

WHITE PAPER

FINAL
RELEASE

MAY
2025



YE4RS OF
EUROPEAN
CAPITALS
OF CULTURE

Chemnitz
European Capital
of Culture



GO! 2025
NOVA GORIZIA
GORIZIA

European
Capital
of Culture

WHITE PAPER

40 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM 40 YEARS OF ECOC

TABLE OF CONTENT

FOREWORD.....	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	5
HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS PAPER?.....	8
INTRO.....	9
HAPPY BIRTHDAY ECOC.....	9
40 YEARS OF ECOC.....	10
ECOC SEASONS.....	11
KEY FACTS.....	12
WHAT COMES NEXT?.....	14
WHY A WHITE PAPER AND WHY NOW?.....	16
WHAT WE ALL SUGGEST.....	19
POLITICAL MATTER 1. EUROPE IN EVERYTHING YOU DO.....	19
POLITICAL MATTER 2. CELEBRATE WHAT YOU CHANGE.....	27
POLITICAL MATTER 3. MAKE IT SIMPLE AND TRANSPARENT.....	33
POLITICAL MATTER 4. KEEP YOUR PROMISES.....	39
POLITICAL MATTER 5. STOP MAKING THE SAME MISTAKES.....	42
40 RECOMMENDATIONS IN A NUTSHELL.....	46
WHAT NOW?.....	50
CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	52
REFERENCES.....	55
ANNEXES.....	56
(1) METHODOLOGY.....	56
(2) TABLES OF PARTICIPANTS.....	58
IMPRINT.....	61

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OF CULTURE

An independent research initiative by the City of Chemnitz,
with the support of the City of Nova Gorica

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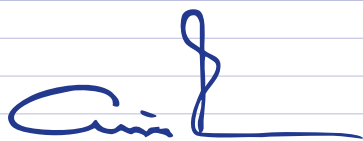
European
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FOREWORD

As part of its commitment to the European dimension outlined in its final bidbook for the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2025, the City of Chemnitz has initiated this research project in collaboration with the City of Nova Gorica, the Slovenian European Capital of Culture. Researchers and experts from both cities have co-designed this White Paper titled “40 recommendations from 40 years of ECoC: Insights for the Capitals from 2034 onwards”. This initiative follows a recommendation from the 30-years celebration of Pilsen 2015, where the community expressed its hope and desire to jointly develop a smaller set of concrete and better-focused recommendations for future policymaking as a group on a subsequent occasion. It positions Chemnitz and Nova Gorica as an act that two capitals develop together within a European framework, and thus demonstrate an innovative, progressive, and transnational approach to the ECoC programme.

Recognising that the ECoC initiative is fundamentally city-led, this White Paper aims to amplify the voices of ECoC managers and artistic coordinators from the 82 cities that have held the title since its inception in 1985. The project aligns with the European Commission’s objective of fostering participatory policymaking, ensuring that cities remain central to shaping the future of the ECoC initiative.

In their role as ECoC Cities for 2025, the two cities intend to fulfil their commitment to commemorating the 40th anniversary of the programme. Through the collaborations, this research reflects a shared European effort to advance the initiative through a city-driven approach.



Mr. Ferenc Csák

Head of Cultural Department and Institutional Lead
Chemnitz ECoC 2025 on behalf of the City of Chemnitz

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TOWARDS A LEGAL BASIS FOR ECOC IN 2034 AND BEYOND

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) action, established in 1985, has become a key cultural policy tool for urban development. With the current legal framework expiring in 2033, a new one is expected by 2027. If the rotating calendar remains the same as in the current legal basis, the new one will likely cover the 2034-2048 capitals¹. While the ECOC initiative enjoys broad support, today's political uncertainty calls for an improvement of its rationale and impact. In addition, the forthcoming European Cultural Compass—a strategic framework set to guide future EU cultural policy from 2025 - offers a timely opportunity to reinforce the ECOC. In an era of growing national cultural capital programmes, the ECOC should be explicitly recognised as a flagship EU initiative within the upcoming Compass, reinforcing its strategic role within the European project.

