

*The Art
of Living*



Culture changes everything

Saimaa is a place and a state of mind. On its shores we have found our own way of doing things, living, and thinking. We have found creativity in both beautiful and harsh conditions. That's why our culture is unique – and worth discovering.

We are the droplets that set in motion the power to change culture. When we hit the surface of the water together, we cause a vibration that resonates throughout the world. Culture doesn't just change the story. It changes everything.

Facts

50
steamships
(Saimaa, ca. 280 in Europe)

116
libraries

671,586
residents

138,596
seasonal residents

124
theatres
(8 state subsidy)

600
km of border
shared with
Russia

127,298
summer cottages/
villas/second homes

6,000
km of shoreline
in Savonlinna

35,000
bed-places in
accommodation
companies

Imatranajo
(The Imatra road race)
40,000
visitors

Lappeenranta
Sandcastle
150,000
visitors

173
museums
(19 state subsidy)

53
municipalities

St. Michel
Trotting Race
23,000
visitors

Vekara-Varkaus
Children's Summer
Festival week
26,000
visitors

Ilosaarirock
64,000
visitors

Savonlinna
Opera Festival
65,000
visitors

Art Centre
Salmela
45,000
visitors

Kuopio
Dance Festival
37,000
visitors

The easternmost point of
the continental EU is located
in the municipality
of Ilomantsi.

FINLAND

Examples of events

Municipalities with additional funding: Enonkoski, Heinävesi, Hirvensalmi, Iisalmi, Imatra, Joroinen, Kitee, Kiuruvesi, Kontiolahti, Lemi, Liperi, Luumäki, Mäntyharju, Nurmes, Outokumpu, Parikkala, Pertunmaa, Puumala, Rantasalmi, Rautjärvi, Ruokolahti, Rääkkylä, Savitaipale, Sulkava, Taipalsaari, Tohmajärvi, Varkaus

North Savo
(19 municipalities)

Kuopio

North Karelia
(13 municipalities)

Joensuu

Savonlinna

Mikkeli

South Savo
(12 municipalities)

South Karelia
(9 municipalities)

Lappeenranta

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**Leverage from
the EU**
2014–2020

Introduction

Q1

PROGRAMME CONCEPT

After the pandemic is over, the world will yearn for peace, clarity and sustainability. These factors constitute the very essence of life for the people who live in eastern Finland. We have developed a special way of living and a unique set of skills that we wish to share with the world. It's high time we reveal everything about our secret haven and the source of our creativity for all of Europe to see. We can do this by letting arts and culture lead the way - by acting as our lingua franca they can be a catalytic force which drives the power for change.

Water is the conduit that connects the people who live in our region. Our forests and lakes have always provided inspiration, a refuge for relaxation, and livelihood for people living in the area. Throughout the centuries, Saimaa has been the gateway to Europe; its beautiful and somewhat rugged environment has moulded our arts and culture into something truly unique. At its roots, our national landscape has served as the cradle of Finnish culture.

Another feature that has had a special effect on our everyday life is the proximity of the border. Since World War II, we have lived in amicable and peaceful coexistence. Along the border zone special cultural expertise has been created which is strongly evident in the relationship between eastern Finland and Russia. We consider it important to share our mutual experience with the rest of Europe. The cities of Saimaa have cooperated and wish to continue the cross-border cooperation between the EU and Russia. The people living here in eastern Finland have the knowledge, experience and skill to do this.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will serve as a catalyst to bring about real change, through which Savonlinna and the whole of eastern Finland can identify themselves as a European cultural city and a well-defined cultural region. Our voice and competence will be strongly visible and audible. From the very beginning we have stressed openness and cross-border activities: Savonlinna is the candidate for European Capital of Culture (ECOC) 2026 among the regions of eastern Finland (North and South Savo, North and South Karelia), and their respective capital cities: Kuopio, Mikkeli, Joensuu, and Lappeenranta. All 53 municipalities and close to 700,000 residents in the area have joined us in our collective endeavour.

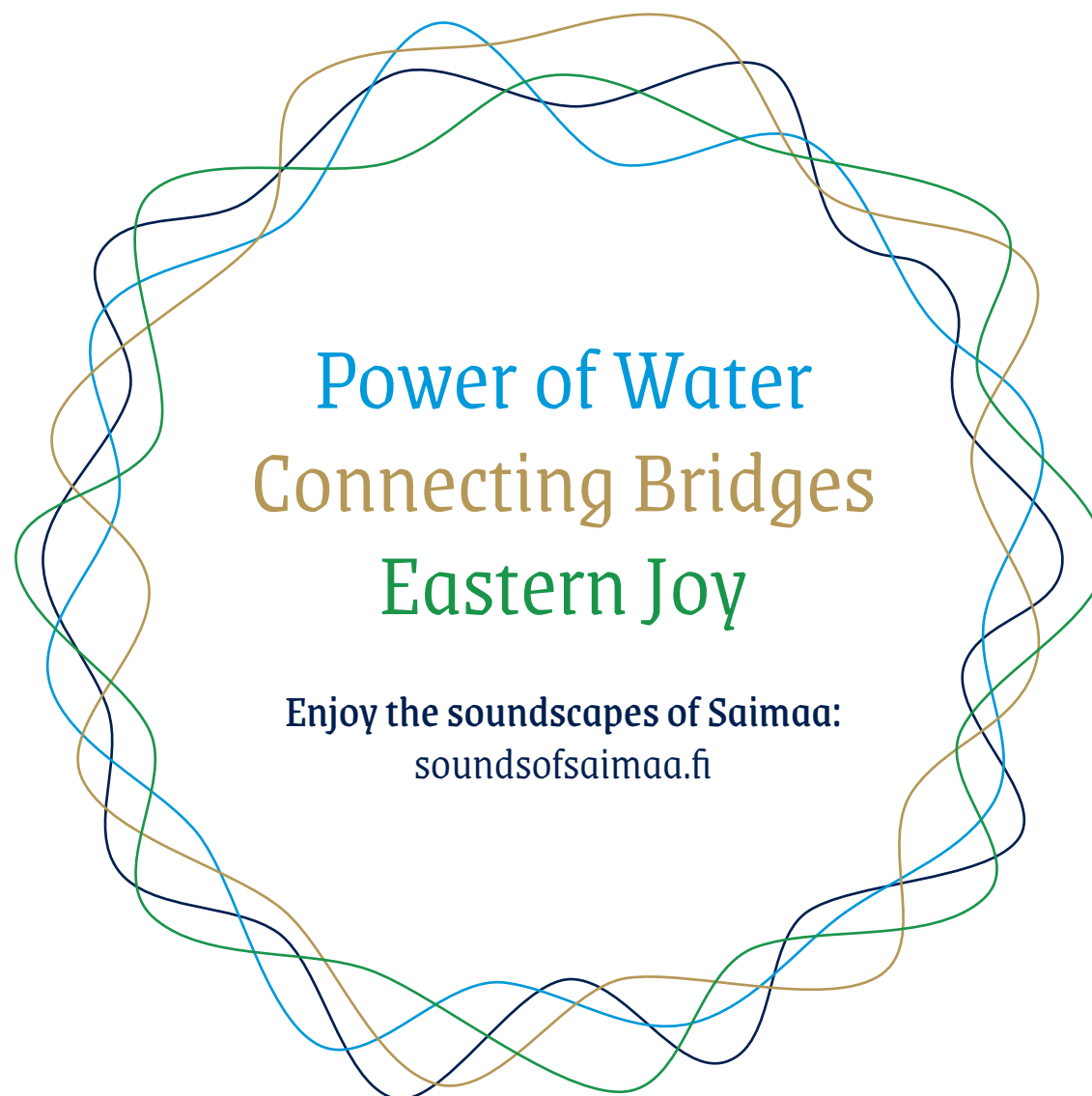
Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has shown the value of big cities standing together in support of a smaller city. Sharing common goals can bring about miracles. Only by acting together are we able to muster enough courage and know-how to broadcast a sufficiently loud voice. The future of eastern Finland will demonstrate a genuine transformation; lifting itself from a "fading back in the woods" attitude into a vibrant, diverse, and attractive place to live.

Our common views concerning a sustainable future have become stronger and more solidified in our Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Goes Bauhaus workshops, which were organised during the second phase of the candidacy. We believe it is important to safeguard a common ecosystem where everyone has equal rights to a secure environment and equal opportunities. Equally important issues include working together, involving everyone, and maintaining a compelling dialogue. From the very beginning, our programme has emphasised broad participation by a varied group of stakeholders. Due to the recent change in the nature of our meetings going online has made it possible for participants to take part in our workshops and seminars, when otherwise the physical distance would have precluded their attendance.

While our cooperation with Russia is strong, we need to work on developing partnerships with other international contacts as well. We are currently building new types of networks to connect and develop good working relationships with other areas of Europe. At the same time, we are building a stronger European identity and getting rid of our exaggerated modesty.

The COVID19 pandemic put a stop to the notion of doing “business as usual”. It halted event production, closed theatres, museums, and many cafés. At the same time it opened up new opportunities, offered some surprises, and presented avenues for the creation of a new phenomenon. Summer 2020 was anything but quiet in the Saimaa region – the markets and summer cottages were packed with multilocals and travellers from all over Finland. We experienced a summer of miracles in Savonlinna: the town was filled with events organised by artists and small cultural activists. What we learned from this was that everything we needed was actually right here in existence already. This is a phenomenon we want to share with Europe. What if something small is actually something big?

The three main themes presented in our first book: THE POWER OF WATER, CONNECTING BRIDGES and EASTERN JOY have been developed and expanded into concise programmes thanks to the commitment of a large group of people who have joined forces. Together we have identified and acknowledged our strengths, and pinpointed those themes that require additional content. Special emphasis has been placed on keeping our eyes and ears open so we don’t miss out on any silent signals of future development opportunities. Our European partners have opened our eyes, making us aware of the unique rapport we share with nature. Our discussions have directed Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 to focus on the opportunities afforded us by virtue of our unique relationship with nature and silence, and have helped us visualise how these elements might play an important role in the development of our future with respect to the fields of art, culture and well-being.



Q2

CULTURAL STRATEGY

The Savonlinna-led Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has transformed into a very concrete, common goal for all of the regions and cities in eastern Finland. It will initiate a long-standing process of development and promote change within the Saimaa region, utilising the unique cultural resources available in the area.

During the first stage of our candidacy, the regional councils and stakeholders of the cities in the area joined together and compiled a cultural strategy for the area, extending up to the year 2030. The Phenomenal Culture City, the Cultural Strategy of Savonlinna, and the Cultural Strategy of Cooperation in eastern Finland are not only a question of the cultural strategy of Savonlinna, but encompass the fundamentals for development of the cultural economy throughout eastern Finland. The regional councils and cities have compiled individual cultural programmes in the past, but either their time span has expired or the programme has not originally been drawn up from a specifically cultural perspective.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has asserted positive influence on all of the cities, regions, and smaller municipalities to develop their own individual cultural strategy. The city of Lappeenranta and the region of South Karelia have already implemented their joint cultural strategy which extends up to the year 2027, and have named it “Uusinajattelijoiden kulttuurimaakunta” (“Rethinkers’ cultural province”). It has been agreed that the individual cultural strategies of the regions and cities will be developed as part of the “Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa” and will (as independent projects) increase the capacity of our

region and its readiness for action towards culmination in 2026, Savonlinna’s European Capital of Culture year. The culture programmes compiled for the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa will communicate with each other, taking know-how forward.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 regions and cities apply good practices and have experience in effortless cooperation. However, during these challenging times new structures are required to facilitate interaction; updated models for building contacts, and encouragement to think on a more international level. The idea is to incorporate our ECoC programme content into pilot projects to fulfil these objectives. While implementing and developing these we will put into action the good practices for enhancing cooperation among participants at all levels. We will now sow the seeds of change and build a common ecosystem for all.

The city as a platform

The cities in our region act as cultural platforms, enablers, and coordinators. They bring people together and encourage everyone to link artistic and commercial activities with each other. Professionals in arts and culture, residents, enterprises, and other types of organisations can all contribute by producing artistic and cultural content. A flourishing, diverse field of arts and culture forms an environment that attracts new cultural actors, and provides fertile territory for tourists hungry to explore new cultural experiences.

We will work to develop new ways of doing things and will offer events that provide cultural activities all year round for businesses and other entities. We will build bridges and renew cooperation; for example, between travel sector, various service providers, and cultural services.



Examples of the programme:

- Piloting the Savonlinna ecosystem for the creative economy.
- “Myö taataan” (“We guarantee”) financing. This agile funding model will facilitate production of cultural activities in available empty spaces in the cities and increase the number of happenings on event calendars during the quiet seasons.
- Art Trek. Special art routes designed to connect cultural experiences and exercise - in urban environments and in the midst of nature.

Identifying and acknowledging arts and culture

In the new arts field ecosystem all participants will be able to find their own creative space, regardless of their background or the nature and character of their work. The idea of the ecosystem is based on the premise that all voices have merit and should be heard, and that these different voices warrant the development of different types of opportunities. We plan to break down the walls of so-called “institutionalised culture”. We will feature new subcultures and marginal art, while ensuring that the cultural spectrum remains vibrant and diverse.

Examples of the programme:

- Secret artists. The Saimaa region will offer artists-in-residency programmes and opportunities to create art anonymously.
- The Youth Panel and surveys among the young people. Young people in the region can influence Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 content and produce arts and culture especially of interest to younger audiences.

New cooperation and networks in eastern Finland

The interregional dialogue initiated by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will become deeper and broader, expanding on both national and international levels.

Our cooperation will broaden cultural offerings, know-how and operational capacity, and create networks focusing on different themes in a cross-industrial manner. For example, through hands-on projects tourism operators will join forces with cultural programme producers.

Connections between eastern Finland and Russia and the Nordic countries have traditionally been excellent. Now we will strengthen our networks with other parts of Europe. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 provides an excellent way to put eastern Finland into the focus of attention in Europe.

Examples of the programme:

- Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub. Cultural sustainability through cooperation between art and science.
- Reviving choir activities. Creating a new, interregional network.
- Interregional cooperation between arts institutions.
- Saimaa Skill Share Lab. Sharing information and skills divergently to different target groups. With a little effort, anyone can cultivate the skills necessary to bring joy to others.

Q3**CONTRIBUTION TO LONG-TERM STRATEGY**

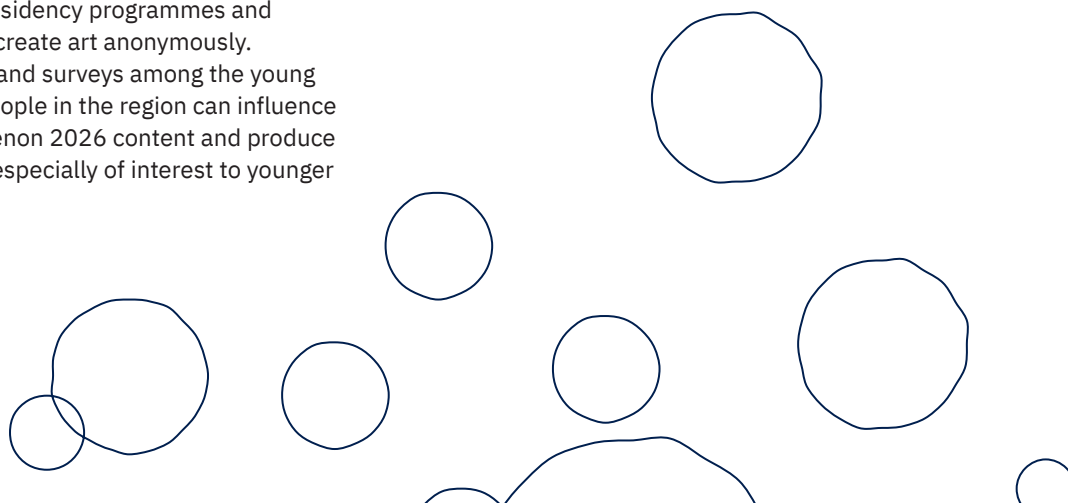
General objectives of the European Union’s Capitals of Culture action are to:

- safeguard and promote the cultural diversity in Europe, highlight the common aspects they share, increase the citizens’ sense of belonging to a common cultural space (G01);
- and foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities (G02).

Under these general objectives, specific objectives are to:

- Enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of the cultural offering in cities, including through transnational cooperation (SO1);
- widen access to and participation in culture (SO2);
- strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and its links with other sectors (SO3);
- and to raise the international profile of cities through culture (SO4).

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has identified its own long-term strategic goals in a way that the above mentioned objectives and cultural, social, economic, and urban impacts have been taken into account. As a result of ECoC activities, different cultural operators in the Saimaa region operate internationally, also crossing regional and sectoral boundaries. The level of competence among participants will have risen and become diversified due to Saimaa Skill Share Lab, the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 capacity building programme.



A change of attitude among the residents in the area has taken root: understanding and appreciation of the creative industries has expanded, which has also become evident in decision-making.

During and after the European Capital of Culture year, the attraction, retention, and enchantment power of the Saimaa region will have been increased. An increased number of new multilocal residents and both national and international visitors will find their way to the region to enjoy everyday Saimaa life. This, and the visibility of culture put into focus by the ECoC year, will bring about new entrepreneurship to bolster the creative economy in the region.

Our vision for social and ecological impact is a thriving Saimaa. People will experience feelings of well-being resulting from the effects of both nature and culture. Participation and a sense of inclusion will be extensive, thanks to improved availability of cultural activities. Residents in the area will be proud of their home region - they will experience a new sense of belonging to a common Saimaa community, while being curious about their role as part of a greater European community. Understanding other cultures will increase tolerance and diversity among the residents in the area.

Cultural sustainability and responsibility, including ecological sustainability, are focal points in all operations. Implementation of the Capital of Culture year will work to preserve and protect the pristine nature of the Saimaa region, as emphasis will be placed on training all partners to engage in responsible working procedures during the course of their actions. We are forerunners in the areas of sustainable tourism and event production.

We will define our success by measuring and comparing our achievements to the long-term strategic goals set for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Our mission is to open up the Saimaa region to Europe through implementation of our long-term goals.



1. Creative Saimaa

A strong regional, national, and international ecosystem serving a strong creative economy will have been created in the Saimaa region.

2. Thriving Saimaa

The Saimaa region will have remained pure and the well-being of the residents will have increased and their identity strengthened due to broader cultural offerings and opportunities to participate, and through stronger communality.

3. Enchanting Saimaa

Saimaa Phenomenon and the newly adopted interregional and inter-sectoral operation models and networks will have increased the regional attraction and retention power, and a unique enchantment power, thereby having increased cultural, tourism and other industrial entrepreneurship, and jobs within the Saimaa region.

4. Knowledgeable Saimaa

Multi-sectoral and international competence of the regional operators will have been strengthened and common ways to transfer, strengthen and further develop skills will have been created throughout the Saimaa region.

Q4

MONITORING AND EVALUATING IMPACT

Objectives of our monitoring and evaluation procedures include providing up-to-date and transparent information that will be shared openly. This will also serve other regional operators, in addition to the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 ECoC organisation. In evaluating our operations and determining our indicators we will comply with the long-term strategic goals of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. We will achieve a permanent change through our Capitals of Culture action. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026's preparatory procedures have already initiated completely new and interesting types of cooperation.

The following table (on page 8–9) presents the strategic goals of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026; in other words, our vision for the year 2035, and the determined objectives through which we will reach our strategic goals. Examples describe the indicators that will be used for monitoring our achievements, and the sources of the data used.

Implementing Evaluation

The indicators for evaluation have been selected to support follow-up on the achievement of the strategic goals set for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, taking into account the indicators proposed in the ECoC procedures whenever the data is applicable in Finland. Supplementary indicators have been put in place to determine achievement of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 objectives.

Our vision for 2035 - Long-term strategic goals	How we aim to achieve our goals – Objectives	How we will measure our success - Examples of indicators	Where we will acquire information - Data sources
Creative Saimaa A strong regional, national, and international ecosystem serving a strong creative economy will have been created in the Saimaa region <i>Cultural & economical efficacy - SO1, SO2 & SO3</i>	Operating conditions for the creative economy will be enhanced; entrepreneurship and employment within the creative economy will be increased.	Number employed within the creative economy	Statistics Finland / Arts Promotion Centre Finland
		Number of enterprises within the creative economy	
		Number of qualifications and degrees in the field of arts	
		Views and future outlooks among people working within the cultural sector	Survey among operators in the region's creative economy
	Appreciation of the value of culture and cultural workers will increase in the region	Residents' views on the activities and significance of the creative economy	Survey among residents in the region
		Residents' annual spending on cultural services	
		Different stakeholders' views on the significance of the creative economy within the region	Surveys among stakeholders
		Municipalities' appropriations for cultural activity	Municipalities' budgets / financial statements
	Cultural activity will become more international in the Saimaa region	Number of artists involved in international cooperation and participating in international productions	Survey among operators in the region's creative economy
		Number of international arts and culture projects which have been awarded funding	
		Number of international artists in the ECoC programmes	Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 data sources - survey among event producers
		Residents' awareness of European Capital of Culture activity	Survey among residents in the region
Thriving Saimaa The Saimaa region will have remained pure and the well-being of the residents will have increased and their identity strengthened due to broader cultural offerings and opportunities to participate, and through stronger communality <i>Social & ecological efficacy - SO2</i>	The Saimaa identity will become stronger and we understand our own identity as being European.	Share of residents owning a Saimaa identity	Survey among residents in the region
		Sense of inclusion in one's own regional community	
		Understanding of belonging to a mutual European cultural region	
	Residents' well-being will be enhanced due to increased cultural activity.	Residents' experiences of well-being	Survey among residents in the region
		Share of residents who consider their quality of life good	Sotkanet (Statistical information on welfare and health in Finland)
		Amount of ECoC programmes implemented in nurseries, day-care centres, schools, and sheltered housing	Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 data sources - survey among event producers
		Amount of programmes produced for people under risk of exclusion and other special groups	
	Sense of inclusion and participation will increase	Residents' participation in different cultural activities and events	Survey among residents in the region and monitoring participants in events
		Experiences of easiness to participate	Survey among residents in the region
		Number of volunteers	Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 data sources – survey among event producers
		Number of residents who have participated in producing events	
	Responsible operations (ecological, social, cultural accountability, ethics, safety) will become the upholding idea in service offerings and in cultural activities.	Number of sustainability-certified enterprises and events	Visit Finland, regional tourism organisations, survey among event organisers
		Share of ECoC events with formulated sustainability/responsibility plan	Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 data sources – survey among event producers
		Erosion of the ground at event venues	Erosion mapping

Our vision for 2035 - Long-term strategic goals	How we aim to achieve our goals – Objectives	How we will measure our success - Examples of indicators	Where we will acquire information - Data sources
Enchanting Saimaa Saimaa Phenomenon and the newly adopted interregional and inter-sectoral operation models and networks will have increased the regional attraction and retention power, and a unique enchantment power, thereby having increased cultural, tourism and other industrial entrepreneurship, and jobs within the Saimaa region <i>Economic & urban efficacy - SO3 & SO4</i>	The service structure of the region will develop and regional vitality will grow.	Revenue from tourism	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment / implementing regional research
		Number of enterprises	Statistics Finland
		Number employed and unemployed	
		Views of entrepreneurs on the impact of ECoC on their business operations	Survey/interviews among enterprises in the region
	The attraction and retention power of the area will increase	Number of tourists and overnight stays	Statistics Service Rudolf and Statistics Finland
		Population	Statistics Finland
		Net migration	
		Residents' satisfaction with available services and the pleasantness of their area of residence	Survey among residents in the region
	The national and international profile of the region and cities will be enhanced	Position of the cities in national image research	Taloustutkimus Oy research
		Tourists' views and perceptions of the region and cities	Tourism research
		Amount of media visibility in national and international media	Media monitoring
		Number and share of international tourists	Statistics Service Rudolf and Statistics Finland
Knowledgeable Saimaa Multi-sectoral and international competence of participants in the region will have become stronger and mutual ways to transfer, strengthen and further develop skills will have been created throughout the Saimaa region <i>Social, cultural & ecological efficacy - SO1 & SO3</i>	Cooperation between the cities in eastern Finland and their residents will increase	Views of stakeholders in the region on the development of cooperation	Surveys among stakeholders
		Participation of residents in events taking place in the other cities	Survey among residents in the region
		Visibility of cooperation in the media	Media monitoring
		Number of interregional and cross-municipal projects	Financiers' statistics /data sources
	Multi-sectoral knowledge capital will be strengthened and new innovations will be created in the region	Number of multi-sectoral projects	Financiers' statistics /data sources
		Number of innovations created in competitions	
		Number of participants in Saimaa Skill Share Lab capacity building events	
	New international partnerships and networks are created among cultural operators and the creative economy	Number of new international partnerships among operators in the creative economy of the Saimaa region	Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 data sources – survey among event producers
		Number of international productions	
		Number of multicultural projects	Financiers' statistics /data sources

Implementation of the research and evaluation plan for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 requires both quantitative and qualitative research methods and data. Some of this information is available in existing databases and published researches, and some will need to be collected during the process.

A major part of the quantitative indicator data can be collected directly from statistical data sources. Data is provided by entities such as Statistics Finland, Arts Promotion Centre Finland, Visit Finland, TAK Research, Taloustutkimus Oy, and the Finnish institute for health and welfare. Baseline information

will be collected from statistics during 2021 and development will be monitored biannually. Starting from 2023, monitoring will be conducted annually. Collection of statistical data will be continued after 2026 to evaluate long-term impacts and the legacy of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Collection of statistical

data will be accomplished in cooperation with the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities, regional councils, the Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, and regional tourism organisations. A plan will be compiled to collect any missing quantitative and qualitative research data.

Data closely related to the European Capitals of Culture activities will be collected within the ECoC organisation. Media monitoring and collection of research data is also necessary. These are defined in detail in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 research and evaluation plan. Research required by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will be mainly implemented as longitudinal studies, e.g. research is conducted at least once before the ECoC year, during the year 2026, and after the ECoC year. Research data will be collected mainly through internet surveys and interviews. In addition to those, new methodologies, such as web analytics, real-time data on overnight stays, and data from teleoperators or Bluetooth technology will be employed to monitor event participants and determine visitor numbers.

Fundamental in putting in place methodology for evaluating Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 activities are the reproducibility and comparability of data collected during different years so that the development, efficacy, and legacy of the Capital of Culture process can be assessed. The main objective of collecting and evaluating data is to support the practical implementation of the ECoC process, not to produce academic research. On the other hand, the quality of the data and the collection methods will be sound and can withstand thorough scientific scrutiny. Research and evaluation will be conducted in cooperation with other European Capitals of Culture. With respect to research concerning i.e. residents' regional identity and quality of life, cooperation has been agreed upon with the University of Pannonia, a Veszprém-Balaton 2023 partner, to ensure the collection of internationally comparable data.

Evaluation of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will be conducted by an independent consortium of universities and a commercial research organisation. The consortium cannot be named at this stage because the ECoC organisation must comply with the EU directive on public procurements exceeding 60,000 euros. The consortium responsible for conducting evaluation will be open for tendering in 2022. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 organisation will recruit a Research and Evaluation Manager, who will, among other tasks, take responsibility for coordinating and monitoring the evaluation process.

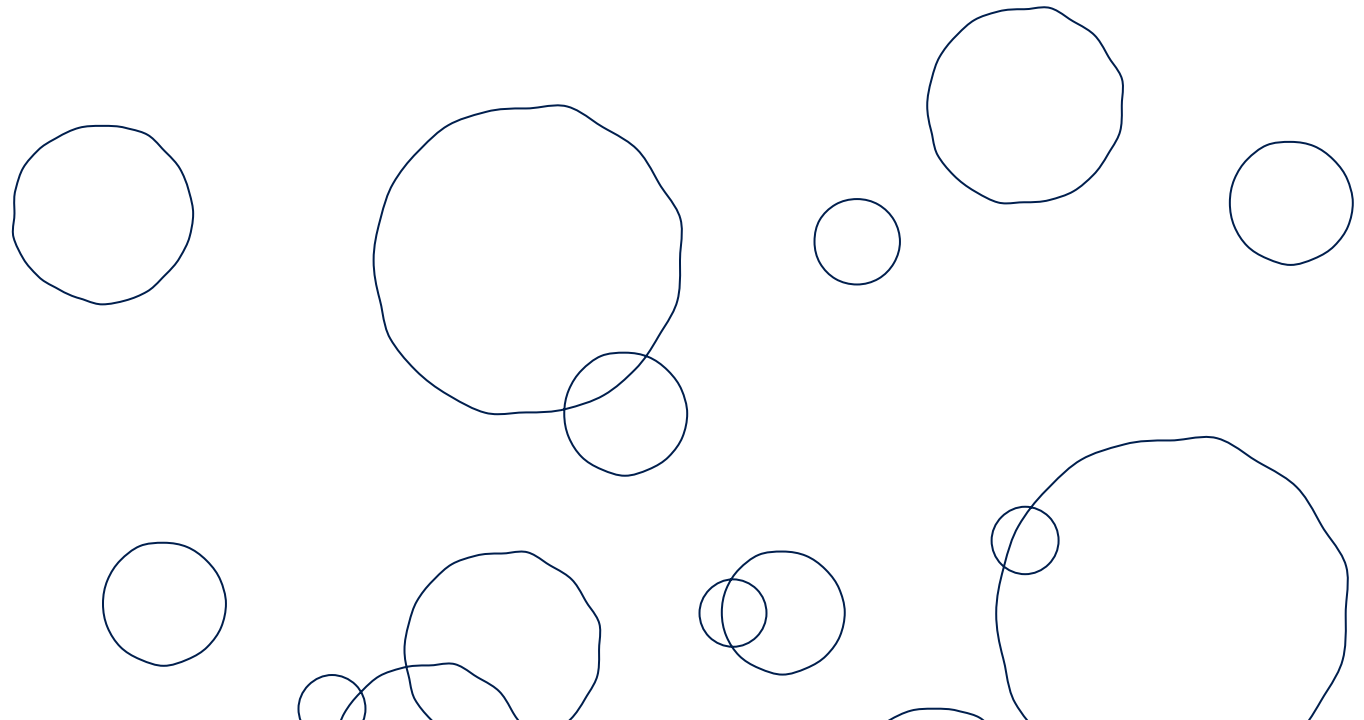
Distributing results

Transparency and open access information play an important role in the values of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. This also applies to the statistical and research data collected for evaluation purposes. A knowledge management dashboard will be created on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform where statistical data, research reports, and results will be shared

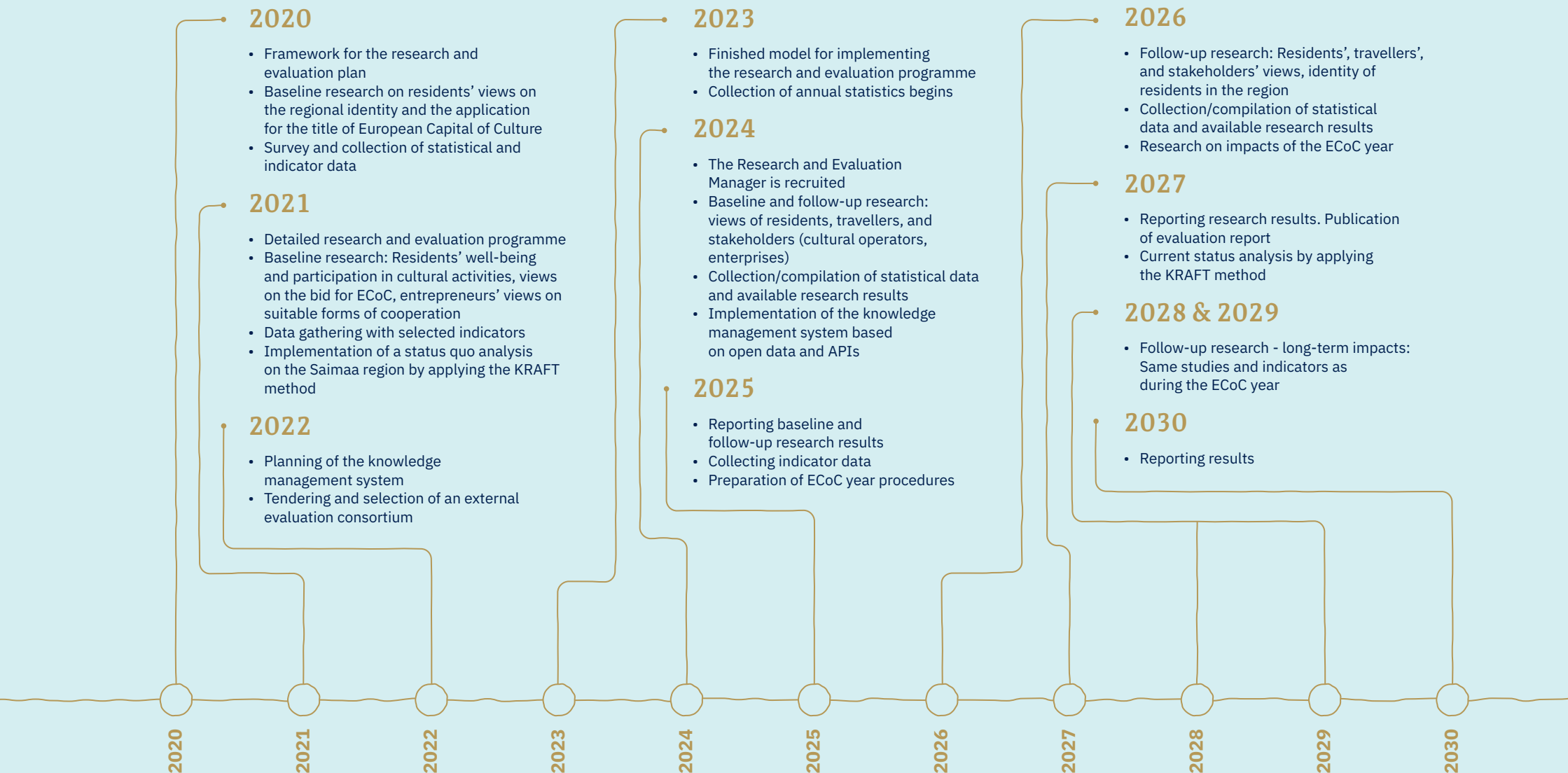
openly with interested parties. The ability to access statistical data and research results from one common source and the visual presentations of the information will facilitate the evaluation and development of the ECoC organisation's operations. At the same time, the information and results will be made visible to decision-makers, developers, and residents.

We will communicate results both locally and regionally; to regional council boards, city councils and city boards. On a national level we will communicate our achievements by organising seminars and other open events, both onsite and online. We will report results through both conventional and social media.

We will actively participate in activities and joint projects of our ECoC network, sharing information and results through these channels also. We will give presentations on our results at the international conference that we will organise in 2026, and after the ECoC year at the University Network of the European Capitals of Culture (UNeECC) conference, and other ECoC-associated webinars and conferences.



Scheduling of evaluation



Q5

ARTISTIC VISION AND STRATEGY

In our first phase bid book we pondered on our artistic vision as follows:

“In 2026, arts and culture play a significant role in the development of Savonlinna and the four regions in the Saimaa area. In our vision, culture belongs to everyone and it has been proven that the sense of well-being of people is improved when they engage in cultural activities. Arts and culture will have played a significant role in the branding of the Saimaa region and will have expanded the awareness of our presence on the international scene. The financial resources, knowledge and experience invested into the ECoC project will have remained within the area of the four regions. The entirety of the artistic programme has proved to be phenomenal and Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has based all of its actions on sustainability and accountability.”

We are extremely pleased to note that many of the visions outlined in our first bid book have already been realised and have been put into action: cultural activities are playing a significant role in the development of our region. The common cultural strategy of Savonlinna and all of eastern Finland will bring about totally new and revised individual cultural strategies and action plans for the years 2022–2025. Also, many of the residents and actors in the region have joined forces to actively support Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. We have reached thousands of residents and players through the project as indicated by the growing number of participants and contacts we

have received through our virtual and onsite events. Smaller municipalities and a growing number of other entities have also shown interest in becoming part of our phenomenon. Together, we will introduce a broad artistic programme and create an extensive network of artists and partners which will ensure that resources, such as know-how, remain in our region.

Our candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture 2026 has been strongly tinted by a very exceptional year with the ongoing pandemic. The ensuing year has moulded people’s way of thinking and acting. National and even regional borders have been closed and everyday life with restricted social contacts has been forcibly limited. Remote working has become the new norm and the concept of hybrid identity has surfaced. Globalisation has suddenly been put on hold and we have entered into a time of localisation.

Our vision is to develop small-scale, but rich cultural offerings, while maintaining high artistic quality. This means hosting small events and providing more personal art experiences and individual, virtual experiences and encounters. Arts and culture created on the shores of Saimaa are perfectly suited to fulfil this vision.

Our region is no metropolis – it’s not even close to being the centre of the world. Many forecasts predict that the future of our home region is to wither away; but thanks to our ECoC candidacy, the region has already been able to usher in what appear to be the beginnings of great change. All of us, nearly 700,000 residents, have chosen eastern Finland as our home. Confidence in the future, our visions and dreams of new opportunities move us forward. Our vision is to put our own know-how and our partners into focus during the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa celebrated in 2022–2025. This will ensure that the small cities in our broad region and the “droplets” required to drive change are activated and all come together, begin to ripple, and end up creating a surge that will become visible everywhere.



Strategic foundations

We will carry out our vision through the following strategic actions:

Together we are stronger

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is not merely a project of the city of Savonlinna; it encompasses a joint effort of all the regions, cities and municipalities in eastern Finland. We are working diligently to ensure that no one is left behind and everyone has an equal opportunity to join in the development of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 and can thereafter reap the results of a strengthened sense of belonging. We are paying close attention and listening carefully to all participants, stakeholders and residents, and will strive to exchange knowledge and experiences with our international partners.

Our 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. The Bridge Builders have been involved in creating and developing a model for cooperation between the regions and have helped in creating networks and profiling the strengths of individual cities. The work of the Bridge Builders, and that of our other expert groups, will continue as part of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

The common cultural ecosystem we are currently building will provide creative space to all operators, regardless of their background or artistic character and scale of their work, and will be made available to other European players as well.

Art spreads everywhere

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is an important journey for us, and has proved to be an integral tool in changing our manner of thinking about art. It has already

awakened decision-makers in the region to realise the diversity and opportunities offered by arts and culture, their impact on our well-being, and underlying resources which we have not yet had the capacity to fully utilise. Our journey of change will begin in 2022–2026, when we will work together to build strong bridges on local, regional and international levels, between various participants, artists, and different business fields.

Redesigning the relationship between the rural and urban areas will also be a part of our journey. We will elaborate on new operation models in the section **City <3 countryside**.

We will learn from each other

To promote participation and competence we have developed a concept where, in turns, each region will highlight its own art, artists and cultural activities, led by its central cities. We've named our concept the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa. The individual Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa will increase the capacity of our region and fine-tune our readiness for action towards culmination in 2026: Savonlinna's European Capital of Culture year. Our expertise in organising events and our capacity to deliver will increase, as we acquire valuable experience with respect to the functionality of our artistic programme content. During these years we can test programme content and select those items which reflect the most potential to be developed further. Our concept of the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa is described in more detail under section Q5.

Art can be made accountable

We currently live in a state of abundance and in an environmentally unsustainable manner. Even though we know that we have to slow down and reduce our levels of consumption, becoming more aware of the

way we live our life, making changes is difficult. Is it possible that we've ended up imagining we exist totally independently from our surrounding nature? Our way of thinking has to be reprogrammed.

During the second stage of our ECoC candidacy we organised three Saimaa Phenomenon Goes Bauhaus¹ workshops where our sole mission was to bring people of different backgrounds from all over eastern Finland together, so that they would have an opportunity to encounter each other. As a result of these workshops cultural influencers, artists and cooperative partners envisioned the future of Saimaa in the year 2050 and defined the relationship of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 with, for example, the principles of sustainable development outlined in Agenda 2030. A new type of thinking evolved from this union of science, art, technology and economics. More details on the results of our Bauhaus workshops are described in section Q11.

Future thinking and confidence in our capability to solve climate change and redesigning our relationship with nature are important factors motivating our actions – and they are equally common factors to all of Europe. Change is initiated by individuals. Through our own actions, each one of us can have a positive impact on how the world around us is built. Art plays a significant role in awakening both our thoughts and our feelings. Our programme content addresses issues of ecology, future utopias and breaking down borders. Our events stress accountability and are organised on a principle of providing safer space. We challenge everyone to take an active part in helping to preserve our environment.

