



Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2027 in Latvia

Selection Stage

Expert Panel's report

Edited by

the international expert panel members

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Introduction

This is the report of the expert panel (the “panel”) for the selection phase of the competition for the European Capital of Culture (“ECoC”) 2027 in Latvia. The competition is a European Union initiative dating back to 1985.

The Ministry of Culture of Latvia (the “Ministry”) acts as the managing authority (the “managing authority”) of the competition, which is governed by Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”)¹ and by the “Rules of procedure – Competition for the European Capital of Culture 2027 in Latvia” (the “rules”) adopted by the Ministry and published on its website.²

In line with Article 2 of the Rules, a panel of twelve independent experts has been established for the selection process. Ten panel members have been appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies (European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions). Two members of the panel were appointed by the Ministry of Latvia.

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

Pre-selection round

The managing authority issued a call for applications on 4 August 2020. Eight applications were submitted by the closing date of 4 June 2021 by: Cēsis, Daugavpils, Jelgava, Jēkabpils, Jūrmala, Kuldīga, Liepāja, Ogre and Valmiera. The panel met online on 5-8 July 2021 for the pre-selection meeting. It recommended inviting the four bidding cities of Daugavpils, Jūrmala, Liepāja and Valmiera to progress to the final selection stage. The panel’s report is published on the website of the Commission.³

The Ministry accepted the panel’s recommendation and invited the four cities to submit revised applications with a deadline of 4 April 2022. The city of Jūrmala decided to withdraw their application for the final round of the competition.

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

A delegation of four members of the panel took part in city visits on 3-6 May 2022. They were accompanied by observers from the managing authority and the European Commission. The delegation reported to the panel at the selection meeting.

Panel meeting

The panel met partially in presence and partially online on 9 and 10 May 2022. One panel member was excused for personal reasons. Two panel members joined the selection remotely.

Representatives of the managing authority and of the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers took no part in the panel’s deliberations or decision. All

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

² <https://www.km.gov.lv/lv/media/324/download>

³ https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-08/ecoc-2027-latvia-preselection-report_v2.pdf

panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality. The panel confirmed Ms Suvi Innilä as its Chair and Ms Diana Civle as Vice-chair. Ms Else Christensen-Redzepovic and Mr Jorge Pinto were elected by the panel as rapporteurs.

At the selection hearings on 9 and 10 May 2022, each candidate city, in alphabetical order, presented its case (in 45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (in 75 minutes).

The Chair of the panel announced the panel's recommendation at an ECoC announcement event, live streamed, on 10 May 2022 in the presence of the Latvian Minister of Culture, Mr Nauris Puntulis, and the Head of the Representation of the European Commission in Latvia, Ms Zane Petre.

National context

2027 will be the second time Latvia will host a "European Capital of Culture" after Riga in 2014. The selection criteria for an ECoC have changed considerably since then. They now embrace a deeper and wider scope of the role of culture in the city and European development. A particular new requirement is for a city to have a formal cultural strategy, including the ECoC project. This ensures that the ECoC is an element in the progress of a city and not a one-off event. It therefore enhances the importance of sustainable legacy.

The panel recognised the bids in Latvia as ambitious, reflecting the particular states in their respective cities and regions and taking into consideration the wider European agenda and the geo-political situation. It welcomed the development of the bidding proposals between the pre-selection and the selection stages. The panel appreciates that the three cities have used the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies, to further involve their citizens in the cultural process, and to strengthen the role of culture in their overall socio-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition.

The panel encourages all candidates to continue with the development and implementation of their strategies.

Assessments of the candidates

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

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

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

The panel emphasises that its assessments of the candidates were based on the proposed programme set out in the bid-book and the presentation session. A city's history, its recent and

current policies, and its cultural offer may form a basis for a programme but play no part in the selection process. In the commentaries that follow, the panel notes the main elements of its discussions during the selection meeting. In the case of the selected city, specific recommendations are made, in order to assist it in the implementation of the ECoC.

I. Daugavpils

The ECoC application of Daugavpils is based on the theme “Lingua Franca: find, make, speak”. Sustainability & inclusivity concepts are at the core of the application. According to the application, all projects will be implemented at three levels: local, Latvian and European, and they aim to seek a common language among the different communities. This will be done in cooperation with the Latgale region and the project aims to engage Latvia’s leading creators, national cultural organisations and international partners.

The geographical position of Daugavpils in Europe, its history and the composition of its population - with 60,8% Russian-speaking or Belarussian-speaking - positions the city in a very challenging situation in terms of the current crisis.

It is encouraging to see the Daugavpils2027 team immediately addressing the current geopolitical situation unfolding on their doorstep, taking initiatives to increase public awareness, providing practical information and highlighting eyewitness accounts and lived experiences.

Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city:

- Daugavpils has joined the Culture 21 Network and is building on UCLG sustainability principles. This allowed the city to incorporate and learn about more advanced concepts / notions around sustainability and inclusion that were not applied before - e.g. the need to shift from culture consumer to co-creator. The panel sees this development as positive and worth being continued.
- By learning co-creation principles, the city felt more confident to organise events that bring ‘art’ to people rather than ‘people to the art’. This led, for example, to more music events in parks, involving passers-by and to more open programmes and initiatives.
- The city has been collecting relevant data about the community(ies) behaviour since 2021. This is now being followed-up by studies, for example, related with the engagement of disadvantaged citizens and risks of social exclusion. Being able to focus on issues that are backed-up by studies and data, has facilitated the discussions - and led to additional discussions addressing specific challenges with communities that feel left out.
- The culture city strategy that was developed and approved by the city and region, places a priority into activities that aim at a more inclusive society-building and this is also a strength of this application, as the panel sees a correlation between those objectives of the strategy and those of the city’s ECoC project.

