



Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2029 in Poland

**The Expert Panel's report
Pre-selection stage**

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Panel meeting	1
Next steps	2
Thanks.....	2
Assessments of the candidates.....	3
Bielsko-Biała	4
Bydgoszcz.....	8
Jastrzębie-Zdrój	11
Katowice.....	15
Kielce	19
Kołobrzeg	22
Lublin.....	26
Opole	30
Płock.....	34
Pszczyna	38
Rzeszów	42
Toruń	45
General recommendations	49
Contribution to the long-term strategy	50
Cultural and artistic content	51
European dimension.....	52
Outreach	53
Management	53
Capacity to deliver	54

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 2029 in Poland. The competition is a European Union initiative, which started in 1985. The title “European Capital of Culture” has previously been awarded to two cities in Poland, namely Kraków in 2000 and Wrocław in 2016.

The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of Poland (the “Ministry”), acts as the managing authority of the competition, which is governed by Decision n°445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”) and by the “Rules of procedure - Competition for the 2029 European Capital of Culture title in Poland” adopted by the Ministry and published on its website.

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

The competition takes place in two phases: pre-selection (shortlisting) and selection. The Ministry issued a call for submission of applications in November 2022. Twelve applications were submitted by the closing date of the call (15 September 2023) by: Bielsko-Biała, Bydgoszcz, Jastrzębie-Zdrój, Katowice, Kielce, Kołobrzeg, Lublin, Opole, Płock, Szczecin, Rzeszów and Toruń.

Panel meeting

The panel members met in Warsaw on 23 – 27 October 2023. One panel member was excused for professional reasons. The panel elected Suvi Innilä as its chair and Agata Wąsowska-Pawlik as its vice-chair. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality and gave it to the Ministry ahead of the pre-selection hearings. 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 23-26 October 2023, each candidate city, in alphabetical order, presented its case in 45 minutes and answered questions from the panel during a 45 minutes timeframe. The panel deliberations took place on 27 October 2023. At a live press meeting on 27 October 2023, 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 round (in alphabetical order):

Bielsko-Biała, Katowice, Kołobrzeg, Lublin.

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 are encouraged to take into account the panel's assessments and recommendations in this report.

The deadline for the submission of revised applications will be suggested by the Ministry at the same time to the pre-selected cities. The final selection meeting is scheduled to take place in Warsaw at a date that will be communicated by the Ministry.

Two to four panel members will conduct one-day visits to the shortlisted cities shortly before the final selection meeting, aiming to acquire a three dimensional impression of the four candidates. Accompanying the panel members as observers during these visits will be representatives from the Ministry and the European Commission.

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 wants to highlight the high number and quality of the bids submitted as well as the importance of the strategic development processes implemented in the candidate cities, making its task a challenging one. This reflects a dynamic and diversified cultural landscape in Poland and an awareness that culture is a sound investment for improving our living environments.

The panel strongly encourages all candidate cities, including those not recommended for pre-selection, to persist in the development and implementation of their respective cultural strategies. The panel would like to thank all twelve candidates and everyone who contributed to their bids, the European Commission for its advice and the Ministry for its excellent administration, as well as the interpreters and the technical team.

Assessments of the candidates

In its assessment of the candidates, the panel noted the general and specific objectives in Article 2 of the Decision and the requirement for the application of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2029 in Poland 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 outlined in Article 5 of the Decision:

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

In the commentaries that follow, the panel notes the main elements of their findings during the pre-selection phase.

Not all bidding 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 requirement is to ensure that the ECoC is grounded in a medium-term transformation of the city and its cultural life.

The panel noted that, in general, candidate cities need to strongly enhance the European dimensions within their bids. The European dimension is the *raison d'être* of a European Capital of Culture and must be at the heart of a bid in all its different aspects.

The panel emphasises that, in line with the specifications in the call published by the Ministry, its assessments of the candidates were based on the bid books and the cities' presentation and Q&A sessions during the pre-selection meeting. A city's history, its recent and current policies as well as its cultural offer may form a basis for the proposed programme, but they are not criteria in the selection process.

In reference to the four successful cities, specific and common recommendations are made, in order to assist them in the preparation of their final bid books. The panel's recommendation for the shortlisted cities is also based on the analysis of the capacity of the cities to make the required steps before the final selection in order to win the ECoC title.

Bielsko-Biała

The theme of the bid book is “Wellbeing”, constructed on the concept of weaves. “Wellbeing” embodies the harmony between our resources and mental, physical and social challenges - such a difficult balance to achieve today. The pandemic, war, long-term climate crisis and a crisis of faith in values have all shaken the framework on which the relationship with the world was anchored. Through the theme of weaving that offers a sense of place, the city aims to create a future that respects its past while addressing current issues. The primary aim is to create an agenda that will be a response to the post-pandemic world, weaving a new, modern fabric for the city, whose durable and original weaves will allow residents to achieve wellbeing - satisfaction in various areas of their lives. The city of Bielsko-Biała believes that through the ECoC competition it will discover new “Weaves”, enter into a creative dialogue with tradition and make the best use of local resources to create a common European future.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- In its strategic direction Bielsko-Biała aspires to build bridges between tradition and modernity, between generations and between culture and business. The overall desire is for the city to become a model for other cities in the realms of cultural development.
- A long term development strategy until 2030 has been in place since 2022, while the cultural plan is developed along with the ECOC application. Its main priorities are clearly pinpointed and are closely aligned with the ECoC programme.
- Whereas the anticipated impacts of the title year are clearly identified in the bid book, their link with the ultimate objective of wellness remains generic.
- The city demonstrates cultural vibrancy across multiple sectors, however the panel lacked a deeper understanding of the key players.
- The panel welcomes the plans for monitoring and evaluation, which include existing data sources and research on the sense of belonging to a community, local identity and sense of freedom. It will involve collaboration with the University of Bielsko-Biała and private companies. Hackathons to create IT solutions will help collect other data such as light pollution or architectural accessibility.

Cultural and artistic content

- The programme’s concept - Weaves - is clear and coherent, and has a strong connection to the local identity, being based on the city's borderland experiences and its textile heritage. The panel appreciated a very interesting

metaphor for the city as a fabric (as a palimpsest), which is a good narrative for building a cultural programme.

- The programme is built around wellbeing: society, awareness and surroundings (environment). Each main theme consists of a flagship project and more projects under three sub-themes: identity, community, freedom (society); knowledge, skills, imagination (awareness); nature, urban space, digital space (surroundings).
- Approximately 30 long-term projects are presented in the bid book, including Opening and Closing ceremonies and covering most of the art forms. Intentions to collaborate with renown festivals, other ECoCs, etc. are expressed, but the panel missed a mention of the leading organisations or partners for the projects.
- The local cultural scene has been strongly involved in the planning and preparation of the programme. An open call resulted in more than 100 project proposals. But the panel notices a lack of projects with bolder artistic ambition and quality and recommends strengthening this in the 2nd stage of the bidding.
- The panel welcomes the importance given to heritage as it is the projection of the past into the future. However, it suggests developing a stronger narrative in the heritage critical studies stream, reflecting on issues connected with work, workers, women, etc.
- At the same time, the panel recognizes the very solid digital potential of this programme, having in mind the strong audio-visual sector acting in the city. Developing such a theme as weaving, the panel suggests going deeper into the connections between heritage and innovations adding in this way a stronger European dimension.

European dimension

- The city is already cooperating with other ECoC cities and with potential title-holders by co-creating partnerships, collaborating on common themes, and engaging in networks. The panel notes the lack of tangible cooperation with European networks and recommends development in this area.
- Some projects are already conceptualised as European projects and are in line with the City's strategic priority to improve international cooperation. The panel encourages the city to expand cooperation beyond ECoC cities.
- There is an emphasis on common aspects of European cultures, heritage, and history. Plans also involve student exchanges, artistic residencies, and educational programmes to enhance cultural awareness. Challenges of

migration, climate change, social tensions, and religious diversity are also acknowledged and woven in the bid.

- The strategy to attract a broad audience involves creating a programme based on common European values, collaborating with international artists, and providing convenient access to the city. The focus is on a high-quality artistic programme, strategic media patronage, and targeted campaigns to encourage both returning and new visitors.
- Whereas wellbeing is in line with the current trend in European conversations across governance, business, education, health, as well as culture, the panel encourages further reflection on how the leitmotiv WEAVING for Europe will communicate and resonate within Europe.

Outreach

- The panel emphasises strong community involvement in the design of the bid book and in the process to create a meaningful ECoC experience for the communities, including border communities, NGOs working on women's rights and LGBTIQ+. At the same time, the panel missed any mention of migrant communities and/or refugees.
- Different forms of community inclusion were presented as: series of inclusive debates, extensive callout to residents for projects, consultations with young people, surveys, an establishment of Cultural Collective, a launch of Youth Volunteer Centre programme, etc. However, there is limited information on the level of involvement by the afore-mentioned communities in creating/co-creating and leading/co-leading projects. The panel would also suggest taking into account that outreach should be an ongoing process to maintain community involvement.
- While there are initiatives for youth involvement, there could be a more dedicated focus on youth engagement strategies. This includes partnerships with youth organisations, cultural programmes tailored for younger audiences, and more extensive involvement in educational institutions.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 3% of the overall city budget (i.e. 9,6 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to 4% (or more than 14,5 million euros) from 2029 onwards.
- The ECoC project's operating budget of 56,47 million euros is very sound. The City and the Region will confirm their financial commitments by June 2024.

- The planned income from private sources is optimistic and makes up 13% of the total operating budget; given the ambitious target, the strategy for raising these funds should be further developed for the final stage.
- The distribution of operating costs is balanced, with 65% of the budget allocated to the programme, 15% for promotion and marketing, 15% for wages, overheads and administration and 5% for other costs.
- Various plans for infrastructure development totalling 81,53 million euros are foreseen and clearly presented.
- For the purpose of the ECoC delivery, an independent Municipal Local Government Cultural Institution will be established, and an international call for the appointment of the director of this institution will be announced. The intended governance and delivery structure is presented, but the idea of holarchy (which the panel considers a very challenging task, with a high risk component for the ECoC delivery) needs to be further developed. Together with that, the division of tasks and responsibilities between departments and organisational actors should be clear in order to avoid possible overlapping of tasks.
- The marketing and communication strategy is solid for this stage of the competition, but needs further development, especially in the international communication strategy.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council (through a resolution) and the Beskid Agglomeration have expressed unanimous support for the candidacy.
- The city has a developed cultural life and has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme.
- Bielsko-Biała is experienced in organising large-scale international events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are good, as well as the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Bielsko-Biała proceeds to the final selection phase. Bielsko-Biała presented a solid bid book with most necessary details provided. They wish to build bridges between tradition and modernity, between generations and between culture and business. Their aim is to become a model for other cities in the realms of cultural development. A long-term development strategy has been in place since 2022 with a clear alignment between the strategy and the ECoC project. However, in the light of ECoC, it would be reasonable to extend the strategy till 2034. Promoting cultural diversity and mutual

understanding is the key focus of the applicant, presenting European initiatives that include partnerships and networks. Having a strong theme like “Weaving”, which is also a local identity, the panel recommends deeper insight into the theme and its connection between heritage and innovations as well as resonance within Europe. The unanimous support by the City Council as well as well-balanced financial plans, are evidence that the city can deliver the ECoC programme. For the final phase, the panel expects the support of the voivodeship (province) and a greater emphasis on the international communication strategy.