¹ Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission introduced the "New European Bauhaus" in October 2020. The New European Bauhaus is a creative and interdisciplinary initiative which brings together architects, engineers, scientists, students, artists, designers and residents. Ours was the first region in Europe to accept the challenge.

Q6

CULTURAL PROGRAMME



Approximately half of the programme content will take place in Savonlinna, and the rest will take place elsewhere in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 area.



LAKE CULTURE

Lake culture brings together programmes where the history of Saimaa and current events meet.

**Gateway to Saimaa,
gateway to Europe**



A central site for events during the ECoC year is, of course, Savonlinna; a city connected through water routes to the entire Saimaa lake area, and to Europe. The surrounding area of Riihisaari and the Olavinlinna Castle are renowned Finnish national landscapes which welcome guests to events in the city, all year round.

Europe's northernmost fortress Olavinlinna, built at the end of the 1400s, is the main stage for Savonlinna's European Capital of Culture year. In

2025, Olavinlinna will celebrate its 550th anniversary, which will serve as a rehearsal for the European Capital of Culture year. In addition to the Savonlinna Opera Festival, Olavinlinna is a popular museum and a magnificent active cultural space offering a versatile platform for participants to produce different, even surprising events, including X-rated Horror Tours, Escape Rooms, Boxing Night, and Live-action role playing games.

The Riihisaari area is an interesting place for guests of the opera just as well as for summer residents. During 2022–2026, the area will become a year-round open-air living room and meeting place where everyone can join in. In 2026, the Riihisaari area will be ready to serve as a versatile event arena for concerts, work demonstrations, open workshops and perhaps opportunities will arise for communal work with steamships, loading them with firewood or giving them a new coating of tar.

Riihisaari Lake Saimaa Nature and Museum Centre

located on the island of Riihisaari, features extensive exhibits of Saimaa culture, nature, and the sailing history of the region. In 2026, the Riihisaari museum will also be a nationally and internationally significant, unique water transport museum centre, specialising in steamship culture, as an owner of a sailing steamship fleet.

The world's largest fleet of steamships (around 50) continues to sail in the Saimaa region.

Olavinlinna will invite members of The Association of Castles and Museums around the Baltic Sea to an annual meeting and seminar in Olavinlinna in 2026.

STEAM POWER! During the Capital of Culture year a new international Steamship Festival will be organised, bringing the European steamship network together

for the first time, through a cultural programme and virtual connection. The stage for the festival will be, in addition to the open water of Saimaa, the Riihisaari Lake Saimaa Nature and Museum Centre, Laukansaari (the local recreational ground for steamship aficionados), and the Laitaatsilta ship repair yard.

The festival programme is a tribute to the steamship tradition and the Saimaa Canal. It is also a celebration of the "Tuuliajolla" ("Adrift") rock festival tours organised 1981–1986 and 2006 and is the source of inspiration for the name "Saimaa Phenomenon 2026". Singer-songwriter, musician, and poet Juice Leskinen came up with the idea for the tour – which illustrated the point that Finnish rock 'n' roll music emanates from all over Finland, not just from bars and clubs in Helsinki.

We will invite a group of international artists to step aboard a steamship docked in Russia. The ship will sail to Lake Saimaa and Savonlinna via the 43-km long Saimaa Canal that connects Lake Saimaa to the Gulf of Finland and continental Europe. The project for lengthening the locks in the canal (estimated to be completed in 2024) will allow longer ships to sail through the canal. Live-streaming will enable everyone who is interested the opportunity to watch the artists making their way through the canal on the steamship. Music promotor, producer, and founder of the Light Music and StereoLeto festival, Ilja Bortnuk will, in collaboration with Cinematographer Pauli Bessonoff, produce a documentary of the Steamship voyage. On the Finnish side of the border the steamship arriving from Russia will be met by another steamship with a group of artists on board, summoned together by musician Ismo Alanko. The ships with their travellers will make stops at the harbours of Lappeenranta and Puumala. City poetry based on stories about Saimaa steamships will be created for the Steamship



Regional



International



Skill Share Lab



Flagship



Legacy



Open call

A wide-angle photograph of a winter scene. In the foreground, a dark, calm body of water reflects the sky and the castle. A bright pink inflatable swan floats in the center of the water. The middle ground is a snow-covered bank with several trees, some with bare branches and others with dark green needles. A small, dark wooden building is visible on the left. In the background, a large, multi-towered stone castle sits atop a hill. The castle has several towers with conical roofs and many small windows. The sky is overcast and grey.

THE SAIMAA PHENOMENON

The name of our Capital of Culture project stems from a documentary film by Aki and Mika Kaurismäki, which captures the most popular Finnish rock bands of the early 1980s as they toured Lake Saimaa on a steamship in 1981. Musician Ismo Alanko was one of the original artists on the Tuuliajolla tour. The tour also made the point that Finnish rock'n'roll was going strong throughout the country and not only in the clubs and bars of Helsinki. The iconic film, and the spirit it represents, is widely known in Finland. Our ECoC project name has the Kaurismäki brothers' approval.

Festival in collaboration with Timisoara 2023's Memories of The Citadel.

In 2026 we will work together with the European steamship network by organising seminars for a virtual event and presentations of steamships in their home harbours. The festival will culminate at the same time in different parts of Europe in a virtual Steamship Regatta; live-streamed so anyone who is interested can follow online. The festival can also be viewed on a giant screen on the island of Riihisaari. At the closing event in Savonlinna, Ilja Bortnuk and his talented team will set up a grand dinner concert featuring cuisine prepared by top chefs from Finland and Russia, and international guest artists will take the stage to give us an unforgettable performance.

Partners: The Lake Saimaa Nature and Museum Centre Riihisaari, the Finnish Steam Yacht Association, the Laukansaari sobriety society, The Association of Castles and Museums around the Baltic Sea, Light Music Cultural Communication Agency (RU), Cinematographer Pauli Bessonoff, musician Ismo Alanko, Timisoara 2023

Timetable: 2025–2026

Arts and Culture on the Waters



Arts and culture will travel along the water during the ECOC year. Our artists will take over the region's lakesides, islands, villages and cities and stage their unprecedented and unique performances for people to experience. Saimaa with its bays and peninsulas has served as a stage for many tours and performances. During the seasons of open water, various events and arts will glide along the water into harbours and villages; whereas in the winter, performances can be staged on bare ice.

In this programme we can offer international artists the opportunity to come experience Saimaa as a source of creativity, a production platform and unique environment for producing art through an open international call.

We will provide a time and place for art to be featured during the slower seasons as well. We will purposefully cause small-scale events to coincide with each other so that they can join together and transform into much larger, totally new festivals. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will coordinate the timing of festivals and enable the production of events together with municipalities and cities which can also serve as venues for events. These newly created events will also support our City <3 countryside programme content.

We will work in close cooperation with the Veszprém-Balaton 2023 project in producing all-year round cultural activities (Balaton 365). Hungarian arts and design students at the Moholy-Nagy University of Arts and Design and the Veszprém University of Pannonia will design new concepts in the city of Balatonalmádi for different seasons of the year and will redesign beach furniture and the infrastructure on the shores of Lake Balaton. In 2024 multi-sectoral student groups will set out to solve event design challenges related to new festivals planned for Savonlinna under the Arts and Culture on the Waters programme. Their objective is to create prototypes and capability for a new operational model: to determine the required know-how and event structures to achieve activities all year-round.

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Skill Share Lab programme will facilitate participation in the Veszprém project for students at the University of Eastern Finland Business School's Tourism Marketing and Management programme, Savonia University of Applied Sciences (design), and the LAB University of Applied Sciences.

The "Finland's Largest Museum" programme created by the network of museums in eastern Finland will be integrated into the Arts and Culture on the Waters programme.

AFLOAT. Life on Earth is dependent on sunlight and clean water. Plants make use of both by photosynthesising all the oxygen in the atmosphere and by growing biomass on which all the food chains are based.

Afloat is an art project produced by the Band of Weeds which demonstrates, using plants, the significance of pure water to all living organisms, and maps the relationship between humans and specific individual plants which are significant to people in the Saimaa area. The result is a series of concerts which will be presented on Lake Saimaa and its shores.

The concert programme will consist of plant recordings made in the various Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities and the sounds of the lake plants found in the crystal-clear water of Saimaa lakes. City plants to be chosen will have a personal relationship with the artists or hold a significant memory. Residents of the specific cities may be asked to share memories and stories about plants that are significant to them and this material will be used in composing the artwork. Lake plants to be chosen will be species that exemplify pure water; for example, water lobelia (*Lobelia dortmanna*), water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus peltatus*) and spiny quillwort (*Isoetes echinospora*, or *lacustris*). Lake plants will form a background for the whole recording and the plants which represent cities will bring their own tone pattern to the forefront.

Partners: Band of Weeds artists: Olli Aarni, Lauri Ainala, Kalle Hamm, Hermann Keko **Timetable:** 2026

STORIES OF ICE AND WATER will dive deep into Lake Saimaa and raise mythical beings and stories from its depths.

The mystical underwater world has inspired poets and storytellers throughout the ages. Supernatural powers, elves and deities have all been believed to live under the calm surface of the lake, in the eyes of swamps, in springs and in the churns of rapids and the swirls of a mist. Water is a primal force,

the prerequisite of life, cleanser of the soul. New stories emerge from old myths, replenished with new perspectives and beliefs. What does Saimaa nature, pure water and the world hidden under the water mean to a modern person, to the world, and to modern society?

Saimaa Theatre is a troupe that sails the Saimaa waters. Composed of professional performing artists, it has been going strong since 2014. In 2026, the theatre will produce a winter tour on the frozen lakes. Quiet harbours, snowy piers, and icy open spaces will serve as props and stands, when the Saimaa Theatre performs its “Stories of Ice”.

In summer 2026, Saimaa Theatre will expand its traditional boat tour to encompass all of Saimaa; it will berth at harbours in small villages and take modern folk theatre to stages of historically valuable village halls.

Partner: Saimaa Theatre **Timetable:** 2025–2026

LOTJA (BARGE). An old barge will be transformed into a floating stage to be used in the Arts and Culture on the Waters tours. The performances on Lotja will take place on the waves of Saimaa and the audience can follow the performance from their own boat or, perhaps, on a steamship leaving the Savonlinna harbour. Often we watch performances with our backs turned towards the lake, but now we will turn around so we can view the open water. To avoid language barriers, performances on Lotja will focus on non-verbal expression. Artists will be invited to participate through an open call. Lotja will sail Lake Saimaa when the water is open in 2026 and take art excursions to the rock paintings of Astuvansalmi as well as the centre of Savonlinna.

We will implement an artist and art programme exchange programme in 2023 with Hungary’s Veszprém-Balaton (Ferryboat – A festival of somewhere in between) and in 2026 with Slovakia’s Trenčín (Green Bridge 2023–2026 legacy).

SAIMAA LIVE! organised by the Nature and Science Centre SAIMAARIUM in Lappeenranta will send real-time transmissions from several nature and event sites. Impacts of the changing seasons, exhibitions of ancient art on rocks, and the heartbeats of life on Saimaa shores will be transmitted from several places.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will organise arts and cultural programmes for live transmissions. A performance may appear in front of a camera conveying visuals from a nature site or the transmission might include musical art.

Saimaa LIVE! will make its debut at the beginning of the year by dance artists Jukka Ristolainen and Maija Tuomi, who manage the Kokko1721 artists-in-residency programme in the municipality of Kangasniemi. Ristolainen’s and Tuomi’s work focuses on site-specific improvisation and the relation of motion to the surrounding nature, people, and built-up environment. In 2017 Ristolainen and Tuomi produced their art performance “Dance on Saimaa”, where they rowed and danced for almost 200 kilometres, along the water from Savonlinna to Mikkeli.

Partners: Nature and Science Centre SAIMAARIUM, Jukka Ristolainen, Maija Tuomi, and international and Finnish artists to be selected by an open call **Timetable:** 2026

LANDSCAPE SOUNDS. Site-specific concerts bring listening experiences into new atmospheric and extraordinary places, such as among prehistoric rock paintings, alongside a swamp formed 9,500 years ago, and to interesting acoustic spaces formed by boulders. The music is expressly composed to be performed in nature. The concept will tour around many different nature attractions in Saimaa. The concerts will be

KIZHI BELLS. Igor Arhipov comes from a long line of Karelian folk musicians. He revived Russian Karelian Orthodox Church bell ringing music in 1988 after it had been forgotten for decades. From then on, the bells continue to ring at the renowned churches of the Kizhi open-air museum, and in different parts of Karelia, as well as outside Karelia. Igor Arhipov will bring a 9-bell mobile set of bells which he has developed with Igor Hutter, with him to Lotja. The bells are rung by striking on tensed strings set in front of the ringer. The strings are tied to the bell clappers. Their bells have a joyful ring to them, sounding true to the Karelian heritage of conveying emotions on totally different scales compared to other European bells. Ringing of the bells is based on improvisation and varying. Each bell ringing session is unique when the heritage of the Kizhi Museum Island echoes on Lake Saimaa.

Partners: Artists: Igor Arhipov & Igor Hutter (RU)
Timetable: 2026

recorded three dimensionally so that they can later be experienced via an augmented reality application on site or remotely. This lessens the congestion of tourism, and experiences can be produced digitally so performances can be relived throughout the whole year.

Attractions/sites/destinations: Orinoro gorge, Leppävirta (North Savo), Ukonvuori, Kolovesi National Park, Enonkoski (South Savo), Kesonsuo, Ilomantsi (North Karelia), Kummakivi, Ruokolahti (South Karelia), Pihlajaniemi, Savonlinna **Partners:** Äänikkö-kollektiivi: (Äänikkö Collective) Anna Chekassina (RU), Biliana Vouchkova (BG/DE), Miles Perkins (CA/DE), Lauri Sallinen, Eivind Lønning (NO), Colm O’Hara (IE), Tatu Rönkkö, Markus Pesonen **Timetable:** 2026

Become bewildered by art



We will raise local people into the limelight and revive communality in our everyday life. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Skill Share Lab will train local guides who will lead guests to immerse themselves in everyday Saimaa life in an authentic way. With the help of the local guides or a digital platform one can find the way to nature attractions, island or village stores, dance pavilions, secret swimming, or fishing spots. Local professionals in the creative fields will produce unexpected encounters and experiences along the way in the programme. You may come across art under a bridge, on a rowing trip, behind ferries or in a lagoon. Art invites us to participate, do and experience things together.

The Great Saimaa Water Tour project themes can be found in the cultural diversity of the Great Saimaa area, its creative and charismatic people, Finland as part of the European community, and the interconnection of all these perspectives. The tour will be brought about by unique cultural events in the countryside, workshops, and a communal working spirit, which will create forceful experiences. Participating villagers and local players will create “village artwork” for water tour attractions, with the support of the environmental and communal artists involved in the project. Each of these attractions will be the venue of a distinctive local event. The unique and engaging ITE-artists and ITE-environments of eastern Finland will be highlighted along the routes, in workshops, and in the work demonstrations. In 2026, the Great Saimaa Water Tour will culminate in an extensive series of events and a large water convoy of boats and ships.

Partners: the Association for Rural Culture and Education, Teatteri-traktori (Tractor Theatre), Saimaa region Leader activity groups, village associations, and international ITE Art and contemporary folk art networks **Timetable:** 2026

Countryside artist communities Kulttuurikiska, Kolkkokollektiivi, and Parkumäen Masinistit (which specialises in old machines and gadgets) will invite experimenters of all ages to venture on the brink of creative ridiculousness. This interdisciplinary and multi-art project will entail constructing a pig Latin generator, scrap metal robot, weather poem machine, and a mystery machine equipped with unartificial intelligence. The machines can be easily moved from one place to another and many of the gadgets will function all year round. In addition to machines, the “Knocking” exhibit is designed to take the listener to a cracked-up and dreary world that can be experienced under bridges, on piers, in ancient forests, and amongst shrubbery.

Culture Swing Coop workshops and events will take place both on and under water – which will engage people living by the lake to take a stand and to scrutinise the future of humans and their well-being in relation to the purity of water.

Partners: Kulttuurikiska, Kolkkokollektiivi and Parkumäen Masinistit, Culture Swing, Tuomo Haapala (SE) **Timetable:** 2026

Muhasaaren Teatteri (Muhasaari Theatre) presents performing arts in an old barn attic on the island of Muhasaari, on Lake Saimaa. In 2026, theatre performances will spread out on the ferry routes, the shores, nearby islands, and other outside locations. The majority of Finland’s ferries serving inland water routes are located on Lake Saimaa. The tour-like series of performances will be vividly tinted by French physical theatre.

Partners: Muhasaari Theatre in cooperation with Institut Français de Finlande, Finferries **Timetable:** 2026

Joensuun Vapaa Teatteri (Independent Theatre of Joensuu) will produce an annual communal modern art display, Välke (Lo Splendore) which will take place in August 2023–2026 on the Ilosaari lagoons. This

impressive work will gather more than one hundred performers, each telling their own story through their art. People of different ages and from different cultures will share their stories about turning points in their own lives and the significance that water has on their livelihood. Family history, and the life-changing events that have occurred, will be interpreted in the form of modern art. A collage of photos and texts (in English) will be collected annually from all exhibition participants and will be saved on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform.

Partners: Independent Theatre of Joensuu **Timetable:** 2023–2026

CULTURE OF THE FOREST

The current situation in the world challenges us to rethink how we live and encourages us to make radical changes to ingrained habits. The Culture of the Forest programme will address forest mythology and query: “What can we learn from the past?” – that is, with respect to living more modestly on nature’s own terms.

City(e)scape



A cathedral will be built in the midst of the forest, providing a space where each visitor can discover their own creativity.

Architect **Sami Rintala** currently lives in Bodø, Norway, but he will make a return to his roots in eastern Finland once again to exhibit his **City(e)scape / Return to the forest** installation. Once completed, his project

will feature a cathedral located amid the forest, in close proximity to the water. The forest cathedral will serve as a haven for silence, networking and creating experiences.

City(e)scape is literally a return to the roots of European culture. Greek and Roman temples were sacred throwbacks, echoes of the time when culture in continental Europe was still developing and growing from within the middle of the forest. The forest has always been an important part of life and a sacred place from where we have hunted food and sought protection when our well-being has been threatened. Our traditional forest relationship is an unending source of creativity that we can share with others throughout Europe.

The location for the cathedral will be decided upon by a tendering process whereby interested Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 municipalities can submit an entry for a suitable building site and engage the services of a local partner to provide the necessary building materials. Three to five suitable sites for the forest cathedral will be selected for review in 2024, and a panel headed by Sami Rintala will make the final decision on the location. Universities offering architectural studies who also have insight of northern dimensions and knowledge about winter conditions will be invited to participate as cooperation partners. A group of architectural students will be chosen through an open call to work on the design and construction of the forest cathedral.

City(e)scape buildings will be ecologically designed and constructed with the least possible disturbance to nearby nature, and in a way in which they will seamlessly blend into the landscape. Architectural students will conduct their research and learn and design under the careful guidance of Sami Rintala. Materials used in construction of the buildings, such as natural stone and wood, will be procured from nearby locations. In addition to the main building, a storage

building, eco-friendly outhouse, and sauna will also be constructed. It will be possible to follow the design and construction process of the cathedral virtually, via the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform.

The Forest Cathedral will be inaugurated in 2026. Thereafter it will serve as a base for international scholars and artists who will have the opportunity to work immersed within the unique nature of eastern Finland. Once the forest cathedral is completed it will host a variety of day courses and longer-term educational and residency programmes. The space will also be offered to various associations and NGOs for their activities. The cathedral will provide a visitor with such an outstanding experience that they will return from there a changed person.

Partners: Sami Rintala (NO), 5 international universities, one municipality and enterprises to be selected through an open call
Timetable: 2024–2027

Lovet2026



“Lovi” is a term that originated in Finnish mythology and relates to supernatural places and a mystical state of being. When a seer fell into a “lovi”, they made contact with the other side.

Lovet 2026 is a joint forest culture project of the Finnish Forest Museum Lusto, the Slovak Vychylovka Forest Museum, and the Kizhi Museum Island of the Russian Federation. The project explores the myths, religions, and beliefs of different cultures and their relationship with the forest. Finnish sauna culture is already on UNESCO’s Cultural Heritage List. The next endeavor is to get the Finnish forest relationship listed as a cultural heritage of humanity.

Cooperation between the Finnish Forest Museum Lusto and the Kizhi Museum Island in Russian Karelia will begin with a seminar in autumn 2026. The

Vychylovka Forest Museum and the Beskid Forest Railway (Slovakia, Žilina 2026) project will be invited to the following seminar which aims to create a theme for a joint wood sculpture exhibition. An open call for Finnish, Slovakian and Russian artists will open in 2022. Annual seminars and workshops at the Vychylovka Forest Museum, for example, are planned which will introduce artists to the traditions of wood construction and their use in the design of new types of structures and works of art. In June 2026, artists will gather in Punkaharju to complete their artwork for a joint exhibition staged on the Finnish Forest Museum Lusto grounds, as part of Lusto’s largest event – the Forest Culture Days.

Participating museums:

Finnish Forest Museum Lusto is the national museum responsible for nurturing forest culture – an international meeting place for the past and future – a living history of man and his relationship with the forest – located by the Punkaharju esker, in Savonlinna. Lusto’s exhibitions, collections, events, work demonstrations, and theme days tell about the forest, and its significance in the lives of Finns. The largest event at Lusto, the biannual Forest Culture Days, offers an eventful weekend for families and forest lovers everywhere. Approximately 6,000 visitors from all over Finland are expected to attend Finland’s largest forest culture event.

The Vychylovka Forest Museum and Beskid Forest Railway (Slovakia, Žilina 2026) includes the construction of a new forest museum, including exhibition, workshop, and residence facilities. The series of three new, eco-friendly wooden buildings maintained by the Kysuce Museum offer modern museum services and a family-friendly interactive experience. The museum also offers technical production facilities for artists and craftspeople



working with wood. The museum hosts programmes for professionals in the form of discussions, environmental research, and workshops on wood-based contemporary architecture and design.

The Kizhi Museum Island is an approximate 66-km boat ride from the city of Petrozavodsk. The Kizhi Pogost was added as a significant culture and nature reserve to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1990. During the 1400s the Kizhi island became a regional centre, or pogosta, around which a World Heritage Site was established to preserve a world-famous group of wooden churches. The unique buildings are complemented by Orthodox prayer chapels, or tsasounas, traditional Karelian houses, granaries, mills, shops, smoke saunas, and abundant old artefacts. The oldest tsasouna that has been transferred to the site dates back to the 1300s.

The museum's collections include a unique collection of nearly 600 icons, some of which can be seen in the virtual iconostasis opened by the museum.

Partners: Finnish Forest Museum Lusto, Vychylovka Forest Museum (SK) and the Kizhi Museum island of the Russian Federation (RU), Žilina 2026 **Timetable:** 2024–2026

Art Trek



This art event will merge place-specific artwork with nature, along water routes and trekking trails.

Art Trek is a joint project organised by four visual artists' associations in Saimaa, designed to transport art and art lovers into the middle of nature. The project involves close cooperation in the form of exchanging artists and artwork with Žilina 2026. In Slovakia, art will take over in the cottages located alongside mountain trails. In Saimaa, 3 to 5 trekking trails or water routes will be chosen as special sites for the

art in each of the four regions. The works of art will be built on the terrain in stages during 2026 and will be visible, for example, on island sheds, campfire sites, or along the rapids at fishing sites. Snow and ice sculptures created during the winter will gradually disappear into the terrain as spring arrives. Artwork created in the spring, summer and autumn will either be temporary or remain visible in the forest for many years after their creation. All the materials used in the artworks will be environmentally friendly and biodegradable. Some of the works will be interactive; visitors travelling along the route can become part of the artwork or even participate in its construction.

Art Trek will be accessible to all! Route descriptions and recordings of the works will be compiled on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform.

Two participatory art events will take place in conjunction with Art Trek. At the end of February 2026, a communal event, **Taidepilkki (Art ice-fishing)** will unite artists, art, local residents, and travellers. We assume that we will have ice that withstands the weight of people on the lakes and we can do some ice-fishing surrounded by artwork. In case the weather is unfavourable, the event will go forward by applying artistic creativity. In the **Elosoutelu (August Row/Life Row)** event, illuminated row boats laden with art, will glide along the water in the darkening August evening, beckoning to other row boats and rafts to join the parade on water.

Partners: Ars Nova, Joensuu Artists' club, Kaakon taide – Artists' Association of South East Finland, Kuopio artists (Ars Libera) / Savonlinna International Nature Film Festival, ANTI-festival, LAB University of Applied Sciences, M_Itä? Biennial, Žilina 2026 (SK), Kotkatharju (Joroinen), international open call for artists **Timetable:** 2024–2026

SWAMP EMBRACE. We will take art to the peatlands and at the same time will take part in restoring the swamps to their original state. Linking scientific data and bioArt will broaden the spectrum of environmental art in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. A peatland will be

designated in each regional area as a site for an event or as a location for displaying artwork. The works will be part of the restoration of the area and they can be, for example, land art or bioArt. Our partner, Hiilipörssi (Carbon Market Ltd) will restore drained peatlands in cooperation with corporations interested in emission compensation. Hiilipörssi started up operations within the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation in a research project on ecological compensations. Environmental art projects also took place at the peatland sites. The environmental art by Hiilipörssi evolved into many different forms, from audio artwork to virtual reality and communal events.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will invite Spoken Word poetry and rap artists to a "suohonlaulu" ("sing into a swamp") battle. Inspiration for the themes will be drawn from everyone's own relationship with nature. The swamp as an art site will create a special dimension to the performances and will offer a background for solitude at the forefront of words. The battle will launch the series of artwork to be created by swamps.

Partners: Hiilipörssi, stage poet Veera Milja, stage poet and word art director Juho Kuusi. **Timetable:** 2026

The Spirit of the Forest



An experiential programme which utilises the forest and nature as an implementation platform for art.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will conduct an open international call to locate artists to create, for example, music, dance, or light art for our environmentally friendly festivals in eastern Finland, and for the Saimaa Geopark AR/VR application. The open calls for programmes challenge artists to think about their own relationship with nature and their lifestyle through their artwork.

Works of art come to life in geologically interesting natural sites. How has the Saimaa landscape been shaped? Why did man choose these particular areas to establish his home at the time?

Saimaa Geopark which is expected to receive a UNESCO Global Geopark (UGG) status any day now, seeks to present stories about the region and its landscape and its unique geological, archaeological, historical, and cultural sites through the AR and VR content it produces. The first version of the application will be completed in summer 2021. Saimaa Geopark and Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will jointly open an international artwork call in October 2021, using the materials produced for the application as a starting point for art ideation:

1. Landscape stories (3D modelling of major natural phenomena, such as lake surface change).
2. Human living and cultural heritage
3. Creation of eskers and the Salpausselkä esker system

As a result of the artwork search, five 3–6 minute Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 works will be published in the Saimaa Geopark application. The works will be publicised annually in connection with the opening of the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa and the European Capital of Culture year. Saimaa Geopark feeds for AR and VR content can be found at Geopark sites in different parts of the Saimaa region.

Festival organisers who value the environment will share their know-how and search for international artists for side events.

Eastern Finland is the promised land of a variety of summer festivals. Event organisers understand the significance of sustainable development in their activities, whether their event takes place in an urban

area or in nature. Even the smallest festival does not come about without the work input of volunteers, i.e. communal workers. Volunteers play a significant role; especially when the inspiration of doing things together by helping your friend, spreads. Experienced event organisers will share their own experiences and skills in a Masters and Apprentices spirit, also engaging new international partners.

Festivals in eastern Finland are always an unforgettable experience; for the artists involved (especially international artists) and of course, for the guests. A call will be opened for side programmes to complement five of our programmes. The ECoC year programme will include five side programmes that a separately invited panel will select. The call will open in spring 2021 and will be publicised in autumn 2025.

A programme call will be conducted in cooperation with each of the following festivals:

Savonlinna International Nature Film Festival

(SINFF) is an interdisciplinary film festival that was established in 2010. The four-day festival highlights leading films featuring environmental themes, art and discussions, and serves as a common forum for the film makers, experts, artists and, of course, the festival audience. Films at the festival provide us views out of our own anthropocentric world perspective and into the worlds of other species.

Kosmos Festival is an annual event which is celebrated in the village of Närhilä, in Ristiina, on the outskirts of the city of Mikkeli. Kosmos Festival takes place over a four-day period and is the largest alternative culture and music festival to combine different styles of electronic music, arts, visuals, performances, lectures, and workshops immersed in nature. The festival's location is in the middle of the forest. The landowner and villagers are engaged in organising the event.

UUS Festival takes place in Lappeenranta and focuses on the arts and music. Festival profits are used to purchase forest land for conservation through Ilmastometsä ry (Climate Forest). The UUS Festival is the first carbon negative festival in Finland, with the objective of collecting funds for carbon capture and supporting activities of local climate change activists.

Finland Ice Marathon (FIM) has been organised since 1984. It is Finland's oldest and most popular outdoor skating event organised on natural ice, on the lake. The event includes a wide array of activities, including competitions of varying lengths in studded bike racing, kicksparking, Nordic skating, and tour skating. This annual event attracts hundreds of competitors from all over the world. The unique natural 12.5 km-long tour skating tracks start from the Kuopio passenger harbour and wind around beautiful Lake Kallavesi in winter.

Local skills and products play a central role in the marathon and are incorporated as much as possible when organising the event. Examples include prizes sculpted of recycled wood and carbon neutral souvenirs which are produced by local craftspeople in the region.

The **ILO!LUMI ("Joy!Snow") event** combines snow with elements of art + play + entrepreneurship + tourism + undiscovered opportunities for entrepreneurship. Additionally, the event raises the question of snow and ice as a climate-related issue. In many places, the presence of snow can no longer be taken for granted. The event connects the municipality of the venue (Ilomantsi, Ilo = joy) with the joy winter brings and demonstrates snow (lumi) sculpturing as a fun past time. Snow creates zero waste: nature itself takes care of the recycling by melting the snow and allowing it to become part of the water cycle. The event will be digitised, so viewers can watch the programme online.

Partners: Saimaa Geopark, Kosmos Festival, Savonlinna International Nature Film Festival, UUS Festival, Finland Ice Marathon, ILO!LUMI!
Nitra 2026 Timetable: 2021–2026

PERMISSION TO BE DIFFERENT

Eastern Finland is replete with thousands of second homes, cottages, and villas. We are multilocals, accustomed to life in the city as well as in the country. Many of us choose to return to our families and roots on the shores of Lake Saimaa – here you can kick back, relax and discover another way of being.

During the past decades, a certain type of culture has developed focusing on leisure time living. The core family expands into a larger family: a circle of friends or neighbours. Laid back summer days pass by quickly, while enjoying gardening and competing at playful Olympic games. One person may wish to live a reclusive cottage life, whereas another wants to meet up with acquaintances and participate in all sorts of cultural events. The majority of the second homes are quiet in the winter, but many multilocals choose to remain amid the snow and ice to enjoy the cold winter days and the silence of mid-winter.

The Saimaa region is the most well-known place to feature lakeside saunas. The Mikkeli area alone boasts about 30,000 lakeside saunas. In addition to private saunas, abundant public saunas are also available in the Saimaa region. In 2020, the city of Mikkeli celebrated its anniversary (7th of March) by inviting all its citizens to join in ten different types of sauna brought to the marketplace. In the communal event, the city staff worked as “saunamajuri” (“sauna major”, the person responsible for heating up the sauna) along with volunteers. The “hot tub panel” served as a place for discussion about current events among the city’s decision-makers. The exceptional summer of 2020 also saw the dawning of a new sauna event in Savonlinna, when saunas were heated up in the Olavinlinna landscape, on a raft, in a caravan, tent, and

a ship. Sauna-goers cooled off by jumping into pristine Lake Saimaa – in the middle of the city! As a communal project, a historic Finnish log sauna will be constructed in Savonlinna, on the island of Riihisaari in 2024–2025, drawing inspiration from traditional building methods.

Sauna is the very essence of being a Finn, a traditional place of purification and meditation – a place with which everyone calling themselves a Finn has some kind of relationship. The sauna is a place for discussion and peaceful contemplation, where everyone is equal. It is one of our sacred places. The word SAUNA is one of those rare Finnish words that has spread throughout the world. We wish to share our love for the sauna with our neighbouring countries as well. We cast “löyly” (water to produce steam) onto a common stone stove and invite others to enjoy the experience with us.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has invited Tampere 2026 and Oulu 2026 to join us in the sauna.

Decades at the Cottage



Summer cottages are like time capsules; they convey a story about life at the cottage during different decades. During the annual “Summer Cottage Open-Doors” event anyone who wishes to, can open their cottage to visitors, organise a thrift market or pop-up summer kitchen in their garden.

Finnish cottage culture has changed quite dramatically from the 1800s, from a time when only the wealthy spent summers at their villas in the countryside, into a way of life for many Finnish families nowadays. Cottages can be anything from a basic hut without

any comforts to a fully furnished second home that is habitable all year round.

During 2022–2025 we will collect different types of memories of “Happy Summers” from people’s cottage diaries, food recipes and artefacts. A group of artists from different backgrounds will put together the acquired material and will create digital art to be saved on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform. The art will depict the “civilised folk’s” villa culture from the 1930s, “everyone’s” cottage holidays in the 1960s, the “communal” holiday-making of the 1970s and the “second home” culture beginning from the 1990s. The group will design the milieus around rental cottages and manuals describing the daily routines of cottage life and food recipes. The manuals will be written in several different languages.

In 2026 our guests will have the opportunity to rent these cottages – time capsules that take them into past cottage life. The experience will be a true “blast from the past”: allowing a guest the opportunity to relive the moments of the person who has actually lived in the cottage. The digital material compiled by the artist collective can be accessed whenever you want.

In the **Summer Cottage Open-doors** event Finnish cottage doors will be open to guests in July–August 2026. All multilocals can join in the event, no matter what type of house or grounds are in question. Guests can taste authentic local cuisine at the cottages or buy used goods – anybody signing up can decide themselves what they want to put on offer. The sites will be introduced on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform, so each guest can design their own cottage tour.

Partners: artist collective: Elina Talvensaari, Film director; Paavo Halonen, Textile Designer, Artist; Juhana Moisander, Artist; Matleena Jänis, Photographer and Film director, D.O. Saimaa, Mikkeli’s “Dream Year of Culture” 2022 project, Mikkeliin seudun vapaa-ajanasukasvaltuuskunta (leisure residents’ delegation), Mikkeli Development Miksei Ltd, Laiturilla project, Mäntyharju museum / collections and cultural services **Timetable:** 2022–2026

Pop up Sauna



Throughout the ages, Finns have used the sauna as a place for refreshment and problem solving. Whenever we have guests, we heat up the sauna. When it is time to make deals, we seat our business partner in the sauna. Even our State guests are invited to talk politics in the sauna: in the sauna we are all equals.

Pop Up Sauna brings people together to experience the magical, connecting powers of bathing in a sauna. The same seats offer a place for both, conservatives and liberals, urban and rural people to sit together and enjoy the heat and converse – and to see what happens.

Pop Up Sauna will begin its travels from Sulkava, which earlier on was divided by the border between Russia and Finland. The sauna will continue its journey to sites on the shores of Lake Saimaa where Finns and Russians have been at battle or where arguments have taken place in the past. Modern bathers will take over these places by sweating together.

The travels of the sauna will be documented by a traditional guest book, where everyone can sign their name, write messages to each other, or draft out their own solutions for resolving their own conflicts.

In connection with the touring peace sauna, we will publish a series of discussions on the web in the spirit of “How to build peace the Finnish way”. In the series Finnish politicians will tell how the sauna is used as a tool of diplomacy.

In 2026, the sauna will tour around Saimaa, and then continue its journey to the south, along the border between Finland and Russia. In September – December, the sauna will cross over the national border and invite people to bathe together in the sauna in the name of peace.

Partners: Peace Invaders **Timetable:** 2022–2026

Lauteilla (On the sauna bench)



The Lauteilla series of events opens up saunas to everyone, warming up both bodies and minds, and the hidden traditions of the sauna are revealed to all.

SAIMAA SAUNA DAY is a combination of peeks into saunas in both homes and cottages. Anyone who has a sauna (located anywhere in the world), can sign up to participate in the event, deciding when their sauna will be available and how many sauna-goers they are willing to accommodate. Products and services connected to the Saimaa Sauna Day will be promoted by packing them into easily accessible experiences and product packages.

In 2016 the first Helsinki Sauna Day presented more than 50 saunas. Even though the event took place in Helsinki, the event raised much interest in places such as Germany, California and Malaysia. The city of Mikkeli organised its first-ever regional Rantasauna Day event on 22 July 2017 in cooperation with the Sauna Day event. A total of 15 saunas signed up. In 2026 the event will be organised four times; with one event during each season of the year.

Partners: Visit Mikkeli, Sauna Day (Jaakko Blomberg, Helsinki Urban Art) and Mikkeli Development Miksei Ltd **Timetable:** 2026

SAUNA, SAUN, KYLY, BANYA. Finns, Russians, Estonians and Karelians alike, are all passionate about the sauna. It is time to tell our story about sauna – about how people living in the easternmost part of Europe have been cared for throughout the centuries, how they have bathed forefathers, how they have been cured from illnesses, prepared for celebrations, given birth, and how they have passed away. For good reason the sauna has been referred to as the “pharmacy of the poor”, where people have been cleansed, washed, therapeutically whipped with a “vihta” or “vasta”

(bundle of birch branches), bathed, bled, massaged, and been cured with herbs and folk healing. Certainly a sense of competitiveness shrouds the sauna; Estonia has succeeded in getting the smoke sauna on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the Finnish sauna culture is on the same list.

To us Nordic folk sauna is a sacred place, stripped of anything extra. In the sauna we are all present as humans, in peace and goodwill. In languages related to Finnish, the word “löyly” stands for the life soul of a person. When a sauna is heated up in Võromaa, Estonia, forefathers are also invited to the sauna. Also in Finland, the sauna has been heated up for deceased family members at Christmas. In Karelia, spirits of Earth have been consulted for permission to build a sauna and it was believed that the “kyly” (sauna, bath) had been the home of a kyly host and kyly hostess.

The border-themed sauna programme of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will study the sauna traditions that link Finland, Estonia, Russian Karelia, and Russia together, through methods of storytelling, therapies, and exchanges of know-how. We will bring together sauna experts from our neighbouring countries to unravel the profound knowledge and fading folklore that is hidden not only from other Europeans but a major part of the Finnish people as well. Even though almost all of us enjoy going to the sauna, traditions have partly disappeared from our daily life.

Partners: Mooska Suitsusaunatalu / Sauna mother Eda Veeroja (EE), Sauna grannies – In the footsteps of traditional Finnish sauna healers / Kirsti Viikki, Salla Pyykkönen, Julia Shelepina (RU), Russian national banya association **Timetable:** 2026

THE SAUNA MENTORING EVENT is the meeting place for people with impact on the current and future well-being of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region. The sauna binds people closer together, encourages them to speak kindly about each other, and to turn their eyes and minds towards a mutual future. The programme

includes sauna traditions with a modern twist, a “Praise your colleague once a day” competition, and a touch of performing art. We will remind everyone involved in the development of regional vitality about the significance of achieving the most beneficial ambiance for an encounter, whether it is a sales venue or a public event.

The Sauna mentoring event will tour Saimaa throughout the year of 2026. Seasoned entrepreneurs will mentor new entrepreneurs and those who are upcoming business entrepreneurs. The mentors will work in cooperation with LUT University and international students who are studying in eastern Finland.

We will conduct exchanges in our programmes relating to mythology and folklore with Bodø’s Midsummer Mythology programme, by paying them a visit in Norway in 2024 and we will host them here as a guest in 2026.

Partners: regional organisations of the Federation of Finnish Enterprises and the Young Entrepreneurs, Bodø 2024

THE SPRING

Sustainable development cannot be realised without cultural sustainability. When a person consciously changes their way of thinking, their world view, and their ways of acting, that change impacts the daily lives of other individuals, as well as the economy, politics and administration. From the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 spring percolates clean water and faith in a better future.

