



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

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

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Introduction

This is the report of the expert panel (the “panel”) for the pre-selection phase of the competition for the European Capital of Culture in 2025 in Slovenia. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985. The title “European Capital of Culture” had previously been awarded to one city in Slovenia, namely Maribor in 2012.

The Ministry of Culture of Slovenia (the “Ministry”) acts as the managing authority of the competition, which is governed by Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”)¹ and by the “Rules of Procedure – Competition for the European Capital of Culture 2025 in Slovenia” (the “Rules”) – adopted by the Ministry and published on its website².

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

The competition takes place in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection. The Ministry issued a call for applications in February 2019. Six applications were submitted by the closing date of 31 December 2019 by:

Kranj, Lendava, Ljubljana, Nova Gorica, Piran, Ptuj.

Panel meeting

The panel met in Ljubljana on 25-27 February 2020. The panel elected Cristina Farinha as its chair and Igor Saksida as its vice-chair. Due to previous commitments, one of the panel members nominated by an EU institution - Jiri Suchanek - was unable to attend. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality. Representatives of the Ministry and of the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers took no part in the panel’s deliberations or decision.

At the pre-selection hearings on 25-26 February, each candidate city, in alphabetical order, presented its case (in 45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (in 45 minutes).

At a press conference on 27 February 2020, the chair of the panel announced the panel’s recommendation that the Ministry invites the following cities to submit revised bids for the final selection (in alphabetical order):

Ljubljana, Nova Gorica, Piran, Ptuj.

¹ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG (in English)
<https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MK/Projekti/EPK/EPK-poslovnik-o-izvedbi-postopka-za-pridobitev-naziva.pdf>
(in Slovenian)

² https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MK/Javne-objave/Javni-razpisi/EPK-2025/bec4bab7d6/EPK_2025_Besedilo_razpisa_slo.pdf (in Slovenian)
https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MK/Javne-objave/Javni-razpisi/EPK-2025/22f5e608ac/EPK_2025_Besedilo_razpisa_ang.pdf (in English)

Next steps

The Ministry will arrange for the formal approval of the shortlist based on the recommendations included in this report (Article 8 of the Decision). It will then issue an invitation to the cities named on the approved shortlist to submit revised applications for the final selection.

The shortlisted cities should take into account the assessments and recommendations of the panel in this report.

The deadline for submission of revised applications is 10.11.2020.

The final selection meeting will take place in Ljubljana in December 2020.

Two to four members of the panel will pay a one-day visit to the shortlisted cities shortly before the final selection meeting, in order to obtain more background information on the respective bids. Representatives of the European Commission and the Ministry will accompany the panel members as observers.

Thanks

The panel members would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in this pre-selection phase of the competition. In particular, the panel noted that all cities have used the opportunity of the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies as well as the role of culture and Europe in their overall social-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition. The panel encourages all cities, not just those short-listed, to continue with the development and implementation of their respective cultural strategies.

The panel thanks all six bidding candidates and everyone who contributed to their bids, the European Commission for its advice and the Ministry for its excellent administration.

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:

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

- Management.

The panel noted that not all candidate cities had fully completed the formal approval of their cultural strategy at city council level. One of the most important features in Decision 445/2014/EU governing the ECoC action from the 2020 titles on is the requirement that cities have a formal and explicit cultural strategy. This is to ensure that the ECoC is grounded in a medium-term transformation of the city and its cultural life rather than in a one-off festival.

In the commentaries that follow, the panel notes the main elements of their discussions during the pre-selection meeting. In the case of the shortlisted cities, specific and common recommendations are made, in order to assist them in the preparation of their final bid books.

The panel emphasises that its assessments of the candidates were based on the bid book and on the cities' presentation sessions during the pre-selection meeting. A city's history, its recent and current policies and its cultural offer may form a basis for the proposed programme, but they are not relevant for the selection process. The panel's assessment and recommendation for the shortlist are also based on the analysis of the capacity of all candidate cities to make the required steps in order to win the ECoC title in the following eight months until the final selection meeting.

Kranj

The bid of Kranj is centred around the concept of infinity and sustainability, which encompasses the need for ecological and cultural sustainability. The goal of the bid is to shape the Gorenjska region's public image as the prototype of a sustainable cultural region, reinventing itself through culture, with Kranj serving as its administrative flagship alongside partner towns. The concept brings to the fore Kranj's cultural heritage, technological and artistic innovation and Gorenjska region's image as a place for green tourism.

Through the concept of a sustainable cultural region, the bid has the ambition to address artists' needs in terms of capacity building, national and international audience, underprivileged groups and the need for infrastructural modernisation - with an overall aim to increase the well-being of local citizens. However, even though the setting up of an Academy for cultural managers is a step in the right direction, the bid does not clearly present the capacity building plans for the ECoC project itself.

Four strategies are currently being developed including the Municipality of Kranj Cultural Strategy 2021-2026 and the Gorenjska region's Sustainable Cultural Region plan. The issues to be addressed have been rightly identified. A cultural regional platform has been set up, with identified themes and priorities, although the latter are more directed towards quality of life than towards culture. The city plans to increase the cultural budget in the years leading to the ECoC-year. The wish to assess the level of ecological sustainability is noted as positive by the panel. The efforts for decentralization, and for achieving distinctiveness from the nearby capital Ljubljana, is an important strategic aim that has been identified.

A monitoring and evaluation framework is outlined, but its parameters are rather vaguely defined. In addition, it does not address the European dimension while this should be an essential element of every aspect of the ECoC project.

