



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

*The Expert Panel's report
Selection Stage*

Virtual Meeting

June 2021

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate D — Culture and Creativity
Unit D2 — Creative Europe

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*European Commission
B-1049 Brussels*

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The Expert Panel's report

Selection Stage

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	4
Introduction.....	5
Pre-selection round.....	5
Panel Meeting	6
National context.....	6
Assessments of the candidates.....	6
I Oulu	7
1. Contribution to the long term strategy	7
2. Cultural and artistic content.....	8
3. European dimension	9
4. Outreach.....	9
5. Management	10
6. Capacity to deliver	11
Conclusion	11
II Savonlinna	11
1. Contribution to the long term strategy	12
2. Cultural and artistic content.....	12
3. European dimension	13
4. Outreach.....	14
5. Management	15
6. Capacity to deliver	16
Conclusion	16
III Tampere	16
1. Contribution to the long term strategy	17
2. Cultural and artistic content.....	18
3. European dimension	18
4. Outreach.....	19
5. Management	19
6. Capacity to deliver	20
Conclusion	21
The Panel's Decision	21
Reputation of an ECoC	22
The monitoring phase	23
The panel's recommendations	23

Introduction

This is the report of the expert panel (the “panel”) for the selection phase of the competition for the European Capital of Culture in 2026 in Finland. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985.

The Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland (the “Ministry”) acts as the managing authority (the “managing authority”) of the competition, which is governed by Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”)¹ and by the “Rules of procedure – Competition for the European Capital of Culture 2026 in Finland” (the “rules”) adopted by the Ministry and published on its website.²

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

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

Pre-selection round

The managing authority issued a call for applications on 1st April 2019. Three applications were submitted by the closing date of 5 May 2020 by: Oulu, Savonlinna and Tampere.

The panel met on 23-24 June 2020 for the pre-selection meeting. It recommended inviting all three bidding cities to progress to the final selection stage. The panel’s report is published on the website of the Commission.³

The Ministry accepted the panel’s recommendation and invited the three cities to submit revised applications with a deadline of 23 April 2021.

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

A delegation of five members of the panel took part in city visits on 26-28 May 2021. They were accompanied by observers from the managing authority and the European Commission. The delegation reported back to the panel at the selection meeting.

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

²

https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/12954142/en_Rules+of+Procedure.pdf/f9e9ade0-8731-5c3c-82d1-3a1581dd4ef4/en_Rules+of+Procedure.pdf

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

Panel Meeting

The panel met online on 31st of May and 1st of June 2021. Representatives of the managing authority and the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers took no part in the panel's deliberations or decision. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality. The panel elected Ms Dessislava Gavrilova as its Chair and confirmed Ms Riitta Vanhatalo as Vice-chair.

At the selection hearings on 31st of May and 1st of June, each candidate city presented its case (in 45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (in 90 minutes).

The Chair of the panel announced online the panel's recommendation at a press conference after the meeting on 2nd of June in the presence of the Finnish Minister of Science and Culture, Mr Antti Kurvinen, and the Deputy Head of the Representation of the European Commission in Finland, Ms Maria Kokkonen.

National context

2026 will be the third time Finland hosts the "European Capital of Culture" after Helsinki in 2000 and Turku in 2011. The criteria for an ECoC have changed considerably since then. They now embrace a deeper and wider scope of the role of culture in the city and European development. A particular new requirement is for a city to have a formal cultural strategy, including the ECoC project. This ensures that the ECoC is an element in the progress of a city and not a one-off event. It therefore enhances the importance of sustainable legacy. The selection of an ECoC is based on the programme specifically set out for the ECoC year in the bid-book and not the current cultural offer in a city.

The panel recognised the bids as ambitious, reflecting different situations in their respective areas and demonstrating a considerable development between proposals at pre-selection stage and those at the final selection. The panel noted that the three cities have used the opportunity of the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies as well as the role of culture in their overall socio-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition. The panel encourages all candidates to continue with the development and implementation of their strategies.

Assessments of the candidates

In their assessment of the candidates, the panel noted the general and specific objectives in Article 2 of the Decision and the requirement for the application to be based on a cultural programme with a strong European dimension created specifically for the title (Article 4).

The panel assessed each bid against the six criteria in Article 5, as reflected in the call for submission of applications:

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

❖ Capacity to deliver.

The panel emphasises that its assessments of the candidates were based on the proposed programme set out in the bid-book and the presentation session. A city's history, its recent and current policies, and its cultural offer may form a basis for a programme but play no part in the selection process. In the commentaries that follow, the panel notes the main elements of its discussions during the selection meeting. In the case of the selected city, specific recommendations are made, in order to assist it in the implementation of the ECoC.

I Oulu

Oulu presented its final selection bid under the title "Cultural Climate Change", with a strong programme proposal, built around the values of courage, fairness and responsibility. The bid envisages a complex set of measures, aiming to reshape how people interact with each other on the social, cultural, artistic, political, spatial and virtual levels, with the overall aim to transform Oulu into an (even) more vibrant and attractive city. The bid book, complemented by the presentation, demonstrates strengths against all criteria.

1. Contribution to the long term strategy

- A culture strategy has been adopted, and it will run until 2030. This strategy and related proposed action plans are clearly aligned with the vision of the ECoC project, which the panel sees as a solid way to ensure that one feeds the other and vice versa. The ECoC project, as a key element of the overall strategy, will concretely contribute to some of the latter's objectives, i.e. deliver more and better jobs in the cultural and creative sectors and allow Oulu to become a truly international city and a well-known cultural city in Finland and beyond. Such connections are quite welcomed.
- The project is based on a clear concept, combining ecological issues related to climate change with cultural activity, community engagement and new technologies. This is a reflection of the city's already successful experience in combining high-tech and arts, modernity and eco-balanced lifestyle, etc. By building on existing practices and experiences, the project strongly reinforces the bid's credibility.
- Furthermore, the strategy implementation will be based on the Oulu's City Strategy Monitoring and Evaluation plan that will be conducted by the Centre for Cultural Policy Research, Cupore. It aims to measure the success of Oulu2026 in reaching its long-term goals in creating a (1) Vibrant, Gripping City; (2) a Balanced Community; and (3) a Creative Region.
- The proposed evaluation framework is very robust, aligning goals, metrics of success and potential data sources. The results of the evaluation will be communicated through a final report and a conference to be held by the end of 2027. This is relevant and most welcomed, as it should facilitate dissemination and enable a wide public engagement with the assessment and findings, feeding in this way a debate on the impact of the title year and potentially on the reorientation of the cultural strategy.
- The envisaged long-term cultural, social and economic impact, including in terms of urban development, are described in a very concrete, though maybe too concise, way. In comparison with the described cultural and economic impact, the social impacts presented are lagging behind. Therefore, in the view

of the panel there is still some scope to further develop the long-term sustainability assessment and the corresponding action plan.