Primal Force of Water conference



High-end aquatic research is underway at the universities in eastern Finland. LUT University represents the most

comprehensive expertise in water purification. The research conducted by LUT produces solutions for reclaiming harmful substances and wastewater treatment that can be implemented at their source. University experts continuously create locally applicable solutions for purifying water bodies, stopping the degrading of water quality and for improving the condition of water bodies. The Water Research Community at the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) works in multidisciplinary cooperation involving three different faculties. The UEF Water Research Community aims to be the most internationally recognised Finnish water research organisation by 2030. Research subjects include water safety, wastewater, water environments, and water ecology, including fishery and Saimaa Ringed Seal research, biochemistry and the use of water and water bodies for recreation, and water regulation.

The Primal Force of Water conference will be organised in 2026. The five-day conference will take place in Joensuu and Lappeenranta, aiming to bring together the arts and science by inviting scientists and artists from Finland as well as other parts of the world. The conference will comprise a closed programme with an admission fee for professional delegates from science, arts, and business fields. The conference will also include public lectures and events with science cafés and a Primal Force of Water science and arts event especially for children and young people. A part of the programme will be live-streamed on the internet.

The conference will take place in May, when Lake Saimaa water is at its purest. Also, in the month of May the probability of sighting an endangered Saimaa Ringed Seal is higher, because the seals spend more time on rocks to change their fur. The first part of the conference will take place in Joensuu. Before the conference, participants will be afforded an opportunity to participate on excursions to familiarise themselves with the aquatic environment or technology, and on tours in the Joensuu area. Halfway

through the conference participants can take a boat or train or boat and travel to Lappeenranta for the second half of the conference. After the conference, excursions and tours will be arranged in the nearby surroundings of Lappeenranta. We will cooperate with the Salgammergut H2OH – NO! Conference. We will provide them with up-to-date expertise in water research and in turn, they will provide us with artistic expertise.

Partners: UEF/University of Eastern Finland, water programme, LUT University, Salzkammergut 2024 **Timetable:** 2024–2026

ODE TO CLEAN WATER. North Karelia is known for its pure drinking water, but clean water cannot be taken for granted. Lieksan Somaliperheydistys ry (association for Somali families in Lieksa) /Metka village hall, Ihmisen Teatteri (Human Theatre) and theatre director Tero Sarkkinen, will, through performing art methods, demonstrate the significance of fresh, clean water to all humans and mankind.

Partners: Lieksan Somaliperheydistys ry (association for Somali families in Lieksa), Ihmisen Teatteri (Human Theatre), The Jongunjoki village association, the province of Hirran in Somalia, the University of Eastern Finland, the University of Beledweyne and Lieksan Musiikkiopisto (the Music school in Lieksa) **Timetable:** 2026

Schoolchild Science Meets Art – Cultural content for science workshops



LUT University is a forerunner in integrating studies in technology and economics. In cooperation with Uniori (the Lappeenranta Junior University) and Universoma (the Imatra Junior University), LUT annually organises multi-sectoral learning workshops for all 8th graders in the cities of Lappeenranta and Imatra. The workshops are organised by LUT student guilds and various partners of the two cities. The workshop themes

touch on sustainable development from a perspective of ecological and economical sustainability. LUT University is a member of the International Sustainable Campus Network and the LUT Junior University won the 2020 network's Partnership for Progress award.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 contributes to the 8th graders' workshops by using art as a tool for promoting social and cultural sustainability. Content will be transferred to multidisciplinary curricula and assignments in the schools.

The workshop facilitators will be shaken up in separate workshops in the themes related to social and cultural sustainability. At the same time, partner networks will be broadened when the students in technology and economics, and the region's businesses and other participants network with cultural participants. Training is part of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Skill Share Lab activities and cooperation partners will be invited among other ECoC cities.

The South Karelia Children's Cultural Center Metku will coordinate the cooperation as part of its curriculum and the Kulttuuripolku (Culture Path) laid out in the cultural education programme in the municipal legislation. Metku will be responsible for coordination among the art and cultural participants and schools, for recruiting art educators and teachers, for communications and will produce artwork for a public space together with an exhibitor. The children's centre Metku regional and national network will serve to spread word about the art-science-cooperation model and implementation of the model to other regional, national, and international children's culture stakeholders.

In 2026 an interregional technology competition, Saimaa Around Us, for lower secondary school students will be organised with the intention of supporting the curriculums of schools and to promote the utilisation of science in schools in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 areas. Themes specifically

include the purity of Saimaa, increasing amenity, and sustainable travel on water. The regional theme of the competition will be connected to the StarT activities of the national LUMA (STEM) network (<https://start.luma.fi>), so the competition will enjoy both national and international visibility.

The winners of the competition will be publicised during the Primal Force of Water conference arranged by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, LUT and the UEF. The winners will be awarded with an art experience and will be invited on a visit to the J. Hyneman Center (JHC) that operates in conjunction with LUT. JHC is a meeting place for students of different faculties, for testing various solutions and for building prototypes.

Partners: LUT University, Lappeenranta Junior University, J. Hyneman Center, Metku – Children's Cultural Centre of South Karelia
Timetable: 2026

Say Norppa!



Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will launch a special educational programme for children, the "Say Norppa! (Saimaa Ringed Seal) curriculum" which in 2026 will be fused with art projects produced by various children's cultural players in different parts of eastern Finland. The multi-sectoral Say Norppa! learning programme will be created in cooperation with Saimaa Ringed Seal experts and researchers. It will be implemented among children and young people through basic education and cultural pedagogical content created by partners working with children's culture.

The life of the Saimaa Ringed Seal will be followed and projects implemented through basic lessons in biology, geography, mother tongue, media teaching and lessons in handicrafts and arts. Teaching material with manuals will be compiled for schools and pre-school teachers. A Saimaa Ringed Seal exhibition tour

will be organised based on research and educational material produced. The exhibition will tour around eastern Finland. Together with the students, partners in children's culture will implement different pedagogical drama and art projects.

We will invite the Russian Lake Ladoga area seal researchers, conservationists, schools and children's cultural players and the researchers who are experts in conservation of the Monk seal in the Mediterranean Sea area to cooperate with us. School staff and students will familiarise themselves with the different endangered seal species in different regions and the actions being taken to ensure their conservation.

Partners: The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, Metsähallitus, Savonlinna education and culture department, Saimaarium, Children's Cultural Center Metku, Children's Cultural Center Lastu, Children's culture network Verso, LIFE-project "Our Common Saimaa Ringed Seal", Baltic Ringed Seal Friends Fund, St. Petersburg (RU) **Timetable:** 2023–2026

Connecting the local and the global



ANTI – Contemporary Art Festival is the only international festival focused on location-based city art and live art. This event, held annually in Kuopio, is free of charge to audiences, and provides broad international visibility to the artists involved in the programme. The festival usually generates an audience of approximately 10,000. Through use of social media it is expected that the audience will expand to more than 100,000 people from all over the world. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will include a broad programme created by the ANTI Festival, who will invite a broad network of international partners to participate.

SHORTLIST LIVE! The ANTI Festival will award the world's only International Prize for Live Art and the artwork of four of the nominees will tour around Saimaa. Nominees for the prize will represent the world's most interesting current performing artworks, and the tour will exhibit their artwork so that it can be experienced by all Saimaa residents. An international jury will select the top artists who will tour the following Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities: Kuopio, Mikkeli, Savonlinna, Joensuu and Lappeenranta. A public vote will be organised in connection with the tour, and people will be able to vote for their favourite nominee.

Partners: Live Art Development Agency (GB), New Theatre Institute of Latvia (LV), Second Nature (FR), Falmouth University (GB), Kira Kirsch (AT) **Timetable:** 2026

ASYLUM RESIDENCY. The municipality of Rääkkylä and the ANTI Festival will collaborate with the Artist at Risk network in offering Russian dissidents and artists whose work in their own environment has become difficult, asylum residencies. Rääkkylä has committed its involvement in the project for a period of three years. Experts in the project are Anita Parri, producer (Eve's Rib Festival St. Petersburg), Aarno Rankka, curator, gallerist, sculptor (Gallery Rankka) and Marita Muukkonen and Ivor Stodolsky, Artists at Risk.

Partners: Artists at Risk, Eve's Rib Festival (RU), Gallery Rankka, Thomas Frank & Residenz Schauspiel Leipzig (DE) **Timetable:** 2025–2026

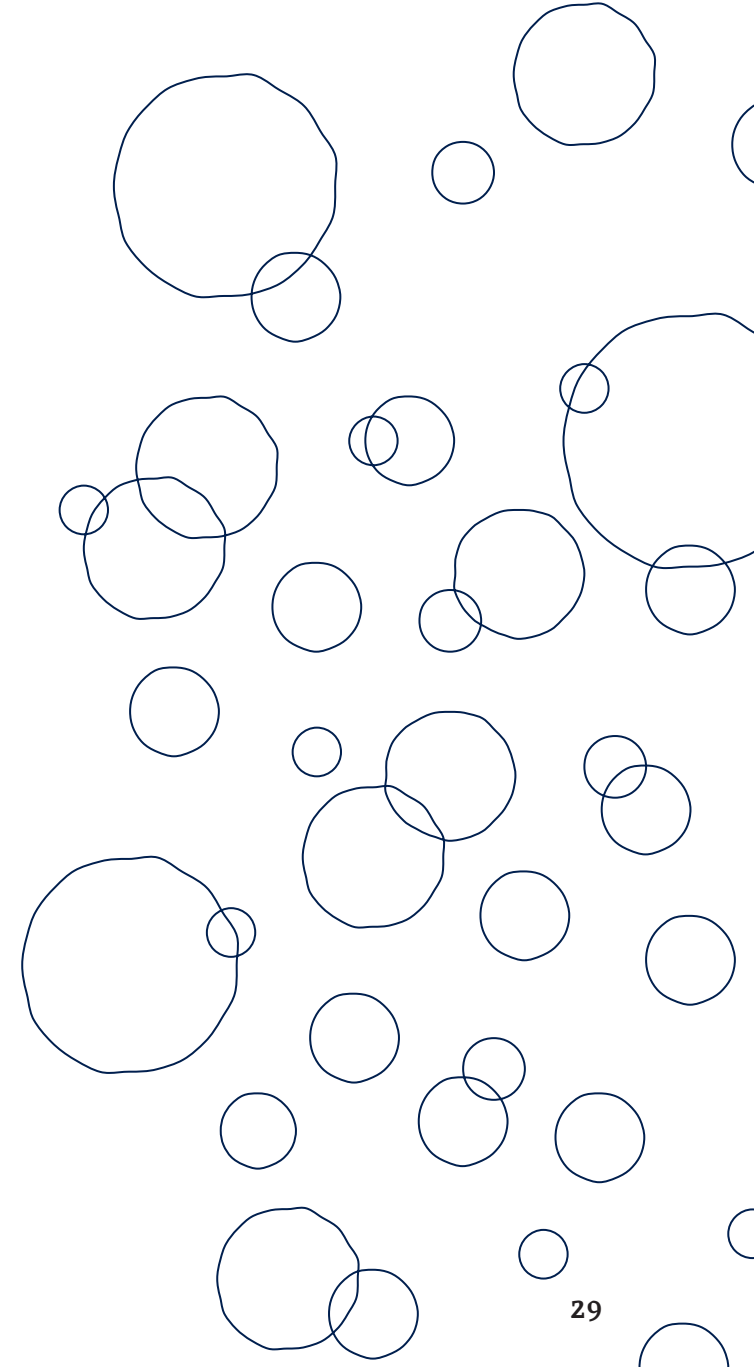
THE APPLE TREE PROJECT will grow different apple species for each of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities for different parts of the cities and their neighbourhoods. An educational mobile app will be connected to the project. In 2026 the ANTI Festival (in collaboration with regional artist associations and a food tourism consortium) will produce, as a sister project of the Apple Tree Project, the artwork: "Hunter, Gatherer, Purveyor" by Canadian artists Mia Rushton

and Eric Moschopedis. The project will combine art and social commitment. Elements of handicrafts, performing arts and inclusion will be intertwined to create edible artworks from the growth of the different regions – ice lollies. The ice lollies of different tastes will represent the cities in the different areas and the audience will have the opportunity to taste the different parts of the cities. At the closing of the project, the audience will get to taste the ice lollies from a bicycle ice cream kiosk in the Apple tree park.

Partners: Mikkeli Art and Design Weekend, S creatives – Savonlinna Art And Design Festival, Norfolk & Norwich Festival (GB), International Festival of Contemporary Theatre – Homo Novus (LV), Food tourism consortium **Timetable:** 2022–2026

THE SOUND OF SAIMAA composition incorporates the archaic primal force of music and fuses it with modern art and the newest technology. Designed with mythological Saimaa landscapes in mind, the piece is a collaborative composition by regional composers, musicians and leading sound artists Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey, who in the past have worked with Aboriginal Australians. As a result of this international group work, a unique Saimaa sound will be created – drawing inspiration from runosong, lament, and kantele playing heritage – into a work that blends well-being, streaming technology and interactive poetic language with artificial intelligence. The project will be filmed and made into a documentary for international distribution.

Partners: Sonica (Scotland), International Festival of Contemporary Theatre – Homo Novus (LV), Chroniques (FR), Sally Cowling (GB), Brighton Festival (GB), Norfolk & Norwich Festival (GB), Kontejner (HR), Modomo Films (FI), Public Art Lab (DE), Liepāja City Council (LV), BEK – Bergen Centre for Electronic Arts (NO) **Timetable:** 2026



Connecting Bridges

ARTS AND CULTURE AS A BRIDGE

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 presents arts and culture as both visible and invisible bridges. The theme will bring cultural institutions in the region together to create joint efforts, allowing both large and small cultural participants to build phenomenal events. We will emphasise cultural equality and collaborate closely with our international partners.

Saimaa Lights



Lighting artist Kari Kola will plan, coordinate and produce Saimaa Phenomenon 2026's opening show "Saimaa Fusion" which will kick off the cultural year. He will also conduct an international "Smelter"

workshop and be in charge of creating a brilliant display of lights for the closing ceremony of the cultural year. The opening show will be produced in conjunction with various partners from the Saimaa arts and culture sector.

SAIMAA FUSION, a collection of works with spectacular visual elements, presents a repertoire of art offerings from the coming cultural year. Several different types of art forms will fill the air and water, the walls of Olavinlinna Castle, and the surrounding islands. The bridges and lakesides in the Kyrönsalmi area of Savonlinna will serve as the stage of the opening event and will form the background of the Savonlinna panorama, which the audience can view from different locations in Savonlinna. Through-composed music, sounding throughout Savonlinna, will frame the show. After the opening show, Olavinlinna Castle and the surrounding islands will be illuminated and the light show will be in place to be viewed for a longer period. Ecological considerations have been taken into account with respect to the work as a whole; both the opening and closing ceremonies will be short-lived, so as not to cause permanent light pollution in the area. New, low-energy equipment will be used, and efforts will be made to obtain all the necessary equipment from nearby areas.

Partners: Kari Kola, Riveria Outokumpu Performance Technology, Southeast Finland University of Applied Sciences XAMK, East Savo Educational Federation SAMIedu, performing arts professionals, arts and cultural schools and amateur clubs **Timetable:** 2022–2026

SMELTING WORKSHOPS. The smelter is a year-round workshop in the visual fields, resulting in new know-how being rooted in the eastern Finland region. The artistic content of these workshops has been drawn from the exceptional natural and cultural sites of

each region and will be spearheaded by international, award-winning art professionals. During the year, five workshops will be held in locations in Eastern Finland:

- South Savo: video art, Nuno Maya / OCUBO. A special target group are kindergartens and primary school children in the area.
- North Karelia: visual arts, Koli national landscape
- South Karelia: light art, Kari Kola, Veijo Rönkkönen Sculpture Park
- North Savo: dance art, islands, peninsulas, caves
- Savonlinna: music, Sylvain Moreau, Olavinlinna and Kyrönsalmi

Each workshop will be attended by 20 visual arts professionals, who engage approximately 10 non-professionals or enthusiasts regionally. In this way, a database of thousands can be compiled in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 area. The ensemble of works created from the artistic content created in the smelter workshops will be live-streamed to all the central cities of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 as part of the closing ceremony of the European Capital of Culture year.

Partners: Light artist Kari Kola, artist Nuno Maya (PT), composer Sylvain Moreau (FR), Veijo Rönkkönen Sculpture Park
Timetable: 2025–2026

Voice to Europe



Voice to Europe creates cultural programme content in many languages. The Voice to Europe programme brings together discussion forums and podcasts from different cultural participants in the region and provides diverse and multilingual content to both local and European audiences. It will be possible to



Regional



International



Skill Share Lab



Flagship



Legacy



Open call



follow the discussions and podcasts via the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform.

BERLIN-SAVONLINNA EXPRESS. European discussions on railways. Top researchers, artists and authors travel from Berlin to Savonlinna in 2026. What will be the “hot” topic of discussion in Europe in 2026? Berlin–Savonlinna Express travels the rail roads through Europe collecting data in every-day language, seeking craziness and wisdom, joy and sorrow, beauty and sanctity and all things as yet unknown. On our way, we will encounter European top researchers, philosophers, authors, and artists, not forgetting people who are European in the most precious of ways: able to exercise free movement, no matter their background and colour of skin.

The interviews will be conducted on trains throughout Europe, in cooperation with Finnish Institutes and other cultural players on the way. The last part of the journey will be from Helsinki to Savonlinna along Eastern Railway and will be sanctified for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

A set of 12 emotional states will travel throughout Europe, narrated by European poets, artists, authors and thinkers, making stops among the hustle and bustle of the cities and on the meadows of small villages. The result will be a website which will gather all the discussions and encounters that have occurred on the way. The work group is led by director-photographer Maria Seppälä.

We will collaborate with the Žilina Intermotion project which will present art programmes produced by VlakFest.

Possible routes: Berlin–Copenhagen–Stockholm–Helsinki–Savonlinna/ Berlin–Rail Baltica (completed by 2026): / Warsaw–Vilnius–Riga–Tallinn–Helsinki–Savonlinna

Partners: director Maria Seppälä, Savonlinna Music Academy, Savonlinna Summer University, Berlin University of the Arts (DE), Žilina 2026 / VlakFest (SK) **Timetable:** 2026

LITERATURE IS ALIVE. Savonlinna’s own Joel Lehtonen, author of the masterful one-day novel “Putkinotko”, was influenced by places as far away as Italy and Switzerland. The Saimaa Cultural Forum will bring together today’s writers and researchers to reflect on different aspects of European fiction and non-fiction. International writers, literary enthusiasts and amateur writers will meet to conduct a seminar, workshops and podcasts.

IN MINNA’S SITTING ROOM. The Minna Canth Academy will organise a series of seminars and discussions taking a stand on the themes of ecological sustainability, equality, well-being and inclusion. These live events will focus not only on the surroundings of Kanttila, where the equality fighter and Kuopio-based writer Minna Canth lived, but will also include wide participation and co-production by others, so that the whole of Europe will become involved in the events.

ROWING RADIO is especially aimed at those who are particularly interested in the local peripheral culture of the eastern Finnish countryside. The themes that will be explored include local music, climate, the future of the countryside, the border region and opportunities for sustainable tourism. Regional multicultural participants and other global citizens will contribute additional content to the podcasts.

THE SAIMAA CULTURAL FORUM is an event that will make its appearance with a tour of eastern Finland during 2026. It will begin in Savonlinna, pass through Joensuu, Kuopio, Mikkeli and Lappeenranta, and finally conclude with a three-day seminar in Savonlinna in November 2026, which will be live-streamed throughout Europe. The seminar will present the achievements of the Capital of Culture year, spotlighting the advancement brought about by the unprecedented level of cooperation in the region, and highlighting the many positive ways in which Saimaa

Phenomenon 2026 has effectuated a permanent change in our cultural field. At the same time, we are already looking ahead to the future: making decisions about how we will maintain these newly found networks and international contacts we have made during this eventful year, and in what ways we can increase our standing as a European city of culture, while enhancing the common Saimaa cultural area.

Partners: The Joel Lehtonen Literature Association, literary events, regional writers’ associations, Ihmekollektiivi (Miracle Collective), artists and writers from eastern Finland, The Association of the Minna Canth House, Smart science café at the University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio City Theatre, Kuopio Music Centre, Savonia University of Applied Sciences, Savo Vocational College **Timetable:** 2022–2026

Saimaa Art Bridge



In addition to independent, foundation or privately funded entities, each city in eastern Finland maintains art institutions that receive funds from the state. Invited and inspired by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, orchestras, museums, theatres, and libraries in the area will implement their own interregional programme content and will thus start up a totally new way of working between regional art institutions.

FINLAND’S LARGEST MUSEUM. Individual museums will showcase their own exhibitions supportive of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 themes on their own premises and when all the museum exhibitions are combined, it will form the largest museum exhibition in Finland.

The museums will utilise the Finna information retrieval service in their exhibitions. Finna provides free access to digital material, making available the collections of several Finnish archives, libraries and museums. This will create **Saimaa Phenomenon 2026’s own Finna view**, through which the digital

materials and collections of the Saimaa region will be made accessible throughout Europe.

A Floating Exhibition will bring one part of Finland's largest museum exhibition to the harbours of Saimaa; it will be constructed on the deck of the S/S Savonlinna, built in 1904. Each landing site will host an experimental exhibition or event related to the industrial history of the area and local body of water. The floating exhibition will be added to the Finna service gradually, through the presentation of industrial sites and ship culture, prior to 2026.

M_itä? Biennial of Contemporary Art illustrates the high degree of diversity and innovativeness portrayed by eastern Finnish contemporary art. Managed by the Mikkeli, Kuopio and Joensuu art museums, the review will be featured simultaneously in five different cities when it expands to Lappeenranta and Savonlinna. International curators will be sought for the biennial of the Capital of Culture year through the European networks of museums.

As part of the Saimaa Skill Share Lab, the regional museums of eastern Finland will be responsible for organising a series of seminars on the archaeology of eastern Finland. In 2021, the City of Imatra will apply for a new national Museum of Wilderness and Natural Culture in its city. Should the museum be located in Imatra, it will open its doors in 2024–2025 and will contribute to expanding the 2026 exhibitions of Finland's largest museum in terms of nature and wilderness culture.

Partners: The National Museum of Finland / Olavinlinna Castle, Finnish Forest Museum LUSTO, Riihisaari – Saimaa Nature and Museum Center, Muisti Centre of War and Peace, Joensuu Museums (North Karelia Museum, Joensuu Art Museum), Imatra Museums (Imatra Art Museum, Imatra City Museum), Lappeenranta museums (South Karelia Museum and Lappeenranta Art Museum), Varkaus Museums (Cultural History Museum, Art Museum), Kuopio Museum Center (Kuopio Art Museum, Kuopio Museum, Kuopio Cultural History Museum, Kuopio

Museum of Natural History), Mikkeli Museums (Suur-Savo Museum (museum of cultural history), Mikkeli Art Museum, Headquarters Museum), RIISA Orthodox Church Museum of Finland, Poleeni The Pieksämäki Cultural Centre, Savo Railway Museum, Border Guard Museum, The National Library of Finland. visual arts associations in the area **Timetable:** 2022–2026

SAIMAA ORCHESTRA BRIDGE. Orchestras in eastern Finland are multinational work communities and are accustomed to practising their artistic work across cultural and language boundaries. Orchestras will learn from Europe and develop a new, common model for their audiences, which will extend to the elderly and those in need of care through singing and playing.

In May 2026, all the regional orchestras will take the stage at the same time in Savonlinna. The entire 120-member Saimaa Symphony Orchestra will premiere an orchestral piece as a tribute to Saimaa nature and its ancient cultural heritage. The work will be commissioned to a Finnish composer in 2022.

Furthermore, the orchestras will work together with the Russian Karelia State Philharmonic and the Ruskeala Symphony Music festival. | TBA -----

Partners: Joensuu City Orchestra, Kuopio City Orchestra, Lappeenranta City Orchestra, Mikkeli City Orchestra, Savonlinna Orchestra, Directorate of the festival and cultural events of the Republic of Karelia **Timetable:** 2022–2026

SEVEN STORIES FROM SAIMAA. The seven professional theatres in the area will tell seven stories about Saimaa through seven different performances. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will announce an open script search for young playwrights – selected premieres will debut in theatres in the Saimaa region during the period of May–September 2026. The accompanying programme highlights will feature stories of artists from different cultures living in the Saimaa region, represented through live music, food, or dance.

Partners: Savonlinna Theatre, Kuopio City Theatre, Joensuu City Theatre, Mikkeli Theatre, Lappeenranta City Theatre, Theatre of Varkaus, Imatra Theatre

Black and white. As part of the theatre collaboration, the Black and White Theatre Festival in Imatra will curate a high-quality tour of the Saimaa region by the famous Schaubühne theatre of Berlin. They will tour all seven of the Saimaa theatres during the year of celebration. The Savonlinna-based Enchanted Festival concept, in conjunction with the Black and White Theatre, will stage performances of puppet and street theatre in cities throughout eastern Finland.

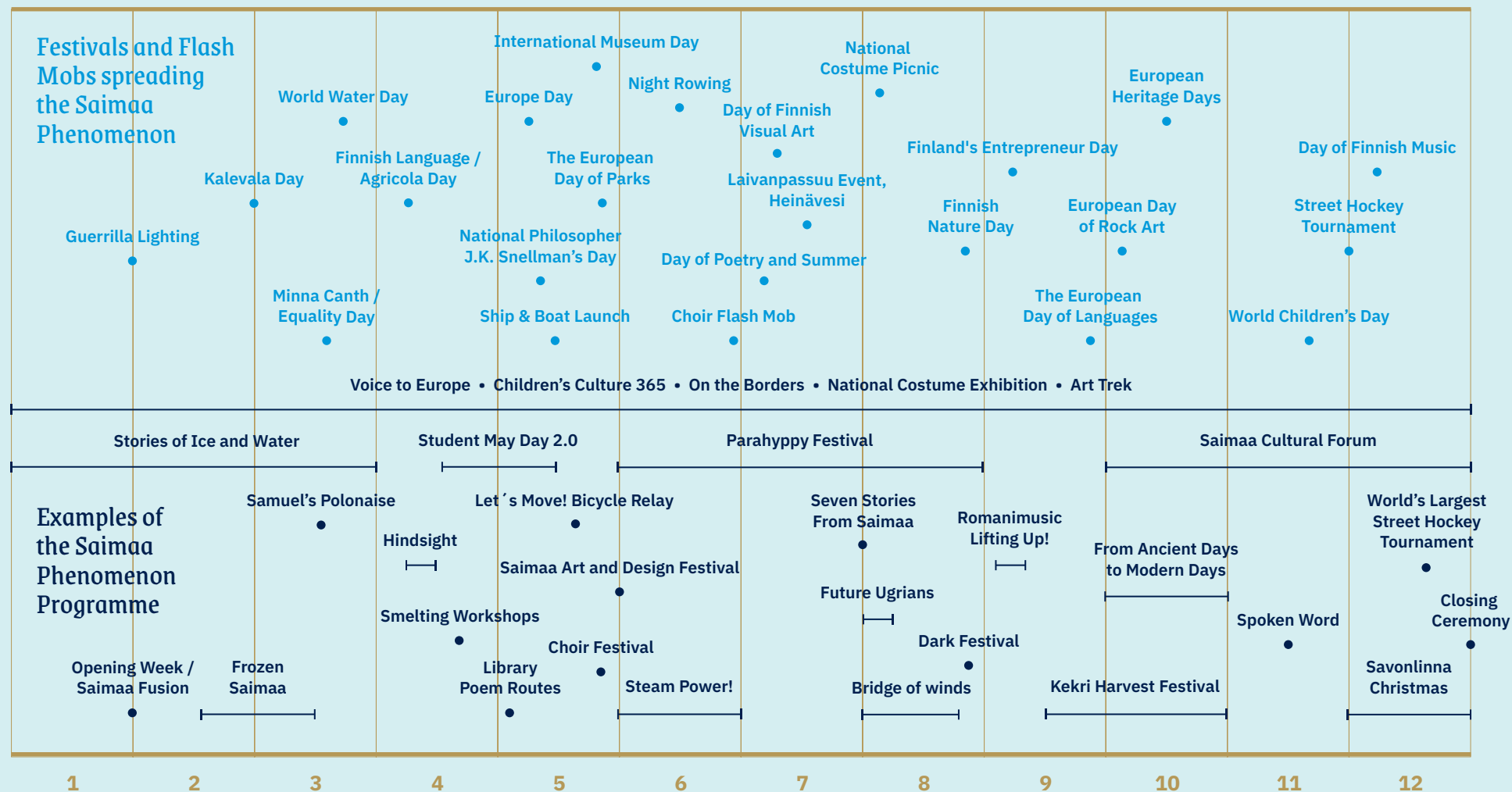
Partners: The Schaubühne (DE), The Black and White Theatre Festival, Kamran Shahmardan, film and theatre director, Lumottu-festivaali (Enchanted Festival), Joutava Ruuhi (Idle Boat), Krepsko Theatre Group, Satuteatteri Punahilkka (Fairytale Theatre Little Red Riding Hood), Theatre Karelus, , shadow artist Paula Vilmi, Close-Act Theatre (NL), Mr. Pejo's Wandering Dolls (RU), International Puppet Theatre Festival "Kukart" (RU), E. Demmeni Marionette Theatre (RU), Puppet theatre of the Republic of Karelia (RU), Olavinlinna – National Museum of Finland, Žilina 2026 **Timetable:** 2026

LIBRARY POEM ROUTES. The library is a fundamental pillar of Finnish equality, education, and training. The 116 libraries and 21 mobile libraries in sparsely populated eastern Finland are places which guarantee access to open data. They also provide spaces where physical and virtual encounters take place, services and goods are loaned out; they are platforms for events, and co-creation and sharing.

In 2026 library buses will be used as messengers of civilisation and the eastern Finnish culture; as a venue for microcultural events at their stops. In addition to books, the library buses will have as passengers local and European artists who, in addition to performing, will talk about literature and its significance in creating art.

Our library bus artists include: Musician brothers Ilja and Johannes Teppo, theatre director Piia Kleimola, circus artist Karoliina Turkka and singer-songwriter Jooe Keskitalo. We welcome European artists to participate in our programme by taking part in our international open call.

Celebrate Together in Savonlinna 2026



Kullervo's literary route which tours from library to library, is a tribute to our national epic, the Kalevala, the most translated and broadly published Finnish literary work. Kalevala has been translated into 59 different languages and can be read and sung throughout the world. The route begins in Kesälahti, where Elias Lönnrot collected his first poems for Kalevala, and ends in Savitaipale, the birthplace of D. E. D. Europaeus (1820–1884), linguist, archaeologist and collector of national poetry. The Kalevala-measure verses collected by Europaeus are established as the basis for the entire epic. Without these verses, Kullervo, a key figure of Kalevala in addition to Väinämöinen, would not have been created.

The route will be designed by Mikko Europaeus, a folklore researcher and musician. Researcher-artist Europaeus will also tour the entire route during 2026 and collect material from the footsteps of Lönnrot and his ancestor, D. E. D. Europaeus. Digital content will be produced from the experiences that arise along the way, and subsequently a written work will be published memorialising the experiences and encounters occurred along the route.

In 2025, we will integrate our own eastern Finnish culture and translated literature into one of the library buses which will be transported to Italy and Slovenia as part of the Bibliobus programme of the Nova Gorica Capital of Culture year.

Partners: North Savo, South Savo, North Karelia and South Karelia libraries, library bus artists Ilja and Johannes Teppo, Piia Kleimola, Karoliina Turkka and Jooe Keskitalo, researcher-artist Mikko Europaeus, Nova Gorica 2025 **Timetable:** 2025–2026

Savonlinna Connecting



Savonlinna is a city of culture – constituting an area much larger than its physical size. The city's extensive cultural and artistic field seamlessly combines the

cultural services provided by the city, the high culture brought by the Savonlinna Opera Festival and the Academy of Music, and a strong field of independent artists. Art professionals and enthusiasts in the area have always worked in concert, allowing a wide range of networks in the creative industries to be built in the city. National and international open calls in various fields of art will open up avenues for future events.

ON THE BORDERS. Savonlinna's cultural participants will offer a series of surprising events and campaigns throughout the year. Art can be seen and heard everywhere; as part of the street view in the centre of Savonlinna, in the nearby villages, on the waves and beaches of the urban archipelago – even under Finland's largest concrete bridges which span over Laitaatsalmi and Kyrönsalmi.

Partners: Savonlinna Orchestra Association, Savonlinna Theatre, Savonlinna Music Academy, Lutheran Church in Savonlinna, Linnala Settlement's Art and Music, Savonlinna Senior Secondary School of Arts and Music, Savonlinna Big Band, Symphonic Wind Band Saimaa, Savonlinna Choir, Savonlinna Theatre Choir, Rantasalmi Wind Band Society, Savonlinna Art Association Ars Nova, Linnala Art School, Musical Society of Savonlinna, Theater Association Teatterimylly, Folk Musicians and Singers Sirkka Kosonen and Pia Rask, Trio Gambaamo, Savonlinna Music Academy, Suomi-Saksa yhdistys (Finnish-German association) Savonlinna, Trio Tanguango **Timetable:** 2026

BUILDING BRIDGES. The Vindenes Bro – The Bridge of Winds is an international group specialising in bringing together people from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds for the purpose of making art. The group will be visiting Finland for the first time. This group of top professionals will work together with the residents of Savonlinna for a period of three weeks in the summer. The work accomplished by the group will culminate in performances and a communal parade through Savonlinna.

Partners: The Bridge of Winds group, including Guillermo Angelelli (AR), Actor, director, professor; Carlos Simioni (BR), actor, director, researcher; Sandra Pasini (IT/DE), actress, director, pedagogue, artistic director; Mika Juusela, actor, director, teacher **Timetable:** 2026

OUR SAIMAA. The European Capital of Culture year will leave a permanent memorial in Savonlinna. Artist Kari Cavén, who originates from Savonlinna, has created "Saimaamme" ("Our Saimaa") a large, polished map of the Saimaa (Vuoksi) water basin which invites you to sit down by it for a closer look. Named in honour of ship work done on Lake Saimaa, "Saimaamme" especially commemorates work done on ships, in timber rafting, and on the water routes.

Partners: The Saimaa Ship Work Memorial Committee, The St. Olav's Guild, the City of Savonlinna, Finnish Steam Yacht Association, Saimaa Sailing Museum Association **Timetable:** 2026

FROZEN SAIMAA. Do we still have ice and snow in the winter of 2026? Is Saimaa going to freeze and can we go skiing or skating at all? Does it make any sense to think of organizing a big winter festival?

Frozen Saimaa – Winter Weeks has brought together Savonlinna's winter experiences and events since 2018. In 2026 Frozen Saimaa is a month long festival full of winter joy, art and culture, from the songwriter, multi-instrumentalist Tuomas Holopainen / Nightwish meets ethno to upcoming stars. The festival's events fill the center of Savonlinna, the Riihisaari area and Olavinlinna Castle, and spread over frozen bays and beaches, squares, streets and windows. The festival is held almost entirely outdoors, under the Saimaa sky.

We will bring a new European carnival and jesting tradition alongside our downhill sledding fun; modern-day stand-up comedy which gives us permission to make fun and talk nonsense with a Saimaa touch. An open call for wintry cultural programme content will be organised. New secrets will be revealed about the chilling history of Olavinlinna during the international Dark X-rated tours.

Partners: Tuomas Holopainen / Nightwish, fire artists Andrey Das (FR), Steven Bryunseraede (BE), Konstantin Kisovic (LT), Margareta Kristall (EE), rap artist Ondrei (RU), Visit Savonlinna, SounDome, The Lake Saimaa Nature and Museum Centre Riihisaari, The Natural Museum of Finland / Olavinlinna Castle, Cēsis 2027 **Timetable:** 2026

TOGETHER

Communality is an integral part of everyday Saimaa. Here we have brought together entities that create new community practices and events aimed at different generations.

Parahyppy Art Tour



Phenomenal special art dazzles the entire Saimaa region! Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will bring forth the talent of artists requiring special support and will create inclusion and equal opportunity for all. We will include special arts in our programmes and encourage all our cooperation networks to pay careful attention to humane values and equal opportunities in their own projects.

The Mikkeli Hyppy! Performing arts festival has expanded from Joensuu to Petrozavodsk, in Russian Karelia, and joined with the multi-artistic Parafest. They will invite and inspire special arts partners to join in from Lappeenranta, Kuopio, Savonlinna, and other cities and municipalities. The Parahyppy tour will take place in 2022–2026 and will make special art visible to the entire Saimaa region as part of the cities' independent Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa. Parahyppy will bring participants together and instil special art events as an integral part of urban festival offerings. Competence sharing and development will also play a significant role: is it possible that a professionally-managed group of actors and performers with developmental disabilities could operate in the Saimaa region?

The content of this festival will be designed in close cooperation with experienced experts and arts and culture professionals. The European partner in the

project will be the Irish Blue Teapot Theatre Company (BBTC); one of six professional theatres in Europe that feature artists with special needs. Parahyppy, in collaboration with other BBTC professionals, will implement a training project in each of the five cities.

Partners: Hyppy!, Parafest, Theatre Telmi, Kuopio Conservatory, Hurjajoukko (the Wild Bunch), Blue Teapot Theatre Company (IE), Petrozavodski Parafest, Luovi Vocational College for vocational special needs education and training, LAP-tuotesäätiö (foundation for non-profit workshops), Kirsikoti (residential, activity and work community), Elma-koti (residential community), Art School Estradi, Lappeenranta Support Association of People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities **Timetable:** 2022–2026

Children's Culture



CHILDREN'S CULTURE 365 – Every day is a children's culture celebration. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, together with regional children's cultural centres and other partners, will organise an eventful and colourful event – the World's Largest Children's Culture Festival – which will take place throughout the year 2026. We will listen to choirs, we will sing, create light art, go on adventures in huts we build ourselves and create colourful experiences. In addition to the children's cultural content we produce together, we will arrange an open call for children's and young people's programmes. The participating children's and young people's hobby groups will receive assistance from art professionals to hone their performance or production.

With the Children's Culture 365 project, the cooperation of professionals will also be structured for sharing know-how and developed structures, such as a cultural education plan. The project will employ an approach based on mentoring, identification, and utilization of the special expertise of different children's culture centres in the regions.

We will provide informative, descriptive and subtitled, webcasts of the Children's Culture 365

festival content that will make our year of events accessible to everyone. The same content can also be used as cultural education content in schools.

The Association of Finnish Children's Cultural Centres will organise an **international children's culture forum** in 2026 in the city chosen as European Capital of Culture in Finland. The forum will network children's cultural activities and will increase and enhance the visibility of children's culture and cultural exchange on a practical level.

Partners: Children's Cultural Center of Joensuu, Teatteri-traktori (Tractor Theatre), South Karelia Children's Cultural Center Metku, Children's cultural centre Lastu, Children's culture network Verso, Vekara-Varkaus Children's Summer Festival week **Timetable:** 2025–2026

CHILDREN'S CULTURAL AMBASSADORS! The children's band "Mimmit" is Finland's most international children's music ensemble. Mimmit animations have been viewed on YouTube nearly 10 million times, they are sold in 40 countries, and can also be viewed in English in 196 countries. Songs by Mimmit have also been released in Germany. Mimmit fuses music and learning in an entirely new way. By singing together, we can learn anything from English skills to cleaning and biology. Mimmit concerts are made accessible thanks to the background animations and descriptive sign language supporting the stories in the songs. The Mimmit band acts as a children's music ambassador for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, delighting families with its music and spreading Finnish children's music all across Europe as part of the Children's Culture 365 year.

Partners: Mimmit **Timetable:** 2026

A STORY OF GOODWILL. Writer Esko-Pekka Tiitinen and the Story of Goodwill revolves around kindergarteners and primary school children talking about the importance of protecting the environment.

Partners: Esko-Pekka Tiitinen, The Story of Goodwill **Timetable:** 2026



THE WORLD'S LARGEST METKU! The Metku choir for children and young people, which has been operating in South Karelia since 2009, brings together up to a thousand singing children each year. Low-threshold choir activities are open to all; there are no entrance exams or other entry requirements for choirs which operate primarily in schools. The focus of the Metku choir is the joy of singing! In 2026, we will gather all the children of eastern Finland to sing together in the world's largest "Metku" choir, and we will invite singing children from Estonia and other European countries to take part as well.