- However, the proposed monitoring and evaluation plans are still under-developed and this raises concerns on the existing capacity to monitor and assess the project's impact.
- The connection between the urban strategy plan and the cultural programme needs to be improved, for example, by identifying a virtual or physical platform or a hub that could facilitate the community-led place-making initiatives and contribute to their sustainability. This could also be important to ensure the "right to the city" to the young generations, who play a crucial role in the programme.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The programme is now substantially stronger than in the pre-selection phase, and the projects have generally improved in terms of artistic quality, European dimension and topical relevance.
- The programme positively references in multiple situations the European dimension of the projects. This is very clear in some projects - for example Lines 1 (Punctuation), 3 (Words) and 5 (Stories) have a cultural vision and a high artistic quality, that allow to explore some crucial European and international themes and to respond to the urgent need for an active dialogue - but many others still remain at the level of a statement, with no clear evidence about how these projects are relevant to Europe - for example, Lines 2 (Letters) and 4 (Sentences) have mostly a local focus.
- On a positive note, at the start of 2022, public organisations submitted 102 project applications to the municipal grant competition, with more than half related to community strengthening and participation.
- There remain still doubts about some key moments of the programme; for example, when enquired about the calendar and the rhythm of the programme (calendar cycle), the team replies were not very clear, and could not describe main programme markers, although it was mentioned that the programme would take into account the rhythm of the seasons, which is not related to the concept of Lingua Franca.
- The programme concept has been improved and simplified following the recommendations of the pre-selection panel, but the integration of many projects into the overall artistic concept is still relatively weak. For example, the programme proposes a wide variety of activities (sports, future mobility, zoo issues, scouts, hiking, etc.) and in these cases, it is difficult to identify artistic or cultural content or input.
- In addition, there are some overlapping projects between the programme lines, and although this could be positive, it also demonstrates the need for general coordination to convey a coherent narrative, to be supported by a clear calendar and a compelling rhythm of the programme.
- In conclusion, some additional issues that were not adequately addressed: there are many different projects based on the same idea, only changing the genre - with a

special emphasis on folklore and heritage (including gastronomy, crafts, nature), but there is no certainty that the ideas put forward will reach and involve all the different communities in the city and region and have a sufficiently strong European dimension.

European dimension:

- Overall, the submitted bid book addresses and integrates the European dimension in a much better way than was the case at pre-selection and, in most cases, this comes across naturally and genuinely - not only in the European dimension chapter but also throughout the bid.
- It is a strength to see how Daugavpils focuses on the environment as a leading principle of all areas of the culture programme - a vital European theme that offers an innate European dimension to the programme segments.
- Furthermore, the way Daugavpils plans to use the ECoC as soft power and a bridge-builder to make a stand against Russian aggression is convincing.
- In the bid book, it is mentioned that the values of the ECoC's culture programme are aligned with the European Green Deal and the New European Bauhaus initiative. This is positive, but it is not detailed and the additional explanations provided during the presentation showed that there is little knowledge about how in reality the cultural and artistic content will integrate those other references, particularly the New European Bauhaus angle.
- It is also encouraging to see the connections made with other ECoCs as well as other cities in Europe. However, most of the mentioned partnerships still remain under-developed, especially partnerships in the context of the programme.
- Although many projects claim to have a European dimension, they are mainly local projects: just because a project claims to have a European dimension/ values is not enough. Therefore, the overall project would benefit with more activities based on co-creating, co-curating and collaborating with European partners on an equal level (what Europe can give to Daugavpils and what Daugavpils can give and share with Europe). In summary, despite the good attempts at addressing European values and themes, there are still concerns that the European dimension is not fully and clearly understood.

Outreach:

- The panel welcomed the thorough analysis of outreach barriers and engagement strategy. On that note, it was also positive to read about the special programme focussing on non-citizens.
- Whilst acknowledging that Daugavpils is innately an inclusive community it was encouraging to see how the team have intensified the work on reaching out to minority groups since the pre-selection stage.

- The panel welcomed the plan whereby representatives of minority and marginalised groups would be involved in the ECoC team advisory board and thereby ensuring that the programme meets the interests of various social groups and cooperates with NGOs.
- It was positive to learn that the programme has been developed with the involvement of a wide range of local cultural operators and institutions with solid involvement of the community and with good interaction between artists and curators.
- Each project enlists a large number of organisers with a plan on who will be responsible for the implementation of each project in cooperation with the Foundation.
- The LearnShareDo initiative linking different aspects of the project from outreach - with the training of 100-1000 volunteers - to evaluation as well as the cultural programme is ambitious and well-conceived. The proposed budget however appears on the low side given the high level of ambitions for the project.
- Given the low civic activity of Latgale communities in the NGO sector, it was very positive to learn about initiatives to increase the number of NGOs recognising them as critical partners for the Daugavpils 2027 programme and for its outreach.
- Although the outreach strategy is inclusive and solid, the panel was not convinced about its expected legacy, especially in terms of place making.
- There are clear plans for involving EU's eastern neighbours as partners in the programme and the outreach plans are very inclusive, but the panel fails to see how the vast Russian-speaking community in Daugavpils will be involved and feel ownership of the project, none-the-least given the current geo-political situation.