Even though the bid gives an outline for the cultural and artistic programme, the overall narrative remains unclear. The programme relates to the local artistic scene and is envisaging, among others, interesting initiatives like a Biennale of Well-Being, Walk the Talk, and a Centre for Innovation, which are to become part of the ECoC's legacy. In the panel's view, the proposed topic of "rights" that the bid puts forward is quite relevant. Moreover, the models proposed for urban and social choreography are promising. Yet the vision for the development of creative industries is too loose and broadly defined. The sustainability theme, declared as a central element in the bid concept, is still conceptually too incipient and should have been more researched and developed even at this stage of the competition. Building upon the diversity of mixed families and the reference to small languages are interesting entries in the programme concept, but they are not translated into concrete programme lines or projects. The residency proposal has a potential to be developed as a legacy project. Overall, the programme seems rather traditional and lacking clear innovative and experimental cultural expressions.

The place of Europe in the city and in the ECoC programme is seen as a much-needed addition to the culture of entertainment that the local inhabitants are used to. The plans are to add a European dimension through the main themes of the bid. The European dimension seems to be however understood mainly as strengthening existing primarily Alpine region partnerships, as well as those with the countries that belonged to former Yugoslavia or with Balkan and Eastern European countries. The panel considers it a rather narrow understanding of the concept. The Opening ceremony is planned to be of regional scope, spread through the city and its surrounding. Finally, the bid intends to attract European audiences through marketing and tourism, addressing (again) mainly neighbouring countries, which undermines the scope of international involvement expected from the ECoC. The panel would have expected a much broader spectrum of specifically ECoC activities and events aiming at kindling the interest from international visitors. Moreover, the bid does not include clear common European topics that could be relevant and of interest for wider European audiences.

The panel had the positive impression the bid developed in a bottom-up process involving artists, NGOs, experts, businesses, etc., as part of an overall endeavour to build trust between key players, which is a necessary precondition for the development of both the city and the region. Families with children and marginalized social groups are considered as key target groups. Several projects envisage elements addressing children, e.g. children learning digital skills, and workshops for developing mathematical thinking. The mission articulated for audience development is relevant, yet it is only a starting point for a future audience-development strategy.

The management dimension is rather underdeveloped. A positive element is that smaller municipalities are planned to contribute significantly to the ECoC budget. It lacks though a communication framework for the network of partners. There is neither an organigram, nor a staff planning, while the future relation to be developed between the ECoC team and the administration is not described. Furthermore, plans for selecting/appointing the CEO and Artistic Director are not presented. The explanation that the artistic director will be appointed "by consensus" indicates that no concrete plans for the development of the ECoC delivery structure had been elaborated at this stage. No details are given about the legal form of the delivery structure. The bid book includes some innovative marketing and communication ideas (i.e. to develop a concept for what it means to be a minority). The target regions are, however, too broadly defined.

The contingency planning does not take either the financing risk or the political challenges into account.

A challenge in terms of capacity to deliver is the limited number of accommodation possibilities in Kranj, which the city expects to address by having guests stay in Ljubljana – a solution that is hardly of benefit for the desired reinvented attractiveness of the city of Kranj.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Kranj does not proceed to the final selection phase.

The panel found that the proposal was rather underdeveloped in a number of areas. Several of the aspects outlined in the bid book were too shallowly internalized and the plans for further organizational structure were not elaborated. The involvement of regional partners outside Kranj in the future delivery structure was not sufficiently clarified. The centre-periphery strategy and long-term cultural strategy are promising yet they are not sufficiently interlinked. The long-term impacts are too broadly and generally described.

In the panel's view, the proposal does not go beyond the critical analysis of the local context, and fails to make an assessment of the cultural assets that are already available in Kranj. In this respect, it does not manage to build a relevant European dimension upon its rich cultural potential.

Lendava

The Lendava bid is presented by the city and it included a collaboration with towns in the neighbouring region of Prekmurje. The region is by constitution bilingual (Slovenian and Hungarian language) - signposting, administration, as well as schools are bilingual. The bid of Lendava aims to attract attention to life in small towns, underlining that half of the people in the world live in small cities and are often ignored.

The ECoC is expected to help the city and the region to develop capacities, build infrastructure, establish public transport, promote tourism and increase the well-being of local people.

The city has adopted a cultural strategy, but it is quite generic and not translated into more strategic actions and corresponding timelines. As a consequence, it remains unclear what vision the city has for its future and how the city plans to develop towards specific goals, indicators, measurable landmarks and assessment plans. The option not to have a regional bid but to establish close collaboration with surrounding towns as well as neighbouring countries is well justified. There is a confusion between monitoring and evaluation and an apparent misunderstanding about the role of the ECoC expert panel in this process. The bid does not describe the capacity building plans in relation to the ECoC implementation, and the link between the cultural strategy and the ECoC project is missing.

The proposed cultural and artistic programme builds upon the local cultural heritage. The bid outlines a number of local cultural assets – from festival and artistic residencies to the Romani month, linguistic diversity, landscape and land-art initiatives or projects around the art of living. These elements would serve rightly as a sound basis for the city's vision in terms of a cultural regeneration achieved through the ECoC project. The ECoC programme "Culture spoken here" with its four key theme layers (People, Energy, Food, and Borders) is largely based on already existing artistic events and projects, and it hardly reaches the magnitude expected from an ECoC. The bid book relates more to the general development of the city than to culture itself. While strongly highlighting the city's and region's cultural assets, the bid does not elaborate how such assets will translate into

projects specifically developed for the ECoC year. On a positive note, the intention is for the programme to be developed together with the partner cities and to include a variety of formats, from non-professional art to international projects, though these formats were not concretely elaborated. The concept of dualism is original and carries a significant potential, but would need further elaboration. It is worth noting that the work of the local museum is extremely impressive and inspiring – an important asset to the bid. As far as the development of the ECoC project is concerned, the approach seems to have been rather top-down. Moreover, the project ideas are not always coherent with the structure of the programme.