Partners: South Karelia Children's Cultural Center Metku, Children's Cultural Centers in eastern Finland, Estonian Choral Association (EE)
Timetable: 2026

RATTAAT (WHEELS) is a multi-year work that draws upon the centuries-old industrial development of the Saimaa region. The project collects stories related to water and the power of water, as well as industrial development. Primary and lower secondary school students will interview older people about the signs of their time, and open story gathering will take place at events and online. The finished performance will be multi-sensory, multi-disciplinary and nonverbal, like a live silent film; it will be subtitled where necessary. Participation, either as a person experiencing the art or creating it, will be enabled for as many people as possible. Tour-related performances will take place in small towns and especially in places where actual performances are rarely seen. After the Capital of Culture year, the cultural education workshop section of the tour will remain a permanent activity as part of the regional cultural education plan.

Partners: Theatre of Varkaus, Varkaus Museums, Children's culture network Verso
Timetable: 2026

SAVONLINNA MASTER SINGERS. This unique children's national singing competition has been held in Savonlinna since 2003 and focuses its attention

on bringing forth the authentic and pure voices of children. In 2026, the event will feature singing children from all over Europe. The competition programme will be comprised of traditional European children's songs and children's music composed specifically for the competition. When the event takes place in 2026, the professional international jury selected to judge the competition will be joined by a specially selected jury of eastern Finnish children. The competition can be viewed live on the Saimaa Live channel.

Partners: Linnala Art School, Festival della canzone italiana di Sanremo (IT), Istituto Italiano di Cultura Helsinki, Institut Français de Finlande, Lycée franco-finlandais d'Helsinki, Deutsche Schule Helsinki
Timetable: 2026

SANTA CLAUS MEETS DED MOROZ (GRANDFATHER FROST). The most important event of the Christmas season, Santa Claus meets Ded Moroz (Grandfather Frost) at the Finnish-Russian border crossings in Värtsilä, Tohmajärvi and Nuijamaa in Lappeenranta – is a celebration of children, but also of children's culture. It represents a time and place where children and young people from both sides of the border come to meet.

Partners: Central Karelia Music School, Lappeenranta Dance Institute
Timetable: 2026

BLUE ROAD YOUTH. This youth project combines art and science and explores how identity varies in cities connected by one of the oldest tourist routes in northern Europe, the Blue Road (Blå wegen). Through theatre, dance and music, the ensemble seeks to examine the differences and similarities between the cultures of Finland, Sweden and Norway. The show includes four performances and eight camps among young people spread across Scandinavia. The core of the Finnish team consists of students from three regional secondary schools focusing on arts and music, and community artist Kaisa Ritola. The script for the

live performance will take shape based on the young people's journey. The eight camps will begin in Bodø, Norway in 2025 (ECoC 2024) and move from there along the Blue Road to the city of Umeå (ECoC 2014) and then move on to join Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 in Kuopio. In 2026, the last joint camp will be held on a ship sailing from Kuopio to Savonlinna, where all the young people who participated during the previous year will be invited to create a work to be performed in Savonlinna.

Partners: Savonlinna Senior Secondary School of Arts and Music, Lumit Kuopio Senior High School of Arts, Lappeenranta Lyseo Upper Secondary School, Bodø 2024, Umeå midgårdsskolan, community artist Kaisa Ritola
Timetable: 2025–2026

Saimaa Phenomenon Youth Panel will keep our international audience updated on our activities and tell them about our lives in eastern Finland.

The Stage Is Yours



People in eastern Finland tend to suffer more from mental health problems than average when compared to other areas in Finland. Often, these mental health problems are a direct result of loneliness. Through Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, we will take stage poetry to new audiences. Stage poets including Grumpy Bitch Poet and author Jouni Tossavainen will visit homeless shelters, mental health rehabilitation centres, and a forensic psychiatric hospital. We will organise gigs and inclusive workshops and together create new poems from the content shared in these; poems based on stories of bravery, love, and shame. At the same time, we will form new communities, encourage participants to tell stories, expose them to performances, and engage them in creating art through word art and poems.

In 2026, the European Championship in “Poetry Slam” will be organised in Kuopio, where the poetry work compiled through the care homes will be performed by Grumpy Bitch Poet, aka Nihkee Akka. Before the European championship, local “Runopuulaaki” (amateur league poetry) and open mic events will be organised where people can participate, for example, by utilising digital technology. The collection of stories, experiences, and poems will also be put into print and the book will be published in 2027.

Partners: The Niuvanniemi Forensic Psychiatric Hospital, World Poetry Slam Organization, stage poet Grumpy Bitch Poet, author Jouni Tossavainen, local literary clubs **Timetable:** 2022–2026

SONGWRITING. The Humak University of Applied Sciences and Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will seek out new culture consumers in places where they spend their time – such as bars in the cities, suburbs, and villages. Our Songwriting events will collect and record people’s own independent art, aphorisms, mottos, small stories, and corny jokes. We will invite the bus in the **Tartu Men’s Shed (Meeste Garaaž)** programme to participate in our Songwriting activities.

Partners: Humak University of Applied Sciences, actor and singer/song-writer Aaro Vuotila, Tartu 2024 **Timetable:** 2025–2026

Let’s Show Off



We invite all Europe to join us by taking out their national costumes, sprucing them up a bit, and putting them on display by wearing them!

#TuunaaMunPerinne #SprucingupMyTradition

In addition to the traditional respect of a national costume tradition as a dress for celebrations, a more free and slightly wild #TuunaaMunPerinne, #SprucingupMyTradition thinking has been

Opiskelijawappu 2.0



Vappu (May Day) is not only a celebration of work, but also a celebration of students. The semester has ended and the summer begins. It’s time to party! Suomen Pisin Wappu (“The Longest May Day in Finland”) is a traditional May Day celebration organised by the students at Skinnarila, the campus of the Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology (LUT) and the LAB University of Applied Sciences in Lappeenranta. The “Suomen Pisin Wappu” spectacle lasts for several weeks and features a different event every day. The May Day time will begin with the declaration of the “Wappuräyhä” (“May Day revelry”) including the eternal “Wappunuotio” (“May Day bonfire”), parties, sports events, excursions to other regions, outdoor festivals, and academic dinner parties.

In 2026, students from the other universities in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region will be invited to participate in the event. In cooperation with Trenčín 2026, student unions will be challenged to invent imaginative watercraft and a competition will be held in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 area and in Trenčín. The games will be live-streamed from both locations.

Partners: The Student Union of Lappeenranta University of Technology, Trenčín 2026 Splaneor 2.0

established. The national costume (or parts of it) can be combined with other clothing or the material from a torn national dress can be used to make something new – or the prints, techniques and materials of national costumes can be applied to modern products. We will organise a competition for sprucing up national costumes and will create podcasts on the subject.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 invites Europe to join in a **National Costume Picnic** on 8 August 2026. How to join in: Dress up in your national costume, national dress, or ancient costume. You can also combine parts of the dress with modern clothing or just put on a national dress attitude and join in, for instance, in your flower dress! Put together your picnic goodies and go out and enjoy the company of other people in their national costumes, celebrating national dress. Simply the joy of being together is sufficient for programme content. The feeling of the open day of celebration is multiplied by the national dance event organised by the youth clubs of eastern Finland which will gather hundreds of dancers from the very young to the old to dance together in a “Tanssitupa” (“Dance Room”) event. The atmosphere from the picnics and the dancing event can be sensed throughout Europe through the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform.

National Costume Exhibition The National Costume Center of Finland and Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will produce a unique Finnish National Costume Exhibition which will open in Savonlinna on Kalevala Day, 28 February 2026 and will remain open until the end of the year. During the ECoC year, smaller exhibitions will be organised throughout Saimaa by regional associations and other interested groups. We will organise lectures, seminars, workshops and performances where all who are interested in national costumes can enhance their know-how on the subject.

Saimaa Cultural Heritage Days will be organised annually in the Saimaa region and showcase the region’s cultural heritage. The event will be celebrated as part of the European Cultural Heritage Day and it will tour in a different city every year.

Partners: The National Costume Center of Finland, Kalevala Women’s Association, Kansallispuukuyhdistys Raita Ry (National Costume Association Stripe), the Grand Young Lady of national costumes Soja Murto, Finnish Youth Association clubs of Eastern Finland

Timetable: 2026

Liikutaan! (Let's move!)



Regional sports associations will have an active role in the ECoC year through their own Liikutaan! (Let's move!) programme. They will bring together various regional sports clubs, municipal sports services, educational institutions, schools, and day care centres with whom different kinds of all-year-round, easily accessible, and low-threshold exercise activities will be organised. The Liikutaan! project will approach and encourage those that exercise the least to participate in the programme. The main events will be grouped according to the seasons of the year. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform will be engaged to implement the events.

In spring, a special bicycle relay will be organised which will make its way through the four regions, cross the Russian border, and extend as far as St. Petersburg. A unique art event, to be held in each of the four regions and at the state borders, will serve as a relay baton. In the summer, a nightless night rowing orienteering event will be organised. Cultural checkpoints will be erected around water bodies in both significant natural and cultural sites. In the autumn, it will be possible to do some mushroom and berry picking while you hike the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 art route trails. This event will be connected to the Art Trek routes presented in the Power of Water theme, as well as to the Geopark AR / VR destinations. In winter, the ECoC year will be brought to a close with the world's largest Street Hockey tournament. Regional organisations have discussed cooperation with the St. Petersburg sports committee.

Partners: South Karelian Sports Association, North Karelian Sports Association, South Savonia Sports Association, North Savonia Sports Association, Tanhuvaara Sports Institute & Sport Resort in Savonlinna, Southeast Finland University of Applied Sciences XAMK, Humak University of Applied Sciences **Timetable:** 2025–2026

CITY <3 COUNTRYSIDE

Dwellers residing in the cities of eastern Finland live in exceptional urban environments where nature is close by. Cities and municipalities are large in area and surrounded by water and forest. The distance from one's front door to the nearest forest is an average of 600 metres.

The act of preserving the cultural environment and urban nature setting intact has resulted in a proposal to award the city of Savonlinna status as a National Urban Park. Finland, under the leadership of the Ministry of the Environment, has also decided to propose the Saimaa Ringed Seal Archipelago Region (which includes Savonlinna and 16 municipalities in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region), as a natural heritage site on the UNESCO World Heritage List. These two pending applications, which constitute a significant milestone for Savonlinna, broaden the Capital of Culture year programme to include the theme of being recognised as a “unique urban environment”.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will bring the city and municipal centres alive and create opportunities for organising spontaneous events and campaigns in public spaces.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities and municipalities undertake to lower costs and perfect processes for acquiring permits, pointing out spaces for organising art exhibitions and events. This preparation will be tied to the activities of the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa and will be laid out in the regions' and cities' cultural strategies. These procedures will enable the production of a record number of events in 2026, all around eastern Finland.

We will offer small players an agile form of funding for organising their events and activities. With the support of available financing measures, we can bring activities into empty spaces and cultural spaces that are currently not in use. **Myö taataan (“We guarantee”) financing** can in itself be sufficient to organise a small event. Furthermore, we will cooperate with regional LEADER associations and guarantee cultural projects the self-financing share for a total of 150 events in the rural Saimaa areas. In connection with the “Myö taataan” financing, also crowdfunding which involve residents will be implemented.

Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub



We will establish a new Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub in Saimaa, which incorporates new European Bauhaus thinking. The Hub will solve the toughest issues of our time through the collaboration of art and science, creating an even stronger ground for cultural sustainability. At the same time, it will support the EU's Green Deal and achievement of the goals of the UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Program. The Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub will operate on the eastern border of Europe, an area which has always combined more than separated. The winding line of the border has transported people as well as inventions, new trends and utopias.

The core concepts and cross-cutting themes of the Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub are the basis for bridge-building; cultural change creatively connects man's changing urban nature relationship, which in turn activates and promotes interpersonal global peace work. The main themes will act to implement the means by which the New European Bauhaus initiative (Living Lab, meeting place and accelerator) will be involved in inspiring people to build a common future by learning to live a more modest and responsible life.



In 2026, the Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub's activities will culminate in organising a global forum. The Forum will provide guidelines for dealing with European cultural sustainability, providing a place where science and the arts can lay the foundation for building a more secure and peaceful world. The Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub will connect many years of European networking; creating solutions to the immense global challenges of the respective time. The result will be seen in the spirit of Lake Saimaa, synonymous with the hope for humanity – in a present world burdened by climate change and natural loss.

Partners: The Savonia University of Applied Sciences with Human Security Europe Network **Timetable:** 2022–2026

Hindsight



The underlying goal and ultimate reason for founding the EU was to ensure peace and security in Europe. The central theme of the programme, which we have termed “Hindsight”, is to address the consequences of war in people's feelings during a time of peace. The architecture around us carries with it meanings that can be very personal.

Hindsight workshops will be conducted using the methods of the Architecture of Shame working group (Italy, Matera 2019) in four different cities. We are looking for architectural shame that stems directly from the experiences and imaginations of the participants. The ensemble culminates in a week-long event and exhibition in Savonlinna in 2026.

Mikkeli 2022 – Traces of War. How do the traces of war appear in our daily lives? How do we feel about them? World War II in the EU already feels distant, but we live in cities, streets and buildings constructed in its footsteps. The workshop in Mikkeli looks at how we

live in everyday life, which is a bridge between past, present and future generations. The workshop collects documents, materials and memories related to post-war architecture to enliven the public debate.

A photography exhibition by artist Xenia Nikolskaja (RU) will be part of the workshop.

Joensuu 2023 – Migration. At a certain point in history, we were all immigrants. We Europeans tend to forget this; perhaps because it is not easy to talk about homelessness or the loss of human dignity. The Joensuu workshop encounters the great wartime change that took place after the Second World War, through the migration route of Karelian evacuees and the way of life created by this historical period, reflecting from past experiences to a modern understanding.

An art exhibition by Evgenia Golant (RU) will be part of the workshop.

Lappeenranta 2024 – The Memory of Water. How will we live in harmony with water in the future? Clean water is a valuable part of our lives that we need to protect. The Lappeenranta workshop will focus on finding and sharing our water-related expertise. The significance of water, its impact on our identity and our landscape and water-related lifestyle are part of our tradition. Awareness of water has increased and more and more attention is being paid to places where water is seen as a valuable resource.

Dance artist Minni Hirvonen will present her “Miss Catastroph” show in connection with the workshop.

Kuopio 2025 – Equality and A Good Life. After the pandemic, we will change our outlook on our environment. Thanks to the exponentially increasing use of digital technology, the countryside and places close to nature are becoming a true alternative for many as a place to live and work. In workshops, we will identify elements of living a good life both in the

countryside as well as in the city. We aim to create connections and occasions where the interaction between the city and countryside thrives, and prejudices, confrontation and shame diminishes.

The workshop will feature discussions on gender equality led by author Marja-Sisko Aalto and an exhibition by feminist, socially critical thinker, and artist Riina Tanskanen.

Savonlinna 2026 – The Circle Closes exhibition presents the topics of shame that emerged in the workshops and the forgotten resources of the area. The exhibition is a collective picture of an area that connects these places, needs, feelings, values and shame to important issues in today's world. As a side programme at the opening, one public space in the city of Savonlinna will be selected for each of the themes and will be taken over by arts and culture. The results of the workshop are enlivened, for example, by means of a cartoon, new songs or a performance.

Guest artists at the opening event include the folk rock band Otava Yo (RU) from St. Petersburg.

Partners: Fabio Ciaravella and Mimi Coviello (IT) (Architecture of Shame, Italy, Matera 2019), Central Archives for Finnish Business Records, Design Archives, National Library of Finland, Memory Campus, Muisti Centre of War and Peace, Mikkeli “Dream Year of Culture” 2022 project, University of Eastern Finland, Karelian Association, Lappeenranta Museums, Greenreality Lappeenranta, artist Xenia Nikolskaja (RU), artist Evgenia Golant (RU), dance artist Minni Hirvonen, author Marja-Sisko Aalto, artist Riina Tanskanen, folk rock band Otava Yo (RU) **Timetable:** 2022–2026

Room for Culture



In recent years, significant new free-form cultural facilities have emerged in eastern Finland. These independently operating cultural spaces have joined forces to create a new operational model. This cooperation will enable the production of higher-quality

productions and the sale of new cultural service products. In the future, it will also increase the international awareness of the activities of the free form cultural facilities of eastern Finland. Eastern cultural cooperation in 2026 will enable the sharing of information to other players throughout the Saimaa Skill Share Lab, and the production of an ECoC programme designed specifically for independent cultural spaces.

We will determine the location of empty business premises in our area in cooperation with the development associations of the urban centres of eastern Finland. Empty spaces will be identified and displayed for easy access on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform, which will enable their use as work, exhibition, store residence, performance and studio spaces. We will lay the foundation for year-round cultural offerings which enhance the city's appeal by enlisting these empty spaces for a variety of experimental and new activities.

We are collaborating with Veszprém-Balaton 2023 to develop practices within the "Street Management" project. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will lease empty business premises in the register, to arrange an open call for partners to create content in the spaces. This way, we will bring a new service offering to the area and reduce the risk for both the lessee and the operator. In addition to cultural content, we will enable the Finnish 4H Association and other regional associations to implement business ideas that support the cultural offerings extended to young people and will provide appropriate locations where young people can meet.

Partners: Kulttuurikellari Cultural Association in Savonlinna; Teatteriravintola ILO (Theatre Restaurant ILO); Kanttila, The House of Minna Canth; Cultural Venue Nuijamies and Uus Hoi Sie; Näyttämö (Stage), Sovintola (village hall); Artfactory Sihtala; City Center Development Association of Savonlinna; City Center Development Association of Mikkeli; City Centre Development Association of Lappeenranta – LAKES ry; City Centre Development Association of Joensuu Virta; City Centre Development Association of Kuopio; local 4H Associations of the Finnish 4H Federation; Veszprém-Balaton 2023
Timetable: 2025–2026

IN BETWEEN. An increasing number of properties owned by municipalities are slated for sale or demolition. However, decision-making and waiting for the actual demolition can take time, leaving empty spaces and buildings in limbo. The best solution for conserving a built environments is to find a new use for these facilities. We will identify and map potential buildings in our area, in cooperation with municipalities and cities, to be used for art and cultural projects.

We asked the young people what kind of cultural events they would like to see in the Saimaa region in the future, and we received almost 200 responses. In addition to concerts, art events, independent activities and inclusiveness, the young people would like to have a say about which content will be implemented. We offer an agile platform and space for young people's experimental culture, where they can boldly create something new. We are currently seeking a space that can be transformed into an alternative cultural centre for the use of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 for the entire Capital of Culture year. Experienced cultural space pioneers, young people and the St. Petersburg Museum of Street Art in collaboration will produce programme content.

Partners: Street Art Association Urbaani; Uus Hoi Sie gallery; Savonlinna Senior Secondary School of Arts and Music; New Art Museum of Savonlinna; Mimmit Peinttaa Female Street Art Concept; East Savo Educational Federation Samiedu; Street Art Museum and artist Stas Bags, Faber Community (RO) **Timetable:** 2024–2026

CULTURE CUBICLES. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will acquire five well-equipped Culture Cubicles, which will be in use by partners and international artists in the Saimaa region as early as 2022. Our Culture Cubicles will provide a spectacular workplace, the location of which can be decided upon by the artist working in the Culture Cubicle. In 2026, one of our Culture Cubicles will tour Europe more widely and take Saimaa culture to ten sister cities of the Saimaa region. The co-flow-kantele innovated by Koistinen Kantele

in Rääkkylä pulls one into a communal musical adventure. Culture Cubicles will engage European artists and participants in the implementation of content inspired by the themes of Saimaa Phenomenon2026. Even after the Capital of Culture year, the Culture Cubicles will remain in the area for the use of arts and culture. In 2023, our Culture Cubicle will visit the Veszprém-Balaton 2023 programme "Pop Up City" with cheek-to-cheek tango event from our **Tango!** programme.

Partners: Koistinen Kantele, Veszprém-Balaton 2023
Timetable: 2022–2026

Creative Spaces and Doers

Creative spaces in the Saimaa region are worth a visit, entailing adventures and action. The spaces open up unique insights into an authentic cultural field in eastern Finland. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 gathers the creative spaces and cultural homes of eastern Finland all together. Our digital platform will facilitate joining a communal network of players and facilitates accessibility for guests also. As an example cellist Jussi Makkonen does two-way live-stream concerts from his cultural home in Nurmes for audiences to enjoy anywhere around the world.

Eastern Joy

THE PRIMAL FORCE OF MUSIC

| TBA -

Operation Kantele



Our national epic, the Kalevala, narrates in its 40th cantos the birth of our national instrument, the kantele. Väinämöinen constructs a kantele *from the jawbone of a pike and the hair of the Demon's gelding* and plays it so that gladness rolls on *gladness and the harmony of pleasure echoed from the hills and mountains*. The playing charms all who hear it *and eventually the young wept, the old wept and the maidens and married fellows wept*.

Our kantele originates from eastern Finland and similar instruments are played beyond Finland and Karelia; for example, in Estonia (kannel), Latvia (kuõkles) and Lithuania (kañkles). In addition, the Russian gusli and the chromatic kantele played in Russian Karelia are included in the kantele family of instruments. As late as the early 1900s, a kantele player would build their own instrument from their own wood taken from their own forest (either alder or spruce), would fit the kantele with approximately 5– 15 strings and begin to play. During the last three decades, the kantele has developed more than any other modern instrument in the world. Hannu Koistinen, a renowned kantele builder from Rääkkylä, built a kantele for the 2016 Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert in 2016. He continues to develop the instrument, most recently by building a multiplayer co-flow-kantele.



Regional



International



Skill Share Lab



- Flagship



Legacy



 Open call



Operation Kantele will update the kantele to modern days in the following ways:

- We will inspire people to fall in love with the rich tones produced by the Karelian kantele. Continuation of the heritage requires the transfer of playing the kantele from one generation to the next and involves a lifetime journey of learning. We will organise low threshold kantele jam sessions and gigs which will be open to all, and initiate staff in pre-school and educational institutes to the heritage and music composed for the 5-15 string kantele. Based on long-lasting, slow improvisation of aesthetics, the way to play a 5-15-string kantele is Karelian, an ancient response to modern-day technical meditation music. Our masters of modern-day kantele music will be from the folk music study programme at the Sibelius Academy: **Arja Kastinen** and **Timo Väänänen**, both Doctors of Music.
- We will inspire people to adopt the art of playing in many communal ways: We will pack our co-flow-kantele into our Culture Cubicle on its way to Europe and will teach all of Europe to play together! The Culture Cubicle will host guests who are influencers on playing the kantele, from both Finland and Europe; for example, **Senni Eskelinen**, **Sinikka Langeland** (NO) and **Mari Kalkun** (EE). We will compile a unique photo and sound gallery of our music sessions to be viewed and listened to on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform. We will bring the newest innovation, the co-flow-kantele to the forefront, as a source of well-being, and integrate it as part of the care and therapy work among older people and asylum seekers. Musician, storyteller and music therapist **Anna-Maria Toivonen** is in the process of piloting a therapy programme which uses co-flow-kantele in care units and trains healthcare professionals from eastern Finland and foreign countries through the Saimaa Skill Share Lab.
- We need the kantele to know the tone of our nation. **The Rääkkylä Kihaus Folk** music festival which has

been going strong for over three decades, will gather players of different kantele instruments together for a grand ensemble and introduce the kantele to the rest of Europe. **Marjo Smolander**, a kantele player who started her musical career in Rääkkylä, is engaged in extensive work involving international cooperation. She will welcome to the birthplace of our national instrument, the national instruments of a variety of different cultures: Slovakia's national instrument, the fujara; the bombard from Bretagne; the Hungarian cimbalom; and players of the world's oldest instrument, Slovenia's Neanderthal-aged flute. The masters of these instruments will gather together for a two-week Master Class workshop, acting as both masters and apprentices in turn, and together will create totally new and unique music for their individual instruments. The open sessions of the workshops and instrument demonstrations can be viewed online. The ensemble concert will be live-streamed on the digital platform.

Partners: Rääkkylän Folk ry, Municipality of Rääkkylä, Kantele doctors Arja Kastinen and Timo Väänänen, kantele artists Senni Eskelinen, Marjo Smolander, Sinikka Langeland (NO), Mari Kalkun (EE), storyteller and music therapist Anna-Maria Toivonen, The Song and Dance Ensemble Kantele of the Russian Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk, Žilina 2026, Nitra 2026, Nova Gorica 2025, Cesis 2027 **Timetable:** 2022–2026

- We need the kantele to know our roots. A unique collection of Karelian kanteles can be found in the National Museum of Finland, the Joensuu Museum and the National Museum of the Russian Republic of Karelia. **The Karelian kantele exhibition** is a cross-section of the history of the kantele on both sides of the border and it demonstrates the development of the instrument from the beginning to this day, utilising material from archives and VR technology.

Partners: The National Museum of Finland, the Joensuu Museum and the National Museum of the Russian Republic of Karelia, Koistinen kantele, Saimaa Art Cave Retretti **Timetable:** 2024–2026

• The Karelian Song and Dance Ensemble Kantele, (Petrozavodsk, the Russian Republic of Karelia) is also engaged in reviving traditional Karelian kantele heritage, while playing a chromatic kantele.

“Nyt mie ruppeen laulamaan” (Now I’m gonna start singing)



People living in eastern Finland have always enjoyed singing! Hundreds of different singing groups and choirs can be found in our region. We sing tango, karaoke and old folk songs. Children have their own substantial “Metku” choir. Also classical solo singing is strong, thanks to the curriculum of the Savonlinna Music Academy and Savonlinna’s Timo Mustakallio and the Lappeenranta Singing Competitions. In 2026 we will come together to sing, focusing on both old and new songs, we will pass along the traditions of runosong and lament to the next generation; we will establish a new Song Festival and form a new choir bridge! We will seek common traditions of melancholy and wishful-thinking music associated with other cultures as well. In 2026, we will also collaborate with Portugal’s Faro in building a musical bridge over to the African continent in a communal sing-along spirit.

EASTERN FINNISH CHOIR BRIDGE. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 brought together the choir folk in eastern Finland in winter, 2021. During that meeting, the local associations of SULASOL (The Finnish Amateur Musicians’ Association) decided, with the support of other regional choirs, to join forces and create a bridge of choirs to connect both the choirs and regions. Once a year the choirs will take turns hosting communal sing-alongs, training, and other

choir events. At the same time, the annual choir festival Saimaa Sings choir festival came into being. The Choir Bridge will build interregional cooperation between choirs, reviving the tradition of communal singing. The song festival tradition was adopted from Estonia at the end of the 1800s, gathering hundreds of choirs and thousands of singers together to sing in Vyborg, Sortavala and later, also in Joensuu. The song festivals developed into significant national celebrations and the cities constructed special stages for these performances. The singing tradition has been awakening during the last years, but regular singing celebrations have not been organised on either side of the border.

A special choir collaboration will get off to a spectacular start when the Mikkeli Music Festival convenes choirs for a nationwide event in July 2022. As part of the event, singers will be divided into flash mobs in several locations, and international choirs will also be challenged to participate. The rapture will capture the interest of an entirely new audience and arouse enthusiasm for singing together. In 2023, eastern Finnish choirs and vocal ensembles will meet in Joensuu. In 2024, we will sing at the Lemi Music Festival and the Karjalan kuoroviikot (Karelia Choral Weeks) events on the stages of Lappeenranta and Lemi. The same year, the Estonian Choral Association has extended an invitation to choirs in eastern Finland to create a song bridge to the Estonian Song Festival. In 2025, the Choir Bridge will expand through the Kallavesi Soi event to Kuopio and through the Karelians' Song Festival to the Russian Republic of Karelia.

In 2026, the **“Ilolla Ilosaarella” (“Joy in Ilosaari”)** Festival will convene in Joensuu, bringing together choirs, vocal ensembles, bands and orchestras from Finland, Estonia, Russia, and other European countries. A special invitation will be extended to the choirs of the Slovakian Capital of Culture city. The musical celebration of singing and playing instruments

will bring together different genres of music, from metal to classical, and will launch Eastern Joy directly into the 2030s.

Partners: SULASOL (The Finnish Amateur Musicians' Association) of eastern Finland, Estonian Choral Association, Republic of Karelia Cultural Initiatives Centre, Sortavala Young People's Social and Cultural Centre, Mikkeli Music Festival, Lemi Music Festival, Karelian Choir Week, Nitra 2026 **Timetable:** 2022–2026

RUNOSONG PATH. Kalevala poems have their own particular meter, the trochaic tetrameter, which makes our runosong tradition unique. Runosingers who possessed the talent of singing in trochaic tetrameter were the masters of silent aesthetic, mythology and word use. Some of them also possessed a strong force of word by which they cured aches and pains and aroused feelings of love. Nature and silence have always been the source of inspiration for runosingers,

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 : **CHOIR FLASH MOB.** On Finnish Nature Day, the
 : choir folk will organise a Choir Flash Mob that
 : will fill forests, campfire sites, lakesides and
 : open lakes with songs about nature and water of
 : Saimaa, Kallavesi, Puruvesi, Pielinen and Koitere.
 : The Choir Happening will include sing-alongs that
 : welcome everyone to participate – in person and
 : online The “Saimaan laulut” (“Saimaa Songs”)
 : book will be the official songbook of the Choir
 : Flash Mob and the European Capital of Culture
 : year. The songbook will include both well-known
 : songs and songs that have been specifically
 : composed for the book. The stories behind the
 : songs will be translated into English to provide an
 : easy to follow narrative for the rest of the world.
 : A song exchange will take place with Nitra 2026.
 :

Partners: SULASOL eastern Finland, Savonlinna Summer University, Savonlinna Choir, Cantilena ry, Nitra 2026
Timetable: 2026

lingering aesthetics and a silent ecstasy – the warranty of a runosong having been created.

In 2026, we will walk along the runosong paths and will hear the masters of the art at its birthplace. A walk on the runosong path in the Petkeljärvi National Park proceeds in a leisurely way, singing in antiphony led by a lead singer. On the wandering paths at the Koli national landscape the wanderer will meet a runosinger who will listen for a spell and continue on their way. At the base of Lönnrot's pine in Hummovaara, in the municipality of Kitee, the power of word rises from the silence in the presence of Juhana Kainulainen's spells and healing words. In the home of runosinger Simana Sissonen songs are sung of the birth of Earth and Lemminkäinen in the words of Sissonen herself. On the island of Hytermä in Kerimäki and on the Enonkoski poetry path, poems by Pietar Makkonen are sung.

Partners: Sorcerer Helena K. Karhu, Perriin Tyssit Ensemble, Duo Liisa&Tellu, runosingers Reetta-Mari Kellokoski, Tellu Turkka and Kirsi Uutinen. **Timetable:** 2026

TEAR CHANNELS. The Karelian lament or “crying out loud” has originally been a ritual of expressing strong emotions: eternal longing, sorrow, or worry. The lamenter's own experiences are at the core of traditional laments and the lamenter channels the emotions of the whole audience through the lament. Modern day lamenting caters to different types of needs and the significance and implications given to the lament.

The Tear Channels Community examines, through science and art, the continuity of laments and their role in modern Finnish society and links our heritage as part of the European lament tradition. The lament tradition is approached through emotions, expression, experience and through the meanings given to it. In 2026, the European lamenting community will gather together at an international Tear Channels seminar

in the poem village of Parppeinvaara in Ilomantsi where the tradition of lamenting today is approached through workshops, lamenting circles, lectures and artistic presentations. The seminar will be organised in cooperation with the University of Eastern Finland and the Tear Channels Community.

Partners: The University of Eastern Finland, Äänellä itkijät ry, (Association of Lamenters) Liisa Matveinen, musician and runosinger; Emilia Kallonen, lamenter; Emmi Kuittinen, lamenter; Viliina Silvonen, Riikka Patrikainen and Elina Hytönen-Ng, researchers
Timetable: 2026

MIE SE LAULAN LAPSELLENI (I'm Singing for My Child). Multicultural group activities will be organised in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 area in which parents and their children will come together to sing. Participants will learn lullabies and other children's songs which stem from other cultures and will be able to teach their own favourite songs in turn; sharing the special traditions related through songs and singing.

Partners: Eksote Immigration Services, Umucu Entertainment Troop ry, MLL Southeast Finland **Timetable:** 2026

THE FOLK MUSIC INSTITUTE. The Institute of Folk Music in Eastern Finland to be established in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region will serve as the foundation for research of regional folk music and organising training and events. The goal is to raise awareness of the region's cultural heritage, enhance its value, and serve as a broad platform for renewal work.

The Institute of Folk Music in Eastern Finland will collaborate with Nitra2026 and Slovakian folklore institutes. It will invite everyone to a big celebration of Finnish folk music, the "Samuelin poloneesi" (Samuel's polonese).

SAMUEL'S POLONESE. During the Capital of Culture year, the national celebration of Finnish folk music will make an outstanding arrival to Saimaa and raise the folk music of the Savonlinna region as the

theme of playing ensemble in a big group. Samuel's Polonese gathers hundreds of Finnish folk music players together yearly, and presents the best. We will invite Portuguese accordion music virtuosos to come together by organising virtual jam sessions, combining different generations and cultures.

Partners: The Finnish Folk Music Association, The Institute of Folk Music in Eastern Finland, Faro 2027 **Timetable:** 2025–2026

FOLK – OUT OF THE GRAVE! The Eastern Joy theme will be updated to include the latest of new world music in 2030, through the content of accordion virtuoso Viivi Maria Saarenkylä (born 1993). Saarenkylä and the PIIRAINEN-BLOM-COMPANY will create a ground-breaking work of world music by combining music, song and folk dance and bringing them to the Olavinlinna stage. The evening concert will employ the newest AR and VR technology and will bring new skills and updaters on stage. The rhythm of our national heritage and the melodious world of sound will fuse with the soundscape of modern urban life to echo powerfully from the Olavinlinna stage. Central to the sound is a trio composed of an acoustic guitar, beatbox and accordion, resonating an elegant power similar to a chamber orchestra, to convey the modern day phenomena of popular culture.

Partners: PIIRAINEN | BLOM | COMPANY: Viivi Maria Saarenkylä, J-P Piirainen, Venla Ilona Blom and visiting artists, including the urban a capella ensemble Tuuletar, kantele player Maija Kauhanen, Sámi musician and master of the Sámi vocal tradition, the 'joik', Hildá Länsman, folk dance group Motora, and Trad Attack Ensemble (EST), Nitra 2026, Savonlinna Music and Dance Institute
Timetable: 2025–2026

Music for all



Finnish folk music is an accumulation of popular music played in different eras – the music people have listened to, played and sung, together and alone. The skill of singing and playing, the tones and words which are transferred from a master to an apprentice, from one generation to the next. New, identifiable evergreen tunes and words are needed as emotional tracks for the upcoming successors in the tradition of Eastern Joy and as part of the European community.

TANGO! The Finnish tango is perhaps the best musical genre in interpreting the emotions of our people. It is filled with melancholy, drama, genuine emotions and is more often than not in minor key. Finnish tango is best known on account of the Kaurismäki brothers' films and in Germany it has its own group of fans with their culture, thanks to the tens of FINTango festivals.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will return the Finnish tango to its authentic environment, to the Saimaa dance pavilions and markets. Newer nuances are also being introduced into the tango culture by tango DJs who provide entertainment at filling stations which are modern village centres, and bars, offering Finnish tango pearls in the midst of everyday life. We will organise summery cheek-to-cheek tango events in various locations in the Saimaa region, such as the dance pavilions of Vuonisahti, Pistohiekkä, Tulenliekki and Iitiä and invite tango experts from different parts of Europe to join in. Fans will have an opportunity to meet up and local families will host tango tourists at their homes. A reciprocal visit will be made to the August 2026 FINTango pavilion dance and culture festival in August 2026, when Berlin's main railway station will be taken over by tango lovers. Tangos from around the world will be danced to during the week-long festival. A special evening will be dedicated

to the Finnish tango. TangoSawo from Kuopio will host a tango event in Savonlinna during which singer training will be provided in traditional Finnish tango, seminars, and concerts for the general public. The national TangoMaestro tango song contest will also be organised. We will take the cheek-to-cheek tango event to Europe along with our Culture Cubicle.

Partners: FINtango, The Finnish Institute/Finnland-Institut in Deutschland, TangoSawo ry **Timetable:** 2025–2026

ROMANIMUSIC LIFTING UP! The international week-long Romani culture event held in Savonlinna will bring forth the Finnish Romani music and culture as part of our cultural life and the region's events. The week-long programme will include round table discussions, multicultural gigs, and a unique Romani music class artistically led by Merts Lindgren, a renaissance man of music and the arts. Educational work will be undertaken with guidance from the world's oldest Romani theatre, the Romen Theatre from Moscow. The event week will culminate in an ensemble and Romani music concert with participants such as master violinist Miritza Lundberg, Gypsy Kings (FR) and Rosenberg Trio (NL).

Partners: Savonlinna Christian Institute, RomaMedia, Savonlinna Romani Mission, The Folk Music Institute of East Finland, ST Olaf's Jazz Association, Romani Cultural Center Tšeeruno, Romen Theatre (RU), Miritza Lundberg, Gypsy Kings (FR), Rosenberg Trio (NL). **Timetable:** 2026

F(EAST)!

Our guests will, without exception, be able to enjoy the world's finest hospitality and experiences – unavailable anywhere else. Hospitality in eastern Finland is a tradition moulded by our history. It has been strongly influenced by the changing borders, religions, and military history. Our hospitality encompasses care, willingness to serve, passion, humour, heart, warmth, kindness and experiences.

Table Over the Border – Стол через границу



In 2026, we will be setting a table over the border crossings of eastern Finland and Russia – or at least on both sides of the border. Crossing the Finnish-Russian border is an everyday occurrence for many living in eastern Finland, but rarely do we sit down to eat together. Now is the time!

Table Over the Border brings alive the most authentic and genuine type of gastro-diplomacy: engaging food, discussions, merriment, culture, and music. Even difficult topics are not avoided. Restaurant, culture and event planning professionals from both sides of the border will participate in setting the tables, table service and organising the programme. As satellite events we have invited the Särö Association's Oder residency at the border of Germany and Poland, the Narva Museum at the border between Estonia and Russia (Narva-Ivangorod) and Europe's largest street food event Gusti di Frontiera at the border between Slovenia and Italy. In Faro, Portugal, a dinner table will be set on the border by the sea, highlighting the archaeology of food culture and disappearing culinary traditions.

Event themes will vary by location and season, but encompass elements that have both united and divided people across the border during the course of history. These include historical borders, fortresses, runosong and narration, and national forests which have inspired artists. These elements have also ushered in new winds and prospects affecting culinary traditions and monoculture.

In addition to large events, we will also produce smaller, more inclusive communal grass-roots level events relating to gastronomy, while not forgetting digital technology. Throughout history, secret recipes and wild food collected directly from the forest have

been a staple of Finnish kitchens. Future food trends will be gathered together on one platform and provided as a free service via social media. This concept draws its inspiration from the Russian custom of sharing travel lunches with fellow passengers. A small gesture that can lead to a life-long friendship.

The Table Over the Border programme will lessen prejudices and establish a third space – a place where new usage, interfaces, and context will be created through arts and culture. The border can act as a dividing factor, but in 2026 we will concentrate on factors that will connect the regions instead driving them apart.

Partners: Finnish and Karelian Chef Associations, Cultural Venue Nuijamies, Ruokateatteri (Food theatre), Kulttuurikeittiö – Cultural Kitchen (Helsinki–St. Petersburg), South Karelian Foundation for Recreation Areas / Suvorov project, Gusti di Frontiera (IT), Estonian Integration Foundation (EE), Narva Museum (EE), Twin Cities Association, Oder Residency Särö Ry (DE), 42 Foundation (RU) **Timetable:** 2025–2026

Masters of Hospitality



Ulla Liukkonen, Saimi Hoyer, Anni Korhonen and Eeva Mertanen are Masters of Hospitality, who are known both locally and nationally, and multi-sectorally. They are authentic and warm women who represent the genuine hospitality of eastern Finland through many generations. These four ladies are our Saimaa Gastro Ambassadors and in 2022–2025 will take the concept of Savo-Karelian hospitality to European events such as Grüne Woche (DE) and Gusti di Frontiera (IT) – sharing stories about our cultural heritage and cuisine while expanding their own knowledge by learning from other European masters of hospitality. They will have prominent roles to play in numerous events related to cuisine in 2026, including our “Tables Over Borders” programme. We will collaborate and practise cultural exchange with the Slovakian Degustories programme



(Trenčín 2026). The idea of Degustories is to introduce the different cuisines of various countries. They will also pay a visit to Slovakia to learn more about the local food culture and will invite Trenčín 2026 partners to come taste authentic Finnish wild food.

