international stays. These findings position Trenčín not as a long-haul tourist destination, but as an emerging Central European regional hub with strengthening cross-border connections. In the

months following the opening weekend, the city also recorded increased visitor numbers from Austria, particularly among visitors arriving for one-day or short multi-day trips, often travelling in groups by train.

The role of the **Regional Tourism Organisation (OOCR) - Považie Region** as the official destination management organisation responsible for tourism development and international promotion of Trenčín and the Považie region has also strengthened. During and after the opening weekend, the organisation coordinated hospitality services for individual and group international visitors, as well as journalists and tourism-sector professionals, including travel agencies and tour operators. In doing so, it has been building international relationships that are expected to remain valuable beyond 2026. In April 2026, the organisation also hosted the General Assembly of the Association of Hungarian Travel Agencies, attended by representatives of 68 travel agencies.

To support domestic tourism, OOCR Považie Region launched the digital Považie Cultural Pass application. The app allows users to check in at cultural events, collect points, and exchange them for benefits at partner venues across the city and region, thereby strengthening cooperation with local tourism service providers. The application was launched during the opening weekend and downloaded by 842 users, who checked in at event locations a total of 2,252 times.

Taken together, these indicators suggest that the ECoC title is strengthening Trenčín's visibility within its immediate geographical network – an essential first step towards broader international tourism growth.

4. CHALLENGES AND OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The evidence presented in this report is early and preliminary. It captures Trenčín at the beginning of the ECoC year, before the majority of the programme has been implemented and before most of the intended impacts can be meaningfully measured. At this stage, the data allows us to identify where the foundations appear strong and where risks, gaps, or vulnerabilities are most visible. At the same time, this represents a process-oriented evaluation approach in which the project's core objectives are reflected directly in the dramaturgy of key events – such as the opening weekend – and subsequently compared with evidence gathered in the field. The purpose of this report is to provide the Trenčín 2026 team and other cultural actors in the city and region with evidence and analytical insight to support the ongoing implementation of the project. It also aims to identify strengths and weaknesses whose further analysis can contribute to the sustainable development and long-term legacy of the ECoC year 2026.

Strengths and Stable Foundations

- The opening weekend demonstrated that Trenčín is capable of mobilising its residents and attracting significant regional and national attention. Overall satisfaction was high, and the atmosphere was widely described as exceptional.
- Indicators of social cohesion are positive: interpersonal trust is above the national Slovak average and continues to grow. Local institutions also enjoy relatively high levels of trust. The volunteer programme is creating social connections and strengthening civic engagement.
- The cultural and creative sector is active, established, and growing, with particularly strong foundations in architecture and design that predate the ECoC title itself. Capacity-building programmes are directly addressing the sector's most significant barriers.
- Residents also demonstrate a nuanced understanding of placemaking: they clearly identify safety and community as core priorities in urban life. The ECoC programme therefore has an opportunity to demonstrate that culture contributes to these priorities rather than competing with them.

Risks and weaknesses

- Trust towards people outside residents' immediate social circles – including people of different religions, nationalities, or backgrounds – has shown a slight year-on-year decline. If the ECoC is to fulfil its inclusive ambitions, the programme will need to create opportunities for encounters between different social groups, rather than only strengthening ties among those who are already naturally connected.

- Barriers to cultural participation are primarily informational and psychological rather than material. The city therefore needs communication strategies capable of reaching residents who currently do not feel that cultural life is “for people like them”.

- The Západ district shows a consistent downward trend across indicators related to placemaking, wellbeing, and trust. This part of the city may therefore require particular programme attention during the second half of the ECoC year.

- The creative sector's dependence on micro-enterprises, combined with fragile funding structures, also creates vulnerability. The ECoC year provides an opportunity to build more permanent support infrastructure – but only if followed by sustained commitment beyond 2026.

- Cooperation between the city and the wider region in the areas of placemaking and cultural development also remains insufficiently developed. At the same time, the regional reach of the ECoC – already visible in visitor data from the opening weekend – creates an opportunity to strengthen these connections further.