OBJECTIVES OF THE WHITE PAPER

Based on an extensive independent research study that involved ECOC managers and artistic coordinators from 64 ECOC cities², this White Paper consolidates insights from four decades of ECOC experiences to guide EU decision-makers in the European Commission, European Parliament, Council, and Com-

mittee of the Regions in drafting this new framework. It identifies five key political issues affecting the ECOC's effectiveness (see next point) and offers 40 actionable recommendations on how to enhance its impact and relevance in light of contemporary challenges. An initial version—featuring 35 recommendations—was debated at a European-level conference in Chemnitz in April 2025. Five additional recommendations were added following input from around 200 managers, artistic coordinators and jury members during seven “Participative Turning Tables”.

KEY POLITICAL MATTERS

- 1. The European dimension is not sufficiently embedded in practice.** Many cities prioritise local over Europe's development, raising concerns about how the contribution to the European project should be reinforced as a stricter selection requirement.
- 2. The initiative risks losing relevance if it does not meet contemporary needs.** Long-term development is still framed in economic terms rather than cultural legacy. The ECOC action lacks specific links to artistic freedom and cultural rights, risking the reinforcement of inequitable practices. Likewise, digital innovation needs stronger integration to support democratic dialogue and participatory engagement.

¹ Following the logic of the current country calendar (see Annex of the Decision No 445/2014/ EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014), we assume that the next legal basis will cover a 14-year period, with 2 EU countries for 13 years, 3 countries every third year (2 from the EU and 1 from candidate countries or potential candidate countries), and 2 countries for one year (one from the EU and 1 from candidate countries or potential candidate countries).

² For further details on the research methodology, please see Annex (1) Methodology.

3. The selection and monitoring process is complex and not fact-based. The need for simplification is emphasised. Additionally, a more evidence-based approach is needed to better assess the cities' capacity to implement the action.

4. The stability of the implementation process is a growing concern. Securing funding and maintaining political commitment remains a challenge, particularly for smaller cities. While the participation of smaller cities is seen as a success of the ECoC, insufficient effort is made to secure implementation in line with commitments outlined in the bidbook.

5. Institutional memory and knowledge transfer are inconsistent. Many lessons learned from past ECoC cities are scattered due to a lack of structured mechanisms for preserving and sharing expertise. New methods and tools are needed to document and transfer both outcomes and the knowledge and skills acquired.

RECOMMENDATIONS: PRIORITISING LEGAL CHANGES

The 40 proposed recommendations are categorised by their level of implementation, with the most crucial being the following 19 recommendations which can be introduced through legislative amendments.

Key Political Matter

Legal instruments to bring change

Related articles³

POLITICAL MATTER 1. EUROPE IN EVERYTHING YOU DO

General objectives	2
Selection criteria	5
ECoC Logo	15
Budget allocation for staff and communication	–

POLITICAL MATTER 2. CELEBRATE WHAT YOU CHANGE

Pre-selection process in Member States	8
Selection criteria	5

POLITICAL MATTER 3. MAKE IT SIMPLE AND TRANSPARENT

Pre-selection process in Member States	8
Selection process in Member States	9
Evaluation process	16

POLITICAL MATTER 4. KEEP YOUR PROMISES

Monitoring process	13
Melina Mercouri Prize	14

POLITICAL MATTER 5. STOP MAKING THE SAME MISTAKES

Selection criteria	5
Creative Europe programme	18 ⁴
ECoC official online repository	15