The bid aims to re-define what culture means, but the European and global dimension is not considered in this broad and interesting reflection, which is a flaw. The European dimension of the proposed ECoC programme reaches out mainly to the neighbouring countries and further to the region, which is too limitative in scope. Though the proposed project is expected to be of small scale, it intends to attract large European international audiences – through the use of media and by reaching out to the already existing spa visitors. However, the strategy to attract such audiences is unclear and underdeveloped. Interesting concepts that could be valuable at the European level were presented during the hearing (e.g. the “caring economy”), but they had not been sufficiently articulated in the bid book. Proposed projects like the LendArt biennale, that bring art outside art institutions, the involvement of site-specific projects and artists in residence programme are interesting, but in their whole do not reach the complexity, originality and European resonance that is expected from an ECoC.

A positive feature is seen in the outreach plan, which aims to integrate marginalized groups. The panel also recognizes the respect for multilingualism as a positive starting point, but this aspect is not incorporated in the outreach plan. The audience development plan as a whole however is underdeveloped, with few references to young audiences (the involvement of children and youth is limited to the puppet theatre and music school). The information about the involvement of the local population in the development of the bid book is not convincing. It remains unclear how the local population will be further involved in the development and implementation of the ECoC.

Regarding management, the low targets in terms of local financial contribution and private funding put into question the project’s feasibility. No organizational chart was presented and no information was given about the process planned for the selection of key staff members. The contingency planning does not include a financial risk management plan. The proposed marketing strategy sets mainly local marketing and communication goals, which is not in line with ECoC goals.

The bid states that there is a strong political support at local level, which is a positive element. On a less positive tone, the local cultural infrastructure needs an upgrade. There are plans for investment, but the link to ECoC is not clear. There is a scarcity of local accommodation infrastructure available, and the public transport infrastructure is insufficient, which makes the location difficult to access. This limits the overall delivery capacity of the Lendava bid.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Lendava does not proceed to the final selection phase.

The panel found that the proposal, although featuring some interesting concepts, is rather underdeveloped in several aspects. Although Lendava is close to Hungary, the potential of this proximity was not explored enough. The proposed artistic concept is interesting but

vague, and its European dimension is not convincing enough as a basis for an ECoC programme. The capacity to develop new projects involving local and European artists was not clearly demonstrated. The limited financial contribution expected from the city in the bid is also seen as a weakness.

Ljubljana

Ljubljana presented its bid under the motto “Culture makes cities - cities make culture” to draw attention to the pivotal role of culture in shaping the future of European cities on their quest for solutions to challenges as diverse as migrations, climate change and digitization. Nurturing solidarity is considered fundamental for the success of these municipal endeavours.

It addresses four municipal challenges: increasing citizen participation in cultural activities, raising awareness of culture as a motor of economic and social development, decentralization of cultural offer and climate change. The specific objectives of the project include increasing citizen satisfaction with the local cultural offer and positioning Ljubljana among the top five European “cultural and creative cities” of comparable size by 2026, using the methodology of the “Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor”.

Congruent with the identified challenges of increasing citizen participation in cultural activities and centralization of the cultural offer, Ljubljana presents its bid with the support of the 25 municipalities of the Central Slovenia Region.

The bid is adequately positioned in the municipal strategic context, including the Cultural Development Strategy of the City of Ljubljana 2020 – 2023. The key cultural assets are well singled out. The bid presents a well thought out strategy for evaluation and monitoring, including qualitative and quantitative elements, and recognizes the need for baseline research as well as testing ‘creative’ methodologies. However, it is unclear what specific benefits would be derived from the ECoC in the sense that the city might accomplish the stated goals driving forward its already existing projects and initiatives. In addition, the bid book does not articulate well the capacity building aspect. For instance, it states that in the ECoC context, Ljubljana intends to develop “new forms of education for young creatives”, but does not identify ongoing capacity building initiatives taking place in Ljubljana that could offer synergies for maximum impact, for instance the emerging “Centre for creative industries”.

The cultural and artistic programme is built around a clear and coherent structure, but features proposals that do not appear sufficiently accessible to the general public. A significant part of the cultural and artistic highlights features artists that are already well known to the Ljubljana’s citizens. This aspect is worth considering in light of the city objective to reverse the trend of declining satisfaction of its residents with the local cultural offer. The climate justice element, though very sound, is not sufficiently reflected in the proposal. Furthermore, the cultural and artistic programme has a regional focus, which is good, but the international dimension is less prominent. Finally, the link between the central concept of the bid – ‘Solidarity’ – and the programme itself is not clear at the current stage. The central metaphors – collisions, translations, linkages – while interesting in principle, need to become clearer from an operational and programmatic point of view.

The European dimension base is solid, with some room for improvement. The bid indicates the intention to initiate joint projects with a number of past and present ECoC title-holders and candidate cities. However, the relationships have not yet been developed and the learnings have not yet been integrated into the bid. The latter focuses on fostering relations

with non-European artists, while European artists do not feature as prominently in the programme so as to provide a balance of different cultural contexts. Finally, how Ljubljana's extensive international network cities and international organisations will be integrated into the ECoC actions remains unclear. Moreover, it is not explained how the proposed cultural diplomacy theme fits in with and builds upon EU cultural diplomacy.