Ulla, Saimi, Anni, and Eeva will visit different European communities both in person and online. They will make appearances in several European homes. The expanded experience will bring everyone the opportunity to experience authentic eastern Finland hospitality through VR glasses. Led by our Gastro Ambassadors, everyone will have an opportunity to view beautiful Finnish nature, get a glimpse of the pure natural ingredients nature provides, and feel a touch of Finnish hospitality - all from the comfort of their own home.

The Gastro Ambassadors will visit the Timisoara Slowing Down Festival. They will participate in food-themed workshops and learn the Romanian food traditions and recipes.

Partners: Saimaa region food travel consortium, gastro ambassadors Ulla Liukkonen, Saimi Hoyer, Anni Korhonen, and Eeva Mertanen, Nova Gorica 2025, Timisoara 2023, Trenčín 2026

Timetable: 2022–2026

Saimaa Region of Gastronomy – connective heritage project for food tourism



The roots of Finnish cuisine go deep into the earth of eastern Finland. Many traditional dishes loved throughout Finland: Karelian stew, muikkukukko (vendace and pork pie), Karelian pasties, various other pasties, fish and oven dishes, originate from the local food traditions of Savonia and Karelia.

The uniqueness of our food culture has also been acknowledged in Europe. The Kuopio area has been awarded the highly esteemed European Region of

Gastronomy title for 2020–2021. Inspired by the title, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has been creating and putting together a totally new food travel consortium that includes our four regions. This consortium (composed of regional development organisations) together with Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, will create a strong concept associated with eastern Finnish cuisine and, along with regional cultural players, will promote the content of our bid book. The consortium will also combine existing regional practices to create a new food travel and cultural ecosystem for the entire area of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

Local producers can apply for a D.O. Saimaa insignia, which is a guarantee of the product's high quality and the responsibility adhered to in its production. It was the first mark of quality to be issued by the EU to Finland. It also informs the consumer of the positive effects the product has on the environment, culture, and regional vitality. The D.O. Saimaa mark on a product tells both international travellers and local consumers that the product originates from Saimaa, that it is pure, and the best in quality.

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Legacy project: The Saimaa Region of Gastronomy will continue the responsible development of food travel first initiated by the food consortium. The model for collaboration we established during the ECoC application process will continue on its mission to build a unified gastronomy travel field. Our vision is that our model of collaboration will become concrete in the form of a joint application for European Region of Gastronomy 2027.

Partners: The Finnish and Karelian Chefs Association, Helsinki University Ruralia Institute, Southeast Finland University of Applied Sciences XAMK, Savonia University of Applied Sciences, ProAgria East Finland / Itä-Suomen Maa- ja kotitalousnaiset (Rural Women's Advisory Organisation in East Finland), South Finland regional office of the Rural Women's Advisory Organisation, ProAgria South Savonia

Timetable: 2022–2027

Future Ugrians



This captivating, mobile festival which will take place in eastern Finland and Russian Karelia, will gather together a new Ugrian generation, who has awakened to the fact that their culture is diminishing – and raise the fact that their own identity does not always fit into the prevalent norms. The event will allow the voices of poets, language activists, new word users, musicians, craftspeople, and artists from Finland and Russian Karelia, the Russian Finno-Ugrian people, Setos and Sámi people all to be heard.

The focus of the festival is the Small languages, Great Nations seminar which connects spoken and written language. How do symbols, dialects, language, and rituals unite – but also set apart our cultures?

Festivals, lessons in small languages, events and workshops throughout eastern Finland will be organised during the festival. The week will culminate in a gala in Savonlinna on 8 August 2026 when we will celebrate the official **Let's Show Off**. The gala is not only a celebration, but also a presentation of projects created during the festival week. The programme will be compiled through an open call for artists, which will be combined with the curated content.

The Finno-Ugrian cultural heritage thrives in Ilomantsi, the easternmost municipality in Finland and continental EU. The municipality of Ilomantsi (population 4,800) on the border of Russia, will apply for the title of the Finno-Ugrian Capital of Culture for the year 2023. Other applicants will be small, but distinctive places in Finland, Estonia, Russia, and Hungary.

Partners: Loimolan voima ensemble (Power of Loimola), Karelian activist Maura Häkki, Santtu Karhu & Talvisovat band (RU), Lodkastrun (RU), Zetod (EE), Pielisen Tietäjäkeskus ry (Pielinen Centre of "those-who-know"), Finno-Ugrian Society, MTÜ Fenno-Ugria Asutus (Non-Profit Organisation Fenno-Ugria) (EE), South Karelian Cultural Association Lyyra, Ilomantsi Tourism Association, Kukushka Festival,

Vyborg (RU), Foundation for Art and Culture ORIS of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area (RU), udmurdian poet Nadii Muš (RU), udmurdian textile artist Zoja Lebedeva (RU), Nova Gorica 2025
Timetable: 2023–2026

MUMMOT 2.0 (Grandmas), is also a part of the programme. Grandmas is a modern grandparent exchange programme organised by the Lappeenranta Museums and the western Siberian Khanty-Mansi Museum of Nature and People. The participants will get to know each other's cultures in different types of cultural heritage workshops with themes relating to food, handicrafts, or storytelling traditions and will act as masters for future Ugrian apprentices. Modern grandmothers, their assistance, skills and know-how are required for transferring cultural heritage from one generation to the next as the roles and traditions of generations change. We will expand the concept to 2025 Nova Gorica and in 2026 Grandmas 2.0 will participate in the Future Ugrians.

Partners: Lappeenranta Museums and Khanty-Mansi Museum of Nature and People, Nova Gorica 2025 **Timetable:** 2025–2026

WILD CREATIVITY

Eastern Finland invites you to the source of authentic raw materials and ideas.

The Dark Festival



History will be made in Savonlinna – in August 2026 – when an event inspired by past achievements, craftsmanship and a strong force of metal music takes over Riihisaari and Olavinlinna for the span of one week. The Medieval Market in Olavinlinna will attract

craftsmen from far and wide to exhibit and sell their goods, and will feature a variety of entertainment, including tournaments, jesters, and players. We will engage in a programme content exchange with Latvia's ECoC candidate Cēsis. At the opening of the event week, the shores of Saimaa will echo with the sounds of metal giving way in the artful hands of international master blacksmiths in Riihisaari.

Many prominent metal bands have risen to fame from locations in eastern Finland. After all, the world's unlikely capital of metal music is in the municipality of Lemi, located in South Karelia. In 2023, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will highlight metal music by launching an international band competition in the region, challenging young musicians to create new music by mixing different genres of music. The competition will live on – in the form of videos posted on social media – allowing a wider audience to cast a vote for their own favourite. The band contest will culminate in a joint concert in Olavinlinna. The heavy metal musical group Stam1na, from Lemi, will headline the concert, and singer-guitarist Antti Hyrynen will serve as one of the band competition judges.

Riihisaari will transform into an international forging site when the forging event "Rautasulka" (Iron Feather) will return after years, greater than ever. Master Blacksmith Jarkko Kaartilanmäki will extend an invitation to the blacksmith masters and apprentices of the community to participate in forging demonstrations, and through this collaboration a permanent Kalevala-themed artwork will be completed. Renowned blacksmiths from Australia, North America and Europe will arrive to lead the forging of the mystical Kalevala figures. The audience will have the opportunity to follow the transformation of lake ore into iron.

In Riihisaari, everyone interested can try their hand at traditional handicrafts and to meet the craftsmen. Thematically the centre will be Finnsheep and birchbark. In the discussions and interviews the

artisans from Finland and abroad will be presented to the audience. During the week of the event, an invitation-only exhibition will be organised featuring the work of international blacksmiths and birchbark artists.

Partners: Taito East Finland, D.O. Saimaa Destination of origin, Helsinki University Ruralia Institute, DeSavo ry, Rautasulka (Iron Feather Forging Event), Riihisaari – Lake Saimaa Nature and Museum Centre, The National Museum of Finland / Olavinlinna Castle, Savonlinna Medieval Society, Kolomonen ry, Tavinsalmi Medieval centre, Stam1na (band) and singer-guitarist Antti Hyrynen, electronic kantele player Juha Jyrkäs, Cēsis 2027 **Timetable:** 2026

Saimaa Art & Design Festivals



Art and Design Festivals have been organised in eastern Finland since 2014. The first one was Mikkeli Art & Design Week, next year Design Week Kuopio was born. And in 2021 a Savonlinna Design Festival will commence. In 2026 designers will assemble at the legendary Retretti site in Punkaharju. The theme of the one-week event is "Sense and Taste of Place". The programme will include an international Design Market. Design Learning workshops focused on bringing the rock art into modern days, are open to all. Design Meets Wild Food & Local Flavours event will feature European chefs, designers, and artists. Inspiration stems from the nature, wild food, and the innovative design elements conceived by the artists of eastern Finland. New services and products will be introduced as a result of the workshop. We will collaborate with the Nova Gorica 2025 **What Colour Is the Smell of Grapes** project by inviting their group of young artists and chefs to join in the design challenge. The competition will be organised in cooperation with, and the judges will be appointed by, the international IGCAT (Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism) network.

A colourful city happening will transform Savonlinna into a dazzling celebration. This visual arts event will

bring creativity close to the locals and inspire people to think differently. In addition to traditional exhibitions and workshops, art will make surprise appearances in unexpected places and the public transport will boast colourful displays. Events will be enlivened by audio and visual art, various installations and performances, and communal art and live music. Versatile modern Saimaa folk art will be featured in the Savonlinna city centre. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will issue an open international call and organise an exhibition for national and international ITE (contemporary folk art) artists. Marko Ruuskanen, an artist whose work is on display in many locations around Savonlinna, including the centre and the Talvisalo cemetery, will also be the invited artist.

We will collaborate with the Plovdiv 2019 Legacy project “One Dance Week”. Challenging our perception of what is normal and customary, we will bring dancers into public space for performances. We will elevate the most beautiful, forgotten buildings into positions of prominence in collaboration with Heritage of Timisoara.

Partners: Taito Eastern Finland, Helsinki University Ruralia Institute, Pääkonttori ry, Ars Nova ry, Craft&Design Savonlinna, DeSavo ry, D.O. Saimaa Destination of origin, the food tourism consortium, Nova Gorica 2025, Plovdiv 2019 / ONE Foundation, Heritage of Timisoara by Prin Banat Association (RO) **Timetable:** 2026

New Steps of Eastern Dance



The Kuopio Dance Festival is the largest and longest-running annual international dance festival. It has also gained recognition as one of Europe’s most prominent modern dance events. The festival has been in existence for over 50 years and has had a significant impact on the field of dance in eastern Finland, increasing the recognition of dance, both in Finland and outside the country. In 2026, the Kuopio

Dance Festival will be involved in producing dance programmes in the spirit of east meets west on the border. The event will culminate as a live event in Kuopio. It will be livestreamed and available through digital channels. Via a video recording, the dance choreography can be mastered by all prior to the actual performance. Local dance institutes, dance groups or dance festivals will act as local partners and mobilisers. We welcome everyone to participate in creating the dance choreography: dance professionals, students, dance clubs, dancers, and residents of Saimaa, around Ladoga in Russia, and various bodies of water in Europe.

Partners: Kuopio Dance Festival, Lappeenranta Dance Institute, South Savonia Dance Institute, Regional Dance Centre of Eastern Finland, International Festival of Arts Diaghilev P.S. (RU), Kannon Dance (RU), OPEN LOOK St. Petersburg International Dance Festival (RU), Pihkova and Pitkäranta dance schools, dance organisations and dance enthusiasts, Bodø 2024

RETKI – JAUNT The Regional Dance Centre of Eastern Finland (ITAK) is a significant promoter of cultural diversity, and the production and availability of professional art. During the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 year, ITAK will take dance art into the middle of nature. RETKI – JAUNT performances will comprise treks, open discussions and dance performances at wilderness huts. ITAK together with its international partners form dance pairs from Europe and eastern Finland will produce a performance in each of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 regions. The performances represent various dance genres and the target groups consist of different ages. At the same time RETKI – JAUNT highlights nature values, ecology, and the intangible benefits of the outdoors, forming an artistic connection for addressing the European nature relationship.

Partners: Regional Dance Centre of Eastern Finland, Dansverkstæðið (IS), TROIS C-L – Centre de Création Chorégraphique Luxembourgais (LU), ICK Dans Amsterdam (NL) **Timetable:** 2025–2026

From Ancient Days to Modern Days



In 2026 in eastern Finland we will see different artworks utilising digital art which enable the creation of immersive experiences for the ECOC programme.

Saimaa Art Cave Retretti in Punkaharju will awaken to a new beginning through digital art. Exhibitions produced especially for the cave will employ state-of-the-art VR, AR, and MR technology. Content for the Kalevala-themed immersive adventure world to be created in the Retretti labyrinth will be collected during the preceding five years. The first programme, “The Theft of the Sampo”, will be ready in the summer of 2021.

Digital Kalevala stories will be integrated within the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programme and they will present a background for creating new interpretations for a group of international performing arts professionals who will be invited to participate in a competition that will result in new artwork. The performances will be part of the 2026 programme at Saimaa Art Cave Retretti. The cave will also function as an educational space for organising courses and workshops and will provide opportunities to experiment and work on various digital productions as a part of Saimaa Skill Share Lab activities. Retretti will invite European caves to join in a hybrid event. Collaboration with the Digital Museum makes content available to all, wherever and whenever.

The VB Photographic Centre in Kuopio will create an exhibition space in the city environment, where just by pressing a button a summer forest is transformed into a winter forest scene or into a background for performances. At the same time, it can operate as an innovative platform for different art forms.

Partners: Saimaa Art Cave Retretti, Digital Museum (Digimuseo.fi), VB Photographic Center **Timetable:** 2022–2026

History Comes Alive! This project aims to produce a digital environment for teaching about the history of the Saimaa area. The material being translated into different languages and audio description ensure accessibility. The content will be available to travellers through the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform. In Savonlinna, active events for children and young people will be organised where history can be learned through drama and work based on gamification, such as escape rooms and mystery games. History Comes Alive! will strengthen our own roots and the knowledge about our cultural environment and will support the curriculum in history teaching as interaction between study subjects and phenomenal learning. It will raise interest in the history of the Saimaa region both locally and internationally, bringing new products for the use of travellers.

Partners: History Comes Alive! -work group **Timetable:** 2022–2026

FLORA & FAUNA. The RIISA Orthodox Church Museum of Finland located in Kuopio displays Byzantine traditions from millenniums ago and the Orthodox way of life. RIISA will participate in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 through the “Love Without Borders” programme by submitting an exhibition featuring an international nature theme and supportive digital content. The exhibition will be displayed during the 250th anniversary of Kuopio in 2025. Central to the project is that RIISA owns and manages a considerable share of the Finnish national cultural heritage. Liturgically, and from the aspect of arts and cultural history, the collections are invaluable. The objective is to provide modern artists from Russia and Europe, working in the fields of photography, media and performing dance, with a source of inspiration. The connecting factor of the project is a love for creating art, and the collective theme is Flora&Fauna. The sister cities of Kuopio, Pitkäranta and Pihkova in Russia, and the

artist communities of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 area, will be welcomed to join in. The programme will contribute to the similarity and equality of people, disregarding their gender, age, nationality, or world view. The Novgorod National Museum Velikiy will be engaged in the programme by exhibiting its oldest Russian Orthodox icons at the RIISA digital exhibition.

Partners: RIISA – Orthodox Church Museum of Finland, The Novgorod National Museum (RU) **Timetable:** 2024–2026

Residency Network – Urban meets Rural



Interaction between the urban world and the ascetic experiences in nature. From a metropolis of five million to the silence of nature.

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Artists-in-Residency network will allow exchange artists from St. Petersburg in Russian and other European metropolises to experience the unique nature, peace and quiet of the Saimaa region. Residencies in the Saimaa region will include: The Cubicle Residencies, Cottage Residencies, and Artist Residencies in Vyborg and Narva. The Cottage residencies, together with new Villa residencies to be developed on the Karelian Isthmus, will provide a programme through which artists from Russia, Europe, and eastern Finland can work in collaboration, creating new Saimaa Phenomenon routes, artwork, stories, and encounters - engaging in discussions over the east/west border. **Sami Rintala's forest cathedral City(e)scape / Return to the forest** will play a significant role in this programme.

The Urban meets Rural programme places strong emphasis on encouraging cooperation, so that space is cleared for creativity that will result in a method of working that is rich in content and places great value

on local contact. We will achieve success for this endeavour through the following projects:

Hop to Russia is a programme designed to give assistance to foreign guests and creative partners in the cities of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, by acting as intermediaries – bridging the gap between creative sectors of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 artists-in-residency programmes and Russian partners, by helping to establish contacts, providing consulting, and translating services, and encouraging support of residencies in St. Petersburg and Russian Karelia.

Secret artists. We will search for cottage destinations in eastern Finland for our artists-in-residency programmes for international artists. Cottage residences will offer the perfect opportunity for encounters of cultures and traditions. International cottage residences will be piloted during the ECoC year, our objective is to introduce completely new Saimaa workspaces (hubs) and residency destinations for common use by the artists.

Many artists also spend their summers in the Saimaa area without revealing their identity. We will invite them to create art in the area – anonymously. We will declare an open call for suitable places to display the artwork of “Secret Artists” in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region during the ECoC year.

Savonlinna Calling. Artists living in the Savonlinna area will extend invitations to other artists, encouraging them to come work in the region. The artists will be offered practical opportunities to work in the area, for example, through a broad artists-in-residency network. Additionally, Sakke ry will organise a competition for professional artists, in conjunction with the Savonlinna Senior Secondary School of Arts and Music, which will be a way to invite alumni of the school to create public artworks in the city.

Minna Canth Academy residences. The Minna Canth Academy will build a network of arts-in-residency programmes where available spaces in different areas of Saimaa will be harnessed for arts-in-residency use. Through versatile artists-in-residency activities in the area we will facilitate good working spaces for artists and researchers coming from elsewhere.

Narva Art Residency. We will collaborate with Narva with respect to the artists-in-residency activities. The artist-in-residency programmes are designed to appeal to a wide cultural field, including artists, musicians, architects, curators, and artists working with performing arts, literature, design, and the film industry.

Other residencies in the bid book:

- **Forest cathedral:** In the programme City(e)scape / Return to the forest
- **Asylum residencies:** The municipality of Rääkkylä and the Anti-festival in collaboration with the Artist at Risk network

Partners: The House of Finland in St. Petersburg, Artist Residency of Vyborg Pamaus, Narva Art Residency, EUby Lakes project, Savonlinna City Centre Development Association Sakke ry, Association of the Minna Canth House Partners, Outokumpu OldMine Residency

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 operates in an unprecedentedly wide geographical area, which is not only a strength but also a challenge. Our digital platform will make it easier for our guests to find the art and cultural activities and various travel services of Saimaa region.

From the beginning, it was envisioned that the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform would bring together information about the Capital of Culture year programme, cultural and travel services and products, artists-in-residency programmes, events, transport services, creative spaces and doers, and connect actors and various industries in the region.

Travellers and residents in the area will be able to use the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform as a unified website and mobile application covering the entire Saimaa region. Through the service, tourists will have the opportunity to create their own “Saimaa phenomenon” and receive customised recommendations about the region’s cultural and tourism experiences, based on their location and the data they share.

Digital accessibility

The production and consumption of culture have changed drastically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, cultural programmes and services are nowadays made digitally accessible. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform will make available a large part of the ECoC programme as digital

implementations, but also provides other services and products related to virtual (VR) or augmented reality (AR) and gamification. This way, arts and culture partners in the Saimaa region can reach new target groups and a wider audience – including special groups and those who would not otherwise have access to culture. Interest in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will grow exponentially when services are easy to access, reach and experience digitally.

Cooperation with tourism and cultural projects

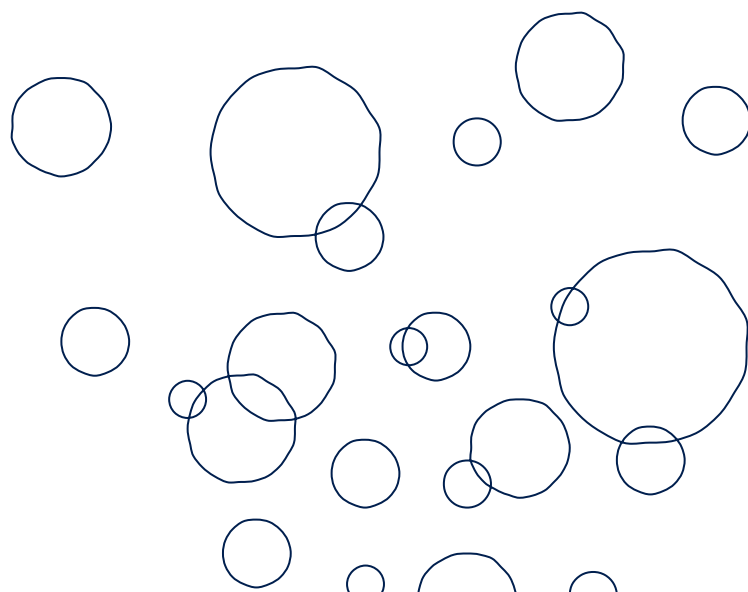
Many parallel tourism and cultural projects and development measures are currently underway in the Saimaa region. Regional tourism organisations will gather information on cultural sites and tourism offerings within their own regions. In terms of arts and culture, currently no digital database is available which contains all the information connecting the provinces of the Saimaa region together. The information is scattered in different databases. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform seeks to serve all operators in the cultural, art and tourism sectors, as well as consumers, by compiling all the information and activities into a common database which covers the entire Saimaa region.

Resource Bank of Creative Professionals

As part of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026’s digital database, a resource bank will be compiled, including information concerning the region’s artists, cultural operators and the various services they provide. The database will enable interregional, international, and cross-sectoral networking for creative professionals, and facilitate employment of artists in our region.

Help with knowledge

Knowledge management tools will be featured on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform to facilitate



the evaluation and effectiveness of the Capital of Culture activities. These tools will bring together statistics and research data to facilitate the evaluation. The results of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 evaluation will be openly distributed via the digital platform to various participants, decision-makers and organisations in the region, which will provide information to aid in their decision-making process.

Production

During the years 2020–2021, we will survey the status of current projects and existing databases in the fields tourism and creative industries, as well as the willingness of actors to participate in the creation of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform.

During 2021, we will define the forms and content of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform in cooperation with active creative and tourism operators, as well as users and developers of new technologies. We will also carry out a small-scale pilot programme based on the results of the survey. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform will remain alive after the Capital of Culture year as a Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 legacy. The concepts developed during 2021 will also seek solutions to platform maintenance issues after 2026. We will collaborate with Timisoara 2023 in conceptualisation.

Partners: Regional tourism organisations, Visit Finland, municipalities' tourism and cultural units, tourism and creative industry projects related to digital implementations, regional and national cultural and tourism industry associations, tourism and creative industry actors and entrepreneurs, events, higher education organisations, Timisoara 2023

Routes

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform will enable the digital presentation of the numerous art and cultural routes in our area. We will link routes to the themes of our programme content, for example.

Route examples:

- **Prehistoric Rock Art Trails** which has been listed as a cultural route of the Council of Europe since 2010, currently includes rock paintings in Astuvansalmi in Ristiina, Mikkeli. Approximately 70% of the prehistoric rock paintings found in Finland are located in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region, totalling 80-100 works.
- **The St. Olav Continental Route** is a pilgrimage route which is still under construction. It passes by eight Olav Churches as it makes its way from the eastern border and Savonlinna through mainland Finland to Turku. Via the St. Olav Waterway, the route connects with other Nordic St. Olav pilgrimage routes which lead all the way to Trondheim, in Norway.
- **The Intangible Cultural Singing Heritage Route** is a cultural route based on singing. It combines Kalevala poetry with the tradition of singing, including Estonian polyphonic leelo singing, the sutartinės singing tradition found in northern and eastern Lithuania, and the Baltic song festival tradition. An application for European Council cultural route status will be submitted.
- **The Green Gold Cultural Road** runs from Mäntyharju through Ristiina, Puumala, Sulkava, Savonlinna and Punkaharju, to the Finnish Forest Museum in Lusto, through Särkisalmi and ends in Parikkala. The digital content of the route opens up the area's relationship with the forest and related perspectives.
- **The Saimaa Archipelago Route** transports cyclists along the most beautiful roads to be found in Lappeenranta, Imatra, Ruokolahti and Taipalsaari and is connected to the Puumala Archipelago Route by ferry. Along the way, there are several Saimaa Geopark sites.
- A total of 57 km long routes have been planned for the Luumäki and Lemi **Kivijärvi Boat Routes**, which will pass several museums. Saimaa and Kivijärvi are connected by an intermediate route, the middle course of which is full of prehistoric rock paintings.

Increasing readiness to act

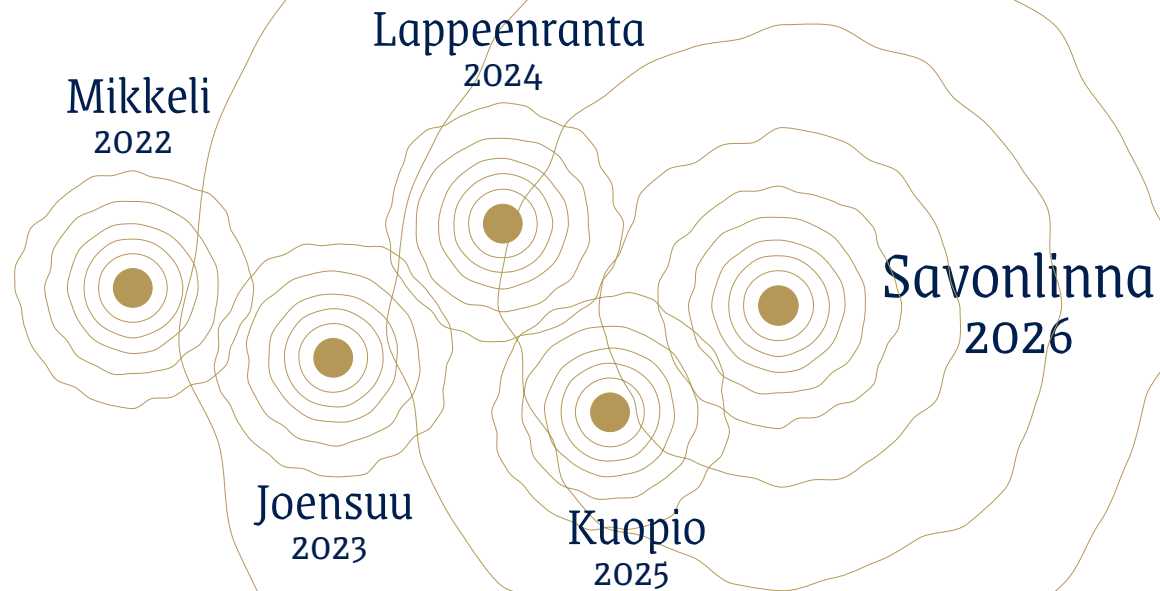
To achieve our goals, our project contains concepts to ensure that we have the broadest possible cooperation and the best possible ways to develop our capabilities in producing our artistic programme.

Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is a joint effort of four different regions and their respective capital cities; also a total of 53 municipalities contribute to our activities through their individual characteristics. Together with the central cities in the region, we have developed the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa concept which offers each city and region its moment in the limelight as we proceed on our journey culminating in our year as a European Capital of Culture. Meanwhile, we will increase our know-how and capacity to organise cultural events. Each city will in turn organise its own self-financed Cultural Dream Year Project based on its own strengths. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will contribute to the project by providing access to its international networks and a European dimension. Programme content spelt out in our bid book will be tested during this time frame: the most fresh and innovative content will be further developed.

In 2022, Mikkeli will be the first city celebrating its Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa, titled “**Dream Year of Culture**”. The city has been awarded its own





financing of 600,000 euros, which is independent of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Next in turn after Mikkeli will be Joensuu in 2023, Lappeenranta in 2024, and Kuopio in 2025 (to celebrate its 250th anniversary). Each city will profile its own year of celebration according to the city's own individual characteristics and acquire independent financing for the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa. Profiling will be used to help us determine Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programme content, utilising the strengths of the different regions. Our concept will culminate in Savonlinna's European Capital of Culture Year in 2026 and will be visible and audible throughout Savonlinna and all eastern Finland.

During the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa, the cities will develop and update their own individual cultural strategies and will be working together in close cooperation. All the municipalities in the region will participate in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 through financing provided by the regional councils, or as a result of their own, additional, independent fundraising efforts.

The Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa will serve to effect a change of views and attitudes with respect to how arts and culture are perceived in our society. The Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa will be implemented as independent projects during the years 2022–2025.

Saimaa Skill Share Lab

Saimaa Skill Share Lab (SSSL) is an extensive capacity building programme designed with the goals of acquiring new skills, sharing information, enhancing communality, and encouraging young people in the region to become involved. The programme's intent is to strengthen our preparedness for successful implementation of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 and help develop the skills of the various participants in the region in a versatile manner. The operational structure of Saimaa Skill Share Lab is flexible and allows easy access to various types of participants; anyone who wants to participate in workshops and

training can do so and share their skills with others. The capacity building programme will be customised to meet the needs of the participants through regular surveys. An advisory board comprised of experts of different fields will also be assembled with the task of compiling content for Saimaa Skill Share Lab. Activities will be conceptualised during 2021. Operations will be specified and the number of activities will increase towards 2026.

Saimaa Skill Share Lab will work in close cooperation with upper secondary schools and higher education institutions, and will seek out new avenues and ways to pursue active cooperation with other entities. Saimaa Skill Lab will not maintain a designated space of its own but will meet up virtually or on premises provided by any of the cooperation partners.

The capacity building programme includes four main areas of development:

Saimaa Youth Lab

We asked the question of who would be the best to spread the word about ECoC to young people and encourage them to get involved in our activities? The resounding response: "We are" replied the young people in the Saimaa region. Accordingly, it was decided that the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 partners include a 12-member Youth Panel who will be responsible for actively developing programme content, providing excellent feedback, and communicating about our activities.

The task of the young people is to change the world: break down borders, go a bit crazy, be open-minded, and act as modern-day civic activists. Our task is to listen to what they have to say and give them space and opportunities to act. Young people had an opportunity to tell us directly through an online survey in winter 2021, about what issues are important to

them and what type of programmes they would like to be creating for the ECoC year. The survey confirmed the prevailing line of thought - young people consider sustainable development and environmental values the most important issues; they also wanted to participate in freeform activities without having to be a member of any certain organisation or group. Among the young, the most popular ways of becoming involved in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 are through various exchange programmes with other European Capitals of Culture cities, participating in new and creative multisectoral projects, and volunteering.

Saimaa Skill Share Lab will allow the voice of the young people to be heard and will provide them with the keys to form a Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 of their own. Saimaa Youth Lab supports young entrepreneurship and environmental and multi-cultural education. The young will be identified and acknowledged as masters who are prepared to share their world views and skills with older generations on equal terms.

Saimaa Youth Lab will work in close cooperation with various educational establishments and organisations. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will embrace beneficial, good practices from other ECoC cities and ECoC-SME project partners. Examples of suitable approaches include ECoC study credits from universities and multi-sectoral courses which are designed to discover concepts to fill empty spaces, or solutions to problems at hand. We have discussed developing cooperative opportunities with Hungary's Veszprém-Balaton 2023 and the University of Pannonia with respect to their ECoC university cooperation and Balaton365 programme. We will also work in cooperation with the Business Practice Center of the Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) in Kaunas. We will utilise their "Smart Practice" model which involves and activates various stakeholders in common problem solving as a part of Saimaa Youth Lab. This will enable the organisation of common courses

and student visits which aim to enhance European co-creation.

Examples in programme: *Arts and Culture on the Waters, Primal Force of Water Conference, Schoolchild Science Meets Art – Cultural content for science workshops, Say Norppa, City(e)scape, Secondary High School Reunion, Room for Culture, Children's Culture, Operation Kantele, "Nyt mie ruppeen laulamaan"*

Methods for implementation:

- Youth Panel
- Digiraati.fi, a social influencing forum especially for young people
- Multi-sectoral project courses, training, workshops, and learning clinics organised in cooperation with several educational establishments
- Saimaa Phenomenon dissertation group, researches, internships
- Idea competitions, for example, business competitions, ideas for solving problems related to seasonality and empty spaces
- Student exchange programmes, camp school activities and young people's volunteer work

Lab for Cross-fertilisation

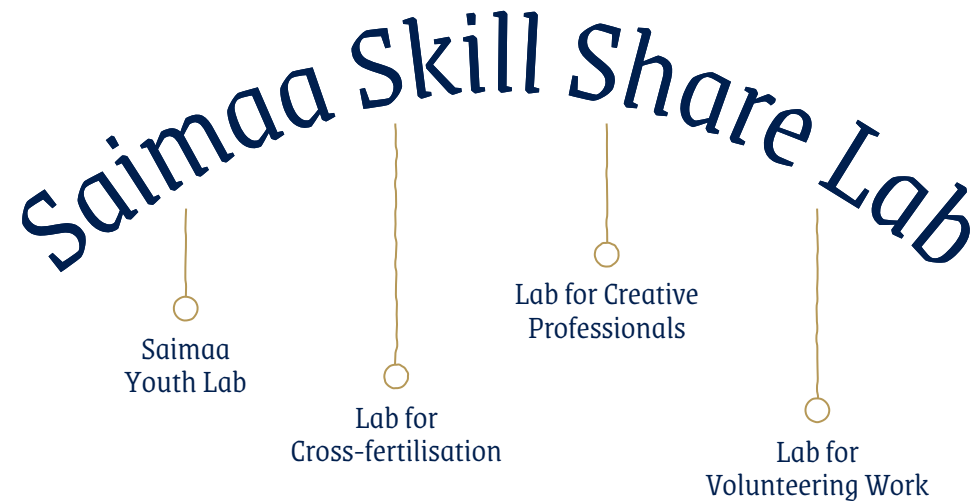
In the new European Bauhaus spirit, Saimaa Skill Share Lab will draw out different groups from their own silos and purposefully cause encounters between different business sectors, such as administration, regional development, universities, science, arts, culture, tourism, and technology operators; crossing over municipal, regional and national borders. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will connect participants from different fields, encourage them to innovate together and educate each other about the secrets of their own business field. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform, workshops, and training sessions will provide ample opportunities for creating new innovations,

operating methods, and products and services. This will facilitate the cross-fertilisation of business fields which ordinarily would not meet.

For example, in 2026 we will organise an international **Primal Force of Water Conference** under the leadership of a UEF water research group and LUT University. The aim of the conference is to connect researchers, businesses, and arts and culture partners in a cross-sectoral manner. Water and bodies of water are the prerequisite for life. In Saimaa it is also an essential part of our regional identity. We can share this knowledge with the rest of Europe by explaining how our way of life has evolved, based on and connected to our waters. At the same time, we must acknowledge that our pristine waters are currently under threat; that it is important to engage international and multi-sectoral research and work in cooperation with others to achieve superior knowledge and understanding of water in order to protect it.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, together with Tahko Ski Lift Pitch (the most significant international start-up event in eastern Finland), will create new funding channels for the region's business environment, travel industry, and the arts and cultural fields. As a result of the collaboration, in 2026 several innovations will have received support and achieved growth through the event, and startup entrepreneurship will be perceived as a potential way to find employment in the arts and cultural sectors as well.

Examples in programme: *Arts and Culture on the Waters, Primal Force of Water Conference, Decades at a Cottage, Lauteilla, Saimaa Art Bridge, Lovet2026, Voice to Europe, Eastern Food Culture, Hindsight, Say Norppa, Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub, "Nyt mie ruppeen laulamaan", Table over Border, Masters of Hospitality, The Dark Festival, Saimaa Art & Design Festival*



Methods for implementation:

- Multisectoral international projects and conferences
- Training under different themes, e.g., international funding opportunities
- Workshops, co-working, co-creation, hackathons
- Multidisciplinary MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course), e.g., relating to well-being
- Dissemination of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 researches and research results
- Saimaa Academy of Gastronomy

Lab for Creative Professionals Bring out the Talent!

In our Lab for Creative Professionals we will highlight the broad array of talents possessed by our cultural, artistic, and event production experts! We will utilise and share existing expertise in our creative fields. We can learn from masters about the successes of the past, as well as from mistakes made. Our digital platform will include a resource bank which will facilitate the search for experts required in

the production of future cultural activities. We are discussing the opportunity of opening up archives in the museums and the Mikkeli Memory Campus for the use of our partners. Archives can be utilised in, for example, developing therapies for people suffering from dementia, gamification, producing AR/VR material and cultural routes, and as a source of inspiration for artists. We will cooperate with Timisoara 2023.

The Lab for Creative Professionals will serve to train experts in event production, and in arts and culture, step-by-step towards the year 2026. Through surveys we will identify the bottlenecks in the expertise of our partners in the region. We will organise training and share information on various themes and topics of discussion, including professional event production, responsible and safe activities, digital skills, entrepreneurship, financing, European project funding, financial administration, communication, and multiculturalism.

We will enhance the agility of small-scale events and expertise in organising big events. At the same time we will ensure that principles of responsible

programme design are implemented in ECoC programme content. We will acquire peer learning and good practices from outside our national borders. Our training will support the self-funded production of the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa in Mikkeli (2022), Joensuu (2023), Lappeenranta (2024) and Kuopio (2025).

Our first training sessions have already been held: in our workshops we have had expert presentations introducing topics including, for example, peace technology and the building of a cultural ecosystem. The Culture of the Forest workshops we hosted featured lectures by Finnish architect and artist Sami Rintala on “Forest as Nature and Culture” and Master of Ethnology and Museum Director Johanna Lehto-Vahtera introduced the fascinating topic of our Human-Forest relationship connection. Three meetings have been organised for Saimaa Storytellers, focusing on how to utilise storytelling in communications and how to build a phenomenon. Over one hundred communication experts have participated in the workshops.

Examples in programme: *The Spirit of the Forest, Saimaa Lights, Parahyppy Festival, Saimaa Art Bridge, Children’s Culture, Let’s Show Off, Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa, Operation Kantele, “Nyt mie ruppeen laulamaan”, Music for All, The Dark Festival, Saimaa Art & Design Festival, New Steps of Eastern Dance*

Methods for implementation:

- Resource bank
- Training sessions, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 morning coffees, summer schools, master courses, information briefings, lectures, and workshops
- One-on-one counselling and business mentors
- Volunteering activities
- Utilising archives
- Researches, guidebooks, toolboxes
- Learn by doing with a Master-Apprentice approach

Lab for Volunteering Work

“Let’s do communal work!” is a Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 volunteer programme which is based on close cooperation with local and regional associations and civic organisations and enterprises. We will involve a broad group of residents in the region, consisting of people from different age groups, minorities and special groups included. Our goal is to offer everyone in the region who is interested an opportunity to participate and play a part in making Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 come true. We will utilise the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform in recruiting volunteers.

A voluntary work programme will raise the know-how of local residents and other participants in communal work by organising courses and training programmes in cooperation with vocational colleges and independent cultural partners. *Anna mie autan* (“Let me help”) activities in Savonlinna have produced good results. The programme trains locals as expert guides so they may serve tourists and locals alike. We will expand this programme to encompass the entire Saimaa region, offering residents in the area the opportunity to become as a local guide.

Our volunteering programme will help ensure that everyone working in the cultural and travel industry (and in tasks that interface with them) is familiar with the various Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programmes. We will organise training in ECoC programme content, on the region’s attractions, and about local service offerings to all who work closely with the travel industry, so we can ensure that all guests who visit the area receive the best possible service. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 info points will be located on the premises of a variety of travel enterprises and cultural destinations.

We will compile an international volunteering programme which will provide young people across Europe an opportunity to come to the region as a ECoC

volunteer in 2026. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will apply for Erasmus funding to finance these activities.