- A plan to address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the three main thematic areas of the bid is being developed, the so-called “Plan C: Covid-19 - Culture. Children. Climate”. Given the impact of the current sanitary crisis (especially on culture), the panel considers that such an approach is highly relevant and a clear plus of the bid.

2. Cultural and artistic content

- The proposed programme translates a clear artistic vision (which is inspiring, sustainable and European). Overall, it appears from the application that the programme contains a wide range of art forms and includes many interesting proposals that seem to be of quite a good artistic quality.
- In the view of the panel, there is a clear programme structure and alignment based on well-defined themes, programme lines and specific projects (e.g. tradition and technology; environment; climate change; migration; light in the north etc.). The proposed programme also demonstrates a good capacity to combine local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions, which is also a positive element of the bid.
- The development process of the programme - based on co-creation, open calls and own productions - is well described and well balanced, with relevant national and international partnerships. It appears that creative advisors have been involved to develop the themes, followed up by open calls, which the panel views as an appropriate way to ensure both quality and local ownership. It is the panel’s opinion that this process created opportunities for participation of all the city’s cultural institutions and numerous independent associations and companies (in this respect, the panel appreciates that concrete examples of collaborations with local artists are given). It also appears that feedback from the pre-selection was openly discussed with the relevant parties, and adjustments have been defined.
- A strong emphasis is put on the theme of “sustainability”; e.g. “The Most Sustainable European Capital of Culture” project was launched, with the aim to support event organisers, partners and producers to reduce the environmental impact of all Oulu2026 productions. Several other cities and European partners will also contribute to this aim (e.g. Innofest and Greener Festival). The reference to ‘decarbonizing’ the cultural scene is a good and very timely ambition.
- Innovation is also present, both in terms of specific activities - e.g. “Heated naked debates in a sauna” but also in the use of culture for social purposes - e.g. SmART Hospital initiative, which intends to combine methods of cultural wellbeing and high quality medical care.
- Another positive element is that the programme proposes an inclusive approach to the Sami minority’s culture - one that focuses not only on traditional art, but also on contemporary Sami culture. However, Sami culture is presented only in one project, which is a disappointment for the panel, since a significant percentage of the Sami population in Finland lives in Oulu and its region and the local university is the only place in the country where Sami culture can be studied as a main subject at academic level. This aspect can potentially be considered for future development.
- Finally, the panel considers that the city’s cultural heritage, especially the tangible one, is not given a sufficiently prominent place in the bid-book, though the team expressed during the presentation some interesting and innovative ideas in this respect, which are to be developed. Linking the issues

of climate change and experimental archaeology is a bold concept that must be enhanced and explored further.

3. European dimension

- Oulu is a city already experiencing the effects of climate change and has developed some solutions to this challenge. In particular, it presents a model of work-life balance approach based on sustainability, where culture plays an important role. In this sense, it is a city that can share with other European cities and regions unique knowledge and experiences, as climate change is clearly an issue with a strong resonance across our continent and beyond. The panel sees there a strong potential.
- The European dimension is also clearly present and articulated through the themes of European importance dealt with in the programme, such as Art & Tech and European ArTech Network, the connection between culture and wellbeing, the importance of Europe's often neglected Hinterlands or the possibility for culture to contribute to conflict resolution through the flagship project Peace Machine. It is also present through the number of international partners involved, including a clear cooperation with other ECoCs, in connection with specific projects.
- Consideration is also given in the application to the need to develop a strong collaboration with tourism partners at both regional and national levels with the view to developing a strong strategy to attract international audiences, which the panel also sees as very promising.
- On a less positive note, while climate change (with its strong European resonance) is at the very core of the vision and bid proposal, too few concrete references to it are made in terms of the proposed programmes and activities.
- Regarding the European partnerships established or mentioned, they are mainly coming from the Baltic Sea Region and Western Europe, which is a limit of the application. On top of that, the panel noted that several cities in Europe (e.g. Liverpool, Marseille and Cadiz) are mentioned in connection with their history of managing or using the tar produced in the Oulu area, which is per se an interesting idea, but it seems that concrete collaborations with them are still to be developed.
- The food culture and the common food cultural roots in Europe was highlighted in the team's presentation as one of the areas for further development, which the panel sees as a positive endeavour.

4. Outreach

- The team stated that there has been a process of learning from previous successful ECoCs regarding outreach and audience development, with the aim of incorporating this dimension better in the actual proposals. In the view of the panel, this benchmarking exercise has been instrumental in allowing new ideas to be incorporated in the application.
- As a response to the fact that Oulu has a significant number of disadvantaged suburbs, a strong outreach programme is proposed for implementation. This programme appears to be based on an overall audience development strategy that includes seeking out opinions of people not represented in traditional cultural audiences, local people becoming co-developers instead of just a passive audience, sharing spaces between culture-based and other civic activities and half of the programme taking place outside traditional institutions. The panel sees that as a strong element.
- The development of the programme was based on a series of consultations - more than 200 meetings with local communities representatives, the collection

of many opinions and a needs analysis carried out with different target groups, including minorities (children, elderly people, LGBTQ+, Sami people, etc.), which the panel sees as a good way to ensure relevance of the themes and programme lines selected and a good starting point to get local ownership of the overall project.