Bydgoszcz

Bydgoszcz presents a bid based on the cultural concept: a City as a large apartment. The metaphor of an apartment guides the artistic programme divided into seven topics: Table, Window to the World, Swept under the Rug, Backyard, Wall Unit, Garden and Balcony, and Pawlacz. Bydgoszcz aims to invite guests to experience the city as a home, emphasising safe conversations and a break from traditional tourism, with a goal of domesticating both Bydgoszcz and Europe. Participation in the ECoC 2016 competition brought cultural benefits to Bydgoszcz, stimulating the creativity and the ambitions of its residents. The city has also registered improvement in its aesthetics and heritage promotion, attracting tourists. Despite new challenges caused by events such as the pandemic and the humanitarian crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Bydgoszcz’s bid serves as a starting point on strategic planning for the future and openness to unconventional thinking.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The City development strategy is in place until 2030 with emphasis on civic activation and on an increase of the citizens’ interest in public goods. The panel notes that the role of culture within this strategy is not clearly explained.
- The ECoC programme is directly linked to the Culture Development Strategy for Bydgoszcz (2017-2026). The panel expressed concern that the current cultural strategy does not include the ECoC process. In addition, the mapping and analysis of the cultural sector will only commence in 2024 as part of the new cultural strategy that will be completed after the final selection.
- The monitoring and evaluation plan will be delivered via a consortium of partners, however information was rather generic and the panel had insufficient information on timeframes and the main areas that will be investigated.

Cultural and artistic content

- The programme's concept is based on a thought of Bydgoszcz as a large apartment where ordinary, simple life takes place. The aim is to treat the city as a home, a place where we feel safe. The panel admits it is an interesting metaphor for the city-home. However, the concept is not very artistically challenging as might be basically addressed to any city. It also emphasises the introverted approach: with some exceptions, the projects are rather local and 'homely'.
- The programme is divided into seven topics: Table, Window to the World, Swept under the Rug, Backyard, Wall Unit, Garden and Balcony, and Pawlacz. However, it is difficult to evaluate artistic quality and the balance of the artistic disciplines based on the given information as well as how many of the projects are new 'ECOC special' ones, and how many of them are existing ones.
- The actual programme has been compiled by employees of Rother's Mills, representing approximately 40 project initiatives. Some of them have potential for interesting and powerful projects. However, the projects' descriptions are still rather superficial, and are more a collection of ideas and possible initiatives than actual projects. The information about the responsible organisers or partners was also lacking.
- Despite the statement of the experimental project management model, which might be an interesting approach, the panel missed clear information on how the cultural institutions (public, private or NGOs) had or would contribute to the programme.
- Memory studies, oral history – all of these embed Bydgoszcz in the contemporary discourse of multicultural Europe as well as the difficult history of former residents. Despite the inclusion of environmental themes in the cultural programme, one of the main heritage axes of the city (TH2O cultural route) is not included. Connection to innovative strategy, like digital culture, media arts was also missing.

European dimension

- The city aims to create a comprehensive and inclusive cultural programme reflecting a shared European identity by promoting cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, and mutual understanding among European citizens.
- The programme emphasises joint activities that strengthen self-determination, regardless of individual differences and explores culinary heritage, engaging local institutions and collaborating with researchers across Europe. It also focuses on global perspectives, networking business,

culture, and education, and addresses contemporary European topics in cities.

- Whereas the panel believes that the European aspirations of the programme are aligned to the concept of the bid and its subthemes, there is a lack of concrete examples of projects with international networks and European partners, including former and future ECoCs.

Outreach

- The bid book states that an in-depth analysis was conducted and demands of NGOs and cultural institutions were gathered. Networking workshops and an information campaign about the bid book were organised.
- There is a realistic reference to the problems of contemporary communities such as violence, climate crisis, ageing society, etc. and accessibility is mentioned in terms of the website, providing sign language services, access to neurodivergent users and prisoners. On the other hand, projects with people in correctional facilities, homeless or migrants are not defined enough to provide clarity on the activities and level of engagement that took or will take place.
- Participation and accessibility are mainly defined through passive approaches (making content accessible through sign language, audio description tours, etc.). Very little is said about the involvement of elderly people or youth.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 4% of the overall city budget (i.e. 24,54 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to 6,3% (or more than 36 million euros) from 2030 onward.
- The proposed operating budget of 16 million euros was not justified in detail and given the need to implement the ECoC at the highest level, this raises concerns regarding its suitability. Planned revenues are balanced with 90,63% public funding and 9,37% private funding, but the panel believes that the revenues from the City, which make up 13,79% (i.e. 2 million euros) of the operating budget, are low. The financial commitments of the City and the Region are not clearly presented.
- The distribution of operating costs is not well balanced, with only 58,75% of the budget funds allocated to the programme.
- A positive aspect is that the city is already working on various investments in cultural and tourist infrastructure.

- A special office within the existing municipal Rother's Mill Science and Culture Centre will be established for the ECoC delivery.
- The marketing and communication strategy includes various tools and methods that are well thought through for this stage of the competition, but the general marketing model is not entirely clear.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council has given unanimous support for the candidacy. On a regional level, support for the candidacy has been expressed by councillors from the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship. Further support is shown from a list of individuals including amongst other mayors, vice-mayors and honorary consuls.
- The city has a very-well developed cultural life and has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme.
- Bydgoszcz is experienced in organising large-scale international events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility and tourists' accommodation are appropriate.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Bydgoszcz does not proceed to the final selection phase. Whereas the City's long-term strategy seeks to prioritise civic activation and increase the citizens' interest in public goods, the integration of culture within this plan and specifically its alignment with the ECoC initiative, remain unclear and not based on updated cultural mapping. The cultural and artistic programme, while themed around relatable daily life, lacks artistic depth and international resonance. Projects do not have sufficient detail and partnerships remain vaguely outlined, lacking information on responsible organisers and/or project partners. Whereas on outreach the bid makes realistic references to the problems of contemporary communities, participation and accessibility are mainly defined through passive approaches. Moreover, financial sustainability and diversified funding sources for the ECoC implementation raise doubts on the implementation of an ECoC programme at the highest level. Despite the city's history of hosting significant large-scale events, appropriate tourism services and various investments in cultural and tourist infrastructure, the concept is underdeveloped and not convincing for a robust ECoC delivery.

Jastrzębie-Zdrój

Jastrzębie-Zdrój, historically known for mining, is seeking a new identity beyond its industrial past. The ECoC competition provides an opportunity for the city's development by leveraging its multiculturalism, spa heritage, and educated

population. The city aims to showcase diversity, build a strong identity, and transform its socio-economic profile. This competition is seen as a chance to redefine the city, retain young talent, and demonstrate its cultural richness to the rest of Europe. Jastrzębie-Zdrój's cultural landscape is enriched by three distinct institutions which host diverse events, spanning the city's historical eras, including spa, industrial, and freedom movements. The character of the city is reflected under the mottos of this bid - Freedom! Energy! Culture!. With the proposed artistic vision and programme, with unrestricted culture as the primary goal, the City wants to provide every citizen with access to cultural assets, release creativity and cultural energy, and provide space for artistic self-realisation.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- Jastrzębie-Zdrój's "Strategy for the Development of Culture and Tourism until 2035" provides a clear strategy with clear objectives for active people, strong economy and friendly spaces to diversify the economy with investments in high tech, culture, tourism and leisure to build a local identity and make the city attractive. Some infrastructural projects are already underway and the strategy will be realised independently from the result of the ECoC competition.
- Whereas the bid provides clarity on how the strategy could prepare the grounds for the ECoC programme, the panel lacked neatness on how the ECoC programme can produce the desired changes as part of the overall vision and the transformative change of the ECoC programme.
- The Monitoring and Evaluation plan identifies the main focus of investigation: perception of the city; perception of EU values by the citizens; community development. The panel sees these indicators as mainly focusing on the City strategy (especially on tourism) and not on the changes that the ECoC programme can produce.
- The panel welcomes the competence centre *Enter Jastrzębie*, serving also as incubator, and identified in the bid to boost the CCS. However, it is of the opinion that the bid book does not provide a detailed outline of the cultural and creative scene and of their specific needs.

Cultural and artistic content

- Freedom! Energy! Culture! – the motto of the bid book – reflects the history of the city and its aspirations for the future. However, the concept and the programme structure are not strongly coherent.
- The programme is based on two pillars: energy and freedom, shortly representing several tens of projects. Still it remained open to the panel whether the projects are new ones or existing activities to be developed.

- Different cultural disciplines, cooperation with Sweden, preliminary ideas and timing of the Opening and Closing are listed. However, based on a very short name of the project, it is very challenging to evaluate the artistic quality of the programme.
- The programme has been drafted by the Cultural Council, under the active supervision of the Mayor, by collecting ideas from citizens and cultural, sports and business organisations.
- Very little information is provided on the synergy between innovations and heritage. Digital aspect is mentioned only regarding communication issues.

European dimension

- Jastrzębie-Zdrój's bid emphasises its commitment to promoting Europe's cultural diversity and fostering intercultural dialogue.
- The city, known for its multicultural identity, plans to collaborate with partner cities across Europe, highlighting common aspects of European culture, heritage, and history. It showcases extensive cooperation with cities like Karviná in the Czech Republic and participation in European initiatives and networks. The panel noted that cooperation in project examples in the bid is still at a very preliminary stage and mainly with neighbouring countries and partner cities, with no details on project partners.
- Jastrzębie-Zdrój outlines strategies to attract a wide European and international audience, focusing on programme diversity, collaboration with international artists, themed events, and promotional campaigns.
- The city aims to create a dynamic cultural environment through transnational partnerships, contributing to Europe's cultural richness.
- Whereas the bid addresses current European topics, including migration, climate action, and technological innovation, the panel did not find a strong connection between the European dimension and the themes and concept of the bid.
- There are no concrete examples of the cooperation with former and future ECOCs except from the Swedish city bearing the ECOC title in 2029.

Outreach

- 30 meetings and workshops were organised to draft the bid book and an ambition to include local cultural operators and communities in different levels of the bid book's planning and implementation is expressed. However, the strategy of outreach seems still to be underdeveloped.