³ Decision No 445/2014/EU

⁴ Recital 18 of the EU Regulation 2021/81813

RECOMMENDED LEGAL CHANGES

Key Political Matter	Recommendations	Related Legislative References ⁵
POLITICAL MATTER 1. EUROPE IN EVERYTHING YOU DO	1 Add a third general objective on the ECoC's contribution to citizens' sense of belonging to the EU	Article 2 (Objectives)
	2 Ensure that the European dimension is embedded across each selection criteria.	Article 5 (Criteria)
	3 One logo for all designated ECoC cities should be mandatory.	Article 14 (Prize); Article 15 (Practical arrangements)
	4 Dedicate specific EU funding and expertise to professionalise the communication of the ECoC action.	Budget allocations stemming from the ECoC legal basis
	5 The equivalent of 1.5 full-time staff should be added to the current team of two to become European in every aspect of the activity.	Budget allocations stemming from the ECoC legal basis
POLITICAL MATTER 2. CELEBRATE WHAT YOU CHANGE	14 Revise concepts and language of the ECoC selection questionnaire to align with contemporary needs.	Article 8 (Pre-selection in the Member States)
	15 A "Digital dimension" criterion should be introduced, ensuring that digital tools are not just supporting mechanisms but also fundamental spaces for dialogue, creativity, and cultural exchange.	Article 5 (Criteria)
	16 Introduce "Sustainability" as a selection criterion, integrating culture as a driver and fundamental condition for economic, environmental, and social sustainability.	Article 5 (Criteria)
	17 During the bidding process, ask for commitments made for "Plan B" to assess the long-term perspective on cultural strategies of the bidding cities.	Article 8 (Pre-selection in the Member States)
POLITICAL MATTER 3. MAKE IT SIMPLE AND TRANSPARENT	22 Reduce the questions in the first round. The focus should be on Vision, European Concept, Governance, and Legacy.	Article 8 (Pre-selection in the Member States)
	23 Replace the selection panel's visit to candidate cities with a fact-checking report.	Article 9 (Selection in the Member States)
	24 Add fact-checking reporting activity to the Commission's call for tenders for post-ECoC evaluation.	Article 16 (Evaluation)
POLITICAL MATTER 4. KEEP YOUR PROMISES	30 Transform bidbooks into binding commitments.	Article 13 (Monitoring)
	31 Revise the Melina Mercouri Prize into two payments.	Article 14 (Prize)
	32 The Melina Mercouri Prize should remain strictly conditional to what is written in the bidbook.	Article 14 (Prize)
	33 Ensure that national governments engage in supporting ECoC cities upon designation.	Ad hoc article to be introduced
POLITICAL MATTER 5. STOP MAKING THE SAME MISTAKES	15 Capacity building programmes should be a requirement for applicants so that everyone can address skill needs in the five years before the title.	Article 5 (Criteria)
	16 Allocate Creative Europe funds for mentoring, training and fostering partnerships.	Recital 18 of the EU Regulation 2021/818 (Creative Europe)
	17 Establish an ECoC official online repository for documenting ECoC projects.	Article 15 (Practical arrangements)

⁵ The Articles refer to Decision 445/2014/ EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 establishing a Union action for the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033 and repealing Decision No 1622/2006/EC, unless otherwise specified.

HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS PAPER?



THIS DOCUMENT IS STRUCTURED TO EMPHASISE THE MOST CRITICAL RECOMMENDATIONS BY KEY POLITICAL MATTER. EACH TOPIC THUS INCLUDES:

1. Recommendations requiring legal changes

– These are the priority actions that need to be integrated into a new legislative framework 2034-2048.

2. Other recommendations – While not possible to be introduced through legal amendments, these proposals can further contribute to the ECoC's impact, but need to be implemented through:

a. Policies (i.e. EC documents that put the legal text into action - hiring evaluators, new regulations that need to be adopted, ...)

b. Guidelines (i.e. that the EC delivers to national governments to put in place the action such as the call for applicants, the selection questionnaire or the evaluation guidelines).

c. Local Implementation actions (i.e. that need to be modified or implemented by ECoC managers and stakeholders).