Examples in programme and activities: *Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Storytellers, Parahyppy Festival Tour, guaranteeing the feasibility of the entire programme*

Methods for implementation:

- Increasing broad involvement and awareness: information briefings, information desks
- Training to be a local guide
- Communal worker training, also for special groups
- International volunteering programme
- Education in ECoC content – Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 information package
- Security guard training, hygiene and security passports
- Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Storytellers
- Host School

Cooperation partners creating the Saimaa Skill Share Lab:

Veszprém-Balaton 2023, University of Pannonia, Timisoara 2023 PowerStation, Kaunas VMU Business Practice Center, University of Eastern Finland, LUT University, Savonia University of Applied Sciences, Karelia University of Applied Sciences, South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences, LAB University of Applied Sciences, Humak, Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, Riveria vocational school, Samiedu vocational college, South Savo Vocational College, Savo Vocational College, Saimaa Vocational College Sampo, Savonlinna Summer University, adult education centres, LUT Junior University, Savonlinna Senior Secondary School of Arts and Music, regional art and cultural organisations and associations, artists, players in creative fields, ECoC-SME project

Programme budget

Power of Water	In €
Lake Culture	1,300,000
Culture of the Forest	1,100,000
Permission to be Different	500,000
The Spring	700,000
	3,600,000
Connecting Bridges	
Arts and Culture as a Bridge	4,000,000
Together	1,400,000
City<3Countryside	1,500,000
	6,900,000
Eastern Joy	
The Primal Force of Music	3,600,000
F(East)!	650,000
Wild Creativity	1,350,000
	5,600,000
Saimaa Skill Share Lab	1,500,000
Saimaa Phenomenon Digital Platform	400,000
	1,900,000
TOTAL	18,000,000

A photograph of two young women with long hair, wearing dark clothing, sitting in a pond. They are surrounded by numerous green lily pads. The woman on the left is looking towards the right, and the woman on the right is looking down at the water. The background is a dark, calm body of water with more lily pads scattered across it.

Enchanting Punkaharju

Not far from the city of Savonlinna you will come to find Punkaharju, the most beautiful amusement park in nature. This unique area has attracted tourists and artists alike since the late 1700s. The national landscape, as described by the Finnish poets J.L. Runeberg and Zachris Topelius, can still be experienced in a practically unchanged form. The area is managed by Metsähallitus as a nature reserve and has also been designated a Natura 2000 area.

During Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, all of Punkaharju's enchanting virtues will be highlighted

through extensive programme cooperation between local entrepreneurs. The experience will begin on a steamship or on the commuter train before arriving at Punkaharjun Aseman Taidelaituri (Punkaharju Art Station).

Numerous top-quality cultural sites dot the area. The Punkaharju Art Station and Johanna Oras Art Manor offer a glimpse into the very best of the Finnish art scene. Lovet2026, the joint programme led by the nearby Finnish Forest Museum Lusto, presents an extensive retrospective of our forest relationship, through international exhibition content and nature experiences.

The Masters of Hospitality programme features the beautifully renovated Hotel Punkaharju. Hotel manager Saimi Hoyer, also famous as a fashion model, fills the role of the perfect hostess, charming her guests and

taking them on mushroom excursions into the wild.

One of the key places to experience international art is the Saimaa Art Cave Retretti. The 5,500 square metre cave reaches a depth of up to 25 meters underground. The new exhibition space built above ground is suitable for hanging art displays. From the beginning of the 1980s until 2012, Retretti gained recognition by its presentation of high-quality art works, including works by artists such as Salvador Dalí, Albert Edelfelt, Marc Chagall, Hugo Simberg and Leonardo da Vinci. Retretti also served as a venue for concerts and operas. This place boasts a history like no other — featuring decades of tremendous success, followed by bankruptcy, and now a successful new era is on the horizon. The newly renovated Saimaa Art Cave Retretti will serve as one of the main stages of Savonlinna's European Capital of Culture year.

Q7

CHOOSING PROGRAMME CONTENT

The guidelines of our programme content were identified during the first stage of our ECoC candidacy in the workshops organised by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 in 2019–2020. The main themes and artistic programme presented in our first bid book were the result of these workshops and ideas that were raised in the interregional meetings. To process the artistic programme further, a broad group of artists with special expertise in areas such as BioArt, service design, social inclusion, international issues, and in assessing the effects of arts on well-being were heard. Their special knowledge contributed immensely in enriching the programme.

During the second stage of the candidacy, the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 team continued to actively

Methods of collecting programme content

- Idea seine
- Direct contacts with artists and cultural people
- Meetings with regional operators, workshops and think tanks
- Co-planning with various business sectors and institutions
- Expertise of coordinators and interregional Bridge Builders
- Artistic experts, Russia experts
- Other experts, e.g. Youth Panel, seniors, immigrants
- Cooperation with ECoC cities and sister cities

engage different audiences in discussions. Artists and various cultural players made suggestions and brought forth ideas about their own programme content throughout the entire application process. We received a flurry of individual programme suggestions at the many meetings we conducted in our region, also via the contact form on our website, and through direct inquiries to our Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 team members. Local art institutions, culture and sports organisations, travel and restaurant operators, development projects, NGOs, and various other associations have made the decision to become part of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 through their own programmes.

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 team working on finalising the second bid book for Savonlinna's ECoC candidacy consists of experts from different art fields. They have reviewed all the programme propositions and brought forth fresh, new ideas which support and broaden our main themes and programme content.

To complete our programme content in the second bid book, we invited additional participants with special knowledge in Russian affairs, social inclusion and multiculturalism. A separate, interregional artistic group consisting of five respected art professionals was also invited to join the team. The work of the artistic team was led by the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 leader. With the additional expertise offered by our artistic team, our programme content has expanded, content has been linked to new artistic ideas, and the European dimension has been elaborated upon.

Annual cycle and involving players in the cultural field

We can identify two opposite features in the cultural offerings of our region: an exhausting summer season and a significantly quieter winter season.

We will develop the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 artistic programmes by focusing on the seasonal

cycle and will apply an annual clock in its planning. We will launch the ECoC year by featuring winter elements such as snow, ice, darkness and sub-zero temperatures in our programmes. Spring awakens nature and brings us light. Thousands of boats will be launched to ride the waves of Lake Saimaa. Summer offers us time to delight in the abundant programmes offered by both small and big summer festivals and events. Music will echo from every peninsula on Lake Saimaa. The dampening and darkening tones of autumn will nudge us forward; leading us into concert halls, local village halls, and will invite us to sit around bountiful banquet tables. It will be time to indulge in a feast and bring the year to a close in magical light.

In selecting our programmes and finalising timetables for events, we will utilise a cultural clock that will be formulated during 2022–2025, and our partners' event calendar. We highly value many of the established festivals and activities in the region and will give them adequate space and recognition. We will venture to locations where no activities would normally take place. We will occupy the quiet spells of the year with our programmes. We will purposefully cause encounters to occur between small-scale events that are in close proximity to one another, both time-wise and by location. Many small activities will grow together into much larger events. By using this method, even a small budget will allow us to create events with more impact, and to implement the desired changes in the region's cultural life.

Our ECoC year will gain more traction and become more visible when established festivals and events with a history of their own choose to become involved by aligning their programme themes with the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programme. Our broad offering of events will also gain new dimensions by the allocation of "Myö taataan" financing; especially to local participants. At the same time, we will motivate residents to crowdfund these small-scale projects which will create new activities in the community. We

will promote activities especially in unoccupied spaces and in areas that currently lack any cultural activities and events.

The Art of Living

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will bring into light our phenomenal (but sometimes overly modest) culture providing value and giving room to human-sized art. The people living here in eastern Finland possess all of the necessary skills to live a good life. Our lives often consist of a balancing act, requiring artful maneuvering.

The most important artistic values of our programme are represented by our authenticity, our shared border, our relationship with nature, and our emotions.

We can introduce Europe to our heritage and skills which have remained authentic, and continue to be transferred from one generation to the next. We value the masters who teach their skills to apprentices who learn and boldly improve their skills and move them forward to the next level. We admire those artists who couldn't care less about the rules and wish to leave their own mark on society through their own artistic creations. Authenticity, roughness, even a type of anarchism are the essence of our being. All of these elements must be seen and felt and touched upon in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 artistic programme.

We will inform the inquisitive; and we will invite our guests as well, to observe what it is to live, exist and create art on the border – where East meets West. Our cultures feature the same roots. Each of us has our own special relationship with the border, which serves as a tangible feature of daily life through stories and traditions. Now we are ready to embark on building a new understanding of our eastern border, based on our wisdom and the premise that the world needs more peace.

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Programme of the ECoC year	Programme concept and thematic frame ready	Compiling the programme content begins	25% of the programme ready	75% of the programme ready	Programme disseminated	Savonlinna European Capital of Culture 2026
Phase	planning	development	development	production	production/implementation	production
Increasing readiness to act	Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa plans	Mikkeli's "Dream Year of Culture"	Joensuu 175th anniversary	Lappeenranta 375th anniversary	Kuopio 250th anniversary	

Our relationship with nature represents lungs that give breath to the creation of our arts and culture. Our art is empowered by our forests and waters even though, sometimes, we might not want to admit it. Silence, sighs, and the rippling sounds of nature become entwined in our art. Nature is often the first stage for something new to be created. When we are empowered and filled with creativity, we can share this newly conceived passion throughout Europe.

The task of arts and culture is to touch raw nerves, raise emotional storms and generate opinions. We do not make distinctions or attempt to distinguish between good and bad art. To us, culture is the art of living, and the creator's emotions are depicted by their art. We are promoting cultural change by connecting people together in a creative way, focusing on their ever-evolving relationship with nature, and emphasising the many advantages of peace-making.

Principles

Throughout its artistic programme, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 stresses the artist's right to make a living through their creations. We work in accordance with the values of the Fair Art Manifesto, stating that publicity in itself does not provide sufficient prerequisites for a good life, and believe that the artist must also be compensated for a job well done. We support cultural entrepreneurship in all its forms.

Our artistic content is original and innovative, designed to break down walls and meld tradition with something newly created. The European dimension is bidirectional: we bring something with us when we come, and take something with us when we go. Many international artists participate in our local activities, and at the same time our own artists expand their networks and repertoire, discovering their own arenas in the European art scenes.

Cross-sectional values of our art programmes include equality, accessibility and social inclusion. Experiencing and participating in our arts and culture programme is safe for everyone. We promote well-being, we activate and involve people, and take into account minorities and disadvantaged people as well. We challenge totally new groups to join in and participate in arts and cultural activities. Our artistic content spreads equally into cities, villages and rural areas.

We will draw up a responsibility plan that lays down the principles on how ecology, socio-culturalism, ethics, and accessibility are to be considered in implementation of our programme content. We will build a European Capital of Culture year that will preserve and protect the unique and pristine nature of the Saimaa region.

Our programme will be built as described in the table below. The thematic framework and concepts of the programme form a matrix that we will apply for additional content through international bids.



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CULTURAL HERITAGE AND NEW, INNOVATIVE AND EXPERIMENTAL CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

All the themes associated with our cultural programme have content that draws upon the local cultural heritage and traditional art forms. To be European, we need to know the strength of our roots and to be familiar with our traditions. Traditions and the past converse with the future. All three factors are required to ensure that Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 carries on well past the ECoC year. Right now, Eastern Joy is needed more than ever before. We need authentic emotions to surface and take over: the feelings of joy derived from playing, singing, and dancing together, the skill of doing things by hand, and to experience the lush tastes provided by our own local food culture.

At the source of the Kalevala

Our area has a rich heritage of traditional folk music, rooted in the Finnish national epic Kalevala, the national instrument kantele, and our ancient singing traditions. But our own strong traditions have become endangered and are at risk of being lost forever. Kalevala has emerged as the crux of our theme of Eastern Joy in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 | TBA -----

The primordial power of the Kalevala inspires today's runosong (poem song) singers through mythology, just as it inspired the 19th century travellers, leading them down the same paths and allowing them to gather traditions from the past and to bring them into the present. Contemporary artists, metal music masters and international blacksmiths will create new interpretations of the Kalevala in Savonlinna during 2026. Authentic handicraft traditions will be combined with modern technology through co-creative development work.

Our cultural programme will bring the kantele back into the spotlight. With new innovations, the kantele will not only rise to become a modern universal instrument, but will also return to its traditional mission, playing as an extension of words and opening gates of the mind. The co-flow-kantele brings people together in the same way, allowing them to discover a common tone and communal spirit.

Examples:

- | TBA ----- |
- Operation Kantele
- The Dark Festival
- Kullervo's Literary Route

The stories of Kalevala also take digital form in our cultural programme. New, bold interpretations that mirror the future will introduce a new generation and a new audience to the national epic through drama, experiential pedagogy, and gamification. Through XR (Extended Reality) technology, guests will be invited to walk to authentic venues and immerse themselves into accounts of past happenings, leaving their own tracks in the continuing saga of the virtual story.

Examples:

- Ancient stories in the digital age (History comes to life!)
- Sound of Saimaa
- The digital platform

Bringing life to cultural heritage

An abundant amount of archived material and information exists about our area, which we will introduce for use in a new fashion. Artists and scholars will provide new interpretations of shameful and painful memories as part of our new story, so that they can be understood and not forgotten. We will create a new practice where artists can more easily access archives and locate information that will serve as inspiring sources to produce new innovative interpretations of our past. We want to be exemplary in the way we update traditions. One way we can do this is by inviting all of Europe to join us in taking out their national costumes, sprucing them up, and putting them on display by wearing them.

Examples:

- Let's Show Off: #Tuunaamunperinne #sprucingupmytradition
- Hindsight
- Saimaa Cultural heritage days
- Future Ugrians

Way of Life

Saimaa everyday life and the way we recognise it, is strongly related to our local cultural heritage. Our relationship with nature is unique and is passed on from one generation to the next. We must not lose this skill. Mythology and communality are inspirational in terms of revolutionary thinking. Under the theme of the Power of Water, we will seek inspiration from old sculpting and building traditions, and the way of life

in eastern Finland. International cultural content and artwork will be featured in forest and lake landscapes, at geologically interesting natural sites, and in mythological settings.

Examples:

- City(e)scape (nature relationship)
- Lovet2026 (traditional skills as a basis for new creation)
- Stories of Ice and Water
- Saimaa Geopark AR/VR
- Sounds in a Landscape
- Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub

The way of life also includes permission to be different. Our area has a long tradition as the number one place for holiday homes. Love of the Saimaa landscape is an intergenerational experience for many. An artist collective will produce experiential art in digital form – a view of life from 18th-century villa culture through today's second home/cottage culture. Cottages will be opened to serve as residences for international artists. We have discovered the way of life well – we will come together to seek the advice of mentors and mitigate conflicts – in the sauna.

Examples:

- Decades at the cottage
- Secret artists
- Residency (urban-rural)
- Updating sauna traditions (the sauna as a place for reconciliation and mentoring)

Food culture, art, and design meet – in the **Let's Eat!** and **Wild Creativity** programmes. These programmes will strengthen communality within the area through the rich culinary heritage of eastern Finland. Saimaa Gastro Ambassadors will assist in building bridges between culinary cultures and various gastronomy professionals. Many traditional dishes have gained

wide recognition throughout Finland: Karelian stew, the Karelian pasty, various other pasties, fish and oven dishes, originate from the local food traditions of our region. Primary production forms the basis of Finland's self-sufficiency, and the food grown here by eastern Finns feeds a large part of the population; here you can find the most extensive berry and milk production in the country. In addition, the raw materials from the region's waters and nature are the cleanest in the world. EU name-protected products, such as Puruveden muikku (vendace from Lake Puruvesi), kalakukko (fish and pork pie), and karjalanpiirakka (Karelian pasty), are familiar names of coveted food products that guests look for first when entering the area. Handicraft traditions and design can draw inspiration from the authentic raw materials provided by nearby sources. We will highlight, among other items, Finnsheep wool, birchbark art, local wood, and natural clay.

Examples:

- The Masters of Hospitality
- Saimaa Art & Design Festival (Design meets Wild Food & Local Flavours, design competitions)
- Table Over the Border

Q9 - Q10**INVOLVEMENT
OF LOCAL ARTISTS
AND CULTURAL
ORGANISATIONS**

The artistic programme of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has been successfully developed thanks to interregional cooperation and a broad network of participants. Since the beginning of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, we have identified the unique nature of arts and culture in our region and have taken into account the fact that many participants are overly modest and are very much alone in their work. Our task is to bring participants together and to ignite the spark that triggers their desire to work together. To accomplish this we have conducted various workshops during the two stages of our candidacy and have arranged numerous meetings and discussions in each region and many of our cities. Conducting our meetings online has enabled us to reach many participants within our broad region, accelerating interaction and strengthening the commitment of local groups.

Reaching an extensive number of participants, hearing about their interests and building networks have been the most important tasks during the second stage of our candidacy. This has been made possible by the efforts of the five Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 regional coordinators. Our coordinators have identified the most efficient ways of working in their own regions and have succeeded in encouraging participants and the so-called hidden pearls to join in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. They have organised meetings

between players within the arts and culture fields and enabled direct contact with local artists.

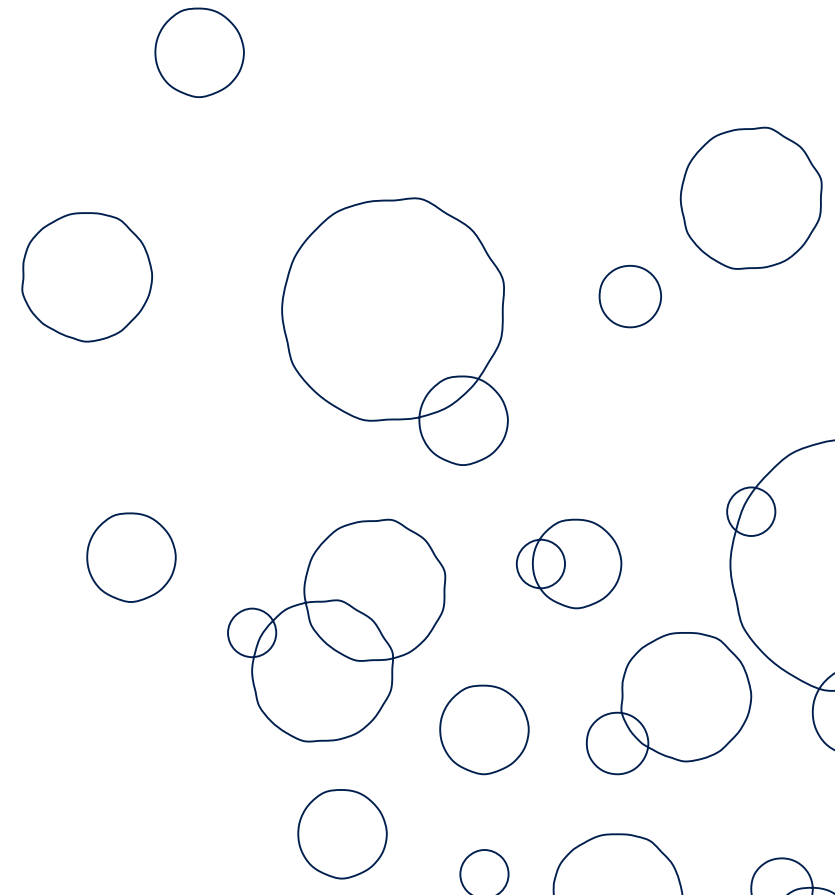
We have been able to meet representatives of our art institutions, facilities providing basic education in the arts, and independent culture spaces to learn first-hand of the burning desire to create art and cultural activities. The trust between artists, participants and our project has facilitated the production of mutual artistic content, giving birth to the reality of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

State-supported institutions in the area, such as orchestras, museums, children's cultural players, theatres, libraries, and various sports organisations have also lent their support by continually working together to develop programmes with Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. We can already see that the interregional cooperation between the arts institutions will become the new normal; in other words, it will permanently change their way of operating in the future.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has already formed a bridge between multi-sectoral cooperation projects. Concrete activities have been developed among participants in the cultural environment, local history, nature tourism, and culinary culture partners and various project operators. A successful jubilee year requires seamless cooperation among all the partners.

The artistic know-how of our project team is strong. Of the ten-member team, four work as artists and are thoroughly familiar with the field of arts and culture in eastern Finland. They are also well-acquainted with both national and international art endeavours. In an effort to further increase and broaden our artistic views, we invited an interregional artistic team to join us and assist in putting our programme together. The five team members were selected based on their artistic know-how, broad networks, and international activities.

We have identified numerous local partners for our themes, from individual artists to associations. Some of them live and work in our region, some of them have roots here and some are Saimaa-people in their hearts. We also want to leave space in our programme for future partners. Our artistic programme takes into account the continuous, accelerating culture and arts scene, and the continually changing European phenomena. Through our open programme applications and programme content, we wish to ensure that upcoming artists can also have a voice in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. We will introduce the versatile group of artists through our thematic artists. These three programmes by three different types of artists will bring together a broad group of participants and will instil new know-how in our region.



Making the Phenomenon

Power of Water

Sami Rintala (born 1969) is a well-known Finnish architect and artist. After completing his architectural studies at Helsinki University of Technology in 1999, he has gone on to create a long list of meritorious work accomplishments. In 1998 he established the architectural firm of Casagrande & Rintala and for the following five years produced a series of critically-acclaimed architectural installations around the world. These unique installations embodied architecture with a critical view towards society, nature, and the real tasks of an architect, all within a cross-over art practice using space, light, materials, and the human body as tools of expression.

Other artists and partners: video and sound artist, author and musician Lauri Ainala • musician Ismo Alanko • ANTI – Contemporary Art Festival • Ars Nova, Joensuu Artists' club, Kaakon taide – Artists' Association of South East Finland, Kuopio artists (Ars Libera) • sculptor Kari Cavén • visual professionals' association DeSavo ry • Finland Ice Marathon • textile designer, artist Paavo Halonen • visual artist Kalle Hamm • theatre educator Tuire Hindikka • Ihmisen Teatteri (Human Theatre) • ILO!LUMI! • film director, photographer Matleena Jänis • collective of artists Kolkkokollektiivi • dancer Mari Kortelainen • folk musicians Sirkka Kosonen and Eila Hartikainen • musician Mammu Koskelo • Kosmos Festival • Cultural Coop cultural cooperative • Kulttuurikiska cultural cooperative • playwright Pirkko Kurikka • stage poet Veera Milja • visual artist Juhana Moisander • actor Jukka Moskuvaara • Mikkeli Art & Design Weekend • Muhasaaren Teatteri (Theatre) • stage poet Jonna Nummela (Nihkee Akka) • journalist Hanna Partanen, Peace Invaders • composer, musician, multimedia artist Markus Pesonen • drummer-percussionist Tatu Rönkkö • Saimaan Teatteri (Theatre) • Savonlinna International Nature Film Festival • Teatteri Traktori (Theatre) • dancers Maija Tuomi and Jukka Ristolainen • UUS Festival

Connecting Bridges

Kari Kola (born 1978) is a Light Artist from Joensuu. He is internationally recognised as a pioneer in extensive outdoor installations and has worked in creating light art for over two decades. Kari Kola was Technical Director in the Alvilda in Åbo and Henrik & Hexhammer operas, programmes of the Turku 2011 Capital of Culture year. Kola's latest work "Savage Beauty" was exhibited in Ireland in March 2020, as part of the Galway ECoC 2020 programme.

Other artists and partners: author Marja-Sisko Aalto (Finland's first openly transgender priest) • folklore researcher Mikko Europaeus • dancer Minni Hirvonen • Hurja Joukko (Music and Theatre Group for the Mentally Handicapped) • Hyppy! Performing arts festival • Ihmekollektiivi (an association working for culture, the arts and a sustainable way of living) • The Youth Associations of Eastern Finland • Joel Lehtosen seura (literature association) • Joensuun PARAFESTYHDISTYS ry (parafest association) • Joutava Ruuhi (sailboat theatre) • actor Mika Juusela • Kalevala Women's Association • Kamariyhtye Gambaamo (chamber ensemble) • songwriter, multi-instrumentalist Tuomas Holopainen / Nightwish • National Costume Association Raita Ry • Street Art Association Urbaani ry • Keski-Karjalan musiikkiopisto (music institute) • musician Joose Keskitalo • theatre and drama player Piia Kleimola • Lappeenranta tanssiopisto (dance institute) • Linnalan Opisto (community college) • Lumottu-festivaali (Puppetry Festival) • folk musicians Hannamari Luukkanen and Pauliina Lerche (Mimmit) • Minna Canthin talo ry (association) • national costumes grand young lady Soja Murto • Black & White Theatre • Puhallinorkesteri Saimaa (wind orchestra) • visual artist Leena Pukki (Mimmit Peinttaa) • graffiti painter "Poppamajja" Inna Pulkkinen • Rantasalmen puhallinorkesteri ry (wind orchestra) • theatre teacher Kaisa Ritola • Savonlinna Big Band • Savonlinna-kuoro (choir) • Savonlinnan teatterikuoro (theatre choir) • New Art Museum of Savonlinna • film and theatre director Kamran Shahmardan • Teatteri Telmi (an open group of amateur theaters with special needs) • Taidekoulu Estradi (art school) • Tangoyhtye Tanguango (tango group) • socially critical thinker, feminist and artist Riina Tanskanen • musician brothers Ilja and Johannes Teppo • author Esko-Pekka Tiitinen • author Jouni Tossavainen • clown and circus artist Karoliina Turkka • Uus Hoi Sie gallery • shadow artist Paula Vilmi • actor and singer-songwriter Aaro Vuotila • local writers' associations

Eastern Joy

Viivi Maria Saarenkylä (born 1993) is a musician and composer who has received many awards in international accordion competitions. Saarenkylä received the title of Finnish Accordion Artists in 2018 as a new herald of accordion music and its active reviver. The versatile accordion virtuoso is best known as a solo artist, freelance musician and a composer, especially in folk music circles. DUO VILDÄ who plays Saarenkylä's original music, won the European Commission's Music Moves Europe Talent Award 2021. Every summer Saarenkylä returns to Saimaa and Savonlinna.

Other artists and partners: Craft & Design Savonlinna • kantele artist Senni Eskelinen • South Savonia Dance Institute • Karelia activist Maura Häkki (Karelian language activist) • Regional Dance Centre of Eastern Finland • Art School Estradi • Master Blacksmith Jarkko Kaartilanmäki • musician, lamenter Emilia Kallonen • sorcerer Helena K. Karhu • Doctors of Music (kantele) Arja Kastinen and Timo Väänänen • runosingers Reetta-Mari Kellokoski, Tellu Turkka and Kirsi Uutinen • kantele builder Hannu Koistinen (co-flow-kantele) • lamenter Emmi Kuittinen • Kuopio Dance Festival • Gastro Ambassadors Ulla Liukkonen, Saimi Hoyer, Anni Korhonen and Eeva Mertanen • Loimolan voima Ensemble (Power of Loimola) • musician and runosinger Liisa Matveinen • Mikkeli Music Festival • Perriin Tyssit Ensemble • Pääkonttori ry (Headquarters) • RomaMedia • Food Theatre - an experiential performance that fuses theatre, dance, and culinary art • contemporary folk artist Marko Ruuskanen • Rääkkylä Folk ry (Rääkkylä Folk association) • Savonlinna Opera Festival • Savonlinna Romani Mission • Kantele artist Marjo Smolander • Stam1na and singer-guitarist Antti Hyryrinen • SULASOL (The Finnish Amateur Musicians' Association) of eastern Finland • Taito Eastern Finland • TangoSawo ry • musician, storyteller and music therapist Anna-Maria Toivonen • multicultural group Umuco Entertainment Troop ry • VB Photographic Centre • graphic artist, painter Ritva-Liisa Virtanen • Association of Lamenters

Q11

EUROPEAN DIMENSION

Time and development in the centers of our cities has all but stalled. At the same time closeness to nature and local ingenuity make the Saimaa region a laboratory for change shaping a new sustainable European way of life. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is dedicated to bring new form and content into our nature-city relation. – Architect Sami Rintala

Culture is a catalytic force for change. It evokes emotions; it encourages people to think and engage in discussions. We invite all of Europe to be our guest in Saimaa, to encounter and acquire first-hand experiences of our phenomenal art and unique nature. The real Saimaa Phenomenon exists within man himself. Saimaa remains in the heart and connects us with our larger European community. Here in the border we have an important role now and in the future: we connect European family to our neighbour Russia.

The New Art of Living

The story of European civilisation joins together environmental, economic and cultural activities. When we connect Europe to the Saimaa way of life, we get answers to many of the burning questions and challenges of our time.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, the Savonia University of Applied Sciences, and Europe Direct invited parties interested in creating the future to participate in three workshops aimed at getting to the bottom of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 as part of a common European story.

The workshops were the first in the world to become involved with the New European Bauhaus initiative, launched by the European Commission in autumn 2020. This initiative brings together the environmental, economic and cultural sectors and seeks to combine aspects of design, sustainability, accessibility and investment. Goals of the initiative include promoting cultural change as part of the European Green Deal development programme. Its core values have been identified as sustainability, aesthetics and inclusiveness.

More than 200 business, arts, and cultural professionals from eastern Finland, as well as representatives of research and educational institutions, met three times over the course of one day. Xavier Troussard, Head of the New European Bauhaus Unit at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, gave our initiative a warm welcome at the beginning of the workshops. Each workshop was led by an artist or researcher who inspired us on the topic.

During the workshops, we developed the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 concept of cultural sustainability, enabling a sustainable lifestyle that is open and inclusive to everyone through cultural content. We envision the Saimaa region as an ecosystem of creative industries. The themed outlook was jointly developed into goals, which were linked to Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development indicators. The following points in the Agenda 2030 were specifically recognised as positive strengths of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026:

- 8 Decent work and economic growth [new remote working area, digital community networks]
- 10 Reduction of inequality [inclusion through culture, across borders]
- 11 Sustainable cities and human settlements [green open spaces, science and research]
- 12 Responsible consumption [moderation as an experience of Saimaa-Phenomenon 2026, sustainable choices achieved through cultural means]

- 17 Cooperation and partnership [what we can give to others in Europe, redesigning the nature/city relationship]

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Goes Bauhaus workshops demonstrated that by intensifying cooperation, we have a unique opportunity to build a Europeanness where the challenging goals of sustainable development and meaningful life are in balance. We will continue organising our workshops with our European partners from 2022 onwards. Influencing the future is a skill that can be developed.

Cultural heritage cooperation projects

- **Lovet2026** is a demonstration of traditional construction techniques and an exchange of know-how with Slovak and Russian artists.
- **Operation Kantele** Our national instrument, the kantele, will be heard together with traditional instruments from other countries. We will introduce the kantele to Europe.
- **Future Ugrians**, celebrations will bring together Finno-Ugric speakers and cultures represented by small languages. We will awaken young people to the need of preserving their own language and culture.
- **“Nyt mie ruppeen laulamaan”. (Now I’m gonna start singing).** In 2026, we collaborate with Portugal’s Faro in building a musical bridge over to the African continent in a communal sing-along spirit, seeking common traditions of melancholy and plaintive music.

International cooperation

Our focus is on getting things done: far more important than signing cooperation agreements, is for artists, associations and various other organisations to actually work together.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has had the opportunity to monitor the Interreg Europe-funded **ECoC-SME -project** (Actions for inducing SME growth and

innovation via the ECoC event and legacy) activities through the University of Eastern Finland. The project has studied good practices adopted by the European Capitals of Culture, particularly with respect to the involvement of young people, educational organisations and businesses. Project partners include the European Capitals of Culture Leeuwarden (2018), Matera (2019), Rijeka (2021), Timisoara (2023) and Kaunas (2022). We will incorporate these good practices and models as part of Saimaa Skill Share Lab activities.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has worked closely with the Interreg Europe-funded **Local flavors project**, which includes the Savonlinna region as one of the regional partners. During 2019–2021 the project has sought (and will continue to seek) to identify and share good practices for better utilisation of cultural heritage among several European regions. In addition to Savonlinnan Hankekehitys Oy, the project partners are Institute of Advanced Studies iASK (HU), Municipality of Vittorio Veneto (IT), Harghita County Council (RO), Municipality of ‘s-Hertogenbosch (NL), Waterford City and County Council (IE), Riga Planning Region (LV) and experts from the University of Bologna and The Institute for Tourism in Croatia.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is a cooperation partner in The Roadmap for growth and renewal in Finnish tourism project (funded by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment) with the Russian Republic of Karelia, and the regions of North and South Karelia in 2021–2023. The goal of the project is to develop cooperation between the countries on the basis of the roadmap.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities have an extensive European **sister city network**, with whom we will align our joint activities and cooperation during the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa.

Our extensive and diverse programme includes a wide range of opportunities for exchanges with a vast array of Russian arts and cultural participants, and we have agreed to form partnerships for examples with the following organisations:

- Leningrad Oblast Cultural Committee
- St. Petersburg City Cultural Committee
- Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Karelia: National Theatre of Karelia, Karelian State Philharmonic, Musical Theatre of the Republic of Karelia, Karelian Dance and Singing Ensemble “Kantele”, Karelian Festival and Cultural Initiatives Management, National Museum of the Republic of Karelia, Center of National Cultures and Folk Art of the Republic of Karelia (Karelian ethnocultural centres, handicraft centre and Media Center Vyhod), Karelian Artists’ Union
- The National Museum Velikiy Novgorod
- Novgorod Children’s and Youth Theatre Malyi
- International Theatre Kingfestival
- Kunstkamera (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography)
- International Puppet Theatre Festival “Kukart”
- E. Demmeni Marionette Theatre
- Kannon Dance Theatre Company and the Open Look festival

Estonia:

- Integration Foundation in Estonia
- The city of Narva

Programme examples:

- **Table Over Borders** In this event we will set dinner tables that extend over the border between Finland and Russia. A way of getting acquainted and building rapport that wends its way through the stomach.
- **Pop up sauna** A “pop-up” sauna that travels from Finland to other parts of Europe, crossing various borders and bringing with it the message of peace.

European artists in the programme

We welcome European artists to participate in our programme by taking part in our many international open calls. Our unique relationship with nature is of

interest elsewhere in Europe, which is why we offer international artists the opportunity to be part of the programme content, especially within our Power of Water theme.

We will share our expertise in, for example, organising ecological events and making use of traditional materials in producing art. At the same time, the skills of our guests will expand the skills of our own artists; for example, the Schaubühne theatre visit from Berlin to our local theatres and the **Sulattamo** (Smelting) workshop programme of the visual fields.

Through open calls, European artists are presented with a unique opportunity to perform on stages on Lake Saimaa and on live-streams from special nature destinations. We will bring artwork to the geological landscapes of Saimaa and to the caves and concert halls of Retretti and will offer the opportunity to make use of digital material as a basis for new interpretations and as a source of inspiration. Open calls will offer us the opportunity to identify new artists, and as technology advances, to discover new ways of creating art.

We have invited international artists to join in collaboration, for instance:

- **Hindsight:** artist Xenia Nikolskaja (RU), architects Mimì Coviello and Fabio Cieravello (IT)
- **Folk – Out of the Grave:** Track Attack Ensemble (EE)
- **Parahyppy Art Tour:** the Irish Blue Teapot Theatre Company one of six professional theatres in Europe that feature artists with special needs (IE)
- **Romanimusic Lifting Up!** Roman Theatre, Moscow (RU)
- **Frozen Saimaa:** Fire artist Andrey Das (FR)
- **Seven Stories from Saimaa:** The Schaubühne (DE)
- **Steam Power!** Ilja Bortnuk (RU)
- **Saimaa Lights:** artist Nuno Maya (PT)
- **Operation Kantele:** Mari Kalkun (EE)

Q12

STRATEGY FOR RAISING INTEREST AMONG INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

In line with our strategy to achieve international recognition, we must muster the ability to initiate change; we must become noticeable, and we must become influencers. We need to challenge ourselves, join forces, and dare to step into the spotlight of the world.

We will be found

Our area is unique: our strengths are unique, our nature is unique, and so is our authentic way of life. The Saimaa region is one of Finland's most precious hidden treasures – which has yet to be discovered by a majority of European and international audiences. Nothing stays hidden forever and change can already be detected. In the strategy of the national tourism organisation Visit Finland, Finnish Lakeland will join Lapland and Helsinki to become a significant tourist destination. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 also works closely with regional tourism organisations.

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 mobile application based on our digital platform will allow easy access to our programme content and services.

We are phenomenal

Our programme content meets high standards. It has been developed and put together with the assistance and input of many local, national and international artists.

| TBA |

Under each artistic theme, we have spotlighted a well-known Finnish artist. Sami Rintala, Kari Kola and Viivi Maria Saarenkylä are all top experts in their own field. Their roots in Saimaa and eastern Finland are well reflected in their respective works of art and are certain to generate a great deal of European interest.

Our programme also involves a wide range of international Russian artists and art organisations. Through them, our artistic content takes on a decidedly eastern dimension that is less well-known in other parts of Europe. Digital exhibitions make it possible to view, for example, some of the oldest icons of Russia located in the Novgorod National Museum.

We will be transformative

The Capital of Culture year programme has been designed with transformation in mind. More and more often, tourists choose an area to visit where they can get to know the local customs, the people, and have the opportunity to learn something new. Our cultural programme encourages extensive mobility and the discovery of experiential cultural sites in the urban environment and nature. When travel experiences perpetuate hearts and minds, it often brings about changes in people's thinking and patterns of action in everyday life.

Q13

LINKS TO OTHER ECOC CITIES

Helsinki 2000 / Turku 2011

We have learned from previous Finnish European Capitals of Culture, Helsinki and Turku cities. The results of the Turku Capital of Culture year have been used as the basis for our SROI (Social Return on Investment) assessment. We have also discussed the impact of the Capital of Culture year with representatives of the cities. One of our team members worked in the Helsinki ECoC 2000 organisation.

Plovdiv 2019

We will collaborate with the One Dance Week Legacy project by bringing dance performances to public space in the centre of Savonlinna during the Saimaa Art & Design Festival. These performances challenge our perceptions of what is normal and customary.

Matera 2019

In October 2019 we participated in Interregional Exchanges with the participation of local stakeholders workshop hosted by Matera Hub together with ECoC SME partners Leeuwarden (2018), Matera (2019), Rijeka (2021), Timisoara (2021) and Kaunas (2022). We will incorporate these good practices and models as part of Saimaa Skill Share Lab activities. During the visit we participated in an ArtLab seminar: the local development Round Table with representatives of ECoC cities. We have participated in the TraCEs –

Cultour Is Capital project which brings the European Capitals of Culture to the forefront of developing transformative travel. With the Architecture of Shame project group, from the Matera ECoC programme, we have ideated our own programme for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026: Hindsight.

Galway 2020

We identified similarities relating to the challenge of long distances in The Arts and Culture Programmes with Galway. We will learn from them by taking the transfer from one place to another into account in our planning. Joensuu-based light artist Kari Kola's Savage Beauty light installation was a significant part of the Galway programme. The Blue Teapot Theatre Company from Ireland is our European partner in our special arts programme Parahyppy.

Timisoara 2021 (2023)

We will collaborate with the Power Station Capacity Building project especially in terms of volunteering and establishing a volunteer exchange programme. As part of our Väli tilassa (Intermediate Space) programme planning, we will familiarise ourselves with the Faber Community industrial building which is dedicated to art. Poetry based on stories about Saimaa steamships will be created for the Steamship festival in collaboration with Memories of The Citadel. The Saimaa Art & Design Festival will raise the most beautiful, forgotten buildings to a position of prominence through means of art in the spirit of the Heritage of Timisoara project.

Kaunas 2022

We are currently negotiating about further project cooperation with the ECoC organization. The Kaunas based Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) is one of our partners in the Saimaa Skill Share Lab.

Veszprém-Balaton 2023

With Veszprém-Balaton we have identified similarities in our lifestyles around water and the challenges related to developing year-round travel. We will engage in content and artist exchange with the Ferryboat – A festival of somewhere in between programme and cooperation with educational institutes and developing year-round cultural activities in the Balaton 365 project. Relating to more efficient usage of cultural heritage, we will collaborate through the Local Flavours Interreg Europe project. In 2023, our Culture Cubicle will visit Veszprém-Balaton during the Pop Up City programme. Our Room for culture programme will utilise the operational model of the Veszprém-Balaton 2023 Street Management project.

Salzgammertgut 2024

We will conduct content exchange in our water-related conferences. The broad artistic content of the H2OH-NO! project conference will complement our scientific content. The Leader collaboration done by Salzgammertgut 2024 was inspirational for forming our own Myö taataan (We Guarantee) funding model.

Bodø 2024

Bodø, a sister city of Kuopio, will be present in our programme through versatile cooperation. The Blue Road Youth project begins from Bodø, Norway in 2025, will move from there along the Blue road to the city of Umeå (ECoC 2014) and will finally end up in Kuopio. We will conduct programme exchanges in our programmes relating to mythology and folklore – Midsummer Mythology and Permission to be different. The Kuopio Dance Festival is part of the #dance2024 digital dance dialogue which lives on Instagram and Snapchat. The Culture of the Forest City(e)scape Flagship project is led by Bodø-based architect Sami Rintala.