Management:

- The overall operating budget foreseen for Daugavpils is 20m EUR.
- The budget is composed of 10,02m EUR from the national Government, 5,548m from the city, 2m from the region, 2m from the EU (not including the Melina Mercouri Prize) and 0,5m from the private sector.
- Given the size of the city and region involved in the bid, the operating budget is quite low leaving doubts if the operating budget will be sufficient to deliver a cultural programme of highest international standard as well as being able to communicate and market the ECoC European wide.
- The JoinInvestCreate multi-level cooperation programme provides an important and interesting model to engage the private sector in a cultural programme. Taking into consideration the solid fund-raising plan in place, it is a surprise to see just half a million Euros being expected from private sources.

- The team demonstrated a very good understanding of EU funding streams with proven capacity to prepare EU applications. However, the panel found the anticipated percentage of 10% EU funding for the operational budget quite ambitious.
- 65,25% of the budget would go to cover programme expenditure, 17% to promotion and marketing, 15,25% to wages, overhead and administration, and 2,5% to other expenses (including capacity building, evaluation, etc.). This distribution is sound and the financial timetable is reliable, though the budget for capacity building is on the low side.
- The organisational structure does not reflect the management and implementation system of the complex programme. The panel found it surprising to see the CEO also acting as chair of the Board.
- The panel questions if the city has capacity to provide the level of strong governance required of an ECoC as well as the sustainable capacity of local human resources. It seems this would require substantial capacity building with the help of national and international human resources.
- Overall, the communication strategy is sound with clear targets, connection with the programme, methods and tools, and the risk assessment and analysis is comprehensive with sound mitigation measures. The branding campaign is modern and very effective.
- The panel welcomed how the bid addressed the potential dangers of miscommunication and propaganda with only 21% of population being ethnic Latvians with the vast majority of the population speaking Russian, of which many would be strongly influenced by pro-Kremlin Russian news content.

Capacity to deliver:

- The decision to apply for ECoC was taken unanimously in October 2020. On 17 March 2022, the deputies of Daugavpils City Council approved the application for submission to the competition, thus confirming the commitment to the ECoC project. The political support and involvement overall is thus convincing.
- Although there is formal support of the Daugavpils ECoC bid from the region, the overall assessment of the panel is that the regional involvement in the ECoC programme on a practical level is underdeveloped.
- The capital investment plan is detailed and comprehensive with a substantial investment of 51,284m EUR foreseen.
- The panel was pleased to learn about the city's overall experience with hosting large-scale events by way of examples; however, it is not convinced of the capacity to deliver an international event of the complexity of an ECoC.

- The panel remains concerned about the insufficient hospitality infrastructure for hosting such large-scale international events as an ECoC.
- Visions and ambitions to develop the tourism sector in connection with hosting an ECoC does not appear to exist. This is a missed opportunity given the proven added value of ECoC to tourism.

Conclusion:

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

The Daugavpils application together with the Latgale region forms the geographically largest cooperation network in Latvia, which has a potential for further exploration. An innately European bid with a strong message to Europe and the world has great potential to resonate within and beyond Latvia. However, although the bidding team is competent and resourceful, the panel has concerns whether the city and region has the required human capacity to be able to deliver an ECoC at the high international level required. The proposed culture programme - although significantly improved - is still overall under-developed. Moreover, the overall budget is quite limited for a city and region the size of Daugavpils to succeed in resonating across Europe and thereby leaving behind a solid legacy. Furthermore, the hospitality infrastructure raises concerns in terms of the city's ability to host vast numbers of national and international guests.

Recommendation:

The panel recommends that the city of Daugavpils and the region continue to build on the momentum created in the bidding phase. The connection between the urban strategy plan and the cultural programme needs to be improved leading to the strengthening of the cultural sector and the connections between the cultural sector, the local economy and the social environment. The current European geo-political situation makes the proposed theme of the ECoC even more relevant in Europe - and the panel recommends that the city seek alternative ways to realise many of the elements of the programme. There is also the opportunity for the city to continue fostering international cooperation, new partnerships and networks created in the bidding phase, while developing adequate monitoring and impact assessment tools. The proposal demonstrates a clear thirst for change that could benefit the city, the region, and in particular the non-governmental cultural sector. It is clear from the application that efforts to promote the development of an inclusive society through culture is paramount - this is ever so important, given the current situation in Europe.

II. Liepāja

The Liepāja theme – (un)rest – is inspired by the wind, which blows strongly in the city and, more metaphorically, from the city towards Europe and the world, and the associated universal cycle of rest and unrest. Incidentally, the idea of the wind is kept from the 2014 ECoC competition, where Riga won the ECoC title, which shows how relevant and locally rooted the concept is for this seaside city. The bid includes the surrounding South-Kurzeme Region. Since the pre-selection Liepāja is also cooperating with the neighbouring Kuldīga city and region - a former ECoC candidate.

The concept of the Liepāja bid is about taking an active stand on societal situations of rest and unrest by harnessing it and working with it to develop necessary cultural competences for finding meaningful solutions. (un)rest is a nice metaphor that can indeed function as a navigation plan to address challenges and to set necessary goals to overcome them - a metaphor that also communicates well.

Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city:

- An extended version of the strategy to 2025 has been approved by Liepāja City Council. This strategy places additional emphasis on long-term cultural cooperation within the restructured South Kurzeme region and the goal to become ECoC 2027. This is very positive.
- In addition, the project has now identified clearer and feasible measures of success to inform its approach to both monitoring and evaluation (e.g., the New Media Arts Centre aims to lead the application of the city to the UNESCO Creative City title).
- The image of the cultural strategy as a Navigation map and Monitoring and Evaluation as a compass for the whole project, works well within the overall concept of the application and offers clarity in the bid's narrative.
- The proposal reflects the fact that the cultural and creative sector in Liepāja is one of the most stable and developed in Latvia: for about ten years Liepāja has been purposefully growing the capacity of its cultural and creative sector by inviting creative persons from Riga to work and live in Liepāja and this objective is properly integrated in the city cultural strategy, and reinforces the solidity and feasibility of the whole ECoC project.
- However, it still remains relatively unclear how the evaluation team will operate: a range of organisations are identified, which is good, but not how they will operate together nor whether they have skills specific to the ECoC evaluation process, though it is reassuring to see that an ad hoc profile is included in the project's organisational chart.
- Furthermore, although there is a solid outline of the envisaged long-term cultural, social and economic impacts, including urban development, that the title would have on Liepāja, in terms of Goal One: From Provincial to European Centre Stage - there are no indicators to measure the impact of non-physical visitors nor digital audiences, and this should be further developed.
- Some of the indicators of the long-term impact are very heterogeneous, many of which have no direct connection with the project. Long-term impact objectives and indicators point too many metrics that tend to clearly increase and do not assess a long-term impact as a result of the project (for example, the reflection of Liepāja as a city of culture); or indicators from which it is not fully understandable how they will be assessed (e.g. improved health indicators such as life expectancy, obesity).

Recommendations:

The panel recommends reviewing and improving the long-term impact indicators so that they can be clearly correlated with the ECoC project and its impact can be properly assessed.

Concerning the evaluation process, the team identified the biggest challenges are related to the quality of the data and growing the databases and baselines. The team suggested that the solution will be IT-based and the ECoC has been a great catalyst to advance this conversation and unite stakeholders. There is, however, urgency to implement and further test the solution, regardless of the ECoC.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The programme is described in a clear way, and is convincingly structured around five lines / themes proposing a strong narrative that is both poetic and locally rooted, on the one side, and has potential to attract widely, on the other side. It also aims to reinforce some sectors or trends with a clear potential for CCIs: i.e. new media, animation, and this is very positive.
- The fact that the programme voices the importance of taking into account the view from the outside - the visitors' experience of the programme, especially those who are unfamiliar with local language, legends and context is also very valuable.
- It is very relevant that the programme enlists a significant number of community-based projects. In this sense, it responds to the challenge - and goal set in the bid - of culturally involving and empowering at least 30% of the population (versus 14% today); also the fact that projects come from conversations with the local scene, which has been prompted to think bigger and to have a European dimension, develop an eco-approach, and think about community involvement, are very important and positive endeavours. As a result, there seems to be a strong ownership of the overall ECoC proposal by the local players, connected with a welcomed will to help them go one step further.
- The programme covers a wide range and diversity of activities, as well as a good combination between local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions.
- On a less positive note, although the programme concept is convincing and stable as a whole, it is in some aspects still somewhat confusing: exploring it in depth reveals some unstable "places", such as the formulation of an overall artistic vision that would act as a red line unifying the various elements of the whole. In contrast, the strategy of the cultural programme is strong, and the various parts included in the programme as well as their positioning are convincing. In addition, it is not clear whether there is a flagship to lead on each of the five thematic strands.
- Some projects are quite generic (which is understandable at this stage). Likewise, the calendar encompasses too many festivals and some overlapping activities. It would be advisable to advance further the artistic curation of the programme, and see bolder and

riskier artistic challenges, innovations developing the programme and the projects included, to provide audiences with unexpected and surprising new experiences that will enrich and enhance the programme as a whole.

- The presentation made by the team, also raised doubts regarding a potential cut in the overall funding that could affect many projects. This is furthermore relevant, given that many projects have relatively small budgets. If this happens, the programme activities could be compromised, while alternative funding sources would be difficult to find and activate. In this respect, the panel is however partly reassured to see that a contingency reserve has been put aside.

Recommendations:

There is a need for further development and refinement of the programme; attention must be paid to ensuring that the activities of the European Culture Programme have a multifaceted coverage throughout the region.

The programme concept has a strong narrative power, but it must be bolder, more radical, and more courageous.

It is recommended that the team improve the linkage between ECoC objectives ('journey goals') and thematic strands (artistic vision/ including the themes explored in the planned Fora).

Although Liepāja has mentioned Kuldīga and South Kurzeme regions as its partners, the activities of the partners are very under-represented in the programme as a whole.

European dimension:

- Overall, the European dimension is now much better embedded within the three main cultural strategy's - and ECoC project's - core objectives than was the case in the first round. The European dimension is now considered as the "guiding light/star" in all key actions and is connected to each core objective. Furthermore, the European and international outreach dimension is a prerequisite for participating in the 2027 programme.
- The team also confirmed the cooperation with many international partners from 35 countries, which is a significant number.
- The references to the New European Bauhaus initiative are well embedded throughout the project and the STEAM references included are credible and suitable to the proposed project's concept.
- The team also recognised that the international links, including with other ECoC cities, was highly relevant and had positive impacts, in terms of increasing the capacity to deliver, saving time, and allowing better planning. A good example are the learnings

that resulted from the conversations with the city of Oulu (ECoC 2026 in Finland) regarding the library as a public space.

- The view of the panel is that some projects mentioned in the bid have a real potential to attract a European and international audience.
- However, when questioned about what the project would contribute to Europe or what would make this contribution unique when compared with other cities, the team was not able to articulate a convincing answer, and in fact, the team noted that there is nothing in their bid that could not be taken over by any other medium size city in Europe.
- When enquired about what other audiences in Europe the project intended to reach and involve in the programme (excluding potential tourists), the answer was very precise and interesting - “Artists, first of all, and among others IT specialists”. The team also mentioned that the project would be important to open the doors for international organisations - like UBC (United Baltic Cities) - and attract companies to be based in the city.