- Out of 240 NGOs carrying out statutory activities in the city, 15 were involved in the final stage of the preselection bid book.
- There is a strong commitment to work with children and youth. In 2023, a strategy for young people was created, introducing their participation in the City's decision-making processes and attracting them to take part in volunteering. Nevertheless, connections with schools and the education system are not presented in the bid book.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 3,15% of the overall city budget (i.e. 4,79 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase it from 2030 onward.
- The ECoC project's operating budget of 45,91 million euros is very sound, but the breakdown of costs is not clear. The planned revenues from private sources are very optimistic, making up 15% of the total operating budget, while the strategy to reach this target has not been satisfactorily presented.
- The financial breakdown for the capital expenses is not clearly presented.
- The organisational structure for the delivery of the ECoC project is not sufficiently presented. The general director will be chosen through a competition, and the team will include directors of individual municipal institutions and city departments, local artists, representatives of civil society, etc.
- The marketing and communication strategy is solid for this stage of the competition, and includes various tools and methods, and different target groups are clearly identified.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council has expressed its support for the candidacy through a resolution, whilst support from other actors includes amongst others the Marshal of the Silesian Voivodeship.
- The city has limited experience in organising large-scale international cultural events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are appropriate.
- The city's absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is limited, but there are adequate accommodation facilities near the city.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Jastrzębie-Zdrój does not proceed to the final selection phase. The city has a clear strategy for development of culture and tourism which will be realised regardless of the outcome of this competition and there are some interesting ideas and plans related to the ECoC, but the panel finds this bid underdeveloped at many levels. The concept is not elaborated enough to be totally convincing and innovative on a European scale, and the proposed cultural and artistic programme with its individual projects is still not developed enough at this stage of the competition. The European dimension, which is the *raison d'être* of a European Capital of Culture, is not sufficiently built up, as well as connections with schools and the education system. Breakdown of the operating costs and the financial breakdown for capital expenses are not entirely clear and the organisational structure is not sufficiently presented. Delivering an ECoC at the highest European professional standards requires a critical mass of capacities with the right skills at the right time. With the capacity at hand and the cultural infrastructure that will be available in the city, the panel is concerned about the city's capacity to deliver an event like ECoC.

Katowice

The city has already participated in the ECoC competition for the 2016 title and gained from it in terms of local cultural development. Katowice sees the European Capital of Culture bid as a journey and a chance to revitalise its identity, bridge cultural gaps between the cultural zones and the surrounding neighbourhoods, and share its young but rich history with Europe. With the theme 'Play!' (chosen for its simplicity and universal applicability) the city aims to integrate people, foster community, and navigate future challenges through the transformative power of culture. Behind this bid stand 40 cities and municipalities with 2.2 million inhabitants of Metropolis GZM, which will be involved in the implementation of projects and activities related to the title year.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The work on Katowice's cultural strategy started in 2020, engaging local stakeholders through consultations despite pandemic restrictions. The final political endorsement by the city government is expected by the end of the year. The three-level structure of the cultural strategy aligns with the City's Development Strategy 2030. The panel welcomes the clear alignment between the objectives and desired impacts of the Cultural Strategy and of the ECoC programme.
- The application is submitted by Katowice along with the 40 cities which make up the Metropolis GZM, with a population of 2,2 million. The metropolitan dimension is proven not only by the involvement of the relevant institutions,

but also by the engagement of the broad cultural scene and by the spread all over the area of ECoC projects and Local Culture hubs. The panel found the bid convincing in providing an accurate overview of the metropolitan cultural scene, identifying also its drawbacks.

- Expected impacts involve increased well-being, a sense of community, and the development of cultural programmes aligned with sustainability goals. Foreseen Long-Term impacts include a shift in audience engagement models, increased cultural participation, and innovative urban design addressing environmental and social issues. Inter-sectoral cooperation with sports, education, health, and social services is emphasised to achieve broader community well-being.
- The panel welcomes the establishment of a unit and the engagement of an independent company for monitoring and evaluation. It recommends that the main areas of research beyond participation should be explored.
- The creation of platforms like the Local Cultural Hubs can help the various social groups to intermingle and dialogue. Yet, the panel recommends exploring deeper the "playful" approach to avoid creating silos and community bubbles.

Cultural and artistic content

- The programme's concept of Katowice "Play!" expresses a wish to spread the message that culture is relatable, simple, down to earth, and playful. The panel recognised that the concept has the potential to appeal to everyone in Katowice and the Metropolis, around Europe and beyond. However, it lacked a stronger discourse with another (darker) side of the play (gambling, addiction to computer games, etc.) – all topics that Europe of today has to tackle.
- The programme consists of four programme lines: Personal playlist, Fair play, Total immersion and Re:play, including 25 projects, which indicate partners, locations and target groups. The programme lines are well explained, but still not totally coherent with the actual projects.
- Overall, the programme gives a contemporary feeling. Artistic and cultural disciplines are well presented, emphasising music. Traditional cultural forms as well as heritage are nicely combined with a digital approach, modern technologies, and cultural forms. The panel agreed that it has potential to draw interest from a wider audience.
- The bid book has been compiled in wide cooperation with the artistic sector and other operators. A consultative council was also created for the bidding phase to implement a shared approach to the cultural programme.

European dimension

- Katowice focuses on diverse cultural collaborations, addressing social challenges, promoting well-being, and embracing sustainability. Despite the good aim and plans of having international partners in many projects, there are few projects with deeper European relevance and potential impact.
- The strategy includes connections with present and future European Capitals of Culture, emphasising themes like industrial heritage, gaming, grassroots initiatives, and more. Initiatives range from retaining talent through the gaming industry to integrating new residents, shifting gender roles, and promoting green place making.
- The city's cultural networks, marketing strategy, and slow tourism notion contribute to its goal of becoming a hub for European engagement and development.
- The panel notes that the theme of PLAY can be easily understood and communicated on a European level and beyond. It also provides a good framework for cooperation as demonstrated in the clearly outlined priority themes, partners and projects.
- Despite the aim of having international partners in many projects, the panel believes that there are not many individual projects in the programme with deeper European relevance and impact potential. The focus is placed on the neighbouring countries (Germany, Czech Republic, Austria), while the cooperation with other more distant and diverse countries is overlooked.

Outreach

- The panel was impressed by the committed inclusion and participative aspect of the bid, as well as the wide outreach reflected in the bid book with attention paid to everyone.
- Ongoing population surveys as well as conversations with local people (as well as 40 other cities in the metropolitan area) through meetings, workshops, a mobile meeting point, an open door policy and neighbourhood walks resulted in more than 100 proposals being received from residents following a public call.
- Work with marginalised and disadvantaged communities (excluded groups, the deaf, miners, LGBTIQ+, Ukrainian refugees, the depressed, etc.) reflects the theme of fair play that strives for equitable cultural participation.
- Children and young people included with dedicated research, as well as intergenerational volunteering programme and capacity building initiatives are indicated.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 3,37% of the overall city budget (i.e. 17,18 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to 4% from 2030 onward.
- The ECoC project's operating budget of 55,2 million euros is very sound. The total income to cover operating expenditures is balanced, with 95,1% planned to come from public sources, and 4,9% from private sources. The City and the Region will confirm their financial commitments before the final round.
- The distribution of operating costs is well balanced, with 70% of the budget allocated to the programme, 18% for promotion and marketing, 10% for overhead costs and 2% for the monitoring and evaluation.
- Several plans for infrastructure development totalling 275,16 million euros are foreseen and clearly presented. The largest capital project will be the Gaming and Technology Hub.
- The existing municipal institution City of Gardens, which was responsible for the Katowice 2016 ECoC bid, will be in charge of the ECoC delivery. The organisational structure is clearly presented, but the panel has some concerns about several of the planned committees, councils and groups and how they will work together. Many boards, councils etc. could pose a risk to the smooth and effective delivery of ECoC and their relationships with other stakeholders within the organisation and among themselves should be clear.
- The marketing and communication strategy is very well thought through for this stage of the competition. The innovative Agile marketing model will be implemented, target groups are well identified, digital communication strategies are prioritised and various areas of action are presented.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council (through a resolution) and the Metropolitan GZM have expressed unanimous support for the candidacy.
- The city has a very-well developed cultural life and has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme.
- Katowice is very experienced in hosting large-scale international events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are very good, as well as the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Katowice proceeds to the final selection phase. The city has a high potential for the delivery of international cultural projects such as ECoC. Objectives and impacts of the Cultural strategy and the ECoC programme are well aligned and the involvement of the Metropolitan area is clearly presented. The panel views the concept of the programme as strong and relevant locally as well as for Europe (and beyond) and the proposed cultural and artistic programme has potential to reach a wider European audience, but the programme lines should be more coherent with the actual projects. The programme would also gain more from emphasising stronger on a discourse with another (darker) side of the play as well as sometimes dissonant past of the mining and heavy industry: impact on environment, the role of women in the patriarchal society, the fate of minorities, tensions in the context of identity of Silesia. Whereas the panel welcomes the intention to develop a focus on the global south, it also recommends exploring possible cooperation with other EU cities, non-European partners and cultural organisations and networks facing the same issues. The relations of the ECoC office with other departments of the City of Gardens should be better explored, as well as relations of many boards, councils etc. with other stakeholders within the organisation and among themselves.

Kielce

Kielce is applying for the title of European Capital of Culture to showcase a dynamic blend of historical heritage and contemporary creativity. Beyond the traditional monuments and structures, the city boasts active cultural institutions, art organisations, and creative industries, fostering a harmonious narrative of people and places. Despite being perceived as peripheral, Kielce draws strength and confidence from its rich heritage, extending beyond regional and national boundaries. The city aims to demonstrate its capabilities and courage on the European stage, contributing to European integration and fostering positive change through culture and art. Kielce's bid for ECoC 2029 is driven by its cultural and artistic community, reflecting a genuine commitment to share its spirit and authentic emotion.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- Two strategies are in place: The "Development Strategy for Kielce 2030+", approved in June 2022, and the "Development Strategy for the Region 2030+", approved in March 2021. In the case of the regional strategy, the emphasis is clearly placed on the creative industries linked to the trade fair and event industry. The panel is positive on the regional aspiration of the bid, yet lacks clarity on the connection between the city and regional strategies and the link with the ECoC programme.

- Whereas the strategy and its general objectives on social inclusion, innovation and tourism are broadly described in the bid book, the panel missed sufficient information on its main strands, and activities and on how it was elaborated.
- The plan aimed to reinforce the Creative and Cultural sectors refers to the national plans, but the panel believes that it does not give a clear outline of its priorities and anticipated results.
- The panel expresses concern that the cultural mapping timeline does not coincide with the strategy and ECoC development.

Cultural and artistic content

- The programme's concept "City of Consonance" is understandable as such and carries many positive aims. However, the panel is of the opinion that it would have much more benefited in depth if also presenting the opposite side – dissonance.
- There are six programme lines, presented as laboratories and having their own, rather complex concepts and principles. The panel thinks that the structure of the programme is quite difficult and has no clear connection with the concept in general.
- The programme presents short examples of approx. 40 projects, part of which are existing activities. Mainly cultural heritage and traditional artistic forms are emphasised with very little space for contemporary art forms and expressions. Due to the limited information, evaluation of the artistic quality of the programme is rather challenging.
- Although four Small Cultural Congresses of Kielce and the Świętokrzyskie Region were organised as a basis for discussion and action for cross-sector collaboration for the ECoC, the panel misses a wider representation of communities' involvement. Just a few partners are mentioned throughout the bid book, which will fulfil most of the projects.