While the bid was developed in collaboration with experts from the region, which is per se a good approach, the extent of involvement of the citizens and the local artistic community is unclear. It was stated that the city implemented a public call for the ECoC programme proposals and received a substantial response from most key institutions, but it appears that the consideration of these ideas has been planned only for the second-stage of the candidacy. In a similar fashion, the bid outlines a sophisticated structure for fostering dialogue with stakeholders from the field of arts and culture in the context of the ECoC, but it is not clear to what extent this structure has been employed in preparing the bid. There are several positive elements in the proposed audience development strategy forming a good starting point for further development. The involvement of local schools is planned, which is a positive element. Finally, the panel strongly encourages that the conflict between the municipality and the Rog community be addressed by an open and constructive dialogue.

The city has been steadily increasing its budget for culture, which is commendable. The overall project budget allocation and the level of financial participation of the 25 municipalities from the region are appropriate, but the estimate to generate 8 million EUR from EU funds is hardly realistic in the panel's view. The high contribution from Ljubljana (30 million, i.e. 47,6% of total budget) reflects a corresponding strong commitment from the city. On the other hand, the principles and mechanisms for distributing funding to the 25 municipalities are unclear. This is problematic given that the delegation did not explain in a convincing way what precisely is meant by the commitment of 33% of the programme taking place in the wider region, whereas one of the central objectives of the bid is precisely to achieve decentralization of the cultural offer. There are unresolved issues regarding the managing body. The contingency planning is unsatisfactory and the risks of spreading the programme regionally are not addressed. Finally, the allocation of 22% of the budget to staff costs is unusually high and requires further justification. Marketing plans do not elaborate how the existing city communication structures and initiatives will be exploited.

On a positive note, the bid appears to benefit from clear local political support. Furthermore, the capacity to deliver is very good in terms of transport facilities, accommodation and cultural infrastructures, which is a good asset.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Ljubljana proceeds to the final selection stage.

The panel considers the proposal solid. The ambition to place culture at the centre of municipal development is admirable, the creative aspects of the bid are strong and the capacity to deliver is high.

However, some elements of the bid are still unconvincing. The city has hosted several international initiatives and held titles, for instance, the EU Green Capital 2016, the World Book Capital 2010 and has been UNESCO City of Literature since 2015. Nevertheless, the satisfaction of the local population with the Ljubljana cultural offer has declined in the same period, prompting Ljubljana to propose to host ECoC to overcome this trend.

Therefore, it would strengthen the bid if the city critically evaluated the lessons learned and demonstrated how the findings will be used to ensure a positive long-term cultural, social and economic impact of hosting the ECoC.

In light of the outlined ECoC goals, the panel considers it particularly important for the bidding team to explain the selection of the proposed cultural and artistic programme, to strengthen the participatory element in developing the bid programme, and to ensure that large European cultural events take place through the region and beyond the city centre. The collaboration mechanisms with participating municipalities should be clearly elaborated already in the next phase of the bidding process.

Nova Gorica

The Nova Gorica bid - under the title "Go! Borderless" - is centred around the concept of "Cultural smugglers". It proposes to utilize the ECoC in order to create a symbolic common cultural and urban space between the two cities of Nova Gorica in Slovenia and Gorizia in Italy, which were previously one single city.

The city has approved its cultural strategy until 2023, in which long-term goals and impacts are described in a measurable way. The strategic document plans cultural development in the whole municipality, including the rural area. Moreover, a cross-border cultural strategy "Nova Gorica and Gorizia 2020-2030, The Third Decade" is being prepared. The strategy also includes environmental goals. The capacity building is sound, including plans to strengthen knowledge of the cultural sector through encouraging collaboration with three universities and the private sector as well as workshops for different stakeholders in cultural tourism.

The bid book mentions brain drain as one of the heaviest problems of Nova Gorica and Gorizia alike – young people leave, as they see no perspectives in their hometowns. The bid aims to reverse that trend, which is common to many small and medium-sized cities, and to create the first cross-border city in Europe. This idea was initiated by cultural workers from the two cities back in 2004, when Slovenia entered the EU and the (subsequently joined) Schengen agreement brought free cross-border movement. The cities understood that only by growing together as one city they had a future. Barriers to growing together are still present though, despite some progress e.g. in culture, where a digital platform to inform about performing art on both sides of the border was created.

The bid book proposes a solid and relevant conceptual base for monitoring and evaluation. Further elaboration is well designed, with the Institute of International Sociology - ISIG, based in Gorizia, already involved in the bidding process, and the support of local institutions.

The cultural and artistic programme is well founded on local heritage, turning challenges into opportunities, and it envisages a strong and practical approach to using digital and communication technologies. The programme contains several intriguing projects – from the urban development plan to turn a now deserted square into a new centre for the united city, through the European platform for interpretation of XX century history, offering historical interpretations from both perspectives, to "Go! Share" – a project about communication and passive bilingualism and the "Come home programme", which aims to bring back artists who have gone abroad to create in Nova Gorica. The topic of "border" is conceptualized not only concerning the particular geography of the two cities, but also horizontally – as division lines in societies, e.g. between minorities and majorities. The related proposed topic of "passive bilingualism" is relevant and its importance goes beyond

the concrete case of the two cities. If further developed it would strengthen the European dimension of the bid.