The Way Forward

The DATA26 team will continue disseminating its research findings throughout 2026. This will include, for example, findings from the full cycle of the resident survey, ongoing ethnographic and biographical research, the extension of the CCI (Cultural and Creative Industries) survey to the educational programmes of the Hviezda cultural and creative centre and the wider CCI ecosystem, evaluations of public-space interventions, and new rounds of focus groups involving volunteers, cultural professionals, and other groups of residents. The final evaluation report will be prepared in 2027 — within twelve months after the ECoC year — with the aim of assessing the long-term legacy of the project.

The goal of this monitoring and evaluation work is not only to measure whether the objectives of the ECoC were achieved. Its purpose is to understand, as honestly and accurately as possible, what this exceptional year meant for the residents of Trenčín and the Trenčín Region — and what foundations the city and region can continue building on after the project ends.



ANNEXES

ABOUT DATA26

DATA26 is an independent research and evaluation team for the Trenčín – European Capital of Culture 2026 project. The team consists of four lead researchers supported by a twenty-member citizens' council and an eight-member scientific council composed of experts from Slovak and international universities, including Liverpool John Moores University (United Kingdom).

Baseline Methodology and Bibliography

The DATA26 Research Strategy: A Living Lab Approach to Cultural Mega-Event Evaluation

By prof. Rafaela Neiva Ganga, Chairwoman of the DATA26 Scientific Board & Author of the DATA26 Research Architecture

The monitoring and evaluation strategy of Trenčín 2026 is not a standard audit of whether activities were delivered or attendance targets were met. It is an attempt to understand — with appropriate rigour, and across multiple dimensions of social and cultural life — what a European Capital of Culture year actually does to a city and to the people who live in it, work in it, pass through it, and invest their creative energies in it. The approach adopted by DATA26 is, to our knowledge, distinctive in the European ECoC evaluation landscape both in its methodological scope and in the participatory principles that underpin its design.

DATA26 methodologically operates as a Culture Living Lab — an independent research and evaluation structure embedded within the ECoC project and following the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) principles. The Living Lab model is not merely an organisational label; it shapes the epistemological orientation of the work. Rather than positioning evaluation as something done to a city from outside, the Living Lab approach understands the city as a co-investigator: residents, cultural professionals, volunteers, local government, and civil society organisations are not only subjects of the research but active participants in framing the questions it asks and the evidence it gathers. This is operationalised through a Civic Board of twenty members and a Scientific Council of members representing universities in Slovakia, the United Kingdom, and the United States — a governance structure that reflects the Open Research and Innovation Group model, adapted from the Quadruple Helix framework (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Ståhlbröst, 2010).

The empirical design is deliberately mixed-methods and longitudinal, spanning the full arc of the ECoC project from the preparatory phase (2022–2025) through the title

DATA26 uses a mixed-methods research approach, combining representative surveys, focus groups, ethnographic observation, sector analysis, and biographical interviews in order to create a comprehensive longitudinal picture of the impact of the ECoC on the city and the region. All data collection and analysis are conducted independently from the Trenčín 2026 programme team.

year (2026) and into the post-event period (2027). This three-stage structure — baseline, in itinere and aftermath — enables the research to track not only what happens during the ECoC year, but what changes endure, and what reverts, once the title year ends. Quantitative foundations are provided by a representative annual survey of Trenčín residents (n=600 per wave), a visitors and audiences survey, a Cultural and Creative Industries sector survey, and analysis of secondary data sources including national statistics on employment, tourism, cultural infrastructure and GDP. These are complemented by a suite of qualitative methods — including focus groups with volunteers, cultural professionals and community participants; ethnographic observation studies embedded within events and neighbourhoods; and biographical interviews conducted with residents and cultural practitioners over time, exploring how the ECoC year intersects with, or transforms, the trajectories of individual lives.