The next steps include presenting these recommendations to the EU institutions who are going to draft (Commission), provide an opinion (Committee of the Regions), and amend and adopt the new legal basis (European Parliament and Council).

INTRO

HAPPY BIRTHDAY ECOC

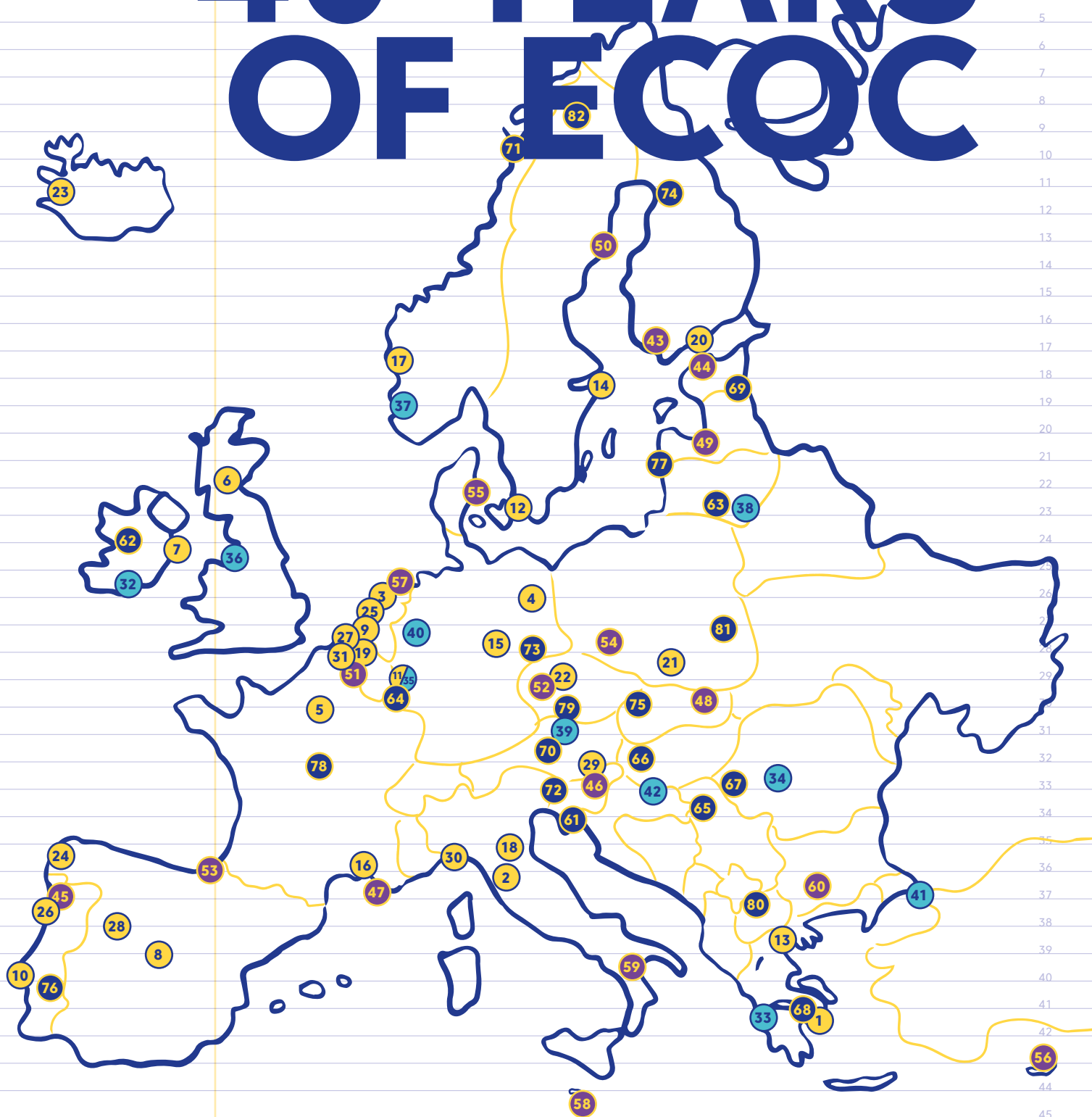
In 2025 the European Capital of Culture action turns 40. What began in 1985 as a celebration of Europe's cultural diversity has flourished into a successful cultural action for cities' regeneration, delivering diverse impacts ranging from artistic innovation to local pride.