- Another positive element is the significant work done with schools, aiming to secure a strong engagement of children and make use of existing frameworks for delivering the school's elements of the Oulu 2026 programme. A specific communication strategy for children and young people will be implemented, which is also a plus and a distinctive aspect of this bid. The aim is that each school-age child will participate in at least one ECoC event.
- There is significant work with the universities to guarantee their engagement - e.g. Creative Campus, an excellent initiative to address youth unemployment while enhancing creativity; or the University Pop Up Space in the city centre during 2021.

5. Management

- Overall, the operational budget at EUR 50M is assessed as realistic and sufficient to reach the identified objectives and deliver the proposed programme of activities. An equal contribution is expected from the city and national government at EUR 20M with further EUR 2,15M coming from the regional level, which is overall a good balance showing a strong local commitment. There is also a list of specific projects mentioned for EU funding, which the panel sees as a relevant step to further connect local and regional operators with various EU programmes. The split of the operating budget between "programme", "promotion and marketing" and "wages and administration" is also standard and appropriate. It is good to see that the capacity building actions targeting the Oulu2026 team is explicitly budgeted under "other costs". Large capital investment projects are planned at EUR 166 M (for renovation works).
- Cooperation with local authorities is already happening, and there is a clear division of roles and responsibilities between the ECoC team and municipality(ies).
- The CEO and programme director will be selected through open calls and there is a clear division of roles and responsibilities. Other staff members will also be selected through public calls, with a special attention to ensure diversity and complementary skill sets. Secondment of civil servants is considered and, in the view of the panel, this may be a good tool to ensure a solid legacy in terms of experiences and skills acquired during the preparation and delivery of the project.
- There is a clear and well-elaborated marketing & communication strategy, with references to Europe and European projects, including other ECoCs. This strategy will also take into consideration the link between cultural climate change and climate change, which are bound together, although this should be more explicitly addressed. From a communication perspective, having such a diverse and complex programme might be challenging and this aspect requires therefore further consideration.
- The panel regrets however that there is very little money available (EUR 100,000) for legacy activities in the programme field (though, on a more positive note, EUR 1,3M are budgeted for 2027). This should be further taken into consideration, as legacy is clearly a key element to ensure continuity of success after the year-title.
- Risk mitigation is well elaborated, but the panel is concerned that the impacts of some risks may have been under-evaluated.

6. Capacity to deliver

- There is clear and stable political support from local and regional levels. There are 32 municipalities involved in the project and they have all decided to appoint a member to the Oulu2026 project, which, according to the panel, is a positive development to create ownership in the whole area. The City steering group, led by the Mayor, has acted as the lead group for project preparation and this seems an adequate solution.
- Oulu2026 has received appropriate resources from the beginning, and a total of approximately EUR 1.2M has been spent on preparation during the period 2017–2020, which the panel sees as a concrete commitment from the relevant authorities.
- A vote was taken on the budget for the entire period of 2021–2027, and this provides the necessary conditions for financial planning and management.
- No new cultural infrastructure will be built, but there is an interesting programme of renovations (with an appropriate timeline), which is in line with the bid. This also reduces the risk associated with the construction of new infrastructures and potential corresponding delays.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the city of Oulu is selected to become a European Capital of Culture in 2026. The bid is very strong across the six criteria, and the evolution of the proposal was significant from pre-selection, demonstrating a welcomed capacity for improvement and a high level of maturity and development. The panel found that the bid was based on an extensive consultative process in the city and region, including relevant cultural actors and infrastructures. The cultural strategies of the city and the region have strong elements of sustainability, with transversal plans for strengthening the cultural and creative sectors' capacity and there is a strong connection between the ECoC mission and objectives and those strategies.

However, the panel notes that there is still room for improvements over the next months and years:

- There is a need to further develop the definition of long-term cultural, social and economic impacts, as well as legacy activities in connection with the city's cultural strategy.
- The role of the city's (and the whole region's) tangible heritage and museums, as well as the Sami culture, could be better integrated into the projects included in the future programme.
- Climate change should be differentiated from other themes, especially in the communication approach and content development strategy, because this is a core element of the application and clearly one with potentially a very strong resonance European-wise and beyond.

II Savonlinna

The leitmotif of the bid of Savonlinna is "The Art of Living". It proposes a cultural programme structured around three main themes: the Power of Water; Connecting Bridges and Eastern Joy. Peace, clarity and sustainability constitute the very essence

of life for the people who live in this part of eastern Finland. This reflects a special way of living and a unique set of skills that will be shared with the world, via their proposed ECoC under the name of *Saimaa Phenomenon 2026*.

1. Contribution to the long term strategy

- It appears from the bid book that on top of the Cultural Strategy of Savonlinna, various strategies motivated by the ECoC project are now in place - namely the Phenomenal Culture City and the Cultural Strategy of Cooperation in eastern Finland -, reflecting the willingness of the region to increase collaboration. In the view of the panel, this is a welcomed development worth translating into actions.
- While there is a declared intention for the ECoC project to implement the specific objectives defined at EU level for the ECoC Action (i.e. 1) Enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of the cultural offering in cities, including through transnational cooperation; 2) widen access to and participation in culture; 3) strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and its links with other sectors; 4) and raise the international profile of cities through culture), the bid is not very specific about how this will be achieved.
- On a more positive note, *Saimaa Phenomenon 2026* has asserted a positive influence on all other cities, regions, and smaller municipalities to develop their own individual cultural strategy, up to the year of 2030, which is already per se an excellent achievement and a solid basis for future concrete actions. Also quite positively, the application does reflect a regional joint cultural strategy, with the cities in the region acting as cultural platforms, enablers, and coordinators.
- Given that the connections between eastern Finland on one side, and Russia and the Nordic countries on the other, have traditionally been tight, the clearly stated aim is now to strengthen the networks with other parts of Europe, which is a welcomed ambition.
- In terms of Monitoring and Evaluation, the proposal demonstrates a solid alignment of strategic goals with objectives - clear description of long-term cultural, social and economic impact, including in terms of urban development - and a sound evaluation methodology, with clear ways to collect information. For example, a knowledge management dashboard will be created on the *Saimaa Phenomenon 2026* digital platform, where statistical data, research reports, and results will be shared openly with interested parties.
- Further, the links between culture and wellbeing are explicitly considered and aligned with the vision and expected impacts.
- However, the overall proposal needs to be further developed, to demonstrate its innovation as well as the robustness of the proposed activities.
- Another aspect requiring additional development concerns the contribution of the event to the city's long-term cultural strategy: the information provided in terms of themes is too generic.