European dimension

- Kielce expresses a commitment to collaborate at local and international levels and wants to be a cultural hub by creating international exchange programmes, producing projects with global partners, and offering educational programmes for intercultural dialogue. Transnational partnerships are planned with Vinnytsia, Gotha, Ramla, Budapest Czepel, Orange, and Třebíč fostering artistic exchange and collaboration.
- The strategy aims to attract a diverse audience through visually appealing content, bilingual communication, promotion of cultural heritage, high-

quality events, and international exchange. There are plans to engage European artists, cooperate with cities globally, and form coalitions for artistic exchange, socio-cultural projects, and digital platforms.

- The strategy emphasises intelligent visual communication, bilingual engagement, promotion of cultural heritage, high-quality events, dynamic international exchange, and hybrid digital initiatives to captivate a broad European and international audience.
- The panel believes that the European dimension is still at a conceptual level with a lack of concrete information on projects and partners.

Outreach

- Public consultation for the bid book took the form of meetings and online surveys, however no clear indications of its impact are mentioned.
- The bid book has no direct and specific emphasis on any marginalised communities. LGBTIQ+, the elderly, migrants, refugees, disabled and other groups of excluded people are not mentioned.
- Children and youth are identified as potential community leaders for Kielce 2029 projects. However, cooperation with education, including activities for pupils, students, and teaching staff, address only a few initiatives like Young Cultural Guides and Digital Cultural Haven.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 1,73% of the overall city budget (i.e. 6,25 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to 1,9% (or 7 million euros) from 2030 onward. The panel considers this budget for culture to be low.
- The ECoC project's operating budget, as well as the public and private sources of funding and the distribution of the operating costs are not clear from the bid book and hearing.
- Various plans for infrastructure development totalling 75,76 million euros are foreseen and presented.
- The main risks are clearly identified with appropriate mitigation measures.
- For the purpose of the ECoC delivery, an independent non-governmental organisation will be established. The planned governance and delivery structure are not clear, while the tasks and responsibilities of the various departments are not presented in detail, and the roles of committees, councils and committees are vague.

- The marketing and communication strategy is solid for this stage of the competition and includes various tools and methods of promotion but needs further development to reach high ECoC standards.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council has expressed unanimous support for the candidacy through a resolution. The Region adopted a declaration of cooperation for the project through the authorities of the Marshal's Office of the Świętokrzyskie Region.
- The city has a developed cultural life and has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme.
- Kielce is experienced in hosting large-scale international events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are appropriate, as well as the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Kielce does not proceed to the final selection phase. City and regional strategies are in place, however lacking clarity on the connection between them and the link with the ECoC programme. Description of the cultural and artistic programme is too cursory, and contains rather too many generalities and declarative statements. The idea of laboratories is underdeveloped and not coherent with the overall concept. The European dimension is still at a conceptual level with a lack of concrete information on projects and partners. The bid book has no direct and specific emphasis on any marginalised communities and cooperation with education, including activities for pupils, students, and teaching staff needs deeper development. The ECoC project's operating budget, as well as the public and private sources of funding and the distribution of the operating costs are not clear from the bid book and hearing. And although culture is integrated in the city's development plan, the panel recommends that the momentum gained in the bidding process serves as a catalyst for the City to develop its culture strategy.

Kołobrzeg

Kołobrzeg is a coastal town and presents similarities with other European tourist locations torn between the demands of the tourism industry and the needs of its inhabitants. While tourism generates income, issues like overfishing and ecological threats to the Baltic Sea affect the city. The bid for European Capital of Culture aims to address challenges of identity, promote equality, foster Baltic community collaboration, emphasise regeneration, tackle over tourism-related issues and problems of gentrification, and advocate for the cultural development of small

European cities. The bid with the motto: "I sea you", is rooted in the sea and aspires towards a future based on balance and harmony. The bid is built on the programme for Cultural Development of Kołobrzeg 2030+ and its slogan 'small is beautiful' aims to position Kołobrzeg as a regional capital of culture, awaiting discovery.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The programme for the cultural development of Kołobrzeg 2030+ has the slogan "Small is beautiful". The priority areas are well identified (identity; Baltic; health resort and culture; experiential tourism; small cities, active seniors). The panel views an alignment between the city's priorities and the thematic circles and strands of the programme. However, the impact of ECoC is described in very broad terms.
- The Monitoring and Evaluation plan is solid and quite detailed for the pre-selection stage. It is unfolded into 3 stages and the panel positively welcomes the definition of 3 research studies (needs of different publics, perception of the city and cultural infrastructures) and the use of visual research techniques that will constitute the bedrock of the baseline data.
- The panel notes that the search for a new and more sustainable tourism model should be fleshed out with concrete plans.
- The panel welcomes the emphasis on the potential of the cultural independent sector and the awareness of the necessity to attract people and to work with the EU and with the region.

Cultural and artistic content

- The panel was convinced by the theme "I sea you", which is thoroughly described both in terms of relevance to local (even for individuals) and European dimension. It plays on the phrase "I see you" and serves as an invitation to see and be seen on issues facing Europe today: safety, climate, economic collapse and a crisis of trust.
- The programme is encapsulated in several levels: Thematic circles / Story circles / Key events / Artistic projects, which despite its argumentation, seems to be a rather difficult system to communicate and implement. Therefore, the panel suggests simplifying the layout of the programme for the second round.
- The structure for the programme schedule of the title year is presented through 11 Story circles, curated by well-known Polish artists and activists, and 19 listed projects, including the Opening and Closing ceremonies. Although the panel lacked the connection between these projects and the

story circles, it emphasises an interesting and potentially very powerful programme based on the overall stories.

- There has been an open call to collect ideas for the artistic projects, attracting 130 proposals. However, the bid book does not present them in full scale, which makes it challenging to evaluate their artistic quality and variety of cultural forms.
- Connection between heritage and innovations should still be developed to reveal its synergy in the best possible way, addressing not only local, but also European issues. This should also address digital means to be used for reaching out the ECoC's goals.

European dimension

- The panel is positive on Kołobrzeg's approach to the European dimension and how this is reflected in its strategy to integrate Europe's cultural diversity.
- The programme circles focus on themes such as intercultural dialogue, shared heritage, and European integration. The bid emphasises cooperation with European partners, particularly in the Baltic region, to address contemporary European challenges.
- Activities and outreach initiatives align with European values, emphasising economic, social, and territorial cohesion, cultural diversity, and human rights.
- The bid underscores the promotion of European values and the importance of solidarity, mutual respect, and combating social exclusion.
- The strategy for attracting a broad European audience demonstrates a well-thought-out approach to engaging with European markets, aligning with EU values.
- Overall, the city is committed to leveraging the European dimension for greater understanding and cultural diversity, contributing to Europe's shared heritage. However, very few project ideas are mentioned and a clear outline of established or proposed European partners and networks are not provided.
- The panel notes that links with other ECoCs satisfactorily covered for this stage of the competition. Cooperation this far is established with 6 other ECoCs and aligned with the bid's four themes.

Outreach

- The genuine interest in excluded groups and minorities is noteworthy. The panel sees a great input in the exploration of difficult topics. However, the bid does not provide sufficient information and context to understand the urgency and priorities of marginalised communities and how ECoC could be of value / relevance to them. For instance, youngsters that are not attending cultural events at all.
- Equality and community engagement are embedded in the bid and established as a priority in various parts of the programme. However, the panel suggests working further on the balance of the programme to ensure the needs both of the locals, and attractiveness of the high season of the tourists.
- Physical, intellectual, and digital accessibility are also listed as commitments to be developed as part of the programme and in the design of new infrastructural facilities.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 4,1% of the overall city budget (i.e. 3,5 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to 5,6% (or more than 5 million euros) from 2030 onward.
- The ECoC project's operating budget of 22,96 million euros is achievable, but the budget figures are not entirely clear. The panel is concerned whether this budget will be sufficient for the realisation of all planned activities. Furthermore, there are extremely high expectations of incomes from private sources (3,86 million euros) and the EU (over 6 million euros). The strategy to reach such ambitious targets should be developed in detail for the final stage.
- At this stage, no commitments have been made to finance operating costs. The panel must have guarantees from the different public authorities on funding for the final selection phase.
- The distribution of operating costs is balanced, with 65% of the budget allocated to the programme, 14% for promotion and marketing, 16% for wages, overheads and administration and 5% for other costs.
- Various plans for infrastructure development representing an amount of 29,31 million euros are foreseen and clearly presented.
- A local government cultural institution will be established for the purpose of ECoC delivery. Governance structure is well presented and thought through with clear division of tasks, but the presence of possible boards and (or) committees is not entirely clear.

- The marketing and communication strategy is well thought through for this stage of the competition. Key stakeholders are identified as well as the communication and marketing values, and some innovative tools such as ECoC 2029 Audience Panel are presented.

Capacity to deliver

- Political support and sustainable commitment from the local and regional authorities is not sufficiently described. On a regional level, support for the candidacy has been expressed by the County Office in a letter of intent and by the West Pomeranian Voivodeship via a letter of support. Further support is shown from amongst others 50 West Pomeranian mayors, the Kołobrzeg Chamber of Commerce and the West Pomeranian Regional Tourism Organisation.
- The city has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme.
- Kołobrzeg is experienced in organising large-scale international events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are very good, as well as the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Kołobrzeg proceeds to the final selection phase. The long-term strategy stands strong but the panel recommends that the ECoC project is enlarged in scope within a regional dimension. The cultural and artistic programme includes strong curators and local artist involvement but requires a more detailed plan and simplified structure. The European dimension resonates well, particularly with the Baltic sea theme, yet requires more concrete planning and connections with European audiences and ECoCs. Outreach shows strong engagement but lacks strategies for youth and women, necessitating clearer plans for marginalised communities and a balanced approach between tourists and residents. The city provides a solid annual budget for culture with a plan to increase this budget. The panel believes that the plan to raise funds from private sources and the EU is very ambitious and recommends its reviewing whilst ensuring that the budget to deliver the scale of the programme is safeguarded. The bid provides clear capital expenses and a clear organisational structure. Lastly, capacity to deliver appears promising, boasting good tourism services and event organisation experience.

Lublin

Positioned on the border of the European Union, Lublin presents itself as a gateway between East and West and eastern Poland's most important centre of cultural life. Lublin's 2030 Strategy for Culture is being drafted in tandem with the ECoC application. Lublin's bid is grounded in the leitmotif of RE:UNION, derived from the

historical Union of Lublin from 1569. Through RE:UNION, the city aspires to identify a set of values for a new, inclusive social contract and address reintegration as the most pressing issue. Using the acronym L.O.V.E., the bid proposes an operating system of Longevity, Observation, Vibration and Embodiment. This is the second time Lublin is bidding for the ECoC title. The outcome of the 2016 bid generated momentum for the city's development, extending beyond cultural activities. The city is hosting the European Youth Capital 2023, creating impetus for projects and events in the ECoC programme to be created by young people.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The City adopted the Lublin 2030 Strategy, stemming from a wide consultation and participative research that involved over 15.000 residents. The panel welcomes the city's strong cultural planning based on extensive consultation, together with the detailed and shared analysis of the strengths and drawbacks of the local cultural sector. The city positions culture as a leading role in its strategy to forge its image.
- This overarching strategy is complemented by other Sector Strategies (Cultural Strategy, Creative and Cultural Industries strategy, Youth Policy and international cooperation priorities) that are underway.
- The bid emphasises the links between the various strategies, the priorities and the ECoC programme. However, the panel notes some overlaps between the Cultural Strategic Plan and the ECoC project.
- The desired impacts are investigated under different levels (cultural, economic, social and EU dimension). However, the panel notes that the bid does not include any indicators that can convey the anticipated changes that the ECoC could produce. The plans for monitoring and evaluation are underdeveloped in terms of qualitative indicators.