The adoption of the first legal basis in 1999 marked the institutional endorsement of the action, securing its place within the European cultural policy realm. The changes in the legal basis are very meaningful in explaining its evolution. Such changes both reflect and influence

the evolution of the ECoC, in line with the rise of concepts such as place branding, the "Creative City" or the "Intercultural City". Some ECoC cities nowadays aim to encourage the development of European citizenship with a programme of cross-border interactions.

Four distinct ECoC seasons can be identified through legal milestones, each reflecting the growing ambition of the action. A new EU legal basis for Capitals from 2034 onwards is expected to be adopted by 2027.

40 YEARS OF ECOC



ECOC SEASONS

1985



SEASON 1 - SYMBOLIC CELEBRATION

The ECoC started as a highly symbolic celebration of Europe's rich and diverse cultural heritage. The title was awarded by Member States on the basis of a city's glorious past, with no competition being organised.

2005



SEASON 2 - INSTITUTIONALISATION

The adoption of the first legal basis marked the institutional endorsement of the action. The title was awarded on the basis of a cultural programme created specifically for the ECoC and featuring a European dimension.

2011



SEASON 3 - PROFESSIONALISATION

The revision of the legal basis brought strategic and structured approaches to city designations. A two-stage competitive selection procedure was introduced.

2020



SEASON 4 - LEGACY

A second major goal was introduced, next to the promotion of cultural diversity, to ensure that each ECoC leaves a legacy on the cities hosting the title.

2025



40 YEARS OF ECOC

2034



A NEW ECOC SEASON?

KEY FACTS

DESIGNATED CITIES

By 2029, a total of 82 cities will have held the ECoC title, 92 by 2033. Spanning a remarkable range of geographies and cultures, all these cities have contributed to Europe's cultural vibrancy, while gradually raising the strategic role of the ECoC action to foster long-term urban development, through culture.

PEOPLE REACHED ON AVERAGE BY THE ECoC INITIATIVE

The impact is far-reaching, having potentially touched the lives of an estimated 52 million people since its start. This means that at least 1 in 10 Europeans has possibly, at some point, throughout the 40 years, experienced the celebrative and transformative power of the ECoC title.

COUNTRY CAPITALS HOLDING THE TITLE

Among them, 18 national capitals have taken centre stage, reinforcing the action's significance and the influential role of major cities in driving Europe's cultural evolution.

GROWING MEDIA RESONANCE

The ECoC action attracts considerable media coverage both within the EU and internationally. Additionally, social media platforms play a significant role in spreading awareness, engaging audiences worldwide, and fostering discussions about the city's cultural programme. For example, the city of Leeuwarden - ECoC 2018 - monitored with Clipl media analyses the use of the term 'LF2018 and/or Cultural Capital', which exploded from 800 mentions in 2014 to 85,000 in 2018. The media use of concepts around culture also exploded during and in the lead-up to LF2018⁶.

CANDIDATE CITIES

More than 240 cities have entered the race over the years, highlighting the high demand for this prestigious title and the transformative potential it represents.

COUNTRIES WITH CITIES HOLDING THE TITLE

Over the past four decades, 33 countries have had the honour of hosting an ECoC, a testament to the title's ability to captivate and inspire communities across the continent.