The European dimension is in the core of the bid concept, which proposes a “case study” of borderless togetherness in Europe, on the example of the two neighbouring cities of Nova Gorica and Gorizia on the border between Slovenia and Italy. A weaker side is the fact that – while centred on creating links between the two cities, the project fails to develop wider European relevance. The topic of “border” is tackled only on a local level, thus failing to develop a more complex interpretation addressing relevant European border issues and cases, including in relation with the ongoing influx of refugees crossing the external border of the EU. The same refers to the issue of bilingualism - very interestingly presented and tackled in reference to the Slovenian and Italian situation - yet, unexplored in terms of similar situations throughout Europe, requiring further research. Overall, the programme remains too local and regional, rather than European, and there is a need to widen its international scope. The list of potential partner organisations leaves the impression that it is rather a wish list than a network of strategically selected and pursued cooperation, which may in fact come to fruition. Connecting with other ECoCs, especially those in line with the project aims is a positive, but only a first step in that direction. The collaborations with other border cities that are being developed (Zittau, Dresden, Rijeka and Esch) is a good start.

The panel noted also a conceptual discrepancy in that – while singling out the identities of the two cities as central to the project, several of the project titles in the Slovenian language version of the bid book are in English. This option would require due justification.

The outreach plan is well structured, based on identified problems and needs of the community. Accessibility, including in terms of language and transport, is addressed. The bid presents good ideas to widen outreach, with concrete project examples. It tackles well the specific need to create cross-border audiences and includes a relevant collaboration with Esch. The non-chemical addictions related project is relevant, given the presence of gambling industry in the city for decades.

The management plans though show some serious weaknesses. The budget expected to come from the State is too high, as it does not correspond to the public statements made by the Ministry in December 2019. The small contribution expected from Nova Gorica may be seen as a lack of commitment from the city. The fact that Italy’s Gorizia is expected to participate with double the amount does not indicate a balanced budget management plan. The possible delays in the Interreg funds that are expected to flow into the project and the related cash-flow issues that might arise have not been addressed. Using EGTC as an instrument to deliver the ECoC, although a novel idea, might raise additional management issues. It is not clear if the instrument is adapted to the needs and challenges of the ECoC preparation and if the staff has the relevant professional experience, in particular as far as the CEO, artistic director and the whole governance structure are concerned. The team started developing a coherent marketing strategy with a relevant ‘GO! Borderless’ slogan, which is positive. The panel expressed doubts about the appropriateness of the “cultural smugglers” slogan (smuggling being something you do secretly and has rather negative connotation), and invites the team to critically reassess it.

The two cities have rather developed cultural infrastructure. Transport facilities are well developed, while accommodation, with only 450 beds available, needs to be upgraded.

The two cities stated that the project benefitted from local political support. However, the panel noted that the mayor of Gorizia did not attend the hearing, which the team explained was due to the emergency in Northern Italy (Covid-19 pandemic). The team assured the panel that they were assessing the political risk and would revise their contingency plan to

include newly identified risks like the finances (including budget contribution disparities) and management structure. The team also underlined that other city development projects had been successfully realized with little local financial contribution.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Nova Gorica proceeds to the final selection phase.

The bid proposes an original regional and cross-border approach to the ECoC. The cultural and artistic programme is already well thought out and includes a number of promising projects. The outreach activities and strategic collaborations with current ECoC title-holders are two further strengths of the proposal.

At the final selection phase, however, the panel would like to see improved contingency planning, including an objective assessment of the political risk as well as measures on how this risk will be addressed – both in Italy and in Slovenia. The panel also expects a clearer proof of support from the city of Gorizia and hopes that the mayor of Gorizia will be able to attend the selection hearing. A key risk to be addressed in the contingency planning is related to the budget allocation from the municipal and national levels.

The bidding team also needs to strengthen the European dimension of the proposal, to move away from an exemplary-European, but still bi-lateral project, in the direction of a truly European one. The panel suggests that the team builds upon the achievements of already existing actions like Nova Gorica - pilot city for Agenda 21 for Culture.

Piran

The bid of Piran is built on the concept of the “Wave of Change” as a metaphor for the city’s current need and political will for the next step in its evolution. Piran sees the ECoC as a driving force in the process of said transformation and a catalyst of regional collaboration towards developing a shared cultural identity, currently fragmented due to the region’s multilingual, multicultural and multinational roots.

A municipal cultural strategy was adopted in December 2017 and revised in December 2019. It is foreseen that it should be subject to evaluation in 2020 and 2027, which is sound. The strategy reflects the objective of forging closer ties between the municipalities on the Slovenian coastline with a view to consolidating and jointly developing their cultural offer. The interest of other three municipalities - Izola, Koper and Ankaran - is evidenced in the support for and participation in the ECoC bid and joint development of the first Strategic Statement regarding Culture.PIKA. However, it seems that a clear vision for this joint strategic endeavour beyond the ECoC bid has not yet been developed. The panel also noted that the strategy is limited to the four Slovenian coastal municipalities but it is not clear how the PIKA strategy relates to and integrates the wider cross-border Istrian region. Finally, it appears that the relation with Rijeka, a current ECoC from the region, is not yet developed, which is a missed opportunity for learning and generating synergistic effects. The information about monitoring and evaluation is too generic for this stage.

The central themes of the bid programme are borders and human relationship to climate change, specifically addressing the questions of seasonality and sustainability, which is an appropriate selection given the geographic and economic profile of Piran. However, the cultural and artistic programme is not yet satisfactory developed as it is too inward looking. It also appears technical in nature and does not reflect a participatory approach even though the project wants to commit to social dialogue. The involvement of the local artistic community in the artistic programme is not elaborated. Furthermore, the execution of the

programme is contingent upon the implementation of six considerable infrastructure projects, which the panel considers a significant risk. The planned venues are described as self-sustaining, but there is no evidence presented as to how self-sustainability is to be achieved. Finally, the central concept of the bid (“Wave of Change”) is somewhat vague. On the positive note, the artistic programme makes a substantial effort towards engaging children and ensuring inclusivity.