Cultural and artistic content

- The programme's concept "RE:UNION", aimed at fostering European values, integrating the West and the East of Europe, and promoting active cultural engagement, is presented under four strands/pillars: Longevity, Observation, Vibration, Embodiment, creating an acronym of L.O.V.E. While welcoming the concept, the panel has doubts about L.O.V.E as an "operating system" as it may be very challenging to communicate and may also be restrictive for the programme's development.
- In total 54 projects (part of which has been received through an open call) are presented with short descriptions and responsible organisations

indicated. Some projects are quite bold and have the potential to generate European interest.

- A strength of the bid is also the presence of a critical discourse and a balance sought between past and contemporary issues, making the most of local cultural heritage while also showing sensitivity to acute topics of today (such as the rights of women, minorities, excluded groups, etc.).
- The bid interestingly covers a diversity of genres whilst also building on the city's remarkable reputation of festivals, cultural heritage and specific genres, such as circus art.
- The programme is inclusive; it is clearly intended for a wide spectrum of audiences and represents a full cross-section of organisations. This is proved by the 300 entries received from the open call.

European dimension

- Through its ECoC programme, the city wants to answer questions about the state of the core humanistic values in today's Europe and about the role culture can play to tackle ever rising fears. By reflecting on the learnings of the Union of 1569, to the present day, they endeavour to unite East and West through culture.
- The panel considers the bid's aspiration to take the lead as an ambassador for Eastern Europe to the EU as bold, challenging and interesting. On the other hand, the panel expresses concerns that the European dimension in the bid is predominantly focused on Eastern Europe with projects mainly including non-EU partners and accession countries, with the risk of limiting wider European relevance.
- The panel welcomes the proposed projects to mark Poland's 25th EU accession anniversary together through the participation of 9 other countries. It is also positive on the work made with European networks and the 25 global twin cities of Lublin but details of the concrete nature of cooperation are missing. On the other hand, project concepts with non-EU countries are provided.

Outreach

- The bid book gives evidence of an extensive engagement of various communities. According to the bid book, approx. 1000 people contributed to the ECoC Lublin 2029 application.
- Engagement projects with children, youth, senior citizens, and students have been defined with indicators and partners seeking to develop friendly Lublin in regard to education, study, senior, CCI and volunteers.

- The panel appreciated that there is a focus on developing audiences through marketing campaigns, special events, and utilising the potential created by ongoing programmes like the European Youth Capital 2023.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 2,24% of the overall city budget (i.e. 14,4 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to over 4,2% after 2029.
- The ECoC project's operating budget of 55 million euros is very sound. Planned revenues are balanced with 85% public and 10% private funding, while the remainder will be raised through ticket sales etc. Funding from the City will be included in its long-term financing forecast, and the Region will confirm its financial commitments before the final stage. For the final selection phase, the panel seeks funding guarantees from the different public bodies. The strategy for raising funds from private sources should also be developed further for the final stage.
- The distribution of operating costs is well balanced, with 72,5% of the budget allocated to the programme, 14,5% for promotion and marketing, 11% for wages, overheads and administration and 2% for other costs.
- Various infrastructure development plans are envisaged, but the total capital budget is not presented, as costs are still being estimated for 2 of the 6 planned projects.
- For the purpose of the ECoC delivery, a new municipal cultural institution will be established. The governance structure is well presented and thought through, with a clear division of tasks. The panel welcomes the position of Director of Eastern Affairs, but would also like to see a department (or a similar entity) for the overall international affairs.
- The marketing and communication strategy is well thought through for this stage of the competition. Various tools and methods are foreseen through different phases until the end of 2029.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council has expressed unanimous support for the candidacy through the adoption of an ad hoc resolution, but there is limited evidence of wider support from the region.
- The city has a very-well developed cultural life and has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructures to deliver an ECoC programme.
- Lublin is very experienced in hosting large-scale international events.

- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are good, as well as the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Lublin proceeds to the final selection phase. The panel welcomes the city's strategic base for the ECoC project and encourages further development of ECoC as a strategic element to address some of the priorities within a wider cultural strategy. It should take into consideration the longer term legacy of the ECoC year. The bid presents a well thought out cultural and artistic programme, includes diverse stakeholders and provides space for critical discourse. The panel recommends the team to balance the significant quantity of the projects with a focus on quality and deeper content. While welcoming the concept of L.OV.E as an "operating system", the panel recommends the team to revisit this system due to challenges that may arise in communicating it and restrictions it may cause for the programme's development. The panel welcomes the innovative and daring approach to reach out to Eastern Europe and commend the team on the courage and interest to develop this further. The panel recommends that the European dimension should have deeper and more specific cooperation with partners and content from all corners of the EU, including other ECoC cities. The city proposes a sound budget for ECoC and the strategy for raising funds from private sources should be developed further. The governance structure is well presented and thought through, with a clear division of tasks.

Opole

Opole, one of Poland's oldest cities and historical capital of Upper Silesia, boasts a rich multicultural history shaped by Poles, Czechs, Germans, Austrians, and Jews. With a diverse population and a unique blend of identities, Opole's DNA reflects its near-border location, fostering a culture of coexistence. This multiculturalism, ingrained in the city's fabric, serves as a natural foundation for Opole's bid for the European Capital of Culture. Under the motto "Close to the people - in the heart of Europe", the city's interdisciplinary cultural programme aims to strengthen the residents' sense of belonging to the wider European cultural space, show the city's rich heritage and cultural diversity, and foster its long-term development. The programme will unfold with dedicated mottos over five years, fostering community mobilisation, partnerships, innovation, freedom of expression, and balance. The climax in 2029 celebrates these values through events and projects, showcasing cultural metamorphosis of the city and expressing gratitude to the community and partners.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The City has adopted a "Development Strategy for Opole until 2030". This strategy identifies as one of its axes the enhancement of cultural institutions

and of grass-root initiatives with the ultimate view to position Opole as an important Polish city of culture.

- The strategy and its general objectives are broadly described in the bid book. Whereas the strategy places an emphasis on education, the development of cultural infrastructures and the enhancement of the city's heritage, the panel remarks that the bid book provides no information on its main strands and implementing activities or on its elaboration process. There is also no clear indication on how the current strategy lays the foundation for the ECoC project and vice-versa on how the ECoC is intended to help address some of the objectives of the strategy.
- Whereas there is an intention to develop in the future a strategy to expand the organisation of the ECoC project with all members of Opole Agglomeration, the regional dimension in the bid is unclear.
- The panel welcomes the plan aimed to reinforce the Creative and Cultural sectors through the establishment of a creative incubator closely related to the Science and Technology Park, as well as a Centre for Cultural Development focusing on new digital technologies. However, the panel notes that the specific needs of the local cultural and creative scene are not presented and thus the programme remains somewhat abstract.
- The panel considers the Monitoring and Evaluation proposal in the bid to be vague. Whereas the anticipated impacts are broadly listed and indicators focus more on efficiency, the panel notes that long-term cultural, social and economic effects are overlooked.

Cultural and artistic content

- The city's cultural programme is built on the two pillars included in the motto - "Close to the people – in the heart of Europe". The first one emphasises proximity and is meant to foster an 'authentic' face-to-face cultural creation, which is deemed crucial in the post-pandemic period. The second pillar highlights Opole's geographical and historical significance at the crossroads of European trade routes.
- The programme consists of approx. 30 flagships with several sub projects each, as well as other approx. 60 projects grouped in six categories. The panel notices that the programme overall is quite disjointed and lacks coherence in terms of vision and theme.
- There is a strong emphasis on music and song, as well as historic and cultural heritage projects. On a less positive note, the descriptions of the innovative projects are rather disappointing, as they do not propose synergy between arts and technologies, and/or science, etc.

- A working group was established to develop the bid book, and meetings with different public institutions, individuals and NGOs were held. There is a wide range of local cultural organisations and other sectors' operators listed as responsible for the implementation of the programme, which is a positive element. However, they are not clearly connected to the individual projects presented.

European dimension

- Whereas the programme seeks to promote cultural diversity by referencing Polish, Czech, German, Silesian, Jewish, Roma, and Ukrainian cultures, the panel was concerned that the European dimension in the bid was limited to a city-centric perspective, understood as a showcase of Opole through ECoC events in the city.
- Opole plans to prioritise European diversity in the cultural offer, involving Europeans in creating future events. However, concrete collaboration with European partners, including other ECoCs, is not strong.
- The panel positively notes the establishment of the Opole Centre for Intercultural Dialogue and projects like "Many cultures, a shared heritage" that will showcase multiculturalism.
- Opole's ECoC events are intended to be organised based on the principles of non-discrimination and freedom, which the panel appreciates. The programme also addresses current European issues, supporting for example the LGBTIQ+ community through events like the Equality March, emphasising equality and human rights. This is also a welcomed development.
- Whereas the programme aims to engage artists from various countries and cultures, underscoring the value of multiplicity and diversity, the panel observes, on a less positive note, that very few specific European project partners or European network connections are mentioned.

Outreach

- Children and youth are strongly represented in the bid, with one thematic area dedicated to them. Arts education and student participation in the ECoC are also prioritised in flagship projects. These are positive endeavours.
- Whereas the bid book states that some projects will directly target people at risk of social exclusion, no detailed information is given on which projects are targeting these groups, on the process adopted to develop them and on how the participation in all cultural projects will be open to people at risk of social exclusion.

- The overall engagement with diverse communities, other than children and schools, is unclear and generic. Such aspects as participation, financial help or reaching out to people's close locations are not thought through.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 1,94% of the overall city budget (i.e. 6,5 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to 3% (or around 10 million euros) from 2030 onward.
- The ECoC project's operating budget amounts to 22,65 million euros. Total income to cover operating expenditures is balanced, 96,1% of the budget is planned to be obtained from the public sources, and 3,9% from the private sources, which is realistic.
- The distribution of operating costs is not well balanced. The panel welcomes the fact that 83,6% of the budget is allocated to the programme, but considers that having 4,7% for promotion and marketing and 0,3% for other costs is very low.
- Various plans for infrastructure development totalling 27,39 million euros are foreseen and presented.
- Possible weaknesses are not identified, as well as mitigation measures to overcome them.
- For the purpose of the ECoC delivery, a Bureau of Organisation will be established within the structures of the City Hall. The intended governance structure is not clearly presented.
- The marketing and communication strategy is solid for this stage of the competition and includes tools such as direct communication, media, Internet and event related activities.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council expressed its support for the candidacy through an ad hoc resolution. There is also support from other actors, including amongst others the Marshal of the Opolskie Voivodeship.
- The city has a developed cultural life and has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme.
- The city has experience in hosting large-scale events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are appropriate, but the city's absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is limited.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Opole does not proceed to the final selection phase. Although the city has a development strategy, the impact and the position of the European Capital of Culture is not clearly presented, as well as the regional dimension, and the monitoring and evaluation strategy. The cultural and artistic programme has quite a large number of flagship projects, as well as numerous other programmes, but the panel considers them insufficiently coherent with the overall theme and vision of the programme. It deals with current European topics, but the European dimension, which is the *raison d'être* of the European Capital of Culture, is not sufficiently developed, and potential European partners are not clearly identified. The involvement of different communities (apart from children and youth) is unclear. The existence of projects aimed at people at risk of social exclusion is mentioned, but without additional detailed information. The distribution of operating costs is not well balanced, potential weaknesses are insufficiently identified and the intended governance structure is underdeveloped even for this stage of competition.