Recommendations:

There here is some under-representation of Southern partners (Italy, Greece, Spain, Malta, Cyprus, Bulgaria). The cooperation with these countries could reinforce their projects for instance in design, urban planning, games, community performing arts, creative use of open data, etc.

Though the starting is solid with already cooperation with 250 foreign organisations from 35 countries, there is still a need to diversify the partnerships, both by involving more organisations - several projects involve the same partners - and more countries so as to ensure the local cultural community fully benefits from the unique opportunity of the ECoC title.

Outreach:

- The outreach chapter captures the right building blocks, which is a very solid starting point to build upon. However, it is less clear how the local community will engage in the concept on a concrete level.
- It was encouraging to see a fresh approach to the pre-selection focus on the alleged 85% non-active cultural consumers to taking a more inclusive approach in order not to risk polarisation between “them” and “us”. The panel welcomes the integration of the STEAM principles in young people’s engagement.
- The programme is well designed to attract a wide audience and to involve people who normally do not have access to culture, which is also one of the key objectives of the ECoC action.

- The audience development plan is sound albeit in some part still a bit too vague. The Community Whisperers is a very interesting concept with very strong potential but would need further clarification to become fully operational. In particular, there is a need to further define how they will work in practice and collaborate with communities.
- There are many interesting projects for children and youth, but it is not clear what will be the overall impact regarding cultural education in general.
- Around 30% of the Liepāja population are Russians and/or Russian speaking and artists taking part in the Liepāja may be from Russia. This may not cause issues for local citizens but it needs to be kept in mind that some international visitors may come with prejudices and different perceptions. This must be kept in mind in programming and communication.

Recommendations:

Attention needs to be taken to recognise that people outside Liepāja/Latvia might come with prejudices against Russian artists and in general come with prejudices against Russians/Belarusians.

Given the project's set outreach objectives, it will be important to ensure the clear and unmistakable inclusion of LGBTQ+, deprived groups, refugees and migrants, and people in jail in the programme.

The panel would like to underline the importance of ensuring the inclusion and involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the city, the region and internationally throughout the ECoC preparation years as well as during the year itself.

Management:

- The overall operating budget foreseen for Liepāja is 23,43m EUR, a substantial increase of 15% from the pre-selection stage, which the panel sees as a positive development.
- The budget is composed of 10m EUR from the national Government, 7,5m from the city, 1m from the region, 1,7m from the EU (not including the Melina Mercouri Prize) and 3,23m from the private sector.
- 63% of the budget would go to cover programme expenditure, 15% to promotion and marketing, 16% would go to wages, overhead and administration and 6% would go to contingency and monitoring & evaluation.
- The panel raises concerns about the low level of budget allocated for programming. On the other hand, the panel appreciates the fact that a clear budget be dedicated to monitoring and evaluation (an essential element to ensure the project keeps on track, and valuable feedback after its completion) as well as a financial reserve to be put

aside to face unexpected expenses and circumstances. This is even more necessary in today's global turbulent context.

- Overall, with the national Government contribution being relatively high, which is a common feature of the three Latvian finalist cities and in line with the announcement made by the Ministry, and is conditioned by local specificities of the public finances allocation and availability, the overall budget is realistic.
- The approach to fundraising and sponsorship and cooperation with the private sector is sensible. However, the panel is not convinced of the foundation's ability to raise 14% of the total budget from private sources. Though the preselection report praised the coherence and solidity of the strategy to attract financial contributions from the private sector, the new target (14% of total operational budget as against 8%) seems extremely ambitious to the panel.
- A very thorough analysis of possibilities for obtaining EU funding for various projects indicates a sound understanding of EU programmes and approach to obtaining EU funding.
- The proposed governance structure is classical and sound. The choice to use the vehicle of a foundation is the outcome of discussions with various stakeholders, including lawyers and relevant public authorities. Also on a positive note, a cooperation agreement will clarify the form of cooperation and role of the partner regions of South Kurzeme and Kuldīga. However, it raises questions as to the efficiency in decision-making. The governance needs of an ECoC with intense all-round pressures and short deadlines, cannot be compared to running a cultural institution. Moreover, the panel is uncertain about who has the last say in programming matters.
- Contingency planning overall is coherent and realistic, and rightly assesses changes in the global international context as “high risk” while also covering the possibility of a national and international financial crisis.
- The marketing and communication strategy is comprehensive with realistic goals, methods and tools. The ambition to stage a massive international marketing campaign with 3,42m EUR is encouraging and also necessary to brand Liepāja and communicate an ECoC European wide. However, the marketing plan presented will need further development.
- The potential of social media platforms is not explored fully, which would normally be the case at this stage of the competition.

Recommendations:

The panel recommends reconsidering if the target to reach 14% of the total operating budget from the private sector is realistic. To meet the target, a substantial fund-raising plan should be developed very soon and a solid plan B be developed.

The panel would like to see a higher percentage of the budget going towards programming.

The panel recommends revisiting the governance structure, in particular the composition and tasks of the Board of Directors as to ensure the independence of the management and its autonomy in the selection of the team. Moreover, it needs to be clarified who has the last say on programming.

With 3,42m EUR allocated for marketing a clear plan must be developed as a priority.