The research spans six intersecting thematic dimensions, each corresponding to a strand of the Trenčín 2026 strategic framework. Across all stakeholder groups — residents, visitors, volunteers, cultural and creative sector professionals, neighbourhood communities and local governance actors — DATA26 enquires into four shared dimensions: how people feel about Trenčín as a place; how European they feel; how their wellbeing and life satisfaction compare over time; and how their social relationships and sense of cohesion within the city are changing. Within specific stakeholder groups, the research also asks more targeted questions: how cultural participation is distributed across the population and what shapes residents' engagement with cultural life; how the volunteer programme changes the social networks, civic identity and wellbeing of those who take part; how the lives of residents in different neighbourhoods are transformed by co-created cultural activity and changes to public space; how much the cultural and creative sector gains in innovation capacity, professional networks, management skills and international reach; what the ECoC means for tourism flows, the quality of the cultural offer, and the longer-term attractiveness of Trenčín as a destination; and how local governance — including cultural policy and investment in cultural infrastructure — adapts in response to the evidence as it accumulates.

This breadth of scope is not accidental. ECoC evaluations have historically been criticised for their tendency towards narrow economic impact metrics and short-term visitor-count analyses – albeit we are also assessing the economic impact of Trenčín 2026 –, at the expense of the social and cultural dimensions that the programme was originally designed to generate (Ganga, 2022).

DATA26 was constituted from the outset as a response to that pattern — an attempt to build an evaluation infrastructure that takes seriously both the ambitions of the ECoC programme and the complexity of the city in which it is unfolding. The methodology is process-oriented as much as outcomes-oriented: it is interested not only in whether impacts occur, but in how they are produced, by whom, under what conditions, and for which segments of the population. The result is an open-access longitudinal dataset that will remain available to the city and the region for analysis long after 2027, and that is already generating academic outputs alongside the policy-facing reports of which this document forms a part.

Bibliography of the Report

The content of the report From Preparations to the Opening of the European Capital of Culture Trenčín 2026 may be freely used, shared, and reproduced, provided that appropriate attribution to the source and authors is given.

Social Cohesion

The concept and design of the social cohesion data collection, including the selection of question types, were inspired by the book *Cohesion in Slovakia: What Holds the Country Together and What Tears It Apart?* by Pavol Kosnáč and Hugo Gloss (2003), as well as by the work of the DEKK Institute - Social Cohesion Research Centre, which serves as the official Slovak representative in the World Values Survey and collects nationally representative data for Slovakia.

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Placemaking

The placemaking component of the DATA26 study draws on participatory methods of public space evaluation, informed by the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) approach to quality-of-place assessment. The Q-sort methodology used at the Korzo Palackého (2024) and Korzo Soblahovská (2025) events

was designed and analysed by Nicholas Wise (Arizona State University, Member of the Scientific Board), in collaboration with the DATA26 team. The approach captures residents' priorities for the city through a structured comparative ranking of place-quality attributes, offering direct insight into public values that complement the statistical findings from the resident survey.

General acknowledgement: Descriptive findings from the placemaking analysis using the Q-method were analysed and provided by Nicholas Wise (Arizona State University, Member of the Scientific Board), in collaboration with DATA26.

Volunteering

The analysis of the Trenčín 2026 volunteer programme draws on a substantial international literature on volunteering motivations, impacts and inclusion. The functional approach to volunteering motivations (Clary et al., 1998) and the intergroup contact and identity literature (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) informed the conceptual framing of the thematic analysis. Evidence on the wellbeing benefits of volunteering, particularly for older adults, draws on Morrow-Howell et al. (2003), Thoits and Hewitt (2001), and the more recent umbrella review by Nichol et al. (2024). The intersection of volunteering with active ageing policy is grounded in the WHO (2002) framework. Gender dimensions of volunteering across European contexts are addressed in Gil-Lacruz et al. (2019), Sánchez-García et al. (2022), and Wemlinger and Berlan (2016).

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Wellbeing

The creative health and creative wellbeing literature draws on a field that has developed substantially over the past three decades at the intersection of the social sciences, public health and cultural studies, though the biomedical and social scientific contributions to this evidence base have, as yet, been uneven (Ganga et al., 2024). The references below reflect the conceptual and empirical foundations informing the DATA26 wellbeing framework, organised by sub-theme.

The OECD Better Life Index and the ONS National Wellbeing Framework provide the primary measurement architecture for the DATA26 wellbeing dimensions, situating individual life satisfaction and domain-specific assessments within a multidimensional understanding of quality of life that encompasses both objective conditions and subjective experience.