Płock

Płock, a city deeply rooted in history and facing various challenges, sees a unique opportunity for development through culture. Utilising culture as a universal tool, the city aims to strengthen its identity, attract residents, tourists, and investors, and address strategic objectives with a focus on history, community, economic potential, and overall city cohesion. The unique opportunity presented by culture allows Płock to further its development, leverage resources, strengthen identity, and enhance its appeal to residents, tourists, and investors. The programme's concept "Meaning Flow" draws inspiration from the Vistula river's symbolic essence and is in a dialogue between two notions: trail and flow. The river becomes a source of stories, contributing to local and European identity.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- A cultural policy is in place until 2030, elaborated by experts based on an analysis of the cultural sector and through surveys among residents.
- Whereas a high number of priorities and objectives are mentioned, the panel found that there was a lack of clarity regarding the connections between this policy and the ECoC project.
- The bid provides insufficient information on the capacity and the needs of the local cultural scene. In addition, the capacity-building plan is not detailed.
- The panel welcomes the effort to enlarge the scope of the candidacy by seeking a regional dimension and by signing strategic alliances with

Warsaw, to reinforce the local cultural capacity and to attract audiences, as well as with Polish cities on the Vistula.

- The intention to pursue the objective of strengthening cultural cooperation with these river cities regardless of the ECoC competition is also positive.
- The impacts to be expected from the ECoC project are correctly described under different levels, although they are not quantified.

Cultural and artistic content

- The programme's concept "Meaning Flow" draws inspiration from the Vistula river's symbolic essence: change, experience, life paths, and relationships. The river becomes a source of stories, contributing to local and European identity.
- The concept is a dialogue between two notions: trail and flow, meeting four principles (staying up to date, diversity, inclusiveness and universality) presented under 3 guiding threads of the trails of Discoveries, Transformations, and Relations, to be carried out in line with the flow of resources, time, and meanings.
- In total approx. 30 projects with sub projects are presented with information of the running years, types of project (flagship, project/event or process), the covered themes, the institutions involved, and the potential financing sources. However, it is not clear if the implementation of these projects is exclusively dependent on these funds and if the international partnerships indicated are at this stage a wish list or already contacted / committed ones.
- Many of the projects presented are more of an educational or development nature, while there is a lack of artistically daring projects based on a professional artistic creation process. Part of the projects are established yearly events and it is not specified whether they will be developed further or integrate a new dimension as part of the ECoC programme.
- The consultations listed in the bid book refer to the city's cultural policy and it remained unclear if they also served as a tool to include the local population in the preparation of the bid book. However, open calls for institutions, artists and NGOs are planned to be carried out, which the panel sees as a positive intention.

European dimension

- Płock's European dimension is shaped by historical migrations and embraces cultural diversity. It responds to contemporary challenges such as the influx of migrant workers.

- Whereas the overall focus is on upholding European common values, it remains unclear how the theme will add to the conversation on sustainability in Europe and how this message will be conveyed on a European level.
- Beyond cultural initiatives, Płock's commitment is exemplified by hosting the CIFAL Centre for sustainable development since 2004, showcasing leadership in the field.
- International accolades, including a European Diploma, exemplify Płock's dedication to fostering European values, reinforcing its bid for the ECoC 2029 as a natural extension of this commitment.
- Whereas the programme lists many international cooperation partners, the panel notes little concreteness in the nature and the degree of cooperation with these partners.
- The cooperation with other ECoCs is mainly grounded in the context of Swedish cities (Sweden will also host an ECoC in 2029), with other cities only mentioned as potential partners.

Outreach

- Four groups are identified as disadvantaged (people with low material status, people with disabilities, the Deaf as a cultural and linguistic minority, economic migrants from Asia) with various activities listed as measures to facilitate participation and inclusion. A housing estate project is also proposed to address audience development. However, it remained unclear if these activities were defined by the communities themselves or based on some research.
- Six actions are listed as commitments to the local community, including surveys, a civic research panel, the appointment of a curatorial team, an online forum, an open competition for local artists and an open call for local NGOs.
- Although the city wants to become the first Future Literacy Laboratory in Poland, no other particular attention to children and young people is presented in the bid book.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 2,79% of the overall city budget (i.e. 7,6 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to around 3,5% from 2030 onward.
- The ECoC project's operating budget amounts to 31 million euros, which the panel considers sufficient for all planned activities. The total income to cover operating expenditures is balanced, 89,8% of the budget is planned to be

obtained from the public sources, and 10,2% from the private sources. The fundraising strategy for seeking support from private sponsors is described briefly.

- The distribution of the operating costs is balanced to some extent, with 65% of the budget allocated to the programme, 12% for promotion and marketing, 18% for wages, overheads and administration and 5% for other costs.
- Plans for infrastructure development totalling 47,80 million euros are foreseen and presented.
- For the purpose of the ECoC delivery, the Płock Cultural Hub will be established, and from 2027 until 2029 a special office will be created within HUB that will be in charge of the ECoC. It is not entirely clear why this office will be formed so late. The governance structure is solid with a clear division of tasks.
- The marketing and communication strategy is basic and includes tools such as digital and new media communications, media relations, advertising, involvement of local and regional Tourist organisations etc.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council has given unanimous support for the candidacy. The regional support is illustrated by the declarations of cooperation from the municipalities of Słupno, Rościszewo, Staroźreby. The candidacy is further supported by the mayor of Warsaw, and the personal involvement of the Marshal of the Mazovian Voivodeship.
- The city has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme.
- The city has some experience with organising large-scale international events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are appropriate, but the city's absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is limited.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Płock does not proceed to the final selection phase. A cultural policy is in place until 2030, but there is a lack of clarity regarding the connections between this policy and the ECoC project. The bid provides insufficient information on the capacity and the needs of the local cultural scene. In addition, the capacity-building plan is not detailed. Vistula river is an inspiration for the bid book's concept, grounded in a dialogue between two notions: trail and flow. Many of the projects presented are more of an educational or development

nature, while there is a lack of artistically daring projects based on a professional artistic creation process. The European dimension is shaped by historical migrations and embraces cultural diversity, responding to contemporary challenges. However, not enough concreteness on European and international partnerships as well as cooperation with other ECoCs are presented. And in terms of the city's economic driver the panel missed critical reflection on the climate change issue. The consultations listed in the bid book refer to the city's cultural policy, but remained unclear if they also served as a tool to include the local population in the preparation of the bid book. The ECoC project's operating budget is sufficient for planned activities and the City Council has given unanimous support for the candidacy.

Pszczyna

Pszczyna, a small city in the south of Poland with diverse heritage in terms of nationalities and denominations, applies for the title of European Capital of Culture 2029 to address challenges such as smog, cultural dominance of neighbouring cities, one-day tourism and youth exodus. The application aims to involve the community in co-creating the city's future, fostering a bold vision, improving connectivity and co-building the "Land of dreams", where every aspect of life coexists in balance. This includes diverse elements such as nature, human activities, and culture. Embracing biodiversity and sustainability, the land promotes freedom, open-mindedness, and sustainable development, aiming to minimise degradation. The six-year process seeks to transform weaknesses into strengths, making Pszczyna a greener, inspiring, and inclusive place. The cultural initiative also aims to connect people, promote environmental care, and stimulate technological development.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The city has adopted a well-defined cultural strategy covering the period 2023-2032, which was developed in a bottom-up approach in consultation with local and national experts.
- This strategy unfolds into 7 pillar actions: consultative community-based body, fund for community projects, summer school for youth, new library as a social space, repurposing buildings for cultural use, new storytelling of the city to enrich the tourist offer, to prepare the ECoC candidacy.
- The panel is convinced that the identified strategic actions are very concrete and clear, with a sufficient time span to ensure the legacy of the ECoC programme.
- The panel positively notes that the NGOs in the city and the region led the process to initiate the ECoC application development. It is visible that the

bidding process was a great stimulus for the local cultural milieu, genuinely striving for change.

- The monitoring and evaluation plan is rather generic, providing insufficient insight on the research plan.

Cultural and artistic content

- The theme of the bid book, i.e. “The Land of Dreams”, has emerged from the present threats and the vision of the world the city would like to live in. It promotes freedom, open-mindedness, and sustainable development.
- The programme is divided into five programme lines: Precedent of freedom; Between heaven and earth; A celebration of respect; Beautiful barbarians; and Laboratory of the future. There are 23 areas for project initiatives described under these programme lines.
- The themes proposed are well-researched and very topical (women's rights, minority rights, exclusion of the elderly, artistic freedom, etc.) and include a critical discourse. However, it is quite difficult to evaluate the artistic quality of this programme based on the succinct information given.
- It is stated that the bid book was initiated by thirty representatives from Pszczyna's cultural field. Some potential partners are already listed. However, all plans seem to come from the ECoC office. It is not clear how the local artistic field has participated in the bid book's planning.
- There is no information on how the cultural heritage and new artistic innovations will be combined. A broader presentation of digital aspects is also lacking.

European dimension

- Pszczyna's *Land of Dreams* aims to foster cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, and mutual understanding among European citizens, which is in line with the objectives of the ECoC action. Rooted in Pszczyna's history, the programme invites European participation, addressing both local and European challenges through artistic and intellectual exchanges.
- The programme emphasises collaboration with institutions and promotes respect. It also commemorates EU Day with annual events showcasing EU artists, envisioning positive emotions as a tangible sign of mutual understanding.
- Networking with ECoCs is ongoing and cooperation is planned to align with other ECoCs programmes. However, very few major European cultural networks are mentioned.

- Whereas Pszczyna's ECoC project envisages to generate positive emotions, mutual understanding between European citizens on a concrete level through people-to-people projects and encounters, the panel expresses concern that the narrative of European relevance is not strongly articulated in the bid.

Outreach

- The Pszczyna's ECoC Office was established to develop the bid book. Future plans include a programme board and a cooperation council consisting of local activists, social workers, creators, artists and creative people.
- Young people are envisaged to be included via meetings and the creation of a youth office within the ECoC structure. An international youth exchange is also planned. However, education and connection to youth still lacks examples and tools.
- Although limited in detail, the Pszczyna's bid book expressed significant emphasis on social issues of disadvantaged groups. Five barriers to participation are identified and measures proposed for each. However, more information would be needed to understand how the marginalised communities are and will be included in the design and implementation of the projects.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 4,96% of the overall city budget (i.e. 3,8 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to 7-8% (or around 5,4 million euros) after 2029.
- The ECoC project's operating budget amounts to 25 million euros. The city has already confirmed its financial commitments. Planned income from private sources, making up 12% of the total operating budget, is optimistic, all the more because the corresponding strategy for reaching such an ambitious target is weak.
- The distribution of operating costs is balanced to some extent, with 70% of the budget allocated to the programme, 19% for promotion and marketing and 11% for wages, overheads and administration. Other costs (such as monitoring and evaluation) are not specified or included in the breakdown table.
- Various infrastructure development plans totalling an ambitious amount of 147 million euros are presented.