Tartu 2024

We paid a visit to Estonia in November 2019 with the representatives of our stakeholders. We received many useful tips from the Tartu 2024 team. We will invite the Tartu Men's Shed (Meeste Garaaž) programme to join as part of the Songwriting activities. We will conduct lecturer exchange with the Tartu literature event 1984/2024 and our Saimaa Goes Bauhaus Hub programme concerning themes of utopia and dystopia.

Narva

We paid a visit to Estonia in November 2019 with the representatives of our stakeholders. We familiarised ourselves with the city and especially discussed our programmes concerning life on the border. We decided then and there to continue our cooperation even though Narva did not win the title. The city of Narva is a participant in our Table Over the Border – Стол через границу project, which links food, discussions, merrymaking, art, and music. Narva Art Residency is also a participant in our Residency Network Urban meets Rural.

Nova Gorica 2025

With Nova Gorica we have identified intersections relating to themes of living on the border. Nova Gorica is a participant in our Table over the border – Стол через границу project. We will collaborate in the Masters of Hospitality programme content. By taking one of our library buses to Italy and Slovenia in 2025 as part of the programme, we will link a bus-full of culture and literature from eastern Finland to the Bibliobus Nova Gorica Capital of Culture year. We will also collaborate in relation to rare instruments and folk music, the Design meets Wild Food & Flavours design challenges and in projects relating to Grandmas 2.0.

Chemnitz 2025

As a sister programme of the Parade of the Appletree Chemnitz 2025 project, the ANTI Festival (together with regional art associations and a food travel consortium), will produce an Appletree project for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

Žilina 2026

Lovet 2026 is a joint forest culture project of the Finnish Forest Museum Lusto, the Slovak Vychylovka Forest Museum, and the Kizhi Museum Island of the Russian Federation and includes art workshops and collaboration in exhibitions. The project involves close cooperation in the form of exchanging artists and artwork with Žilina 2026 with four visual artist organisations in the Art Trek project. The Berlin–Savonlinna Express and Žilina Intermotion programmes moving on railway tracks, will collaborate in creating programme content.

Nitra 2026

We will welcome the traditional instrument of Nitra, the bagpipe to the Rääkkylä Kihaus Folk festival and invite senior choir members to participate in the Joensuu Song Festival in 2026. We will conduct an artist exchange in the On the Border programme. We will also send a translation of the Saimaa songbook to Slovakia. We will lead the Folk Music Institute of Eastern Finland and ethnology institutes in the Universities of Nitra and Trnava into collaboration concerning folklore.

Trenčín 2026

We will conduct programme and artist exchanges between Green Bridge 2023-2026 Legacy project and our Lotja programme. In the Opiskelijawappu

2.0 (Student May Day) collaboration student unions will be challenged to invent imaginative watercraft and a competition will be held in both countries. We will collaborate and conduct cultural exchanges with the Degustories project relating to the Masters of Hospitality programme.

We will also cooperate within our projects to highlight the music and culture of the minorities: Convergencies and Romanimusic Lifting Up!

Cēsis 2027

Cooperation includes creating programme content in museums and castles (The Dark Festival) and the Frozen Saimaa and Kihaus Folk events.

Faro 2027

Cooperation is emerging, as cultural and intergenerational encounters come together, through communal singing and folk music in the “Nyt mie ruppeen laulamaan (“Now I’m Gonna Start Singing”)” programme, and through gastro-diplomacy and food culture in the “Table Over the Border” programme.

Clermont-Ferrand 2028

We participated in a content workshop Ateliers 2028 – Nature et Culture (more than 50 participants). Ideas are in the air about, e.g., building cultural routes.

Rouen 2028

Collaboration is being formed around a forest and well-being theme. This way we also found a contact to the city of Rennes in Bretagne, where the traditional, big music festival, Fest Noz Yaouank is annually organised.

Partner Cities

ECOC CITIES

- 1 Helsinki 2000
- 2 Turku 2011
- 3 Umeå 2014
- 4 Plovdiv 2019
- 5 Matera 2019
- 6 Galway 2020
- 7 Timisoara 2021 (2023)
- 8 Kaunas 2022
- 9 Veszprém-Balaton 2023
- 10 Salzgammertgut 2024
- 11 Bodø 2024
- 12 Tartu 2024
- 13 Nova Gorica 2025
- 14 Chemnitz 2025
- 15 Žilina 2026
- 16 Nitra 2026
- 17 Trenčín 2026
- 18 Cēsis 2027
- 19 Faro 2027
- 20 Clermont-Ferrand 2028
- 21 Rouen 2028

OTHER PROGRAMME PARTNERS

CROATIA

- 1 Zagreb
- Kontejner

ESTONIA

- 2 Haanja
- Mooska Suitsusaunatalu
- 3 Narva
- The City of Narva
- Narva Museum
- Narva Art Residency
- Estonian Integration Foundation
- 4 Pärnu
- MTÜ Fenno-Ugria Asutus
- 5 Tallinn
- Estonian Choral Association (ECA)

GERMANY

- 6 Berlin
- The Schaubühne
- Public Art Lab and The Finnish Institute in Germany
- Berlin University of Arts

GREAT BRITAIN

- 7 Brighton
- Brighton Festival
- 8 Cornwall
- Falmouth University
- 9 Glasgow
- Sonica (GB, Glasgow)
- 10 Norwich
- Norfolk & Norwich Festival

HUNGARY

- 11 Budapest
- Moholy Nagy University of Art and Design
- 12 Veszprém
- University of Pannonia

ICELAND

- 13 Reykjavik
- Dansverkstæðið

ITALY

- 14 Gorizia
- Gusti di Frontiera
- 15 San Remo
- San Remo Song Contest

LATVIA

- 16 Riga
- International Festival of Contemporary Theatre – Homo Novus
- The Theatre Institute of Latvia

LITHUANIA

- 17 Kaunas
- Vytautas Magnus University (VMU)

LUXEMBURG

- 18 Luxembourg
- TROIS C-L – Centre de Création Chorégraphique Luxembourggeois

NETHERLANDS

- 19 Amsterdam
- ICK Dans Amsterdam
- 20 Tillburg
- Close-act-theatre

NORWAY

- 21 Bergen
- Bergen Centre for Electronic Arts

SPAIN

- 22 Barcelona
- International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism

RUSSIA

- 23 Khanty-Mansi
- Nature and People Museum
- Arts and Culture Development Foundation ORIS

MOSCOW

- Romen Theatre, Russian national banya association

NOVGOROD

- The National Museum Velikiy Novgorod

PETROZAVODSK

- Kizhi Museum Island
- Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Karelia

THE CITY OF PITKÄRANTA

THE CITY OF PSKOV

SORTAVALA

- The City of Sortavala
- Social and Cultural Youth Centre in Sortavala

ST. PETERSBURG

- The Finnish Institute in St. Petersburg
- Kunstkamera (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography)
- Leningrad Oblast Cultural Committee
- St. Petersburg City Cultural Committee

BURANOV

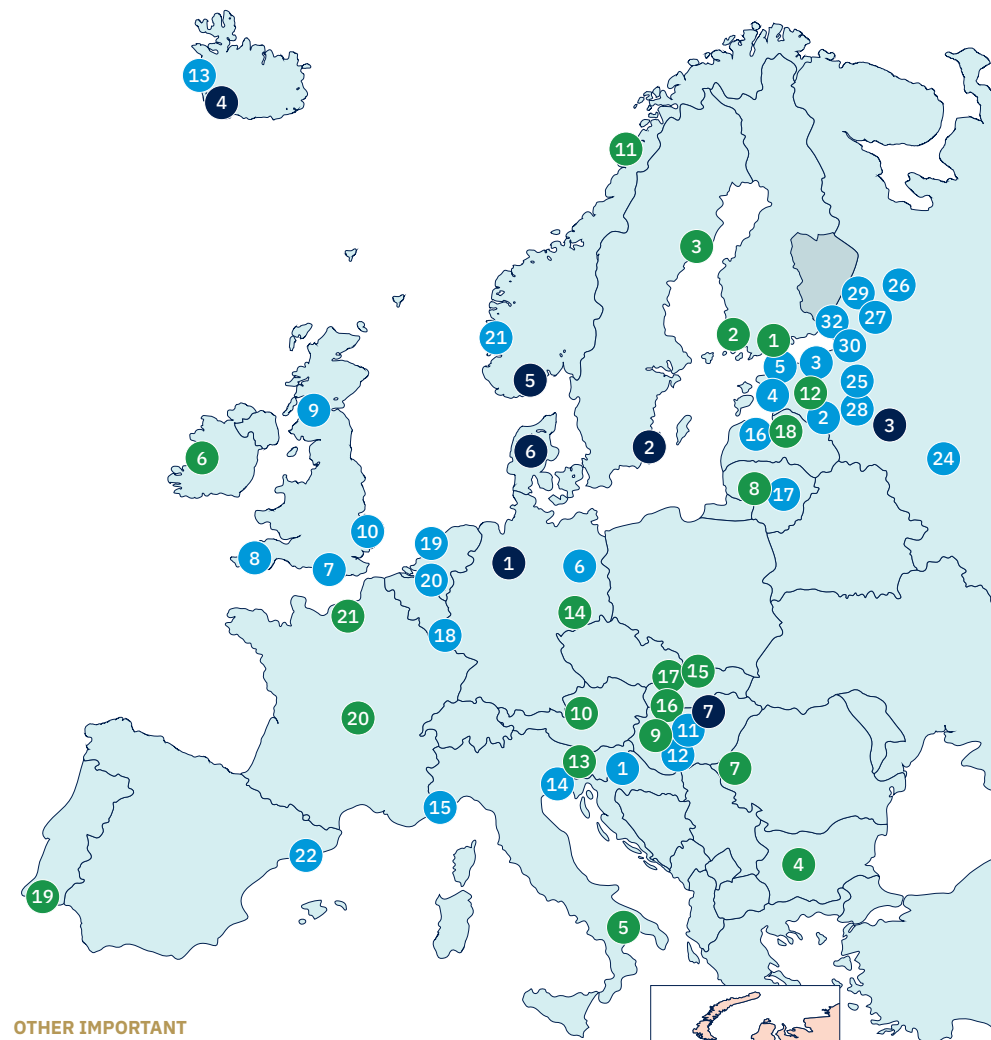
- National Library of Udmurtia
- Udmurt State University

VYBORG

- Artist Residency of Vyborg Pamaus
- Svjataja krepost Theatre
- Kukushka Festival

SOMALIA

- 33 Beledweyne
- Hiiraan University



OTHER IMPORTANT

PROGRAMME PARTNERS:

- World Poetry Slam Organization
- University Network of The European Capitals of Culture
- Campus Network
- Human Security Europe Network
- Artists at Risk

SAIMAA PHENOMENON 2026

ON THE MOVE:

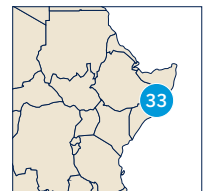
- Pop Up Sauna
- Berlin–Savonlinna Express
- Mobile Library
- Saimaa Culture Cubicle
- Steam Power! A steamboat from Russia to Finland

SISTER CITIES

SAVONLINNA

- 1 Detmold, Germany
- 2 Kalmar, Sweden
- 3 Torzhok, Russia
- 4 Árborg, Iceland
- 5 Arendal, Norway
- 6 Silkeborg, Denmark
- 7 Budavár, Budapest City Zone 1, Hungary

Saimaa region municipalities have more than 70 Sister cities



Q14

INVOLVEMENT OF THE LOCAL POPULATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The people of eastern Finland constitute our force for change. Without their unwavering support, expertise, and commitment, we cannot succeed. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 bid book and the artistic content laid out for the year, have been compiled with assistance and direct input provided by local residents and other participants. The subsequent change and shared determination arises from feelings of local pride, communality, and a sense of inclusion.

The first droplets

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 was created from a clear vision and common understanding of the regions of eastern Finland: to succeed in the future, we must join forces. From the very beginning, we have been aided by an interregional Bridge Builder team consisting of leading cultural and communication officials from the four regions and cities. Nearly 30 public events took place during our first phase of the candidacy, including workshops, discussion groups and online surveys, which were instrumental in laying the foundation for future. These events were attended by more than a thousand people – constituting a diverse group of artists, cultural producers, third sector activists, businesspeople, public officials and interested citizens - from youth to seniors. We convened representatives

of our art institutions, some of whom met their colleagues across regional borders for the first time. We also conducted a regional identity survey for the residents of our area and a Future Saimaa 2026 writing competition for young people. The value base of our bid book, the artistic themes and preliminary programme content were created during these very encounters which were open to all, bringing together a wide variety of different types of participants.

Rippling encounters

During the second phase of the candidacy, the driving force behind Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has expanded and our common will has intensified. In addition to the Bridge Builders, our ten-member team was joined by interregional finance and communications teams, an artistic team, a 12-member Youth Panel, and teams of experts in Russian affairs and inclusion, together with their extensive networks. The active teamwork, expertise, and wide-ranging vision of all these participants has proved instrumental in preparing our application and planning for the forthcoming Capital of Culture year.

A number of ambassadors, whom we refer to as Trailblazers, have taken an active role in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 activities. They are true advocates, genuine eastern Finnish people dedicated to speaking for the area and strengthening its vitality. Our ambassadorship programme will expand in the future, when we invite even more multi-faceted groups to join in to spread our joy and goodwill.

Our ability to engage local people and involve other organisations and businesses increased dramatically with the hiring of five regional project coordinators. Their main task has been to identify and bring together both local and global participants. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has served as a platform for organising workshops and as an incubator for various cultural, organisational, and voluntary participants.

Several national organisations for cultural and civic activities and their regional associations have joined our project during the second phase of the candidacy. These include the National Library, Taito Itä-Suomi (Taito Eastern Finland, part of the Finnish Crafts Organisation Taito), Karjalan liitto (Karelian Association), Itä-Suomen Nuorisoseurat ry (Youth clubs of eastern Finland), Writers Guild of Finland and local associations of both the Kalevala Women's Association and the Finnish Local Heritage Federation.

Enthusiasm for our project has been phenomenal. For example, the three Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Goes Bauhaus workshops attracted more than 200 participants with the number of people multiplying in each consecutive workshop. Participants included students and representatives of various fields such as science, technology, and economics. Our pioneering work has aroused interest in the arts and culture field nationwide. We were invited to present our Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Goes Bauhaus workshops and ECoC project to members of Ornamo Art and Design Finland (an expert organisation for designers in Finland) likely because back in February 2021 we were the only ones who had taken up the New Bauhaus theme in Finland.

In addition to Savonlinna and the regional cities, a total of 48 other municipalities are located in the four regions of eastern Finland. We have conducted extensive discussions with chief executives, and other public and elected officials of the municipalities concerning ways in which the respective municipality can become involved in our project and bring in its own participants. We have presented our project to municipal executive boards, councils, and committees. Social media has enabled our common journey to be followed and commented upon at any time.

Common understanding

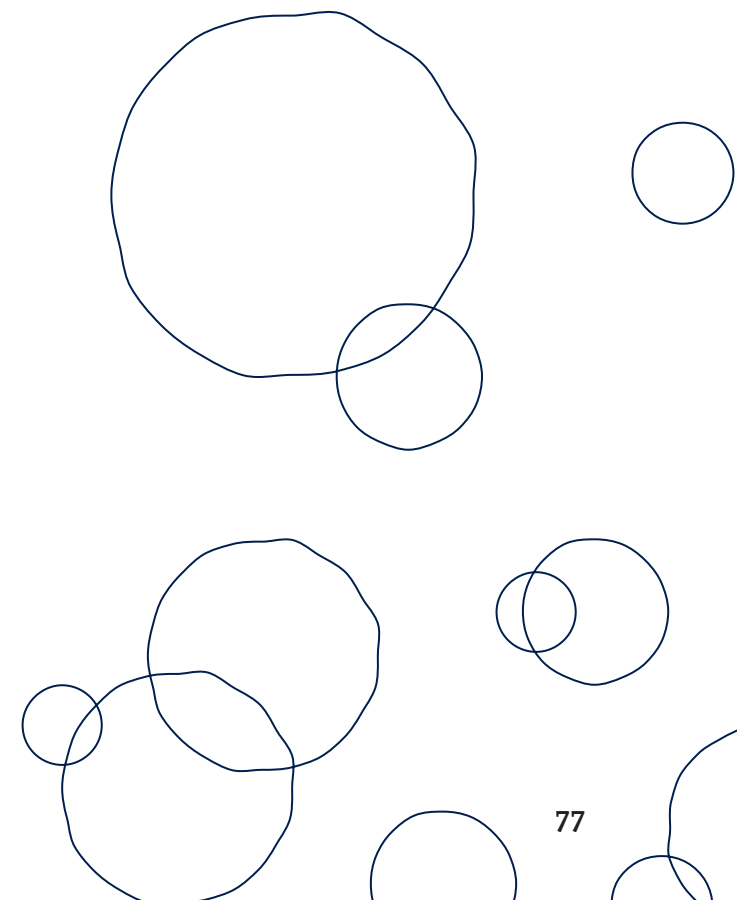
At the turn of the year 2020–2021, we hosted a six-week **Saimaa for All** tour, the theme being equal opportunities for all to partake in cultural activities, which made stops in each of the regional cities, and culminated in Savonlinna. Our brilliantly lit Saimaa for All cubicle, found in the city centre during the darkest time of the year, adapted to the pandemic situation of each locale, according to the respective safety regulations which had been put in place. Among other things, the cubicle served as an exhibition space, podcast point, and as a stage for performances.

Adhering to our core principles, we chose not to cancel the tour but instead look for creative ways to bring our message on the arts to the forefront, for example, through live-streaming. The cubicle attracted widespread interest from the media, passers-by, and followers on social media. It sparked lively discussions about art, culture, and the Capital of Culture year. In connection with the tour, we also conducted a “Saimaa for All” online survey which resulted in 300 responses. We had two main questions we wanted to ask our residents; which of our region's hidden diamonds would they like to tell the rest of Europe about and what did they think we could learn from other Europeans.

Another survey conducted in early 2021 was specifically directed to the young people in our area. It was designed to determine where their interests were focused, how they would like to work with us, and what kinds of programmes they would like to be involved in. We received almost 200 responses to the Saimaa Youth survey, the results of which were incorporated in compiling programme content. The second phase surveys verified results of the previous surveys, but they also revealed a change in thinking brought about by the pandemic; they clearly showed that we are not interested in hosting only large spectacles, rather we want to emphasise the unique nature of Saimaa through

small programmes that put the focus on doing things together and bring our culture close for a bird's eye view.

During the spring of 2021, we will conduct additional surveys; one will be directed to the creative industries in the region to inquire about their competence needs, the other will be an interview among entrepreneurs in the region to determine possible forms of cooperation with Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Research gleaned from entrepreneurs will support conceptualising the Saimaa Skill Share Lab. In addition, during 2021 we will conduct a panel survey among at least a thousand residents in the area to determine the level of participation in cultural services and activities and the perceived effects of culture on the quality of life and well-being of the residents.



Q15

ACCESSIBILITY

Culture comes around

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 culture will go where the people are. Thanks to our extensive cooperation between municipalities and our interregional partner network, our programme will spread throughout the entire region of eastern Finland, and will include numerous events that are open to all. Many of our programmes will challenge partners and residents in the area to participate in events by signing up to do voluntary or communal work. This will bring a large number of people together to work on a common project.

We see inclusion operating as a two-way street. We will take our programme content outside official concert halls and stages – to campfire sites, lakesides, and natural gathering places – to places where the people are. This will make it possible to stumble upon cultural activities practically anywhere you go. Much of our programme content, such as the **Permission to Be Different** programme, intentionally works to expand our traditional understanding of culture, thereby involving new participants, also as active content producers. **Parahyppy** recognises those who are mentally handicapped as artists and instils their performing art events in the regions during 2022-2026. **Lo Splendore, Souturadio (Rowing radio)** and **Ode to Clean Water** work closely with immigrants. We highlight the position of small languages, for example, in the **Future Ugrians** and our library programmes. **Mummot 2.0 (“Grannies 2.0”)** highlights the positive power of grandparenting.

In terms of participation, it is important to reach those who do not recognise the prevailing concept of

culture as being their own. It requires acute listening skills and active dialogue to identify different forms of participation and be able to incorporate them into our programme.

The Saimaa Skill Share Lab content which will increase our operational readiness will be built in cooperation with local and regional non-governmental organisations. Solid local knowledge, practical know-how, existing networks, and partnerships will enable Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 to approach different types of entities and special groups in the most beneficial way.

Digitalisation plays a key role in reaching out to those who are unable to attend cultural events themselves or may not be able to find their way to the events. Due to a pandemic or other similar threat, a digital contingency plan must always be in place for implementing the programme.

Volunteering programme

Many inclusion and civic networking projects are ongoing in our area, such as Savonlinnan Seudun Kolomonen, Meijän Mikkeli, and Joensuun Jelli, whose examples and good practices can be adopted by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Voluntary cultural spaces are also excellent examples of how much can be achieved by joining forces. We will invite the joint projects led by the third sector to join in practical cooperation. Our volunteer programme will bring them and volunteers inspired by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 to work under the same umbrella. We will develop a volunteering programme by organising brainstorming sessions and workshops between different areas and fields. We want to be the spark that unites different participants in our region to work together. We will ask members of the Martha organization and sports clubs in our area how they would like to get involved in our activities and produce inclusive content. We will utilise our communication channels to reach out to new volunteers.

Volunteer activities provide inclusion in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Volunteering serves to activate and motivate third sector actors and private citizens, giving Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 content both local significance and depth. Volunteers from different fields working together will turn the spotlight on Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 functioning at its absolute best.

Volunteering activities will be coordinated through the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform. Information concerning project needs and skills and strengths of the volunteers will be gathered together. Through our Saimaa Skill Share Lab volunteer programme, we will train at least 1,000 volunteers to participate in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 events as researchers, local guides, and storytellers. They will also be called upon to act as local ambassadors – speaking about Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, its programme, and the opportunities it offers to participate during the year of celebration. It is essential that, from the very beginning, volunteers have an influence on their training and implementation of the ECoC year. Young people and representatives of special groups are also invited to volunteer. Many large-scale events would not happen without the hard work, dedication, and enthusiasm of volunteers which is abundant in our area. A Volunteer Coordinator will be designated to oversee all volunteer activities.

Inclusion through cultural well-being

In our first bid book, we set the goal of having a coordinated cultural well-being network in all four regions by 2026. To our delight, this goal has already been achieved with each region having a cultural well-being plan already in place or in progress.

Participating in and/or experiencing cultural activities supports a person's overall well-being and feeling of inclusion. In Finland, culture is already more strongly integrated in social structures than in many other European countries. Culture is perceived as



a central part in the task given to municipalities for promoting health and well-being among residents (Act on Cultural Activities in Local Government §3). However, the position of cultural well-being in our society needs fortification.

In July 2020, the European Council agreed to implement a recovery plan as an exceptional method for responding to the COVID-19 crisis. Finland's recovery plan is a part of the sustainable growth programme which requires practices and digital services to be in place for promoting multi-sectoral inclusion and well-being. One of the objectives of the sustainable growth programme is to accelerate the renewal, recovery, and sustainable growth of the sectors most affected by the crisis - namely culture, tourism, the creative economy, and the event sector. One of the multi-sectoral solutions is the development and implementation of a service concept for cultural well-being.

The primary well-being challenges faced by eastern Finland are associated with the diminishing and ageing population and mental health issues experienced by people of different ages, especially young people. Cooperation among various networks is a good way to tackle these challenges. Taikuhyye in South Savonia and Hyvinvointivoimala (The Well-being Power Plant of Eastern Finland (VOIMALA)) in North Savonia are examples of working regional and interregional networks already in existence. The former network is active on a regional level in South Savonia, and the latter is strongly present in building the network between eastern Finland and the national level. VOIMALA is also actively present in international networks. The Parasta itään (Best for Eastern Finland) network established in 2020, covers all four regions and supports the implementation of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 in that its results take root in the area.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will participate in strengthening the well-being network in the following ways:

- Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will organise training on the effects of arts and culture on the well-being of people (Saimaa Skill Share Lab).
- Universities in the area, in cooperation with Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, will build an openly accessible MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) around themes of nature and cultural well-being.
- We will provide training to share know-how within the area (for example, training special groups in providing communal work).
- We will gather information on the cultural well-being professionals in our region in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform resource bank.
- Almost one third of the municipalities in Finland have a method (for example, the Kaiku card) which allows residents experiencing difficult life situations access to cultural events free of charge, or for a small fee. These practices are in use in regions of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. In 2026, activities for enabling low-threshold participation will be strengthened and expanded to areas where none have previously existed.
- A number of different barriers may preclude participation in cultural activities. Leaving home may be difficult due to a disability, the long distance involved, or not having suitable transport. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 volunteer programme addresses these difficulties by training culture friends, who take on the task of accompanying people to cultural or other events.

Being part of the community

Inclusion is the guiding thought of our idea and operations. When a person receives an invitation and feels that they have been heard and understood, they will want to join in and become part of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

We promote participation by using technical means, such as the accessibility of websites, but the most important thing is to create events that showcase the hospitality of eastern Finland. The sense of well-being is based on establishing social relationships and interaction between the participants. People are eager to join in when they feel included, when they feel that their voices are heard, and they are treated as equals. We will approach the audience and those involved in the programme as equals, not as minority groups, the elderly, or immigrants, but always as individuals. We will all take these words to heart: "Don't assume!" and "Listen!"

When building the programme, our goal is that the total number of performers involved will constitute an equal representation of all genders. We will train our teams and volunteers to confront diversity, including invisible illnesses and disabilities, and to be aware of one's prejudices and privileges. We aim to establish a diverse and multicultural network.

Our responsibility plan, required for the implementation of events and programmes, directs attention to both physical and digital accessibility. Our events follow the **principle of providing safer space** – they are free of any form of discrimination.

Q16

STRATEGY TO EXPAND THE AUDIENCE BASE

Expanding our audience base is of crucial importance. This action will require audience-related measures such as audience strategy, audience and visitor surveys, and collaboration with stakeholders. Our evaluation work will play a key role in enabling us to target our activities in the right direction. New audiences can be reached through new partnerships. Therefore establishing business and third sector partnerships will be a key factor in determining our success.

According to a study we conducted at the beginning of 2020, our most difficult target group consists of middle-aged and older men. We have developed a programme specifically targeted to connect with this group, including our **Music for All** programme involving dancing the tango, and bringing culture to the places where men hang out – petrol stations and bars – in the form of **Songwriting**. We will also challenge local sports clubs in the area to participate in our **Liikutaan! (Let's move!)** programme.

Another group we will specifically target consists of domestic and international travellers who normally stay in the Helsinki metropolitan area or travel to Lapland. Our region features unique attributes which these tourists have not yet discovered. We will explore the possibility of implementing a cultural passport/ cultural visa, in cooperation with different Russian cultural institutions and authorities. An example is the Vyborg card, which was in use from 1991 to 2000. The possibilities afforded by electronic visas in the future are significant, as it will most likely facilitate easy movement between Finland and Russia.

Cooperation with schools

We have called upon young people to act as messengers. The **Youth Panel** will be active on social media, creating their own content in the spirit of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. We will enjoy extensive cooperation with both regional and municipal youth councils.

Our **Space for Culture** is specifically designed to reach young people and get them involved (4H activities and Street Management, the centre for alternative culture in the “Välitilassa” (“Intermediate Space”) programme). We aim to connect with young people who are at risk of exclusion.

We will engage all the vocational schools and universities and universities of applied sciences in the area to create content for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, or to participate in the Saimaa Skill Share Lab. Educational institutions have already become involved in our programmes in many ways, such as the production of the **Primal Force of Water** conference. Through cooperation with the local educational institutions we will, for example, obtain MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course) and assistance in organising seminars and conferences, and volunteer exchange programmes.

The **Schoolchild science meets art** programme will link art to the science workshops designed by the university students. The **Children's Culture** programme includes extensive children's cultural ambassadorship content designed especially for children in kindergartens and elementary schools.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will implement its own school guide for day care centres, and in primary schools and upper secondary schools. The guide will introduce Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 and will tell about programme content for the target group and all the participatory events that they can join in.

A | Finance

Q17

OPERATING BUDGET FOR THE TITLE YEAR

In our first phase bid book we stated that our projected budget would total 20 million euros. At the time, we had received commitment from four regional councils and their respective cities to participate in funding of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, in addition to the city of Savonlinna. Based on the funding models of earlier Finnish ECoC cities, we estimated the share of state funding to equal 12 million euros. We also estimated possible project funding to be 6 million euros. We set our desired budget at 27 million euros for the second phase of the candidacy.

The basic budget for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 for the years 2022–2027 is 28 million euros. We have been able to increase our budget after conducting extensive discussions with the regional councils, and municipalities of eastern Finland, businesses, foundations, educational institutes, and private supporters. Our common will is to produce a versatile and effective ECoC year, ushering in a new era of cooperation in eastern Finland, making a permanent change to our way of doing things.

Q18

INCOME FROM THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Our estimate of funding of 12 million euros from the state of Finland remains the same. The proportions of funding from the City of Savonlinna (two million euros), Saimaa Phenomenon regional capital cities (two million euros) and regional councils (one million euros) were decided upon during the first phase, and total five million euros.

The regional councils have agreed to direct, when and if possible, regional development funds to support Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 projects. Other EU programme funding will also be utilised. The proportion of project funding is 6,5 million euros.

Our budget includes funding from other municipalities in the region totalling half a million euros. All municipalities in eastern Finland will participate in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 through their regional councils, but during the second phase 27 of these municipalities have already committed to securing their own additional funding for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Commitment of the municipalities to the ECoC year enhances regional accessibility and facilitates and expands the implementation of programme content throughout the entire region. Discussions with the municipalities are ongoing and it will still be possible to join in at a later stage.

	Total income to cover operating expenditure (in €)	From the public sector (in €)	From the public sector (in %)	From the private sector (in €)	From the private sector (in %)
Budget	28,000,000	24,000,000	85.7 %	4,000,000	14.3 %

Income from the public sector to cover operating expenditure	In €	In %
State	12,000,000	50 %
City of Savonlinna	2,000,000	8.3 %
Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities	2,000,000	8.3 %
Regional councils	1,000,000	4.2 %
EU (excluding Melina Mercouri prize)	6,500,000	27.1 %
Other municipalities	500,000	2.1 %
Total	24,000,000	100 %

Q19

COMMITMENT OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

The following public finance authorities have approved the proportion of their funding and participation in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026:

- On 30 March 2020 the Savonlinna City Council approved the cultural strategy and the city's proportion of self-financing; on 31 March 2021 the bid book and declarations of commitment were approved.
- The Mikkeli City Board 20 April 2020, City Council 18 May 2020
- The Kuopio City Board 27 April 2020, City Council 11 May 2020
- The Joensuu City Council 27 April 2020
- The Lappeenranta City Council 27 April 2020
- The Board of the South Savo Regional Council 20 April 2020

- The Board of the North Savo Regional Council 27 April 2020
- The Board of the North Karelia Regional Council 27 April 2020
- The Board of the South Karelia Regional Council 6 April 2020

All municipalities in eastern Finland are participants in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 through the regional councils. At the time the bid book has been sent to print, the following municipalities or cities have made a decision relative to their own additional funding:

- Municipality of Rääkkylä 25 January 2021
- Municipality of Hirvensalmi 1 February 2021
- City of Kitee 9 February 2021
- Municipality of Tohmajärvi 15 February 2021
- City of Outokumpu 15 February 2021
- Municipality of Taipalsaari 15 February 2021
- Municipality of Rautjärvi, 15 February 2021
- Municipality of Puumala 15 February 2021
- City of Imatra 15 February 2021
- Municipality of Rantasalmi 22 February 2021
- Municipality of Enonkoski 23 February 2021
- Municipality of Sulkava 24 February 2021
- Municipality of Ruokolahti, 1 March 2021
- Municipality of Liperi 1 March 2021
- Municipality of Heinävesi 1 March 2021
- Municipality of Lemi 8 March 2021
- Municipality of Mäntyharju 15 March 2021
- Municipality of Joroinen 15 March 2021
- City of Nurmes 15 March 2021
- Municipality of Kontiolahti 16 March 2021
- Municipality of Parikkala 16 March 2021
- City of Varkaus 22 March 2021
- Municipality of Pertunmaa 22 March 2021
- Municipality of Savitaipale 23 March 2021
- City of Iisalmi 29 March 2021
- City of Kiuruvesi 29 March 2021
- Municipality of Luumäki 29 March 2021

Q20

EU SUPPORT

EU-funded projects being implemented by our various partners will add considerable value to upcoming Capital of Culture activities. Among EU-funded projects related to the Capital of Culture programme are Saimaa Geopark, Vespaikka – Water in its natural element in South Savo, and D.O. Saimaa and Suvorov Ways, a joint project of South Savo and South Karelia, and the Humak University of Applied Sciences project, EDUCRO.

We are optimistic about the project funding opportunities afforded by the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021– 2027. At the time of writing this bid book the themes of the MFF have not yet been fully publicised. Project funding possibilities vary according to the four regions, but in the past we have been successful in implementing projects and believe in our future success in utilising programmes such as Leader, ERDF, ESF and CBC projects, and Creative Europe projects. Additionally, EU funding can be utilised, for example, in ERASMUS+ projects of the educational institutes and for different types of investment projects.

The **Myö taataan (We guarantee)** financing mentioned in our first bid book involves new partners and ensures that small, local events are created throughout eastern Finland. Our funding also enables organising independent, totally new events or producing programme content that does not require any official background associations or other entities. Events or programme content within the funding can be totally implemented through the Myö taataan scheme or funds awarded by us can be utilised as so-called seed money for the project. In rural events Myö taataan funding can be used as a proportion of

self-financing for associations or organisation in more extensive projects applying for Leader group funding. The funding model has already been agreed upon with the LEADER groups of eastern Finland. Programme cooperation will be outlined in the strategy of each LEADER group area and its implementation will begin in 2023. At the same time, common practices for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Leader funding will be put in place.

Savonlinna's projects that support the implementation of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 in Savonlinna during 2021–2023

- In 2021, the **Local Flavours Interreg Europe** project will produce a cultural heritage programme through which partners can organised and submit content for the Capital of Culture year.
- **The Nature Saimaa Project** develops “experience” products; for example, charter flights from Germany to Savonlinna. The project is also preparing an application for “The Ringed Seal Archipelagos of Lake Saimaa” listing on the UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- **The Events and meetings** as the motor of Savonlinna travel project will create an event ecosystem to simplify the production of events. The project collaborates with Metsähallitus and The Finnish Heritage Agency to achieve the UNESCO World Heritage title for the area around Olavinlinna-Riihisaari and to brand it as the Saimaa hub among the five most popular travel destinations in Finland.
- **The Saimaa Media work group** will renew operational culture in a way that media coverage will be a part of cultural productions and development procedures in the future.

Q21

TIMETABLE TO COVER OPERATING EXPENDITURE

Source of income for capital expenditure	2021*	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
EU	720,000	0	120,000	500,000	1,350,000	3,600,000	430,000
State	600,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	2,500,000	6,000,000	500,000
City of Savonlinna	20,000	200,000	360,000	360,000	360,000	360,000	360,000
Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities	150,000	400,000	400,000	400,000	400,000	400,000	0
Area: the regional councils and other municipalities and cities	10,000	400,000	400,000	400,000	400,000	400,000	0
Sponsors		40,000	40,000	470,000	340,000	3,110,000	0
Total	1,500,000	2,040,000	2,320,000	3,130,000	5,350,000	13,870,000	1,290,000

*The year 2021 with own, separate project funding.

Q22

FUND-RAISING STRATEGY TO SEEK SUPPORT AND INVOLVE PRIVATE SPONSORS

In addition to public funding, the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 budget includes private funding totalling four million euros. Our funding strategy will rely on funding from the business environment, various foundations, and private funds. Businesses and different types

of foundations within eastern Finland are significant funders of cultural activity. Arts and culture are funded by several million euros annually through grants, donations and sponsorship agreements. Additional funding will be sourced from individuals

and crowdfunding campaigns. Many negotiations have been underway concerning cooperation and funding opportunities which will be actualised when the decision on the Capital of Culture title is positive for us and a new legal business entity has been established for implementing Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

Responsibility for acquiring private funding is spread throughout the ECoC organisation and entities involved in the preparation work, so the touch points with various businesses and foundations are numerous. The ECoC organisation will employ individuals whose principal task will be fundraising for the ECoC year and implementing legacy projects which will continue after the ECoC year..

1. Business funding

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has generated considerable interest within the business community. Few publicly listed corporations have headquarters in eastern Finland, but many large industrial operations and both nationally and internationally significant corporations operate in the area. Strengthening and safeguarding the retaining power and increasing the vitality and the attraction power of eastern Finland is instrumental to the business success of corporations in the area. The goals of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 and its possibilities in increasing and maintaining the vitality of the area have been well understood during the discussions. Supporting Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 offers businesses an opportunity to plan and implement social responsibility, increase the vitality of the region, and acquire positive visibility.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will invite 4–6 corporations in the area to serve as main business partners and a broad agreement of cooperation will be signed for 2022–2026. Prerequisites of the cooperation are common values, the promotion of responsibility and sustainable development, and respect for the artistic independence of the ECoC

organisation. Other substantial partnerships are also being systematically explored. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has received support from the following entities: OP union of eastern Finland which consists of 21 member banks within the regions of South and North Karelia and South Savo, as well as OP South Karelia, OP Lemi, OP Luumäki, and OP Savitaipale

Itä-Suomen Unioni (Union of Eastern Finland) is an association established in 2021 by local influencers and business directors. It perceives the added value of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 as significant:

"We see that this mutual project of all in eastern Finland will create not only authentic European added value but first and foremost, can have substantial impact on the cultural life in our area, the economy and even on our demographic development. These growth impulses are needed in our region, even more than those of our competitors. This is why our association and its members are on their part ready to do whatever possible, also by contributing private funding to the project budget as soon as the selection for Capital of culture has been ensured." – 8 March 2021

Mönkkönen Jukka, Rector, The University of Eastern Finland (UEF), PhD (Pharm.), member of the Board of the Finnish Education Employers (FEE)

Lahti Ari, Founding partner and CEO, ICECAPITAL Securities Ltd, Lic.Soc.Sc., Chairperson of the Football Association of Finland and main owner of Kuopion Palloseura (F.C. Kuopio)

Broman Harri, CEO, Broman Group Ltd, Finnish honorary title 'kauppaneuvos' (business) and Honorary Doctorate UEF

Helander Mikko, Finnish honorary title 'vuorineuvos' (business), President & CEO, Kesko, MSc. (Technology)

Kähkönen Sirpa, Author

Liikanen Erkki, Chairperson of the Board of the IFRS Foundation Trustees, former Governor of the Bank of

Finland, former Member of the European Commission, M.Soc.Sc.

Mantsinen Mia, CEO, Mantsinen Group Ltd., MSc. (Economics)

Saksa Juha-Matti, Rector, LUT University, Doctor of Science (Economics), Chairperson of the Board of LAB University of Applied Sciences

Viialainen Matti, Honorary title 'maakuntaneuvos' (regional administration) Former County Governor of South Savonia and South Karelia, Master of Social Sciences (M.Soc.Sc.)

At the beginning of 2021, entrepreneur associations in eastern Finland (Federation of Finnish Enterprises Savo, South Savo, South Karelia, North Karelia, and South Savo Chamber of Commerce, Kuopio Chamber of Commerce, South Karelia Chamber of Commerce, and North Karelia Chamber of Commerce) gave a statement emphasising their support:

"Saimaa Phenomenon is an act of vitality. It will attract new visitors to the area and will increase purchasing power. We want to encourage every enterprise to take this opportunity and think about how Saimaa Phenomenon can be evident in their own products and services." Niina Kuuva, Area Director, The Federation of Finnish Enterprises South Savo

"Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 builds a strong cooperation between the businesses, cultural players, travel enterprises and citizens in eastern Finland and promotes the international attraction of the region. In addition, responsible and sustainable branding of Saimaa and doing things together will promote both the enhancement of vitality, development and nature values." Kaija Savolainen, CEO, Kuopio Chamber of Commerce

The **Saimaa Business Mycelium** is a programme designed for businesses, whereby they can apply for and receive additional business cooperation opportunities coordinated by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Enterprises joining in will agree to adhere to Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 values and after signing the agreement, will have the right to use Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 symbols and marketing material in their own activities. The enterprises involved in the Saimaa 2026 Business Mycelium will be collected in a Saimaa passport, where they will be easily accessible.