Capacity to deliver:

- In March 2022, Liepāja City Council unanimously supported and agreed upon the prepared ECoC application both in the content and budget.
- Liepāja has a well-developed cultural life with a strong institutional and NGO community, and an adequate and viable cultural infrastructure to deliver an ECoC programme. Moreover, the city is experienced in hosting large-scale international events.
- The city has adequate capacity to deliver a digitally advanced ECoC utilising IT and AI in its preparation and cultural programme, however, clearer plans on how to translate this capacity into concrete action need further development.
- Both city and region are a well-developed tourist destination with adequate infrastructure to host a large number of national and international visitors.

Recommendations:

Although the city has demonstrated a good capacity to deliver, its intentions to utilise IT and AI in its preparation and cultural programme need to be further developed and implemented as soon as possible, to allow the necessary time for testing and piloting.

Conclusion:

The panel recommends that the city of Liepāja is selected to become the European Capital of Culture in Latvia in 2027.

The concept of the Liepāja bid speaks into a new reality in Europe where cultural competences must play an even bigger role in seeking solutions to societal “rest and unrest”. This is an important message that has become ever more pressing in current times. The proposal is locally rooted while also having the potential to resonate internationally with some very interesting project ideas. It is based on many discussions with the local cultural community - ensuring local ownership of the bid - and aims to open access to culture to a wider range of citizens. In the endeavours to implement this ECoC plan, the panel invites Liepāja to further raise its level of ambition, to be bolder and daring to take more risks in its programming. Programme elements to include the Russian minority could be taken further. It will be of utmost importance to ensure the inclusion of all citizens and different communities in the ECoC

programme such as deprived groups, refugees, migrants, and LGBTQ+. Taking the ECoC plans of the team from the bidding phase to ensuring the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders for the preparations stage of the ECoC is essential. Revisiting the high percentage of the budget anticipated from the private sector will be necessary as well as monitoring the ever-increasing inflation rates, material shortages and delays in deliveries.

Although the risk assessment of the Liepāja bid is solid in order to meet targets it will be important to keep monitoring closely the effects on the programme rising out of the current turbulent situation with steep inflation rates, delays in deliveries and material shortages.

III. Valmiera

The reflections by a local poet to the war in Ukraine in the beginning of the Valmiera bid book is gripping and powerful. The Leitmotif of the Valmiera programme is CONVERSION, which aims at initiating a process of bringing about significant changes to the city and surrounding region. Complementing this, the slogan DYNAMIC CITY carries the programme and communication. The vision for this ECoC proposal is to develop a micro-city that offers space for re-thinking, mind-set changes and ultimately sparks new insights resulting in better lives for local residents as well as offering new insights and experiences also for national and international visitors.

Given its industrial heritage, focusing on complex questions of sustainability comes natural to Valmiera, as is the inclusion of the business sector in the bid. (The powerful slogan DYNAMIC CITY carries the programme and communication.) Sustainability and a European and international dimension is clearly immersed into the artistic programme. The bid includes seven neighbouring towns - Burtnieki, Beverīna, Kocēni, Mazsalaca, Rūjiena, Naukšēni and Strenči.

Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city:

- The bid-book and the presentation made by the team from Valmiera provided an important description and perspective regarding the Covid-19 situation and its impacts, and the current geopolitical situation in Europe related to the war in Ukraine.
- It is welcoming to see how Valmiera is paying due attention to addressing climate changes and environmental aspects in both strategy and programming in a very solid way. The application shows a credible alignment between cultural development and sustainable development strategies in the city.
- The strategy and approach have a pleasant concreteness and rationality, which corresponds to an industrial city like Valmiera is. It is the participation of entrepreneurs in the ECoC nomination in candidacy phase that distinguishes Valmiera from the other finalists.
- It is encouraging to read that the implementation of the 2024-2034 Cultural Development Strategy is planned to commence already in the second half of 2022.

- The regional culture programme will be developed with Vidzeme Planning Region, and include 8 municipalities from the Vidzeme region. The Valmiera culture strategy is a part of the regional cultural strategy - and they are correlated. According to the team, economic benefits are already happening and they believe it will happen with culture as well.
- The outlining of impacts is organised per ECoC objective and in each of them, multiple dimensions of impact are outlined (Cultural, social, economic, urban). There is a clear explanation of the link between strategy objectives, expected results, indicators and target indicators. However, the approach to evaluation was not sufficiently detailed in the bid book, but was well addressed during presentation. The collaboration with the university is also very positive.
- Given the importance of sports in the city strategy, the “sports + arts” linkage is not sufficiently explored, strategically and operationally, and this is a missing opportunity.
- Both the city and ECoC strategic objectives focused on the local agenda - even when the international angle is presented. The absence of a long-term international agenda, incorporated into the city strategies, is a shortcoming that needs to be further developed.

Cultural and artistic content:

- According to the Dynamic City concept, the submitted project ideas are genre-focused on three main fields - contemporary dance (emphasising the need at the national level), theatre (developing and expanding the city theatre festival, new theatre) and multimedia (emphasising cooperation with Vidzeme University College). This approach is positive, as there is no shortage of activities in other cultural areas, and at the same time, the programme is not too fragmented.
- In addition to bidding for ECoC, Valmiera is also applying to become a UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts by 2027. Both projects complement each other and can contribute to their mutual sustainability.
- However, the concept of a Dynamic City is not sufficiently explained and articulated from the point of view of Klucis personality, so it requires additional explanation and clarification regarding its expansion to a full programme.
- Sustainability is highlighted as a dimension that permeates throughout the programme elements and this is highly relevant, although not fully developed and explained.
- The idea of an Open Programme (p. 58 of the bid book) is well argued and relevant to the development of the overall ECoC programme, both regionally, nationally and internationally. This is further enhanced by a digital strategy that is of a good quality.