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Cultural Participation

Cultural participation — encompassing both active forms (making, creating, co-producing) and receptive forms (attending, experiencing, witnessing) — is one of the most deeply stratified dimensions of social life; as Bourdieu's (1984) foundational account of distinction made clear, and as subsequent empirical work in the European context has consistently confirmed (Bennett et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1987), access to and engagement with cultural life is not distributed neutrally across populations but is shaped by prior educational capital, social class, and the symbolic distance — real or perceived — between cultural institutions and the communities they ostensibly serve.

The DATA26 cultural participation research proceeds from the analysis of the five distinct profiles identified in the 2024 Trenčín resident survey — ranging from highly active and community-oriented residents to occasional mainstream participants and less engaged older adults — represent not failure but the starting condition, and that the social value of the ECoC year will depend critically on which of the two forms of creative intervention proves more durable: the short-term, large-scale city-centre event, whose effects on participation inequalities tend to be limited and potentially regressive, or the hyper-local, co-created, heritage-focused activity that the evidence suggests is more capable of producing lasting change in the cultural practices of previously disengaged communities (Ganga, Davies, Wilson & Musella, 2025) — a distinction that positions the Living Neighbourhoods programme, and the biographical dimension of the DATA26 research, as among the most analytically significant sites of the evaluation.

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Culture and Creative Industries

The concept of cultural and creative industries — however contested its definitional boundaries remain, from the UK DCMS's originating 1998 framework to the more granular NACE-based taxonomy of ESSnet-Culture adopted by the European Commission — has become, over the past two decades, the dominant policy language through which governments and city administrations frame their investment in cultural infrastructure and the economic potential of creative talent (Throsby, 2001; Howkins, 2001; KEA European Affairs, 2006).

The DATA26 CCI analysis the Trenčín sector is real, active and concentrated — with particular specialisations — and what the ECoC year can plausibly offer as a targeted amplification of capacity in the dimensions the sector itself identifies as most constraining: funding access, development costs, and management expertise, precisely the barriers the Runway and Garáž programmes are designed to address; whether the networks and skills generated through these programmes persist and deepen across the wider territorial ecosystem.

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Economic Impact

Economic impact analysis estimates the net new expenditure that flows into an area as a direct consequence of an event. The key principle is that of additionality: only spending that would not otherwise have occurred in the study area is counted. This requires distinguishing visitors who travelled specifically for the event from those who would have been present regardless, and accounting for potential displacement, whereby event-related spending substitutes for rather than supplements other local activity.

The standard empirical approach combines primary survey data with secondary source triangulation. Visitor surveys — conducted both on-site and online during the event — capture the nature and scale of participant activity: total expenditure, trip purpose, and the counterfactual of what visitors would have done in the absence of the event (Dwyer, 2022). This primary evidence is triangulated against administrative and commercial data sources to bound estimates and test robustness. The economic effect of visitor expenditure is then extended through the application of spending multipliers, which capture the indirect effects as money circulates through the regional economy. These multipliers are derived from Input-Output (IO) models of regional production structure (Miller & Blair, 2009), an approach applied to multiple ECoC contexts (Nosková, 2016; Phythian-Adams et al., 2008). A challenge common to smaller Central European economies is that official regional input-output tables are not published at the sub-national level, requiring multipliers to be estimated from national data using non-survey regionalisation methods (Flegg & Tohmo, 2013). This introduces a degree of estimation of uncertainty that is acknowledged in the interpretation of results.

The DATA26 economic impact framework uses this methodology through a mixed-methods strategy. The bedrock is an online and in-person visitor survey capturing expenditure behaviour and trip additionality during the Trenčín 2026 programme. This is triangulated with national statistics and administrative data, accommodation pricing data drawn from commercial platform scraping, and mobile phone mobility data tracking visitor flows into and out of Trenčín — an approach consistent with the growing use of administrative big data to measure event economic effects (Kim & Yang, 2021).

These data streams together support a best estimate of net additional expenditure, to which regional IO multipliers are applied to produce gross economic impact figures.

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