2. Cultural and artistic content

- The cultural and artistic vision - which is based on three themes: "Power of Water", "Connecting Bridges" and "Eastern Joy", each subdivided in project lines - is to develop small-scale, but rich cultural offerings, while maintaining high artistic quality. The themes are not further elaborated in the bid.
- *Saimaa Phenomenon 2026* is a joint effort between the city of Savonlinna and all the regions, cities and municipalities in eastern Finland, with the view to improving the cultural capacity of the whole territory through concerted

actions. In the view of the panel, this is highly relevant in terms of impacts and potential scale of the events.

- The interregional cooperation has been steered by the *Bridge Builders* – a group of experts who represent the different regions and cities, and are responsible for the cultural activities in their own area. This has resulted in a strong involvement of the local cultural sector through workshops, numerous meetings and discussion in each region. This is reflected, for example, in the long list of local artists and cultural organisations that contribute to the programme. The panel sees these developments as extremely positive and worth continuing in such a sparsely populated territory, even without the ECoC title.
- In the view of the panel, the proposal identifies relevant issues to be addressed in the programme of activities: building up on local cultural heritage and artistic work; extending partnerships to the region and Europe; addressing marginal groups e.g. people with psychiatric problems; re-using of empty spaces for cultural use; balancing traditional and contemporary culture e.g. contemporary opera production; European discussions on railways and culture; capacity building programme. The programme can be considered to be rich, inclusive, diverse and with the potential to attract different groups and audiences.
- The proposed time framework for the programme preparation is considered realistic and appropriate.
- There are concerns that the level of programme curation is insufficient and that sometimes no curation seems to have taken place. This is also reflected in terms of the links between the three axes/lines that structure the programme: it is difficult to understand how a global, coherent narrative is being created. Furthermore, based on the information provided, the innovation level that the programme depicts is unsatisfactory.
- Because of the high level of fragmentation of the programme, with many small activities, the legacy issues are not sufficiently addressed and taken into consideration in the bid book.
- Overall, there are issues concerning the vision statement and justifications: the selected keywords (sustainability / accountability) do not easily make for a memorable, inspiring cultural vision.

3. European dimension

- The project has already developed links to other ECoCs, and an extensive list of partners, covering almost all European countries, is referenced, including a significant number of Russian organisations. However, what their engagement will be remains rather unclear.
- The team has identified *rural culture* as the best way to connect with other European rural areas; this will allow the development of projects around common interests, for example depopulation of the rural world. However, this is not strongly reflected in the programme already approved.
- The planned approach to exploring the *New European Bauhaus* concept – and how this will reflect a European perspective beyond the Saimaa region – is ambitious as well as credible and thorough.
- The strategy to attract interest of European audiences will involve cooperation with *VISIT FINLAND*, a regional tourism organisation; the development of a digital platform; and specific programme content linking each artistic theme to a well-known international Finnish artist. Although interesting, there are doubts that these actions will generate the expected impacts in terms of international audiences.

- Some projects listed envisage international artists to join in collaborations. However, the vast majority of the projects in the programme does not list European partners or links.
- In terms of the description of the activities promoting the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding between European citizens little is said. Furthermore, the same can be said regarding the scope and quality of the activities highlighting the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history, as well as European integration and current European themes.
- Although the strategy recognises the need to extend the cooperation policy and some partnerships are planned, the focus is within the Baltic Sea region and with other ECoCs. More information is required to better assess the proposed international cooperation partnerships.
- The proposed programme is very much about the region, with the participation of invited international artists, not about developing true European partnership projects. In other words, the programme is more focused on the promotion of the cultural attractiveness of the region, than on alignment with ECoC goals. In the same way, it can be said that the project seems more adequate for a national Cultural Capital project than for a European Capital of Culture.

4. Outreach

- The outreach strategy will emphasise culture and individual wellbeing as one. Several audience development measures are foreseen, and the information provided is relevant and detailed. According to the proposal, the audience and those involved in the programme will be approached as equals, not as minority groups, the elderly or immigrants, but always as individuals.
- The project has developed an inclusive process in its development, by implementing a diverse range of activities: e.g. Ambassadors / Trailblazers; "Saimaa for All" online survey and a survey conducted in 2021 specifically targeted towards the young; a 12-member Youth Panel has joined the team; etc. Additionally, five regional project coordinators were employed, with the main task of identifying and bringing together local and global participants, national organisations for cultural and civic activities and their regional associations. All this is very positive.
- The surveys implemented asked the residents which of the region's hidden diamonds would they like to tell the rest of Europe about and what they could learn with other Europeans. A survey conducted in early 2021 was specifically directed to the young people in the area. Although relevant, how much of this knowledge was incorporated in the proposed programme is not clear.
- Accessibility - thanks to an extensive cooperation between municipalities and the interregional partner network, the programme will spread throughout the entire region of eastern Finland, and will include numerous events that are open to all.
- Volunteering programme is being fully implemented. This will also include the training of *culture friends*, individuals that take on the task of accompanying people to cultural or other events who cannot do so themselves because of barriers. This is an interesting idea.
- Concerning audience development, three target groups have been identified: middle-aged and older men; domestic and international travellers who normally stay in Helsinki or travel to Lapland. A cultural passport/cultural visa initiative in cooperation with different Russian cultural institutions is also planned. However, although these actions are proposed, no concrete strategy for audience development is truly described and being implemented.

- The issues of how to engage with individuals in 4 regions and 5 cities during the four years before the ECoC year 2026, was not properly addressed.