The European dimension of the proposed programme is underdeveloped, but holds significant potential. Within this scope, the bid is not particularly innovative as it merely replicates existing practices without further exploration. The proposed partnerships are vague and the extent of their actual implementation is unclear. However, the programme touches upon an interesting notion that the EU does not only remove borders, but may also introduce new ones, which become new obstacles. The joint Istrian cross-border identity, with neighbouring Italy and Croatia, referred to in the bid book, is not yet materialised in strong artistic and cultural projects. It is evident, however, that the bidding team has invested a great effort into developing relationships with and learning from previous ECoC title-holders, thus generating strong potential for exploration and development in the scope of the cultural and artistic programme. The idea to invite artists from other ECoC and bidding cities to perform in the framework of the opening and closing ceremonies is a positive element.

The panel considers the outreach dimension not convincing. It appears that the activities have mostly targeted political stakeholders rather than the citizens and that the process of developing the bid was conducted top-down, with only a small percentage of civil society being involved. It is unclear whether there was a basic analysis conducted before the specification of audience development targets. The selection of target groups (e.g. summer tourists, children) is incongruent with other parts of the programme and the strategies for the involvement of target groups are underdeveloped. However, outreach and audience development are considered as essential elements of each project and management strategy and several measures to support this aim are envisaged, which is very positive.

The current budget allocation for the field of culture in the bidding city has been decreasing over the past 5 years, with a small uptick in the current annual budget. In the PIKA region, the spending on culture has been decreasing constantly and is percentage wise lowest in the past 5 years. The proposed ECoC budget does not foresee EU funding, which is surprising. Belonging to a cross-border region, the municipalities have experience with and access to EU Interreg funding and there is no reason why this funding should not be included in the budget, particularly since the bid has a strong focus on the cross-border territory. The bid thus leaves the impression that the awareness of EU funding opportunities is low and that there is a lack of skills in the field of EU fundraising. The organizational structure of the managing body is unclear. The relations between the founders and the management of the envisaged foundation have not yet been specified and the role of artistic director seems minor.

The bid has local political support. There is suitable local infrastructure (airport, waterways and hotels) for hosting an ECoC. However, the communication and marketing strategy for attracting tourists is not clearly defined and the focus is still too much on summer tourists, which is at odds with the bid’s objective to address the challenge of seasonality. The infrastructural and logistic issues related to seasonality have not yet been addressed in substance. Moreover, the bid does not mention any ongoing or envisaged cooperation with the National Tourist Board or other bodies in the scope of providing actual evidence for capacity to provide accommodation and services out of season.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Piran proceeds to the final selection stage.

The proposal introduces some interesting and innovative concepts and practices, such as the attempt to build a regional cultural strategy and joint action. The selected themes have a strong European potential and the panel would like to express particular appreciation for Piran's efforts to reach out to, learn from and build upon the experiences and artistic activities of previous and current ECoC title-holders. The identified joint projects appear to hold great potential for further development.

However, the bid at present lacks a strong artistic vision serving as a basis for a fully developed cultural and artistic programme, an appealing European narrative as well as a convincing value statement for the city/cities involved, their citizens and the local artistic community. The capacity to deliver requires further elaboration, in particular as regards augmenting the project budget with the many available funding opportunities. The management aspect requires further development to ensure transparency and sustainability of the managerial structures that reflect regional cooperation.

Ptuj

Ptuj presented its bid under the title "Ptuj, City of Timeless Transformations". The central concept of the programme is reinterpretation of European culture and cultural heritage to drive transformation and regeneration of European cities. The concept is embodied within the proposed Creative Centre for the interpretation of European heritage platform.

At the time of the submission of the bid, the municipal cultural strategy covering the period 2016 – 2019 has expired and a new one for the timeframe 2019 – 2023 was in the process of preparation. The new strategy, the content of which is not clear at this stage, will extend beyond the four-year format to include already some guidelines covering the ECoC period in 2025. At its centre is a vision of Ptuj as a creative and innovative city that will attract visitors and tourists alike with new cultural and touristic products. Among the key pillars is the development of innovative and contemporary forms of presentation and integration of cultural heritage. Therefore, overall, there is congruence between the municipal cultural strategy and the objectives of the bid. Moreover, the bid is regionally based, integrating 19 surrounding municipalities. A network of local ECoC coordinators is already in place, which is a positive element.

The evaluation and monitoring activity is acknowledged as essential; however, it is not developed in substance. Since the bid allocates 10% of the programme budget to this activity, which is an unusually high allocation, this would merit a more detailed justification and development. The bid introduces appealing capacity building elements, for instance the Academy of Change and Horizon in Focus programme. It is commendable that some capacity building activities associated with the ECoC have already begun (e.g. implementation of the smart city management model), although the value added specifically to the implementation of the ECoC is not entirely clear.

The bid itself is based on Ptuj's cultural and cultural heritage assets and their established international profile, most notably the Ptuj's Carnival, which has UNESCO recognition. The general concept of the bid is nevertheless quite vague and not able to present a clear vision of how the city intends to use and re-interpret the cultural heritage assets in new and powerful ways. The novel and innovative aspects of the proposed projects are not yet articulated clearly, including their link to the four pillars of the programme. Furthermore,

there is no clear delineation of existing cultural offer from the novelties that will be developed specifically for the ECoC project. For the moment, the programme's character is too local.

The European dimension is weak at this stage. The bid does not clearly explain the value of this project for Europe, although the selected topics carry significant potential in the EU context. Nevertheless, the European dimension lacks focus and is still insufficiently exploited. Some interesting and relevant international partners are mentioned in the bid book, which is a promising element but only a starting point. The collaboration with current and upcoming ECoC title-holders is well developed and agreements for collaboration in specific activities in the context of the cultural and artistic programme are in place. The target to have half of the ECoC projects involve a partner from abroad or that demonstrates a European dimension is a positive element, although not reflecting a particularly high ambition in this regard. The strategy to attract European and international audiences is not yet developed.