- The interdisciplinary approach of the programme is relatively under-developed. The programme is mostly explained through the format of projects rather than their contents. Furthermore, the programme concept cannot be considered very strong or cohesive with the city and its ECoC aims. For example, the sport + arts link needs to be explored further, beyond the circus reference - given how important the sporting offer is to the city.

European dimension:

- Overall, the panel believes that the arguments regarding the value of the micro-city concept for the rest of Europe - are well developed from a theoretical perspective, but also evidenced in practical manifestation. There is a good understanding of the European dimension and the current European issues and challenges.
- It is pleasing to see how Valmiera deals with its past Soviet history and stigmas and with the inherent Latvian fear of speaking up and a distrust in democracy leading to 80% of the Latvian population not thinking that their voice matters in a European context and that 71% of Latvian believe that their voice does not matter in a national context. Although to a much smaller degree, the proposal will address the issues of denial and non-acceptance of diversity.
- The collaboration with other ECoCs and international partners is deep and convincing, based on good models of exchange, learning and practice in place. The team also indicated that 85% of the international and national partners in the bid-book have confirmed their willingness to collaborate.
- It is less clear how and which projects directly address the identified challenges and it is also not fully explained how the ECoC programme will impact on those challenges given that the overall system of monitoring and impact assessment is still very much in construction.
- The European dimension is a two-way process; and the direction of what Valmiera can share with Europe is not strongly articulated.
- The planned Youth Agency is both an excellent Outreach project as it is a very good demonstration of the European dimension - but of course, it will be limited to those who choose to take part in it. When asked how they will ensure that the wider population of Valmiera will experience Europe in Valmiera in 2027 and give them a deeper insight and feeling of the richness of the cultural diversity of Europe the answers provided were not clear.

Outreach:

- The Outreach programme offers many important community-based projects, many of which also reach out to industrial partners. This cross sector approach is very valuable and should be explored further.

- The panel welcomes the strong statement “Discrimination will not be tolerated” that underpins the Valmiera programme and sees it as bold and courageous. It is a very strong stand that calls for all people and all aspects of minorities - be it ethnicity, social status, physical and psychological handicaps - to be included in the programme. However, it is not yet clear how this statement will be fully implemented.
- Although Valmiera Municipality has a relatively small proportion of people of other nationalities, it is encouraging to learn about the initiative to capture the stories and memories of 14% non-ethnic Latvians and translate them into different art forms.
- The Youth Agency programme (within the Public Participation and Cultural Audience Development Programme) designed to create a deeper understanding of youth to become actively involved in the events taking place in the country is considered very meaningful and timely, non-the-least given the current turbulence in Europe.
- The Audience Development Academy in the framework of the long-term programme Public Participation and Cultural Audience Development is a promising project, although clearly under-developed at this stage.
- The complimentary year-round creative event, Do it Yourself or the DIY Movement has great elements and potentials to develop new audiences.
- The volunteer plans are solid and the panel is impressed that 26% of the population have already been identified as wishing to volunteer in the ECoC volunteer movement - both young and older generations.
- The outreach programme is very rich and meaningful. However, it appears as if projects are mainly curated and managed by public cultural institutions and agencies. In contrast, the independent cultural and creative scene seems to have a lesser role, at least in the direct implementation of the projects.

Management:

- The overall operating budget foreseen for Valmiera is 21,5m EUR. It is composed of 9,5m EUR from the national Government, 9,5m from the local Government, 1m from the EU (not including the Melina Mercouri Prize) and 1,5m from the private sector.
- With 62% of the budget allocated for the programme, 17% for advertising and marketing, 21% for staff and administration, the Valmiera budget is realistic. However, the panel raises concerns about the low level of budget allocated for programming.
- The governance structure is sound - competences and appointment procedures satisfactorily described, though the Artistic Director and the Executive Director being at the same level in the organisational chart, it is not clear who would have the final word in conflictual cases. The establishment of an independent legal structure - an

association with a Council and a Management Council - has been prepared and the artistic director has been already appointed, which is a positive development.

- On a less positive note, the bid book specifies that the Office will be established in 2023, and the Management Office and all Heads of Unit selected and recruited “by the end of 2023 at the latest”, which the panel considers a rather late deadline. It is also not clear from the organisational chart whether a staff member will be tasked with monitoring and liaising with the structures responsible for carrying the overall evaluation of the ECoC. Together with that, the Valmiera2027 Office staff dynamics before, during and after 2027 is not clearly presented.
- The overall question remains however if there is enough money to communicate the programme widely and thereby succeeding in achieving a strong European legacy.
- Contingency planning overall is coherent and realistic and risk assessment on inflation is included, with mention of a “budget reserve”, though it is not clear what this reserve consists of. Risk assessment on pandemics and other crises is set at “medium”, which given the current circumstances would be a rather high risk.
- The marketing and communication strategy is solid and links well with the programme, target audiences, messages and communication tools and channels. The Valmiera App is clever and an asset to the marketing and communication plan. On the other side, plans for mobilisation of citizens as communicators of the year to the outside world as well as plans for highlighting that the European Capital of Culture is an action of the European Union could be better thought through and developed.
- The brand concept, visual identity and brand strategy is simple and effective. Building on Gustavs Klucis’ concept of a ‘Dynamic city’ is very clever and interesting and has potential, though the concept in itself can also be seen as very generic.
- The crisis communication strategy to convey rapid communication on pandemics, fake news, populism, foreign propaganda (information bubbles), radicalism, military and political tensions, climate-induced weather events is an asset. “Meta company” warning to stop social media in Europe due to strict requirements on the protection of personal data etc.
- The fact that Valmiera recognises the value of reaching out to previous ECoCs to reap the benefits of their knowhow, best practises and their human resources for targeted capacity building in the Valmiera programme is also very positive.