5. Management

- The current budget of EUR 28M represents a significant increase from the previous phase (20M euros). The funding model demonstrates a variety of funding sources, including EU funding (very high at EUR 6,5M, i.e. 27% of the total contribution expected from the public purse), sponsorship from 4 to 6 corporations and business partners and a broad agreement of cooperation will be signed for 2022–2026 with foundations, educational institutions, and other NGOs. This is considered very positive. On a less positive note, the contribution expected from Savonlinna and participating cities and regions amounts to only EUR 5M, against EUR 12M expected from the State, pointing to a potential lack of regional commitment in financial terms.
- Regarding the split of the operating budget, while the part dedicated to “programme” (representing 64,2% of the total) seems quite appropriate, the amount allotted to “promotion and marketing” (10,7%) may be seen as too low to create a positive momentum around the *Saimaa Phenomenon 2026* brand European-wide.
- Specific staff will be assigned for the fundraising activities, as well as the creation of a separate non-profit association (*Support for Saimaa-Suomi*) established for the purpose of collecting funds for *Saimaa Phenomenon 2026*.
- The potential use of crowdfunding at programme level is to be considered. This will add a dimension of engagement and innovation to the management function of the project.
- No information is provided regarding capital expenditures - only independent infrastructural investment is listed (outside the ECoC budget). Also, it is not clear how much funding the different partners are expected to contribute. Little is said regarding the financial impacts post-2026 and legacy-related issues.
- Regarding the investment in dissemination and promotion, further information is required to assess its European ambition and how it will contribute to promote the ECoC initiative. However, the notion of value-based communications is interesting and a good ambition.
- The budget includes specific reference to evaluation - with adequate sums dedicated to it.
- Regarding the ECoC team size, it is expected to include 15 elements, and 9 interns. There are concerns that the project might be significantly understaffed, when compared with other ECoC projects. The governance model will include a board of directors, consisting of 7 members to be appointed by each city.
- Concerning the senior management team, an International open call for the CEO will be launched. No artistic director will be appointed; instead, an alternative model is proposed - a programme team led by a Programme Manager - but its responsibilities are not described in sufficient detail. This raises further doubts, since, based on the information provided, it is not very clear how the curatorial function and work will be divided between the cities. Also, it is unclear what principles will guide each city to decide on programming and other issues.
- When asked about the responsibilities of the programme manager and what the decision process looks like when it comes to assessing project proposals / the artistic quality of the programme, the explanations provided were not sufficiently elaborated and clear. Given the issues raised in the previous notes,

this lack of clear understanding raised further doubts in terms of the proposed governance and management structure.

6. Capacity to deliver

- Overall, the project has received support from the city and regional mayors and authorities, as illustrated by the public statements included in the bid.
- The panel believes that the city and the region are strongly committed to deliver the project and make it viable.
- A significant number of projects are expected to be finished before 2026, and not significant delays are expected. Therefore, the city and the region will have the adequate and viable infrastructure to deliver an ECoC.

Conclusion

The panel recommends that the bid of Savonlinna is not selected. Although the leitmotif of the bid - "The Art of Living" - is an interesting and powerful one, the panel considers that the proposal has significant shortcomings and issues that require careful development.

The concept proposed needs further development in terms of innovation and conceptualization to support the plan and projects. Furthermore, the panel expressed concerns that the level of programme curation is insufficient. The European dimension of the project is also rather underdeveloped: the vast majority of the projects in the programme do not list European partners or links.

Also, little is said about the activities that promote cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding between European citizens. The same can be said regarding the scope and quality of the activities highlighting the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history, as well as European integration and current European themes.

Finally, the panel expressed concerns regarding the governance and management model proposed, namely in terms of the artistic function. However, the panel was impressed by the team and valued the authenticity of the proposal. The panel encourages the city to continue to develop and implement its wide culture city strategy and to increase the cooperation and partnerships among regional leaders, while raising its European profile, through different collaborations.

III Tampere

The ECoC application's motto - *Equally European* - translates the ambition of the city to reach out to Europe, using equality and culture to bind all Europeans together. Since the pre-selection round, the promoters of the ECoC application bid worked hard with international partners to transform the understanding of what is culture in Tampere and Pirkanmaa. These efforts led to a reorientation of the project concept - from *Quality by Equality* to *Equally European*. It is hoped that the new concept will create new levels of social equality, diversity and accessibility, starting with the cultural and artistic tools.

1. Contribution to the long term strategy

- The cultural strategy of Tampere - *A City of Sustainable Growth Through Culture* - was unanimously approved by the city Council on 16 December 2019. It will run until 2030 and includes actions related to the legacy of ECoC 2026, up to 2032, which is a positive element.
- A needs analysis of the cultural and creative sectors was carried out, looking first at why the city of Tampere and its region need to be a European Capital of Culture. Secondly, the big picture of urban and regional development in Tampere and Pirkanmaa was also considered – looking at how to reach across the various policy sectors to deliver ambitious aims. And thirdly, a deep needs analysis of the local communities was conducted, focusing on the social conditions of the diverse communities. This intensive and (also very useful) work led to a change in the concept - from *Quality by Equality* to *Equally European*.
- The strategy identifies in a clear way the needs to be pursued by the ECoC project: culture-led urban development; stronger regional cooperation; broader European and international cooperation; and building capacities for the arts. Tampere has currently six development programmes of large scope running in the fields of sustainability, digitalisation, creative economy and urban development. The ECoC project will be the vital link and umbrella for integrating culture into all of these policies and for advancing the city and region cultural strategy per se. A third layer of the city's strategic framework is related to the identified communities' needs, clearly presented. Although complex, the strategic thinking is sound, robust and its content relevant at European level. Overall, the panel sees that the analyses done and the strong cultural strategy adopted in December 2019 as welcomed and very sound developments, which can only be beneficial to the cultural community in the whole area all along the coming years, even without the city being granted the ECoC title.
- Monitoring and evaluation will be carried out by a department within the team, in cooperation with the Tampere University and local technological companies. Overall, in the panel's view, the monitoring and evaluation plans are well explained and developed, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The project aspires to assess the regional effects of the ECoC as well as what changes the ECoC will create in the long run, which is a positive endeavour in line with the level of ambition.
- Although the proposed new theme is strong, the opinion of the panel is that it is still very broad and generic and thus that the message to be shared remains still somewhat unclear. Because of these shortcomings, the declaration that the ECoC legacy will be "to create a laboratory, a European case study for how arts and culture can contribute to equality", remains too vague and rhetorical, and is not totally convincing.
- Although the cultural strategy was approved and is being implemented, little reference is made to the expected impacts of the current Covid-19 pandemic and the need to re-address and update the strategy. Considering that the Covid-19 pandemic is widely expected to result in exacerbating the issues related with various types of inequalities in particular in terms of access to culture - a theme that is at the very core of the concept of this proposal - the panel was surprised at not finding a more solid reflexion on this in the application.
- The panel took note of the fact that, when asked about what is now missing in Tampere, that the team wants to put in place through the ECoC process as a legacy of the title year in 2026, the central theme of the bid, "equality", was not mentioned. This further raises doubts about the coherence between declared strategic goals, programmes, and impact.