The involvement of the local community in the preparation of the bid was well planned and the bid reflects this bottom-up approach. It includes some audience development tactics such as, for example, addressing issues of accessibility and partnerships, but it is difficult to discern a clear audience development strategy towards diverse audience groups in regard to the ECoC.

Part of the management team was associated with the ECoC Maribor 2012 and thus has the benefit of experience with managing an ECoC. However, the links developed in this context as well as the lessons learned and the way these lessons were used in the preparation of the candidature were not incorporated in the bid book, although the team was able to present them to some extent during the hearing. The management structure's development, e.g. with main directors being hired through international call is going in the right direction.

While the annual municipal budget for culture is quite low, the project budget is more ambitious and participatory, although not all avenues of funding appear to have been sufficiently explored (for instance, the EU LEADER programme resources). Therefore, the fundraising strategy is not satisfactorily developed. Moreover, the financial contribution of partner municipalities is not clear. There is also a strong dependency on the contribution from the national Government, which represents 46% of the total operating budget, which the panel sees as a potential risk to be addressed.

The political support for the bid appears high across the cooperating municipalities in the region.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Ptuj proceeds to the final selection stage.

The proposal is neatly presented, demonstrates a high degree of motivation and a solid capacity to deliver. On the other hand, it appears to be conceptually in an early stage of development and the overall approach somewhat lacks originality.

The European dimension requires further development despite the potential already present, as the topic of novel approaches to cultural heritage management at city-level has been identified as a concern of strategic significance at the European level (e.g. "European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage"-initiative "Cultural Heritage in Action"). This context offers a fertile ground for exploration, in collaboration with European partners for the benefit of a stronger European dimension.

It would also strengthen the proposal if flagship cultural and artistic projects were singled out and developed to refine the profile of the candidacy and to better convey the magnitude of the envisaged ECoC project. The management aspect should be further developed in regards to budgetary planning and fundraising activities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations apply to all four shortlisted candidates.

The panel considers it necessary that all shortlisted cities develop their bids for the final selection in order to reach the required level of quality of such a demanding project as the European Capital of Culture. There is a considerable step-change between proposals at pre-selection stage and those at final selection. The panel will expect significant changes in the final bid books to reflect these recommendations.

The shortlisted candidates are advised to continue studying carefully the **six criteria in the Decision** and the specific comments to all candidates in the assessments above.

A study of the evaluations of recent ECoCs (since 2013) and monitoring reports of recently designated ECoCs may also be of value. These are available on the European Commission's ECoC web page.

General

The bid book at final selection becomes *de facto* a contract for the designated city; it sets out the artistic vision and the key objectives, projects, directions, financing and management of the programme. Close concurrence with the bid book is a factor when the monitoring panel will recommend the payment of the Melina Mercouri prize.

In the final selection bid book, candidates must cover all the questions in the final selection questionnaire included in Annex 1 of the call for applications. For the next and final stage of the competition, the panel expects a considerably more developed section on the proposed artistic vision, the programme and the European dimension.

The selection panel (and the subsequent monitoring panel) has a responsibility to protect the long-term brand of the European Capital of Culture programme. Candidates should be aware that with the level of international attention now being given to ECoCs, policy decisions over a wide area (not just cultural) may affect the reputation of the city, and in turn the ECoC image. The panel would expect to see candidates being aware of this and taking steps to minimise international and national negative images of their city through policy changes rather than marketing/PR.

ECoC and cultural strategy

A formally approved city cultural strategy needs to be in place before submitting the bid book. The panel will expect a tighter focus in the bid books of the final round: cities should indicate the priorities of the cultural strategy, its target outcomes and how resources will be changed over the next few years. A city's cultural strategy will normally be wider in scope than the objectives of the ECoC. Bid books should indicate more clearly which **priorities** of the broader cultural strategy the ECoC is seeking to contribute to. The expected legacy of the ECoC should also be envisaged.

An ECoC is a transformational opportunity for a city. The pre-selection bid books set out in general terms the objectives of why a city is seeking the title. The objectives should be clearly put as there is a tendency to perceive ECoC as panacea for every city challenge. The panel would expect a more focused (and shorter) explanation, which can link to the programme vision, themes, activities, and through evaluation, to the outcomes in the subsequent legacy. There is considerable literature and research available for cities to see the range of cultural, urban development and social benefits of an ECoC.

The evaluation sections of the bid books should be developed in the second phase and the panel expects to receive ECoC indicators of success. The monitoring and evaluation should not be overwhelmed with (just) statistics and data gathering though. The final bid book should focus on the **priority** objectives for the ECoC (rather than those for the entire cultural strategy). One of the priority areas should refer to how the ECoC will meet the various elements of the European dimension criterion. Shortlisted cities may wish to involve management consultancies in addition to a more academic approach.

Capacity building should be based on a wide understanding of specific capacity building needs of all kinds of cultural players and hospitality industry and services. The cultural and creative industries (CCI) should be understood as a transversal topic of the cultural and artistic programme and must be linked to a related mapping and needs analysis of the sector. Capacity building should therefore also encompass the CCI.