Capacity to deliver:

- The decisions of the Municipal Council to nominate Valmiera for the ECoC title confirms the political and institutional support by the Municipality. Decisions were made on 28 January 2021 in the Valmiera City Council and on 31 March 2021 in the Valmiera Regional Council.

- The panel welcomes Valmiera’s intention to use the ECoC project as a way to add a cultural dimension to its further development and can only encourage the City to continue on this path.
- Though Valmiera and the region offers a selection of medium- to large scale infrastructure for the implementation of an ECoC programme, the panel is not totally convinced that the city currently has or will have by 2027 the sufficient cultural mass in terms of institutions and NGOs to implement a year-long programme of the magnitude of an ECoC, with resonance at European level.
- The actual cultural infrastructure is sparse, but there are plans to improve this through several renovations and reconstructions of existing venues.
- The city also plans to stage outdoor events where nature, environment and tourism sites play an essential role in the ECoC programme as well as castles and manors in the region.
- Valmiera is experienced in hosting large-scale events through big national and international sporting events.

Conclusion:

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

The Valmiera bid offers a strong reflection on sustainability and it includes original and sound initiatives to reposition Valmiera as a cultural city and region in Latvia and in Europe. The bid has a genuine European dimension and could contribute to the advancement of the micro-cities’ concept in Europe. Despite its many strengths and strong potential, the interdisciplinary approach of the programme is mostly explained through the format of projects rather than their concrete contents. Sporting metaphors were beautifully applied in the project’s presentation but the links between “sports + arts” did not inform the vision, programme, European dimension or outreach plans as innovatively as could have been the case for a European Capital of Culture. Finally, a more prominent role of the independent cultural and creative scene in the direct implementation of the projects would have been a strength.

Recommendation:

The panel recommends that the city of Valmiera continue to build on the great efforts already invested in the ECoC competition and the momentum that has been raised amongst the cultural stakeholders locally, nationally and internationally as well as in the local community during the bidding process. The city is on the right path to bringing about sustainable changes through cultural and creative capacity building projects that will raise the quality of life for people in Valmiera and the region. Moreover, the city’s consistent efforts to add an international and European dimension to the cultural offer has the potential to branding the city and region European wide as an innovative and creative city and region. The panel welcomes the inclusion of the business sector in the field of culture and its development, as well as the understanding of the social role of culture. The panel therefore recommends maintaining and developing unique cooperation models in both the city and the region. The development of the

Kurtuve idea included in the application is a valuable contribution to the infrastructure of culture and can promote not only the development of the contemporary dance genre in the city, but also on a national scale, it is recommended to preserve and continue it. Finally, the panel considers that given the importance of sports in the city strategy, the “sports + arts” linkage is a highly relevant opportunity that should be further explored and exploited, both at the local and international level.

The panel’s decision

The panel was presented with three different bids from significantly diverse cities and each with its own interpretations of the ECoC criteria. The bids tackled issues of great urgency for Europe and the world at large - non-the-least taking into consideration the turbulent geopolitical situation in the close neighbourhood to Latvia. All three bids had their strengths and weaknesses. The panel was looking, according to Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council, at the programme specifically designed for the ECoC year and with a strong European dimension.

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

The panel reached a decision by secret vote to recommend to the Ministry of Culture of Latvia to designate Liepāja as European Capital of Culture in Latvia in 2027.

This report has been sent to the managing authority and the European Commission. Both will publish it on their websites. In accordance with Article 11 of the Decision, the Ministry will proceed to the designation of the ECoC 2027 in Latvia based on the recommendation contained in this report. It will then inform the European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions. This formal designation enables Liepāja to use the title “European Capital of Culture 2027”.

Melina Mercouri Prize

The panel recommends that the European Commission award the Melina Mercouri Prize to the designated city on the basis of this report. The payment of the 1,5 million Euro Prize is however deferred until 2027, in line with Article 14 of the Decision. It is conditional. The ECoC Expert panel will make a further recommendation to the European Commission in late 2026 at the end of the monitoring process on whether to make the payment.

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

- The ECoC continues to honour its commitments made in the application;
- It complies with the criteria;
- It takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports;
- There has been no substantial change to the programme and strategy set out in the bid-book, in particular:

- The budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-level programme and at a level consistent with the bid-book;
- The independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
- The European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final programme;
- The marketing and communications strategy and material clearly reflect it is a European Union action;
- Plans for monitoring and evaluation are in place.

Reputation of an ECoC

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

The monitoring phase

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

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

There are three formal monitoring checkpoints (autumn 2023, mid 2025 and autumn 2026) when the ECoC will meet with the panel under the auspices of the European Commission. Prior to each meeting the European Commission will invite the ECoC to provide progress reports. The European Commission, after consultation with the panel, will indicate areas that specifically need to be addressed in the reports.

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

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

The panel’s recommendations

The designated ECoC now moves to a transition period from a set-up suited to a bid campaign to the more formal ECoC delivery structure that is independent of local city administration. The

panel expects Liepāja to develop cooperation with other bidding cities and the wider artistic and cultural community in Latvia. The ECoC in Latvia in 2027 provides a national opportunity, which will reflect internationally not only on Liepāja but also on the country as a whole.

The panel will expect the first progress report in autumn 2023 to take into account the recommendations and comments in the assessment of the bid, as stated above.

Thanks

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

Signed:

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June 2022