- The ECoC Office, which operates within the framework of the Pszczyna Cultural Centre, has already been established. The intended governance structure is not clearly presented.
- The marketing and communication strategy is basic and includes tools such as promotional campaigns, advertising, digital communication channels, social networks and new media, partner marketing etc.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council has given unanimous support to the candidacy.
- The city has limited experience in organising large-scale international events.
- Delivering an ECoC at the highest European professional standards requires a critical mass of capacities with the right skills at the right time. With the capacity at hand and the cultural infrastructure that will be available in Pszczyna, the panel is concerned about the city's capacity to deliver an event like ECoC.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are good, but the city's absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is limited.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Pszczyna does not proceed to the final selection phase. The city has a well-defined cultural strategy covering the period 2023-2032, but the monitoring and evaluation plan is rather generic, providing insufficient insight on the research plan. The theme of the bid "The Land of Dreams" has emerged from the present threats and the vision of the world the city would like to live in. It promotes freedom, open-mindedness, and sustainable development. The themes proposed for cultural and artistic programme are well-researched and very topical, including a critical discourse. However, it is quite difficult to evaluate the artistic quality based on the succinct information given. It is also not clear how the local artistic field has participated in the bid book's planning. Networking with ECoCs is ongoing and cooperation is planned to align with other ECoCs programmes. However, very few major European cultural networks are mentioned. And the panel expresses concern that the narrative of European relevance is not strongly articulated in the bid. The City Council has given unanimous support to the candidacy as well as confirmed its financial commitments. However, the panel doubts the overall capacity of the cultural sector and infrastructure to deliver an event of the scale and scope of an ECoC.

Rzeszów

Rzeszów wants to become ECoC to respond to the challenges it faces, such as a dynamically changing population, a lack of a stable model for international cooperation, an insufficient systemic approach to cultural education, limited conditions for artists' development, and a low awareness of sustainable development, particularly in ecological aspects of culture. The city believes it is ready to tackle ambitious tasks and highlights its potential and experience in cultural activities. It aims to share its cultural discoveries and values, and contribute to the cultural richness of Europe. Rzeszów's ECoC 2029 project engages local, regional, and international partners, including 14 neighbouring communes and collaborations with Slovak and Ukrainian cities. The programme is themed around the motto "Moving Map", which aims to use culture as a tool to build a safe space, and to strengthen our resilience to crises by building a sense of self-agency, kindness and solidarity.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- Rzeszów has recently approved both a Strategy for Cultural Development and a Strategy for Audience Development. Their objectives are fully aligned with the ECoC goals.
- Through its strategy and ECoC programme Rzeszów wants to use culture as tool for resilience's building, develop international co-operation, put more emphasis on cultural education, develop art residencies programme, raise the level of spending on culture, create (renovate and reuse) new cultural venues, share the ECoC experience with Ukrainian cities. It also hopes that the ECoC programme will have a positive impact on inhabitants' identity and pride.
- Whereas the key message in the concept is very strong, with high EU relevance, it is not clear how this theme plays a central role in the strategy and in the ECoC programme.
- The panel welcomes the development of an audience engagement plan, but it considers it to be quite theoretical as it is not based on detailed mapping of the cultural participation in the city.
- Whereas the focus of monitoring and evaluation is consistently placed on the 5 challenges and drawbacks identified in the Strategy, only some target indicators are identified. It also remains unclear on who will conduct the Monitoring and Evaluation plan.
- The panel remarks that the expected outcomes are broadly outlined, lacking specific detail, which limits a comprehensive understanding of the projected impacts of ECoC on the city.

Cultural and artistic content

- The programme's concept is "Moving Map" with four programme lines (channels), referring to moving memories, moving meanings, moving relations, and moving spaces. The programme addresses geopolitical challenges and reflects local conditions, embracing multiculturalism and EU principles.
- The key values - Move to change, Kind to pact, Innovation, Freedom, and Balance - determine the ECoC 2029 programme. They also form the themes for each of the preceding years. The climax in 2029 celebrates these values through events and projects, showcasing the city's cultural metamorphosis and expressing gratitude to the community and partners.
- Approx. 15 projects and some sub projects are presented under the channels. The Opening and the Closing ceremonies are also presented. However, artistic genres displayed are quite limited, focusing on traditional and /or classical art forms.
- There is a strong engagement of local artists and cultural organisations. 40 NGOs, artists, scholars, representatives of Academia and cultural institutions were involved in the preparation of the bid book. And 200 projects were submitted by 260 artists as part of an open call.
- On a less positive note, the description of how the programme combines local heritage and traditional art forms with innovative and experimental modes of cultural expression was considered too general with only few examples mentioned.

European dimension

- The START-UP_CULTURE plan, spanning 2024-2029, includes artist-in-residence programmes, thematic collaborations, and a museum centre focusing on migration.
- Rzeszów responds to the war in Ukraine by aiding refugees and by fostering intercultural dialogue. It aims to document and conserve Ukraine's cultural heritage and establish a Central District of Creative Industries, creating a hub for artistic expression, dialogue, and co-working spaces.
- Some contacts have been established with former and current ECoCs on best practices and first ideas for common grounds have been identified; mainly with Wrocław and Kraków.
- The panel expresses its concern that projects and partners reflecting the European dimension lack concreteness and are mainly at a conceptual level with the European message of Moving Maps not resonating solidly in the programme segments.

Outreach

- The Strategy for audience development of Rzeszów 2023-2030 is already being implemented, prioritising social participation, inclusion, and accessibility.
- The artFULL JOURNEY project will include a dedicated programme for people with disabilities, social programmes for the homeless and cultural programmes for migrants.
- Intentions to use the Audience Centred Experience Design model invented by ADESTE+ programme are expressed. However, no specific information on links with the education system and participation of schools.
- Intentions to develop capacities and skills of the institutions and artists are emphasised in the bid book, but still lacking concrete tools of how to reach it.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 2% of the overall city budget (i.e. 6,9 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to almost triple this percentage to 5,4% (i.e. 18,8 million euros) after 2029.
- The ECoC budget's operating budget of 44,44 million euros is sound, and the City has already unanimously confirmed its financial commitments.
- The distribution of operating costs is balanced to some extent. 62% of the budget is allocated for the programme, 18% for promotion and marketing, 18% for wages, general costs and administration and 2% for other costs.
- Plans for infrastructure developments totalling 91,56 million euros are foreseen and presented. The City has already confirmed its financial commitments.
- It is planned that the existing, independently managed cultural institution Rzeszow Estrada, which has been operating since 1958, will be in charge of ECoC delivery. The Artistic director, selected through an open call, will have full independence and their relations with the CEO and the Artistic council will be regulated by an agreement.
- The number of weaknesses presented in the contingency planning is minimal, and appropriate mitigation measures are proposed.
- The marketing and communication strategy is solid for this phase of the competition, but the panel sees the communication of the special programme every year until 2029 as very challenging.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council has expressed its support for the candidacy. The decision to bid was taken jointly with the local government represented by the Marshal of the Podkarpackie province. Support has been given by the Governor of the Podkarpackie province, the Starost of the Rzeszów Poviát and the authorities of the neighbouring towns and communes.
- The city has a developed cultural life and has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme.
- The city has experience in hosting large-scale international events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are good, and the city's absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation is appropriate.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Rzeszów does not proceed to the final selection phase. The panel finds that the key message of this bid has been constructed with a great deal of thought and consideration for geopolitical challenges. However, at this stage, the cultural and artistic programme lacks clarity and its potential is not effectively conveyed. There are not enough conceptualised plans for demonstrating the European dimension of the programme. At the same time, there is a lack of coherence between the general objectives and the specific content and events that are to fill the cultural and artistic content. The development and implementation of the programme for each individual year until 2029 may jeopardise the focus on the titular year, and the communication of each year could be extremely challenging. The city has a Strategy for Cultural Development and a Strategy for Audience Development in place, but just some target indicators are identified and it is not entirely clear who will be in charge of the Monitoring and Evaluation process.

Toruń

Toruń and its surrounding areas are defined by their distinctive heritage. The city has been actively involved in cultural initiatives since 2005, learning from its 2016 ECoC bid and implementing support systems for artists through the establishment of Toruń Cultural Agenda. ECoC is seen as a unique opportunity to transform the city into a creative hub and address the challenges of brain drain and economic competition with larger cities. The bid's motto Art of Gravity envisions Toruń as a laboratory for self-improvement. The mission is to transform the city into a better, more sustainable, and more creative place. The programme built on four pillars draws inspiration from science, particularly the legacy of Nicolaus Copernicus, and aims to blend artistic elements with a focus on humanity. It seeks to emulate

Copernicus's spirit of exploration and understanding, making culture and creativity accessible to all residents, and contributing to the city's continuous improvement.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

- The City has a development strategy until 2028. It plans to integrate culture and ECoC legacy in the perspective of 2029 – 2035.
- In September 2023, the city approved the cultural strategy until 2030. There is an intention to update the strategy on the basis of specific research to be conducted on the cultural sector and on the audience needs. However, it seems to be quite generic and the links between different strategies remains unclear.
- The main objective of the candidacy and of the strategy is to transform the city from a historically rich and well-developed tourist destination into a true creative hub of central and northern Poland so as to retain young people and address brain drain. Yet, the actions aimed to achieve this objective are not clearly developed in the Strategy.
- Monitoring includes tracking university graduates remaining in Toruń and addressing exclusion due to disabilities or addictions. The panel notes that there is a strong focus on local talent retention, thus lacking emphasis on attracting young people from the EU.

Cultural and artistic content

- The theme of the bid book "The art of gravity" is accurately based on the heritage of the city: Copernicus, Hanseatic League, Samuel Linde (Polish-Swedish tie). However, it is not very coherent and has not much potential for a wider relevance or interest.
- The programme is divided into four parts: The Power of Gravity-Participation, Beyond the Exosphere – Inclusivity and innovation, Equal in Gravity – Tolerance, Orbiting – Co-operation and international activities, as well as into 3 implementation phases: Sunrise (Jan-Apr) Midday (May-Aug) and Sunset (Sept-Dec).
- The programme is well structured, presenting approx. 10 sample projects, their partners, leaders and duration, proposals of financial schemes, etc. There are also three flagships described, including the Opening and Closing ceremonies.
- The Local Tourist Organization won a tender to prepare the bid book. A programme council was established by the Mayor's office for residents interested in proposing ideas for the programme via an open call. Although

the team stated that the initiative came from NGOs, the panel notices that all the main leaders of the projects presented are institutions.

- Very little information on the synergy of innovations and heritage has been given. The digital aspect is mentioned only regarding technologically excluded groups.