European dimension

The panel felt that this criterion was considerably underdeveloped. At this stage, the proposals are too much looking at the surface of the challenges. The teams were too focused on their cities' image and relations within the Western Balkans area and neighbouring countries. The panel would wish to see a greater deepening and widening of programmes to ensure a more relevant **European dimension**. A simple fact that a city is in Slovenia, in Europe, has (or can have) a vibrant cultural offer, and will market itself in Europe, is not yet a strong interpretation of the European dimension. An ECoC enables a city to promote itself internationally but that is only half of the story. The European dimension - though not being present in daily politics - often links to wider debates. Selected cities must be able to handle those debates in a professional manner, as they obtain more visibility.

The European dimension has a two-way direction. An equal focus is on seeking to broaden the understanding and awareness of the city's own citizens on the diversity of cultures in Europe and linking through cultural and other projects with citizens in other countries. It is this focus on other cultures that primarily differentiates an ECoC from a national city of culture. An ECoC offers the opportunity for a city and its citizens to learn from others in an open way, but also to reflect upon how they can contribute to Europe. One important legacy area is the creation of new and sustained partnerships between a city's cultural players and those from other countries.

The panel expects to see a significantly increased focus on European partnerships: co-productions, co-curations, conferences, networking as well as visiting artists/performers. Most recent ECoCs have included European and international partners in well over half their projects. Cities should encourage their cultural operators to be active participants in European cultural networks.

One of the elements of the European dimension criterion for the ECoC title is the ability to attract **visitors from the rest of Europe and beyond**. The programme has to have its attraction and that is why it is something else than the usual tourist offers of the city and region. The panel would expect to see these attracting programme ideas in the bid for

ECoC 2025. The panel advises to thoroughly think over building a strategic communication plan for the ECoC project as well as to make a connection between the programme and international marketing vision.

Cultural and artistic programme

The focus of the final selection is the **operating programme** between end 2020, when the ECoC will be formally designated and, in particular, the ECoC year of 2025. Many ECoCs in recent years have used the opportunity provided by the ECoC to address difficult issues from their 20th century past that still resonate today. The panel suggests candidates to look at their past with present-lenses ensuring respect for the victims and proper commemoration, as well as using the ECoC as an opportunity to prepare for the future.

The panel will expect to see more details on the programme, its projects and partners. The cities should set out their artistic vision, the programme and projects more clearly; differentiating between partners who have indicated firm interest and those who are still only potential or possible partners. ECoC programmes normally cover a wide range of art forms and include the increasing development of creative interventions in social issues. An approximate budget should be shown for each major project for the panel to understand the relative balance of projects in the programme.

The panel recommends a more focused and detailed approach to digital cultural content (not just social media promotions and interactions) as integral parts of their programme. Furthermore, attention should be given to the sustainability of the projects - including cultural, ecological, social and economic wise - so to ensure an expected substantial legacy of the ECoC. This was under-developed in the bid books.

Capacity to deliver

Candidates should re-confirm that their bid book, including the programme and the financial commitments, have the formal approval of the mayor, the city (and county/region if appropriate) councils and, ideally, all political parties. The panel also recommends that all candidates have common understanding and expectations regarding the financial contribution from the national Government.

None of the shortlisted cities has convincingly explained their capacity to manage large cultural events. Candidates are reminded that the criterion for an ECoC requires a special programme for a whole year in addition to the normal cultural offer. The panel expects more information on the managerial capacity in the city/region to manage the depth and range of an ECoC. The cities should also plan strong capacity building programmes as ECoCs scope goes beyond current local capacities. If projects are planned to be funded from competitive EU programmes (e.g. Creative Europe) this should be indicated.

Information on urban development and infrastructure programmes, cultural heritage restoration projects and new cultural premises is useful as background and context at pre-selection. The final selection will focus on the capital projects that directly impact the ECoC programme activities (e.g. a new cultural centre in a restored building that becomes a focal point for community arts projects contained in the programme). A timeline for these projects and the realistic estimate of completion should be given.

The final bid books should clearly indicate how potential capital investments crucial for the ECoC would be managed (management structures, state-of-play related to the EU-ESI-Funds such as the connection with the relevant Operational Programme, timeline and public procurement). The capital investment crucial for ECoC should be presented with overall budgets and timeframes.

The hotel capacities should be re-examined and alternative plans should be developed if needed.

The panel would like to see concrete local, regional and European legacy aspirations.

Outreach

Special focus should be dedicated to those audiences that are more difficult to reach but crucial for a new "cultural climate" in an ECoC city (e.g. minorities, the elderly, disabled, people temporarily in the city etc.). The bid books should cover the participation of schools, youth groups, (international) students, volunteers etc. and the capacity building of the creative art sector, in order to approach audience development from a long-term and strategic perspective.

The panel would expect to learn about the audience development policies of the main cultural organisations including independent operators and NGOs.

The role and contribution of universities (except evaluation work) was underplayed in most of the pre-selection bid books.

The **audience development** strategy for the ECoC is expected to be much further developed in the final bid books including online and offline measures and channels for all identified target groups.

Management

The membership of and independence from city administrations of governing boards should be explained, with post holders (or positions) and the method of appointment. The decision-making role of the board should be explained. Clear relationship between different bodies and advisory boards is expected to be outlined.

The General and Artistic/Cultural Directors play a key role in all ECoCs. The selection, preferably through an open international call, of these posts before the candidates' appearance at the final selection meeting, will be to their advantage. This is especially important for the Artistic Director as, unlike many such appointments, the artistic vision is already set out in the bid book. The same applies if a candidate proposes a collective artistic leadership. It is acknowledged that the appointments may be conditional on the outcome of the competition.

The recruitment processes and planned staffing arrangements from 2021 to 2026 should be outlined including secondments, interns and volunteers.

The marketing of an ECoC should go beyond standard information dissemination tactics to include an attractive narrative of European importance and relevance coherent with the artistic vision.

Signed

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