2. Cultural and artistic content

- The cultural programme concept is based on a broad notion of culture. This is done deliberately, as a way to broaden culture while promoting social cohesion and equality. Therefore, the concept includes sports, street activities (e.g. acrobatics, skateboarding), health, education, etc. Such a broad approach to culture sounds quite appropriate to the panel, especially as it is in line with the intended goals of inclusion.
- The artistic vision is based on three core ideas: Expansive! (breaking free from comfort zones, exposing oneself to Europe); Eclectic! (breaking boundaries, reaching out) and Edgy! (shaking prevailing structures). These concepts are, however, only (too) succinctly explained.
- The programme is structured around four thematic cores: (R)EVOLUTIONS tackles questions of equality in relationship with social and political issues in current societies; EQUALLY YOURS addresses equality in the field of culture. Equality is not about blending differences but celebrating them; VILLAGE HOPPING views equality through regional lenses, promoting access to high-quality culture in the regions; WILD CARD places human culture inside nature, not above it. The programme lines are already well advanced and projects are broadly described and linked with the themes.
- Overall, the programme is presented in a robust and easy to grasp structure; almost 50% of the programming is already planned and a significant number of projects are listed with an explanation of how they combine local cultural heritage art forms with new, innovative and experimental expressions. These are all positive elements of the bid.
- Local partners and international partners - predominantly from the northern part of Europe (which the panel sees as a minus) - are identified, and they represent a significant number of highly relevant and prestigious organisations.
- It appears to the panel that the application is the result of an inclusive process of programme development: preparatory meetings were held, reaching 7000 participants; open calls brought in more than 1000 project proposals; the Haloo Pirkanmaa! Platform invited people to tell stories of their good deeds for the communities, fostering a sense of belonging in the time of crisis; a participatory parliament was implemented; even in artistic content creation, people were invited to contribute (e.g. Sauna opera).
- The programme includes a significant and diverse range of activities, reflecting well the bid's broad concept of culture. This raises, however, concerns in terms of coherence and robustness as a core culture programme, reflecting, first and foremost, a city culture strategy.
- The panel has also concerns about why some important historical references were not adequately considered (i.e. Lenin and the civil war, misinterpretation of medieval crusades). While it was pleased to see that intangible heritage was widely incorporated as a source of inspiration for innovative projects (e.g. Kalevala), much less (and maybe too little) reference was put on tangible heritage.

3. European dimension

- According to the bid book and the team presentation, the European dimension in terms of conceptualisation is present throughout the programme, since many of the activities will address important European issues, e.g. freedom of

speech and cross-border accessibility. The panel recognises that these issues have indeed a strong resonance in today's Europe.

- Positively, reference is also made to the "Tampere's strong minority languages" that include not only Swedish and Russian, but also Estonian, Arabic and Persian.
- Also on a positive note, a strong network of international partners and organisations is presented and their inclusion will potentially provide a strong European dimension to the programme. This includes collaboration with previous ECoC cities, in connection with specific and concrete projects, which the panel appreciates.
- However, the view of the panel is that overall, while the application mentions interesting and relevant ideas aiming to promote the cultural diversity of Europe or to highlight the common aspects European cultures, heritage and history and European integration, especially in terms of values and freedom of speech, the descriptions are too broad and rather vague.

4. Outreach

- The strategy for audience development is based on four strategic pillars: cultural education; reaching the regions; digital engagement (although the panel considers that the statement that students will create digital services to enable hybrid accessibility for all the ECoC events in 2026 seems too ambitious); crossing over cultures and over generations. Based on this, the project has implemented an inclusive process of programme development, and reached a considerable number of citizens and stakeholders. This is very positive and a highly relevant aspect of the city culture strategy implementation.
- One of the aims of the bid is to contribute to the reduction or elimination of all barriers to cultural participation. The setting of such an ambitious objective is the result of a thorough diagnosis that assessed the various types of accessibility and barriers, and - if properly integrated in the strategy - can have significant positive impacts.
- The volunteer involvement is already linked to specific projects and is well advanced in terms of its implementation. Though it was mentioned that the programme would involve everyone in volunteering, including migrants, it is unclear to the panel whether efforts have already been made to reach out to them or how this process will happen and produce meaningful inputs and impacts.
- Overall, the panel considers that the work done so far is quite positive, but given that the ECoC is meant to have a European and international dimension, the panel was left with unclarity on what the impacts would be on "people from outside". In parallel, it is the view of the panel that the approach to the Sami minority is not adequately described, while the reference to other ethnic minorities in Europe is very general and not fully thought through.

5. Management

- At EUR 53,18M, the overall operating budget of Tampere2026 seems quite solid and realistic, in line with the stated ambitions of the bid. An equal contribution is expected from the national government and from the city at EUR 18,75M, which seems both a feasible target and a balanced approach. Furthermore, other municipalities involved in the ECoC project will also contribute considerably with EUR 6,48M, which is a positive signal of regional commitment.