European dimension

- The "ReGravity" programme focuses on refreshing activities, expanding partnerships, and accelerating cooperation with European partners.
- Toruń claims that its commitment to cultural dialogue, collaboration, and diversity positions it as a vibrant contributor to the European cultural landscape for ECoC 2029. The panel positively views the work with some EU themes such as the rights of LGBTIQ+ and marginalised communities, sustainability and the importance of inclusivity.
- Whereas some European partners are mentioned in sample projects, the panel notes that projects outlining the European dimension are undeveloped and do not resonate much with the overall programme objectives and themes. It also observes that no European networks are mentioned and cooperation with other ECoCs remains vague.

Outreach

- There are intentions to expand the programme to the 13 city district councils and cooperate with housing cooperatives, residential communities, and neighbourhood clubs. Initiatives also include encouraging residents to host young people and volunteers in their houses.
- The bid book commits to dedicate a portion of the City's participatory budget for cultural and educational projects related to ECoC.
- 5 priority areas have been identified to address issues of exclusion: digital limits, sexual minorities, physical access to historic sites, children and youth from dysfunctional families and access to events with public transportation.
- Few initiatives like Youth ECoC, Youth orchestra are presented in the bid book, but the panel lacked stronger engagement of youth and children as well as collaboration with the education system.

Management

- The City's annual budget for culture represents 4,94% of the overall city budget (i.e. 17,3 million euros) in 2023, and there are plans to increase this percentage to at least 8% from 2030 onward.

- The ECoC project's operating budget amounts to 31 million euros, which the panel considers sufficient for all planned activities. The total income to cover operating expenditures is well balanced, with 95% of the budget planned to come from public sources, and 5% from private sources.
- The distribution of operating costs is balanced, with 65% of the budget allocated to the programme, 13% for promotion and marketing, 16% for wages, overheads and administration and 6% for other costs.
- Various plans for infrastructure development totalling a sound amount of 147,16 million euros are foreseen and presented.
- The existing municipal institution Toruń Cultural Agenda, transformed from the Torun2016 institution that was responsible for the Toruń 2016 ECoC bid, will be in charge of the ECoC delivery. The intended governance and delivery structure are well presented, with a clear division of tasks and responsibilities. It is not entirely clear to the panel why the Local Tourist Agency was chosen to develop this bid, and not the culturally experienced Torun Cultural Agenda.
- The marketing and communication strategy is very well thought through for this stage of the competition. The communication strategy is divided into clear phases, and different tools and methods are presented for its implementation.

Capacity to deliver

- The City Council has expressed its support for the candidacy through a resolution. Support was also expressed by other actors including amongst others the Marshal of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, the Starost of Toruń District and the mayors of the surrounding municipalities.
- The city has a very-well developed cultural life and has/will have adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme.
- Toruń is very experienced in hosting large-scale international events.
- The city's assets in terms of accessibility are good, as well as the absorption capacity in terms of tourists' accommodation.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Toruń does not proceed to the final selection phase. Whereas the panel values Toruń's aims to transform itself from a historical tourist hub into a creative centre to retain young talent and combat brain drain, the strategy could benefit from more clarity, specific actions, and deeper engagement with diverse stakeholders to ensure its success in becoming a thriving creative hub. While the bid book's thematic elements are rooted in the city's

heritage, they lack broader appeal. In terms of the European dimension, while there's a commitment to cultural dialogue and diversity, the connections with European partners and networks are underdeveloped. The outreach efforts to involve residents and address exclusion are commendable, yet proposals for decentralisation or a digital strategy are absent. The bid presents a good management structure and balanced budget for ECoC planning. On the other hand, the panel questions the choice of a tourism entity for the drafting of the bid, providing conflicting messages on the city's aspiration for the ECoC title.

General recommendations

The following recommendations apply to all four shortlisted candidates.

The panel would like to emphasise the considerable step-change between proposals at pre-selection stage and those at final selection. The final selection phase offers an opportunity for shortlisted candidates to consolidate their bids and to improve the level of quality throughout. The panel expects significant progress in the final bid books to reflect the expanded **six criteria in the Decision** for final selection cities and the recommendations of the panel. Studying the panel's comments to all candidate cities in the assessments above may also be useful.

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 website.¹

The panel would also like to stress for the Ministry of Culture the urgency to indicate the State financing share for the ECoC 2029 as soon as possible, as this information will be crucial for the candidates to make accurate further planning.

General

Since 2020, Europe and the world has entered into a new reality as a consequence of COVID-19, climate changes and a new geo-political crisis. The new reality is causing major disruptions, anxiety, fear and limitations. In the panel's view, there is a need for a new approach to align culture and major yearlong events with this new world, notably new procedures and expectations. This refers to every level of operation, from artistic expression to administrative work. A more elaborated contingency plan with due alternatives should be an integral part of such long-term planning as the ECoC. This is a great challenge for us all, also for the bidding cities, but equally - an opportunity to reflect on new and sustainable culture models.

¹ <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/european-capitals-of-culture>

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 at the end of the monitoring phase the panel makes a recommendation to the Commission regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri prize.

It is the responsibility of the panel (which functions as both the selection and subsequent monitoring panel) to safeguard the European Capital of Culture brand. 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 image of the European Capital of Culture Action. The panel expects the ECoC candidate and title cities to take all possible steps to minimise negative and potentially harmful international and national issues connected to their city.

It is the recommendation of the panel that all cities progressing to the second stage of the bidding process include the following in their bid books (in line with the final selection questionnaire):

- Clear commitment of all candidacy partners and commitments demonstrated in projects and budget lines.
- Clear project outlines, with named and committed local, national, EU and other international project partners.
- Strong European dimension throughout the bid.
- Clear and developed outreach models within the cultural programme.
- Clear organisational structure including clear decision-making processes.
- Clear budget breakdowns with clarity between operational and capital spend.

It is also the recommendation of the panel that all those attending the presentation be active participants in either the presentation and/or subsequent questions and answers session. Further, it is recommended to clearly state who in the presentation team are from within the bidding team and who are externals. A further recommendation for presentations is to respect a private sphere between the presentation team and the panel. The panel underlines the prohibition of photos, video or sound recordings during deliberations and inside the deliberation room while the panel is still present.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

A formally approved city cultural strategy needs to be in place before submitting the final bid book. The panel expects very focussed bid books and presentations

for the final round: cities should indicate the priorities of the cultural strategy that are connected to the ECoC project, its target outcomes and how resources will be changed over the next few years. The expected legacy of the ECoC should also be described.

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 a panacea for every city challenge. An important aspect that requires elaboration is the expected visible change in the urban landscape. The panel would expect a more focused (and shorter) explanation, which can link to the programme vision, themes, activities, and through monitoring and 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 given more attention in the second phase (especially research in order to establish baseline data) 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.

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 sectors (CCS) 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 CCS.

Cultural and artistic content

The focus of the final selection is the operating programme between 2023-2024, when the ECoC will be formally designated and, in particular, the ECoC year of 2029. The panel recommends the four cities to have an open minded and daring artistic approach and not be afraid of new, experimental ideas. Deeper considerations on the visions presented in the bids could offer more clarity overall. Consistency between the vision selected and all other elements of the bid must be ensured. Innovation and originality is required not only in theory but also – even more importantly – in practice. The panel will expect to see more details on the programme, its projects and partners. Indeed, the cities should set out more clearly not only their artistic vision, but also the programme and projects; differentiating between partners who have indicated firm interest and those who are still only potential or possible ones. 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 the programmes. Furthermore, more attention should be given to the sustainability of the projects – including cultural, ecological, social and economic wise – so as to ensure an expected substantial legacy of the ECoC.

European dimension

The European dimension being the *raison d'être* of an ECoC the panel expects to find Europe at the heart of all final bids and permeated throughout the cultural and artistic programmes. The panel expects to see a continuous focus on European partnerships: co-productions, co-curations, conferences, networking as well as visiting artists/performers. Cities should encourage their cultural operators to be active participants in European cultural networks.

Although with a promising approach to this criterion, some pre-selection proposals failed to engage fully with the challenges. The teams focused mainly on their cities' image and relations within Poland and/or the neighbouring regions whereas the panel would like to see a deepening and widening of the programmes that ensures a more embracing European dimension. That a city aims to market itself in Europe, is not in itself a strong interpretation of the European dimension. An ECoC enables a city to promote itself internationally but that is only half of the story.

Developing European cooperation requires strategic approaches and actual partnership with artists as well as cultural organisations and institutions throughout Europe. It cannot be limited to relations with other, former and future ECoCs, existing European cultural networks or twin cities, which has been understood in most of the pre-selection bids.

The European dimension has a two-way direction. It is of course to present to the rest of Europe the city's contribution to European cultural diversity. But 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 important to clearly demonstrate how the European dimension is translated into concrete projects in the cultural and artistic programme. 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. One important legacy area is the creation of new and sustained partnerships between a city's cultural players and those from other countries.

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 attractive programme ideas in the final selection's bid for ECoC 2029. The panel advises to thoroughly consider building a strategic communication plan for the ECoC project as well as to make a connection between the cultural and artistic programme and an international marketing vision.

Outreach

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. The bids should approach audience development from a long-term and strategic perspective, using both online and offline measures.

A 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 outside of city centres or temporarily in the city etc.).

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

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

The panel appreciates the ideas for the involvement of schools that are already present in all four selected cities. However, all final bids should show a strategic approach (in relation to the ECoC and not just current practices) that illustrate how schools are linked to the ECoC project.

Management

New times of uncertainty require new approaches in management, too.

Special attention needs to be dedicated to the risk assessment in the final bid book. This section should include a thorough analysis of the impacts expected for the preparation and implementation phase of the ECoC related to the ongoing pandemic, economic and geo-political crisis focussing on the main issues to be addressed in 2023-2024.

The panel expects the four shortlisted cities, which all plan in their pre-selection bid books a considerable level of capital expenditure, to carefully investigate whether these investments are actually feasible.

As far as the management models are concerned, the panel recommends learning from other ECoCs' experiences, while not necessarily copying ready-made concepts.

The delivery team plays a key role in all ECoCs. The cities should address in a clear and well-informed way the best model to guarantee the quality and independence of the artistic management of the project.

The recruitment processes and planned staffing arrangements from 2024 to 2029 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. It is important to remember that the marketing of an ECoC is not only about city branding but mostly about a European message that the city is wishing to share with the rest of Europe and requires a thorough communication strategy.

Capacity to deliver

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

Candidates are reminded that the criterion for an ECoC requires a special programme for the year in addition to the normal cultural offer. The panel expects more information on the managerial capacity in the city/region to manage a programme of the depth and range of an ECoC. Capacity building should not be confused with the implementation of the cultural strategy, but it should be in accordance with local and regional development plans. The cities should also plan strong capacity building programmes as ECoC's 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 those infrastructural 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 those potential capital projects 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).

Signed

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Łukasz Gawęł

Goda Giedraityte (Rapporteur)

Suvi Innilä (Chair)

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Jorge Cerveira Pinto

Marilyn Gaughan Reddan

Else Christensen-Redzepovic

Rossella Tarantino

Agata Wąsowska-Pawlik (Vice Chair)

Warsaw, October 2023

All panel members (signed)