Another goal of the Saimaa 2026 Business Mycelium is to create and develop new products and services for the Capital of Culture year. Businesses in the Mycelium will also have the possibility to participate in the development of Saimaa Skill Share Lab activities and organise training.

2. Cooperation with Foundations

Both national and local foundations in eastern Finland perceive Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 as being significant. Foundations interested in helping us reach our funding goals can easily do so, by contributing funds to a programme that specifically aligns with their own values and principles, or by allocating funding to a specific partner to support the ECoC implementation.

At this time, the following foundations have expressed their support:

- Raija and Ossi Tuuliainen Foundation
- Karjalaisen Kulttuurin edistämisseätiö (South Karelia Foundation for Cultural Promotion)
- Karjalan Kulttuurirahasto sr. (The Karelian Cultural Fund)
- The Eevi and Eemil Tanninen Foundation sr.

3. Cooperation with educational institutes

The following educational institutes have voiced their support for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026:

- University of Eastern Finland UEF
- LUT University
- Saimaa Vocational College Sampo
- Southeast Finland University of Applied Sciences Xamk
- Karelia University of Applied Sciences
- Savonia University of Applied Sciences
- LAB University of Applied Sciences
- East Savo Educational Federation, Samiedu Vocational College
- Savo Vocational College Esedu
- Savo Vocational College Sakky
- Ylä-Savo Vocational College YSAO
- Riveria Vocational Education and Training Centre
- Humak University of Applied Sciences
- Diaconia University of Applied Sciences

"Universities of Applied Sciences provide education, research, development, and innovation operations to create new capability in the local working environment, thereby enhancing the social and cultural well-being of the region.

Karelia University of Applied Sciences wants to be involved along with all the regional educational organisations, to enable Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. This is a matter of honour to us – we can also learn while applying what we know." **Petri Raivo** Rector, Karelia University of Applied Sciences.

"Our task is to train professionals for the changing needs of the working environment and develop the workplace and entrepreneurship. Promoting internationalisation is an important part of our development work. We want to share know-how to all – regardless of time, place, language and culture – nearby, virtually, here and elsewhere. Saimaa Phenomenon will open new opportunities and partnerships by which we can together strengthen the vitality and attraction of eastern Finland and Savonlinna." **Jukka Mustonen** Rector-Director, East Savo Educational Federation Samiedu.

4. Support Association for Saimaa-Suomi

A non-profit association **Tukiyhdistys Saimaa-Suomi ry – Support Association for Saimaa-Suomi** will be established for the purpose of collecting funds for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Through the association Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will be able to achieve both national and global support. The support association will operate as a link between Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 areas of influence and businesses, individuals, and other participants, whatever the domicile or nationality of the party may be. The association can apply for and receive grants and donations. Private citizens can also join the association as members.

5. Crowdfunding

Projects organised by individuals or organisations engaged in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cultural programme can be funded through a special inclusive crowdfunding initiative. In this manner, the audience will be able to influence the programme by voting for the content they wish to see, based on what they are willing to fund. This funding method will be used especially with respect to inclusive city events where it can act as a significant funding method for implementing events.



Q23

OPERATING EXPENDITURE

Approximately 64.2 % of the budget will be used for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programme expenses. This sum includes the costs for making our events digitally accessible. Our marketing budget is 10.7 % of the total budget. The Marketing and Communications team will have the communications and marketing people of the regions, cities, and municipalities as partners. In addition, the travel and marketing organisations in the region will bring Saimaa into the spotlight both nationally and internationally. Marketing plans will be presented in more detail under questions Q37–Q41.

According to the current plan, the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 organisation will put in 107.5 person-years in 2022–2027. The number of personnel will be at its highest in 2025 and 2026, with 24.5 employees. Administration expenses are high due to the high level of salaries and non-wage labour costs in Finland.

Operating expenditure	In €	In %
Programme expenses	18,000,000	64.2 %
Advertising and marketing	3,000,000	10.7 %
Salaries, general expenditure and administration	6,000,000	21.4 %
Evaluation	1,000,000	3.6 %
Operating expenses, total	28,000,000	100 %

Q24

PLANNED TIMETABLE FOR OPERATING EXPENDITURE

Timetable for spending	Programme expenses		Advertising and marketing		Salaries, general expenditure and administration		Evaluation		Total
	In €	In %	In €	In %	In €	In %	In €	In %	
2022	1,030,000	5.7 %	210,000	7 %	800,000	13.3 %	0	0 %	2,040,000
2023	1,030,000	5.7 %	240,000	8 %	950,000	15.8 %	100,000	10 %	2,320,000
2024	1,530,000	8.5 %	300,000	10 %	1,100,000	18.3 %	200,000	20 %	3,130,000
2025	3,350,000	18.6 %	600,000	20 %	1,200,000	20 %	200,000	20 %	5,350,000
2026	10,920,000	60.7 %	1,500,000	50 %	1,200,000	20 %	250,000	25 %	13,870,000
2027	140,000	0.8 %	150,000	5 %	750,000	12.5 %	250,000	25 %	1,290,000
Total	18,000,000	100 %	3,000,000	100 %	6,000,000	100 %	1,000,000	100 %	28,000,000

Q25 - Q29

BUDGET FOR CAPITAL EXPENDITURE

The only infrastructure project of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is the digital platform and its costs are included in “Programme expenses” presented in the Expenditure table.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will utilise all of the readily available infrastructure and according to our cultural strategy will make use of the empty spaces owned by the public sector and private partners in our projects. The most important construction projects and their relationship to our programme has been introduced under section Q43.

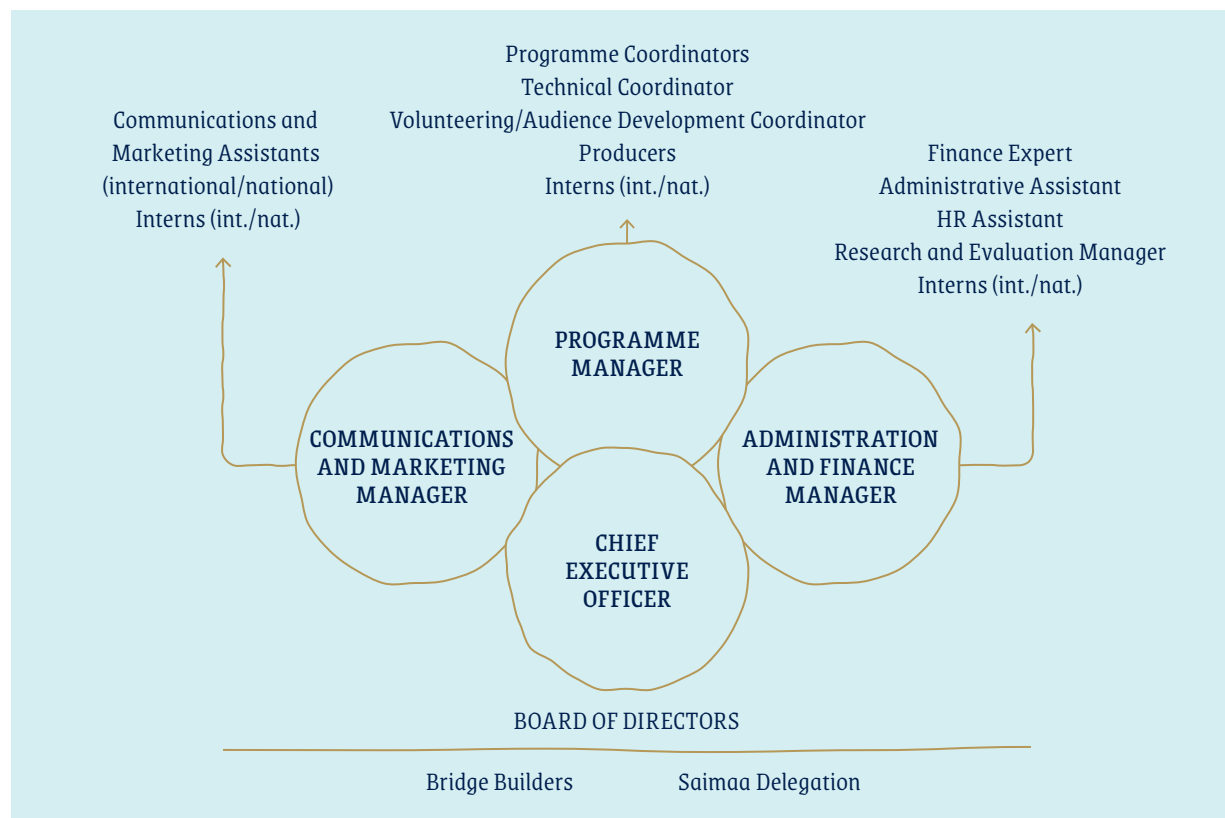
Income from the public sector to cover operating expenditure	In €	In %
City of Savonlinna	150,000	33.3 %
Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities	150,000	33.3 %
Area	150,000	33.3 %
Total	450,000	100 %

B | Organisational structure

Q30 - Q34

SAIMAA PHENOMENON 2026 ORGANISATION

On 28 August 2020, the cities of Savonlinna, Kuopio, Mikkeli, Joensuu, and Lappeenranta and the regional councils of North and South Savo, and North and South Karelia signed a cooperation agreement on the goals, central principles, and guidelines under which the parties would operate to implement further preparation of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 should Savonlinna be selected as a European Capital of Culture. According to the agreement a non-profit limited company will be established to handle preparation and implementation of the ECoC year. Initially, the owners will be the cities of Savonlinna, Mikkeli, Kuopio, Joensuu, and Lappeenranta with equal shares. Other municipalities and cities in the area, and the regional councils, can join in later in a separately agreed upon manner. The limited company model will guarantee operational and artistic independence of the ECoC entity. The application for project grants and funding to implement the programme presented in the bid book and decisions on the use of said grants, as well as funding decisions, will be made by a limited company jointly established by the cities of Lappeenranta, Joensuu, Mikkeli, Kuopio and Savonlinna.



Finance, administration, and other obligations of the project, as well as the distribution of financing, are the sole responsibility of the limited company to be established. Any recovery of grants is also the sole responsibility of the limited company. Establishment of the limited company will be initiated immediately after the Capital of Culture title is secured.

The Board of Directors will consist of seven members and each of them will have a personal alternate member. Each city included in the partnership agreement has the right to name one member to the board and appoint an alternate member for their designated member. The board member

named by the City of Savonlinna will be selected as the chair of the board. The General Meeting outlines the company's procedures at the strategic level.

The Board of Directors will appoint a **Chief Executive Officer** for the organisation. The primary responsibilities of the CEO include making major corporate decisions, managing the overall operations and resources of the company. The CEO will be recruited through an open, international job posting. The CEO will organise the recruiting process of the staff. The headquarters of the limited company is in Savonlinna. Prerequisites for the position of Chief Executive Officer include: strong experience in leading

an arts organisation, a financial background, an understanding of the special qualities of the project, understanding of local, regional and international politics, international commitment to implementing our artistic programme, interest in promoting arts and culture in the Saimaa region, and the capability to act as the public figure representing the project.

Personnel to be recruited will work on programme, communications and administration and finance teams. They will consist of both full-time and part-time workers and interns. Additional staff will be recruited yearly, according to requirements. In addition, we will enact international personnel exchange with other ECoC cities. An extensive open call will be organised to select a wide-ranging staff which will undergo training on a regular basis. Team managers will form the management group together with the CEO.

The arts and cultural programme will be organised by a **Programme team** under the direction of a **Programme Manager**. From Programme Manager we require visionary and broad knowledge of the arts, an artistic view, a broad network of both national and international partners, understanding of the special nature of the project, and excellent cooperation and negotiating skills. The Programme Manager will work with the regional **Programme Coordinators** and a **Technical Coordinator**. The coordinators will also work together with regional programme content producers and implementers and will be responsible for communication with the cultural services of the municipalities and cities. The Technical Coordinator will be responsible for the coordination of digital productions and the compilation of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform. Coordinators must possess strong international know-how and language skills.

The **Marketing and Communications team** will be led by a **Marketing and Communications Manager**. The team will also include **Communications and Marketing Assistants** who specialise in both **national and international communications**. The communications

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	Total
Chief Executive Officer	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Programme Manager	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Marketing and Communications Manager	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Administration and Finance Manager	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Finance Expert	0.5	1	1	1	0.5		4
Administrative Assistant	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
HR Assistant		0.5	0.5	1	1		3
Programme Coordinators	3	3	3	3	3	1	16
Technical Coordinator	1	1	1	1	1		5
Volunteering/Audience Development Coordinator			1	1	1		3
Producer	1	1	1	1	1		5
Communications and Marketing Assistant (international/PR)		1	1	1	1	0.5	4.5
Communications and Marketing Assistant (national)			1	1	1		3
Research and Evaluation Manager			1	1	1	1	4
Interns (int./nat.)	3	3	6	6	9	3	30
Total person years	13.5	15.5	21.5	22	24.5	10.5	107.5

team works closely together with the city of Savonlinna and other Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities and other communicators within the regions. The team will be engaged in regular cooperation with other ECoC cities and sister cities.

The **Administration and Finance team** will be led by the **Administration and Finance Manager**, who together with the CEO is responsible for the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 financing. They will have assistance from a **Finance Expert**, whose tasks include the coordination of funding, business partnerships, administration of the support association and caring for stakeholder relations concerning fund-raising. Additionally the team will include a **Research and Evaluation Manager**, **Administrative Assistant**, and an **HR Assistant**.

Operations of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 limited company will be supported by the **Bridge Builders** whose task is to develop interregional

cooperation and a **Saimaa Delegation** which will be made up of nationally significant partners and spokespeople for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

Various working groups and expert teams can also be formed to support the work of the organisation. The Programme Manager and Programme Coordinators will be supported in their work by a five-member **Artistic Committee**, with extensive representation of the various arts sectors. Furthermore, the entire organisation will be involved in close interaction with the **Youth Panel**, to ensure that the voice of the younger generation is heard in programme planning and implementation.

After the end of the ECoC year the organisation will continue to work for at least six months to ensure the continuity of the Legacy projects and will transfer responsibility for finalising the evaluation measures to the background organisations. The company will be dissolved on 31 December 2027.

C | Contingency plan

Q35 - Q36 RISKS AND MITIGATION

Category	Risk	Mitigating measures
1. Finance	COVID-19 pandemic causes operational difficulties for cultural and tourism players	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respond quickly to develop activities in cooperation with local entrepreneurs. Provide rental spaces for entrepreneurs and artists. Help partners secure funding from various channels nationwide.
	Weakening of the general economic situation endangers full implementation of programme content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply for additional funding from foundations, sponsors and crowdfunding. Encourage new municipalities to join in. Cooperate with other travel and cultural projects to join forces and attain synergy.
2. Capacity to Deliver	Lack of expertise for implementing the ECoC year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Test working practices and new cooperation during the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa. Cooperate with other ECoC cities and international projects to master good, new practices. Recruit international experts to work on the project. Develop personnel exchange programme with other ECoC cities.
	Cultural players in the region lack sufficient expertise to fund and internationalise programme content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saimaa Skill Share Lab has developed individual programmes to give versatile training to both cultural players and volunteers. Create new networks with international partners.
	Expertise will be drained away from the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement the spread of “Masters and Apprentices” thinking into programme and other activities to ensure know-how is transferred to new generations. Work in cooperation with regional universities. Share acquired knowledge through the Saimaa Skill Share Lab.
3. Commitment and cooperation	Splits appear in the cooperation between cities and regional councils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different parties in the project have displayed strong commitment and they are all represented in the steering committee and the Bridge Builders. Coordinators will act as experts in their own regions and as communication liaisons between the cities and provinces.
	Decision-makers in the region fail to adopt ownership of the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain close communication by direct contact and briefings to keep decision-makers and civil servants updated.
	Unfavourable political atmosphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ECoC is non-political action, and decision-making concerning programme content is independent of political cycles.
	Residents in the region lack commitment to the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organise inspirational activities. Involve residents at the different stages of the project by organising surveys, requesting direct programme initiatives, and through “Myö taataan” (“We guarantee”) funding.
4. Programme	Programme fails to consider all target groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programme criteria require accessibility and availability. Adhere to principles of safer spaces. Major parts of the programme are digitally accessible. Programme will be compiled in cooperation with special groups.
	COVID-19 or other equivalent external factor affects organising the programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comply with recommendations set by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Regional State Administrative Agencies to safely organise cultural events. Create contingency plan for carrying out programme content. Design programme to be as flexible as possible and arrange digital access to major part of programme numbers.
5. Communication	Failure to reach European and international audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop strong international cooperation in the early years of the project. Invite European programme producers and partners to become communicators. Establish strong networking opportunities between European and international culture and tourism projects.
	Failure to reach the young, ageing and other special groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve both young and old from the very beginning. Appoint young people to act as communicators and programme planners. Build strong cooperation with third sector organisations.
	Effects of negative publicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activate communications on different levels. Create low threshold campaigns: participation on a personal level contributes to better understanding. Communicate evaluation results on a regular basis.
6. Social and cultural impacts	The unique Saimaa nature and culture is endangered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement plan to ensure social, cultural, environmental, and economic responsibility of the production. Consider ecological and cultural sustainability aspects of the programme.
	The Saimaa Phenomenon legacy is not transferred forward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Become so inspirational that it changes society permanently.

Q37 - Q41

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION

How is a phenomenon created?

In our first bid book, we made a bold statement: that we were phenomenal – and that we wanted to share our happy attitude towards life with other people throughout Europe. We have embarked upon a way of living and developed a special skill set that we feel is worthy of disclosing to the rest of the world. This crystallises the concept presented in our first bid book, the three circles of our communication and marketing strategy: that artists and other participants act as “droplets” which form the force of change; that once they become activated and start to ripple by joining together they create a surge of change. This dynamic creates a phenomenon that demands to be noticed everywhere.

The vision of Savonlinna being designated as a European Capital of Culture in 2026 has brought with it a wide range of new enthusiasm and cooperation throughout our four regions, their cities and municipalities. During the preparation phase, our partners created themes for their own events and activities, in accordance with already developed content themes of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, and joint marketing has begun. Positive rippling felt throughout the region solidifies the fact that culture can and does act as a major force for change.

Droplets

The number of droplets we have accumulated (represented by artists, cultural and other

organisational entities, and opinion leaders), has grown exponentially throughout development of our project. The impressive force created by these droplets, coupled with the ability of officials and decision-makers in our municipalities, cities, and regions, will continue to provide a solid foundation for our power of change. By working together, our accumulated droplets will create an inspiring shared vision of our future.

We can get our message to stand out through the diverse communication channels of our local partners (social media, blogs, podcasts, performances, opinion polls and encounters) in all 53 municipalities in our area.

Many participants and partners have come to us with excellent media relationships already in place. Working together, we can get the word out through the publication of articles and a series of stories narrating our three artistic themes and activities, and the opportunities afforded to everyone who chooses to join in and become a part of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. We need a constant, ample supply of droplets to propel us forward. Once the droplets have accumulated, we will consciously pick them up and train them as messengers, sending them out into Finland, into Europe, and into the rest of the world.

Rippling

When different people join forces and align behind the same goal, a rippling force is created and set in motion which no one person could produce alone.

The ripple that occurs arises from local pride, communality, and a sense of inclusion. It is the feeling of being seen and heard, and of being part of a smaller or larger community. The rippling effect which reverberates throughout Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is caused by all of us - the area's cultural and tourism partners, permanent and multilocal residents, and travellers.

The rippling force represents the best form of communication, because it arises from a genuine emotion and a passion for action. The power bestowed on Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is a two-way street – the artistic work and know-how of our participants enables the rippling effect which is unified and made visible by Saimaa Phenomenon.

Additional rippling will be created and reinforced through inspiring brand ambassadors, astonishing events, competitions, storytelling, and social media.

Phenomenon

The bold vision we set forth in our first bid book is reaching fruition; the decade of Saimaa has already begun. Accumulated droplets and the rushing force they have produced have created waves which are already hitting land around Saimaa. Our phenomenon is emerging. The Helsinki metropolitan area and Lapland will soon be joined in popularity by an enchanting rising star: Saimaa.

Over the past year, our worldview and our entire way of life has undergone radical change – whether we wanted it or not. Nowadays, it is the small, the local, the genuine, and the environmentally-friendly things and actions that are highly esteemed. These elements have been at the very root of our phenomenon from the beginning, and have had an opportunity to grow from small droplets into waves. We are absolutely ready to spread the word – and share with the rest of the world stories about our unique art and culture and about the different opportunities that exist for all of us to become more involved in reshaping the European relationship between environment and nature.

Methods for creating our phenomenon include active and distinguishable marketing, value-based communication and cooperation with influencers and well-known brand ambassadors. Widespread coverage will be ensured by utilising digital event and experiential communications, by ground-breaking

Our slogan

The Art of Living



campaigns that make national news, and dynamic campaigns featuring current issues. Ongoing evaluation will allow us to continue to optimise and fine-tune our marketing and communication strategies.

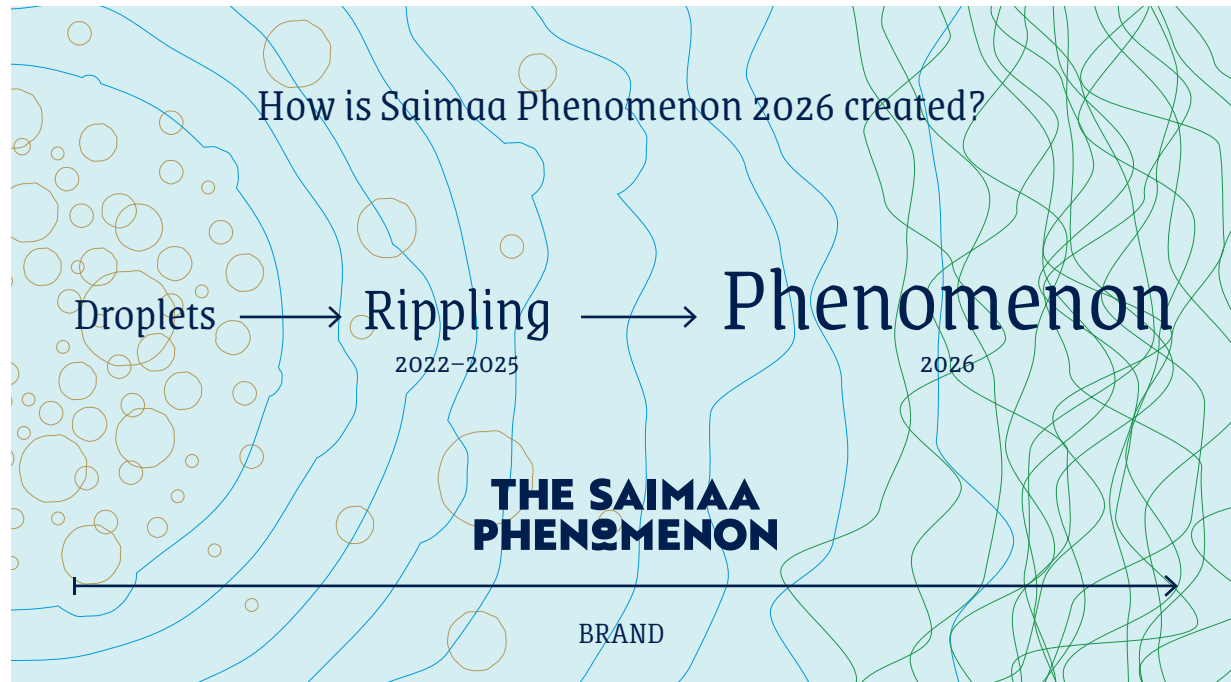
We will continue to systematically update our communication strategy. We will spread the word about Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cultural events and partners, about our special relationship with nature, point out interesting tourist destinations, and touch upon the uniqueness and life skills of the people living in the region.

During the Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa before the ECoC year, we intend to more closely involve one region each year to strengthen the rippling effect. By using this approach, we can establish excellent communication measures which will serve to inspire and engage local participants in that particular region. We will utilise the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform to assist with networking artists and to bring event volunteers on board. Various concepts, designed to transcend regional, national, and international borders, will be launched – all with the same objective in mind: to spread the word so others may discover our unique region and learn more about our unique living skills.

Examples of actions

#Saimaalainen

"The four regions of eastern Finland are inhabited by the people whose daily lives are based on the same values, they appreciate the same things, their identities and feelings of belonging are built around similar elements; them, the surrounding waters are part of everyday life and constitute the landscape of their very soul." Pasanen & Kääriäinen, June 2020, Support from research – Savonlinna's bid for the European Capital of Culture 2026 -project.



Saimaa is a total way of life and state of mind for those of us who live here. In the first phase of our project, this “state of being” was identified and recognised through an identity survey we conducted. According to the survey, family and friends, nature, landscapes, water bodies, and forests come together to create the concept of “place” for inhabitants of the Saimaa region which, in turn, creates a sense of togetherness throughout eastern Finland. The new word “Saimaalainen” (origins and/or heart in Saimaa) creates local pride, speaks of our special relationship with nature, and removes unnecessary barriers which may exist in eastern Finland. It engages and allows us to tell stories about our lifestyle, and the products and services we offer. Beginning in 2022, we will widely use the recognisable hashtags #saimaalainen, #saimaamoments, and

#saimaailmiö2026/#saimaaphenomenon2026.

We encourage residents and businesses, as well as everyone else who feels they are a part of Saimaa, to tell about it by using these hashtags.

Mökki Looks

Mökki (cottage) Looks is a social media campaign to be activated 2022–2026. It is inspired by the “Hel Looks” website, which spotlights urban street style in Helsinki. We will challenge people to capture their “true moment” moving along the water by boat or driving on small winding roads in a recreational vehicle. When we cast our ordinary roles aside, we are all alike underneath: carefree, open, and in our own individual way, European. In the snapshots we will appear boldly different, we will strip off our everyday roles, and throw ourselves into a relaxed life of leisure. Mökki Looks

photos will be posted on our social media channels, and Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will highlight excerpts from the leisure lifestyle on the website. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 sister cities will also take part in the project by sharing photos of their leisure lifestyles and habits on social media.

Mökki Gigs

Living room gigs get Saimaa styling. Company at cottages often consists only of relatives and listening to the local radio, and large summer events can take place far away. The Mökki Gigs mobile application (operating on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform) will change this situation. The app provides information on local artists, who can be booked online for a live gig to be enjoyed by people sitting on their own pier or on a beach shared by the cottage neighbourhood. The mobile application will provide an easy channel for big names of the future and old-timers to rock on together. Mökki Gigs will be piloted in 2022 and summer 2026 will be a cultural dream summer for cottage dwellers. Mökki Gigs will remain available from then on. Yoo-hoo – Saimaa calling!

Art in the Living Rooms

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will harness digital technology by using it as an experiential bridge-builder between culture, art, and people. As early as 2022, we will start up a large-scale programme of compiling and storing a history of our culture and traditions on a common platform. Once completed, eastern Finland's own cultural streaming service will provide a platform for streamed and recorded art performances by both small and large cultural players. These performances can be accessed and enjoyed from your own living room no matter where you are in the world. We feel that digitising all our content makes good sense, because of nature, accessibility, and upheavals in the world.

The Saimaa Showroom

In 2026, those who may not have easy access to cultural, artistic, and nature experiences will have access to Saimaa's culture and nature.

Our Saimaa Showroom will provide users with a virtual, experiential, and mobile sensory experience. Using various soundscapes and smart walls, the sensory room will combine nature, art, and play in a new and immersive way – allowing us to reach a new and much wider audience base.

In 2025, we will open an international open call to find suitable locations for four sensory rooms in Europe to be placed with our business partners. We will bring Saimaa nature and life to Europe – to be experienced in hospitals, care homes and kindergartens.

In the Name of Nature

Our communication and marketing vision is focused on building a sustainable and responsible tomorrow, based on concrete actions. Already many of the initiatives and actions in our region communicate to the rest of the world our strong preferences for making green choices: for example, the city of Lappeenranta won the title of European Green Leaf 2021 in a competition organised by the European Commission. The final decision on the UNESCO Global Geopark (UGG) status applied for by Saimaa Geopark will be made in summer 2021. Finland intends to present the Saimaa Ringed Seal archipelago as a new natural heritage site on the UNESCO World Heritage List. At the initiative of the Finnish Forest Museum Lusto, the Finnish forest relationship was included in the UNESCO National List of Living Heritage among the first phenomena in 2017.

New types of ecological events and actions will be activated in the Saimaa area in the future. The region already has a strong background and reputation for producing environmentally-friendly cultural activities. "Ilosaarirock", the largest festival in eastern Finland, was the first Finnish festival to be awarded the

international Green'n'Clean environmental certificate in 2008, and for several years received the prestigious A Greener Festival Award. The UUS festival in Lappeenranta achieved recognition as Finland's first carbon-negative event.

We will expand our expertise in green event production and share our know-how extensively; both nationally and internationally. We will purposefully develop ways of cooperating and communicating together. We will initiate spectacular movements on behalf of nature, both nationally and internationally. For example, in winter 2021, WWF Finland invited us to participate in a video production of the declaration of nesting peace for the Saimaa Ringed Seal.

European Day for Nature

In 2017, Finland became the first country in the world to officially raise its flag for nature. Since then, Finnish Nature Day has been celebrated every year on the last Saturday in August. Finns have been encouraged to take action, such as spending time in nature or taking a class field trip into the forest.

We now call on all our European friends to engage in concrete actions on behalf of nature. In 2026 the whole of Europe will raise flags to celebrate nature on the same day. This day will bring everyone together to celebrate and appreciate the diverse nature of individual countries as well as that of a unified Europe.

Finland is the country with the most forests in Europe and South Savonia is the most forested region in terms of total forest area. In 2026, we will plant 2026 tree seedlings with our partners in the European Capitals of Culture 2027 in Latvia and Portugal. We invite them to continue this tradition in the following Capitals of Culture.

Digital Ticket to Saimaa

The digital platform being implemented in the Saimaa region is all about raising cultural tourism in the area to a brand-new level. In 2026, a guest arriving here will be able to easily locate all the information they need about travel options, services and cultural offerings using a single application. The platform will provide local and international artists, entrepreneurs, and others with a quick way to locate other Saimaa artists, entrepreneurs, or organisations with whom they can partner to create joint art experiences or to make or sell travel packages and itineraries. Through the digital platform and mobile application, you will be able to admire our natural wonders whenever or wherever you may be — whatever your passion might be — real-time streaming of steamships travelling the Saimaa canal, or exploring the ancient rock art through AR technology.

A digital Saimaa passport will also be made available to travellers and experience seekers arriving in our area through use of the platform. The passport will present a wide array of current cultural events and destinations in Saimaa region and will make a note of various customs and traditions related to Saimaa. The Saimaa Passport will also contain a short English-Saimaa course and will introduce the visitor to our Savonian joviality and Karelian hospitality. At the same time, the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 “code of conduct” will be outlined, defining the pledge for respecting our nature and principles of a safer space. The Saimaa Passport provides guest with access to benefits and offers, which will be compiled together with businesses and service providers in the area.

Media partnerships

Extensive and carefully planned media cooperation is a prerequisite to ensure broad visibility for the ECoC year. We will invite the media to narrate, live-stream and evaluate (especially the phenomenal cultural

programme during 2026), but also to share the story of our unique art of living on the shores of Saimaa.

Visit Finland, a part of Business Finland, has extensive experience building both national and international media visibility. Enhancing the visibility of Finnish Lakeland as a cultural and travel destination is also a goal of Visit Finland. Cooperation with the national Visit Finland and the regional Visit organisations has already begun and will continue to intensify from 2022 onwards.

We will negotiate cooperation agreements with Finland’s largest commercial media outlets, to create closer partnerships which will enable extensive communication and different programme content to promote our visibility to international guests. The Saimaa Showroom Cubicle travelling the world and a similar Saimaa for All programme touring domestically will also provide additional tangible, distinguished platforms.

Yle is a Finnish public broadcasting company and the country’s most versatile media organisation for creative work. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 was visible on Yle during the candidacy phase and our Project Leader was invited as a guest to the “Puoli seitsemän” talk show and to several radio interviews, both nationally and regionally. From a journalistic perspective, Yle will provide ongoing coverage of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 events and people in the future.

Through other ECoC cities, the sister cities of eastern Finland and the media contacts of the Finnish embassies, we will be able to activate a broad existing media community to speak on our behalf. In Russia we will work together with the Finnish Institute in St. Petersburg and with their extensive PR network. We will make use of the expertise of the institute and network concerning large cultural events, such as the Helsinki Flow Festival in increasing media coverage. The Saimaa region is familiar to them through, for example, the seminar on Finno-Ugric languages

arranged in cooperation with the University of Eastern Finland and the circular economy webinar with LUT University.

Commencing in 2023, we will organise customised international PR and influencer visits relating to culture, events, and the nature relationship. Additional effect will be sought from the visits; thus cooperation is planned boldly with the following media: Lonely Planet, The Guardian Culture/ Life Style, Le Monde, Healthy Living, Business Week / Bloomberg, Finnair “Blue Wings”, Vogue Travel, National Geographic and The New York Times. The involvement of social media influencers is planned according to needs and target groups.

Our plan for media cooperation is based on the artistic programme content of our bid book and targeted media. We do not aim at reaching everyone with the same message but will bring relevant content to different target groups. For example, through the international media contacts of the Savonlinna Opera Festival we can communicate to the opera audience, and through Ilosaarirock we can reach EUROPE, the association for European festivals. We have conducted discussions with WWF Finland as well. Through this cooperation we can communicate about the Saimaa Ringed Seal and about the unique nature of Saimaa to Finnish and international environmental media.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 as part of European Union activities

Our Capital of Culture project activities are based on the goals and values described by the EU. It reinforces the EU’s desire to protect the common cultural heritage of our region, which is seen as our common resource, and strengthens the sense of fellowship in Europe.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 actively cooperates and exchanges information with other cities that have already been selected and are just now preparing

for their Capital of Culture year. We actively invite all European Capitals of Culture to visit, participate in our workshops, and bring a taste of their programme content to share with Savonlinna and the whole of eastern Finland. We also plan to visit our own European partners. In encounters with other European Capitals of Culture, cooperation will intensify - we will teach each other and learn from each other.

In addition to the European Nature Day mentioned above, we will highlight the activities of the EU Capital of Culture, for example by:

Host School

We will coach and prepare our community and partners for the Capital of Culture year using a special Host School method. The Host School will offer coaching for service providers in our region, such as accommodation providers, merchants, and taxi drivers, who wish to expand their business services and become local guides. We want to ensure that our guests always return home with unforgettable memories of Saimaa.

At the Host School, participants will become familiar with the region's own cultural and artistic skills, places, and events. A special Saimaa cultural map will be produced to ensure that our guides always find the right information, place, and words. We will also share information about EU activities and values, and train participants to act in accordance with our "code of conduct".

Host School coaching has already been tested by more than a hundred people in our Saimaa Communicators network. The themes have been building the phenomenon and utilising storytelling from a communication perspective. An interregional 12-member Youth Panel has already started their own coaching within the theme: the first steps of an influencer and the world of values. Future coaching will seek a broad perspective on inclusion and accessibility.

Regional days

On Regional Day, within one's own area, the actions of both small and large participants will be highlighted. The day will be a celebration of local traditions and heroes. In 2026, all four regions will provide themes for their Regional Day that centre around being European. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 team wholeheartedly supports these events and celebrations.

Saimaa for all <3 Europe Direct

We will combine the European Capital of Culture year campaign with the Europe Direct info point. One of the Saimaa for All tour cubicles is being designed as a special pop-up info point, which will move from one event, city, and municipality to another as early as 2022. Europe Day, on May 9, will also be an annual Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 celebration day, when a decidedly European celebration gets spiced up with Saimaa delicacies in each of our regions.

Cultural Dream Years of Saimaa

Inspired by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, the cities of Mikkeli, Joensuu, Lappeenranta and Kuopio are committed to implementing their own individual, self-financed projects in 2022–2025. The Cultural Dream Years will engage residents and various partners in a new way. The change can be seen already: Our first "Cultural Dream Year of Saimaa" in Mikkeli 2022 has been awarded its own independent financing (600,000 euros).

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POLITICAL SUPPORT AND COMMITMENT

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is an important element for developing and strengthening the vitality of our entire region. Eastern Finland lies between eastern and western Europe, a location where multifaceted interaction has prevailed between two cultural areas for centuries. During the last 75 years the border has once again become an area of cooperation and exchange; an exemplary model for unifying cultures, not separating or causing confrontations between them. Through the ECoC project we can build a strong bridge across cultural circles in a broader European context. At the same time, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will afford opportunities for developing the area's economy, especially with respect to the travel industry, while enhancing the intangible values of the area.

Janne Laine
Mayor
City of Savonlinna

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is a common venture, involving all four regions of eastern Finland together with their main cities. The emergence of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has established a new precedent. This is probably the first time in the history of the ECoC initiative that larger cities in an area have joined forces to support a smaller city in its endeavor to become a European Capital of Culture. A strong culture creates mental well-being and helps strengthen the region's identification with Europe. A culture-based identity is an essential part of the vitality of our regions. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will exert extensive, positive implications by multiplying the number of visitors to the region.

Pentti Mäkinen
Regional Mayor
South Savo Regional Council
Chairperson of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026
Steering group



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INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

In 2020-2025 many infrastructure projects will be implemented in our region and expenses incurred will be mainly covered by the municipalities' own funding.

These are independent of ECoC activities. The following table is a presentation of projects that support Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programme content.

	Project	Estimated expenditure	Timetable	Status	Programme
Savonlinna	Renovation of the Savonlinna Provincial Museum	3,000,000 euros	2020	Completed	Gateway to Saimaa, Gateway to Europe Finland's Largest Museum
	New library bus	400,000 euros	2021–2022	Authorised	Saimaa Art Bridge
Joensuu	New conservatory	The conservatory will be constructed by an outside operator and the city of Joensuu is bound to a 20-year lease agreement. Annual rent is one million euros.	2022 (completed by the end of 2021)	Construction work underway	Saimaa Art Bridge
	From city hall to museum	Budget still open	2024–2025	Authorised	Finland's Largest Museum, Kantele exhibition
Kuopio	LUMIT, new building for the Senior High School of Arts	27,200,000 euros	2020–2022	Authorised	Blue Road Youth
	Renovation and expansion of the Museum of Kuopio	17,800,000 euros	2020	Completed	Saimaa Art Bridge
Mikkeli	Renovation of Mikaeli, the concert and conference house of Mikkeli	23,000,000 euros	2020–2023	In planning	Saimaa Art Bridge, "Nyt mie ruppeen laulamaan"
	Renovation of the Mikkeli main library	3,100,000 euros	2020–2023	Authorised	Saimaa Art Bridge
	Restoration of Muisti Centre of War and Peace in Mikkeli	3,000,000 euros	2020	Completed	Hindsight Finland's Largest Museum
Lappeenranta	Restoration of the Lappeenranta main library	7,700,000 euros	2023	Authorised	Saimaa Art Bridge
	Acquiring spaces for Lappeenranta museum collections	6,000,000 euros	2025	In planning	Finland's Largest Museum

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OPEN CALL FOR THE ART OF LIVING

We want to preserve the “art of living” on the shores of Saimaa for future generations. However, our old lifestyle and way of doing things requires updating. It’s time to make room for new thoughts, new openings, and for diversity. We extend an open invitation to all – to join us in building a safer, more diverse, and more equal tomorrow. Only by working together can we make a difference and create change. We need everyone to join in, including you.

RESPECT.

Life, nature, and people.
Let’s do things together –
that don’t break anything or anyone.

LISTEN.

To the whispering waves, your neighbour’s humming, children’s thoughts. An open mind (not making any assumptions about anyone) prevents us from establishing barriers between us.

ENCOURAGE.

We all need a gentle hug or an encouraging smile now and then. When you see that someone is getting sidetracked, help them get back on track in a loving way.

BE AWARE.

Not all of us have the same secure beginning to life, but the future must be equal. When the situation calls for it, be brave.

SEE.

Recognise your own privilege and blind spots. See another person as a person. Be prepared to share and change your mindset if need be.

ENJOY.

Be what you are and let others be who they are. Love yourself and others. Life is made for living.

The Art of Living

The Art of living constitutes everyday life in Saimaa and arises from our heritage, our customs, and our unique relationship with nature. It also includes encounters between arts and culture in small, everyday matters and tasks, reminding us of the principles of moderation. Our everyday skills of living in perfect harmony with nature have emerged in different programme content designed to provide all residents access to personal experiences of art and culture. Through this approach even miniature events can become part of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.