- Projected EU fundraising, although relatively high at EUR 4,6M, is well justified and seems plausible given the existing track-record of the city in this respect, as well as the possibility for the ECoC team to collaborate with specialists in the city's project office and the Tampere Region EU Office in Brussels. As a result, 17 international projects have already applied /will soon apply for EU funding. This is a very good starting point and demonstrates a high level of collaboration among the various institutions.
- The split of the operating budget between "programme", "promotion and marketing" and "wages and administration" is also standard and appropriate.
- The projected capital expenditures linked to the ECoC will reach EUR 71,6M and the specific projects are clearly identified. The budget is very well grounded and there is a detailed planning of expenditures for the next seven years. There are also alternative budget scenarios, to address different potential financial situations. All this is very positive and impressive, demonstrating a high level of financial knowledge and risk awareness.
- An interesting idea of the bid is the introduction of the concept of "partnerships with businesses" to replace the more known approach of "business sponsorship".
- According to the panel, the proposed governance structure (based on a new Foundation) and the process for appointing boards and staff members are adequate, whilst the fact that profiles for staff and board members have already been outlined is a positive element. Members of local authorities will be represented in the boards and forums, acting as liaisons between the foundation and the local authorities. Regular meetings and forums with municipalities and regional coordinators will also ensure that municipalities are strongly involved.
- The marketing strategy, including digital marketing and media partnerships, are well in development and some elements are already in place. Citizens were also mobilised to support the communication of the ECoC candidature (e.g. the T-shirt flags project).
- The risk assessment identifies some critical issues with few high risks. However, given the current pandemic and the resulting high level of uncertainty, it would have been appropriate to develop further similar scenarios in the risk analysis.
- Moreover, the panel notes that the strategy for funding capital expenditure through EU funds is not based on a strategy of culture-led regeneration of urban spaces and sustainable development projects.
- Given the complex planned programme, the panel considers that the proposed number of staff members is too low for the delivery of an ECoC (20 -25 full time employees, of which only half will be involved in the artistic programme). Furthermore, the level of ambition of the marketing and promotion efforts would also require a bigger team. The explanations provided to the panel during the hearing were not convincing enough, and seemed too low.

6. Capacity to deliver

- Tampere and all the other participating municipalities have made formal financial commitments to be part of Tampere26 from 2021 to 2027. Furthermore, municipalities have already been involved in financing the bid together.
- It therefore appears to the panel that political support from the city of Tampere and all other municipalities is very high and solid.
- There are significant infrastructure investments already happening and they will benefit to and from the ECoC. However, most of the investment does not

follow a culture-led approach, and were not justified in the context of the culture city strategy.

Conclusion

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

Although the ECoC application motto - *Equally European* - translates the ambition of the city to reach out to Europe, using equality and culture to bind all Europeans together, the panel considers that the change of the strategic theme from the pre-selection would have needed further refinement and a more conceptual and robust analysis.

Furthermore, considering that the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated all issues related with inequalities in particular in terms of access to culture - something that is at the very core of this proposal - the panel would have expected the impacts of the pandemic be addressed in a more solid way in the bid. Regarding the programme, there are concerns in terms of its coherence, and lack of strong articulation with the city culture strategy.

The panel also has concerns about some important historical references, even more because the justifications provided during the hearing were not clear enough. Likewise, the panel considers that there are very broad and rather vague descriptions of the activities that promote the cultural diversity of Europe, that highlight the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history and European integration. Finally, it appears to the panel that the strategy for funding capital expenditure through EU funds is not based on a strategy of culture-led regeneration of urban spaces and sustainable development projects.

Overall, the panel considers that the work done so far is very positive and promising. The panel was impressed by the team and the quality of the presentation, and it encourages the city to continue developing and implementing its wide cultural strategy. The potential of the proposed concept - *Equally European* - is high, requiring additional thinking and further conceptualization that could create original European relevant contributions and innovations.

The Panel's Decision

The panel was presented with three different bids from significantly diverse cities and each with its own interpretations of the ECoC criteria. The bids tackled issues of great urgency for Europe and the world at large. All bids had both strengths and weaknesses. The panel was looking, according to Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council, at the programme specifically designed for the ECoC year and with a strong European dimension.

After the presentations, the panel debated the merits of each city against the six criteria and then in the final discussion the applications were weighed up against each other. Each panel member weighed his/her own interpretation of the criteria against the three cities with their bid-books, presentations, questions and answers, complemented by the feedback from the city visits.

The panel, by voting, reached consent on a single candidate. Accordingly, the panel recommends the Ministry of Culture and Education to designate, as the 2026 European Capital of Culture in Finland, the city of Oulu.

Designation

This report has been sent to the managing authority and the European Commission. Both will publish it on their websites. In accordance with Article 11 of the Decision, the Ministry will proceed to the designation of the ECoC 2026 in Finland based on the recommendation contained in this report. It will then inform the European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions. This formal designation enables Oulu to use the title "European Capital of Culture 2026".

Melina Mercouri Prize

The panel recommends that the European Commission award the Melina Mercouri Prize to the designated city on the basis of this report. The payment of the €1,5m Prize is however deferred until 2026, in line with Article 14 of the Decision. It is conditional. The ECoC Expert panel will make a further recommendation to the European Commission in late 2025 at the end of the monitoring process on whether to make the payment.

The conditions for the payment are as follows (Article 14):

- The ECoC honours its commitments made in the application;
- It complies with the criteria;
- It takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports;
- There has been no substantial change to the programme and strategy set out in the bid-book;
- The budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-level programme and at a level consistent with the bid-book;
- The independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
- The European Dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final programme;
- The marketing and communications strategy and material clearly reflect it is a European Union action;
- Plans for monitoring and evaluation are in place.

Reputation of an ECoC

A city awarded the ECoC title receives considerable international attention from the selection recommendation extending well beyond the ECoC year. It has a responsibility to uphold the reputation of the ECoC brand for the benefit of those previous titleholders and future ones. City administrations should be aware that decisions taken (and not just in the cultural sector) might attract formal media and social media attention far beyond what they are used to handling. This adds a special and new aspect to decision taking in the city over a wide full range of issues much beyond culture only.

The monitoring phase

Once an ECoC has been designated, it enters the “Monitoring Phase” (Article 13 of the Decision). Under the auspices of the European Commission, the panel will work with the ECoC to ensure the quality of the ECoC brand and to offer advice and experience.

The bid-book at final selection becomes the de facto contract between the designated city, on the one hand, and its own citizens, the Expert panel, the Ministry and the European Commission, on the other hand. It has an important role in the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize. The panel will expect a close alignment with the bid-book during the preparation phase and during the ECoC year. Significant variations from the bid-book should be discussed with the panel, through the Commission, in advance of decisions being made.

There are three formal monitoring checkpoints (normally autumn 2022, mid 2024 and autumn 2025) when the ECoC will meet with the panel under the auspices of the Commission. Prior to each meeting the European Commission will invite the ECoC to provide progress reports. The Commission, after consultation with the panel, will indicate areas that specifically need to be addressed in the reports.

In addition, the panel may decide, with the agreement of the European Commission, to visit the city to observe progress.

The panel’s reports after all three meetings will be published on the Commission’s website. The ECoC may decide to publish its own progress reports in the interest of transparency.

The panel’s recommendations

The designated ECoC now moves to a transition period from a set-up suited to a bid campaign to the more formal ECoC delivery structure that is independent of local city administration. The panel expects Oulu to develop cooperation with other bidding cities and the wider artistic and cultural community in Finland. The ECoC in Finland in 2026 provides a national opportunity, which will reflect internationally not only on Oulu but also on the country as a whole.

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

The recommendations refer to the content of the proposed programme:

Cultural strategy

- The work continues on the development and implementation of the cultural strategy and further arrangements are made for integration between policy areas (culture / urban development / innovation and creative industries / education). All documents are published to ensure transparency.
- The ECoC 2026 impact assessment is detailed with monitoring tactics, the baseline figures are defined and first attempts to outline the specific targets are made. KPIs include European sources of information like Eurostat, for example.
- The capacity building is intraregional and cross-sectoral and runs with the view of a successful implementation of all ECoC aspects, as well as sustainability

and long-term legacy. The topic of agile and flexible strategic planning is included in the capacity building topics to prepare the teams for unexpected events.

Cultural and artistic content

- The artistic elements of the cultural programme are further developed and connected with the ECoC narrative in order to improve the overall artistic quality of the ECoC programme.
- Innovative, experimental and digital programme elements are strengthened to ensure the ECoC 2026 meets the needs of the 21st century, paying attention also to principles of environmental sustainability.
- A procedure for selecting the remaining part of the programme is developed, clearly communicated and implemented. Newly developed content has a coherent and clear artistic outlook and European importance in line with the ECoC vision and mission.
- Appropriate facilitation mechanisms including decision-making and conflict resolution principles need to be clarified and implemented.

European dimension

- The scope and quality of activities promoting the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue, and greater mutual understanding between European citizens as well as highlighting the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history are secured, deepened and developed.
- The cooperation and communication with partners from across Europe, including a wide range of the ECoC titleholders, as well as partnerships with other continents are developed and strengthened.
- Further development is needed to ensure Europe wide collaborations to provide new contexts for developing the European dimension to the full.
- Actions to generate an interest in other parts of Europe are strategically developed and promoted.

Outreach

- Work continues to ensure social innovation and meaningful participation in line with the ECoC mission and vision.
- The ECoC audience development strategies and plans for local, regional and international audiences are developed. A special focus to be dedicated to reach out to European and international audiences.
- Both audience development and community engagement are included in capacity building activities involving all relevant partners.

Management

- Information about the Oulu 2026 organisation and its statutes, as well as the ECoC implementation strategies are publicly available.
- An early appointment of the Programme director, with his/her independent role, is needed and his/her high-level position needs to be secured to ensure a collective approach to artistic decision making has a firm structure from the very beginning.
- The envisaged ECoC structure is set up and efficient organisational procedures are created in order to successfully deliver such a demanding project. Sustainable and effective mechanisms for delivery of an extensive cultural

programme with partners demonstrating different levels of expertise are developed.

- The ownership of strategic areas and spaces is clearly defined and clear information on what will be integrated and what will not be included in the programme is communicated.
- The contingency planning is refined and operationalised.
- The strategies and copyright issues of including authorship rights of related merchandise and services are developed and publicly communicated.
- The communication message (including a European dimension) is clearly articulated for use by the ECoC team and other relevant partners and stakeholders.
- The proposed communication elements are carefully considered from the point of view of conveying intended messages to a variety of European audiences.
- Issues of security related to the pandemic, post-pandemic, mass events and threats of terrorism are addressed.
- Issues of data protection are addressed and clearly communicated.
- The sensitivity towards environmental impact is demonstrated.

Capacity to deliver

- A strategy aiming at ensuring continued support of political stakeholders at local, regional, national and international level is developed and implemented.
- The accommodation and transport capacities, also those in the region, are reviewed and potential weaknesses addressed to fully support participation (of diverse public) in all elements of the ECoC programme.

The bid-book sets out several actions to be taken in before 2026 – these timeframes should be met. Experience has shown that successful ECoCs use the first year after selection to establish all the governance, management and administration structures and systems. This essential role needs to run concurrently with the first stage of the project in 2022. Recommendations in this section are based on the experience of previous ECoCs.

The panel would expect:

The relationship between the Foundation’s Board, the Advisory Board and the staff of the Oulu 2026 Foundation to be clearly delineated and made public.

The senior staff is recruited through open competitions.

The General Director issues, with the approval of the Foundation’s Board, financial regulations for the Oulu 2026 organisation:

- An external organisation is appointed to undertake annual audits and to approve the annual accounts of the organization.
- Arrangements are made for the publication of the Annual Accounts and the Annual Report to ensure transparency.
- Internal management and administrative processes are in place. These will include human resources, legal aspects (e.g. project contract arrangements, data privacy, and intellectual property rights), the criteria and systems for calls for projects, the marketing and branding strategy.
- An internal communications strategy is developed and implemented. This covers communications within the Oulu 2026 organisation, between the organisation and the city (and regional) administration, between the

organisation and the Ministry of Education and Culture and between the organisation and the European Commission.

- A detailed staffing plan up to 2026 (and beyond) including involvement of volunteers is created.
- The organisation ensures that in all its (on- and offline) marketing and communications there is recognition that the ECoC is a European Union action.

Thanks

The panel members would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in this selection phase of the competition. The panel thanks the three bidding candidates and everyone who contributed to their bids; the European Commission for its advice and the managing authority for its excellent administration. The panel encourages all cities to continue with the development and implementation of their respective cultural strategies.

Signed

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Jelle Burggraaff

Jorge Cerveira Pinto (Rapporteur)

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June 2021