⁶ Figures extracted from "The Final Assessment LF2018", February 2019: <https://assets.plaace.nl/kuma-friesland/uploads/media/5c8a6c2d209c4/bijlage-slotmeting-lf2018-engels.pdf>

CITIES BEYOND EU

Beyond the EU's borders, the action's impact continues to grow, with 7 of these 82 ECoC cities being in non-EU countries.

CAPITAL OF CULTURE PROGRAMMES WORLDWIDE

Several EU member states have instituted their own Capital of Culture programmes, having seen the impact ECoC has had in their country. Moreover, regional Capitals of Culture programmes have also been established.

At least 20 similar initiatives have been identified around the globe, such as the Culture City of East Asia programme, the Ibero-American Capital of Culture, the African Capital of Culture, the Arab Capital of Culture⁷.

OTHER CAPITAL INITIATIVES FROM THE EU

The concept of a "European Capital of xxx" has been adopted by multiple Directorates-General (DGs) within the European Commission, leading to initiatives such as the European Green Capital, European Capital of Smart Tourism, European Capital of Innovation and many more. In addition to these official designations, various private organisations have also introduced their own prestigious titles, further expanding the recognition of excellence across different sectors.

ECOC BUDGETS HAVE GROWN

Before 1990 ECoC cities had in most cases budgets of less than € 20 mln. However, between 2005 and 2013 the average operating budget for an ECoC city including the region (cultural programme, infrastructure, promotion...) was of € 64 mln, with cities such as Liverpool 2008 standing out as being particularly high, surpassing € 100 mln.⁸

REACHING EVERY CORNER

Smaller cities increasingly see in the ECoC an unprecedented renewal and branding opportunity. From 1985 to 2004, cities with larger populations - notably national capitals - dominated, with an average population of 1 million inhabitants. After 2004, the average demographic size of the cities hosting the title started to get smaller⁹. By 2020 to 2029, the trend continued, culminating in an average population of 176,000. As of today, almost 30% of designated ECoCs (from 1985 to 2029) have a population of less than 200,000 inhabitants.

THE ECOC ACTION'S APPEAL IS THUS UNQUESTIONABLE - NOT JUST FOR THE CITIES SELECTED, BUT ALSO FOR ALL THOSE ASPIRING TO BE PART OF IT.

⁷ For more information, please refer to "39 Capitals of Culture: a flourishing global activity in 2025", posted on January 13, 2025, by Steve Green: <https://prasino.eu/>

⁸ Data extracted from Figure 14: Operating budget for ECoC 1985-2012, by ECoC (€mln), García, B. & Cox, T. (2013). European Capitals of Culture: Success Strategies and Long-Term Effects. Publications Office of the European Union.

⁹ The figures are approximate calculations of the average number of inhabitants of each ECoC at the time of its designation. It should be noted that from 2005 to 2010, the average population was 1,400,000, because of Istanbul, which had a population of 12.8 million at the time. Without the city of Istanbul, the average population would have been around 300,000. From 2011 to 2019, the number of inhabitants was around 311,000 and then 176,000 from 2020 to 2029.



WHAT COMES NEXT?

This widespread interest appears to support the continuation of the ECoC initiative, a perspective reinforced by the informed opinions gathered throughout the research underpinning this White Paper.

However, given the EU's current focus on security and defence, the likelihood of significant cuts to cultural programmes, and the growing dominance of national interests over broader European concerns - alongside financial constraints on cities and governments facing budget restrictions, rising living costs, housing shortages, among other domestic challenges - the need to reassess whether the action requires substantial reform, or even a complete halt, is unavoidable.

Although stopping the initiative does not appear to be a viable option - 87% of survey respondents oppose ending the action after 2033 - there is a clear demand for change:

“There are still so many cities who would like to hold the title. But at the same time, I think that the world has changed so much that we must also be critical about the rules of the game.”

ECoC manager

As the ECoC reaches its 40th year, a crucial question emerges: **What's next? How can it remain meaningful and impactful for the future?**

Over the past decades, the world has made remarkable progress - technological advancements, rising incomes, and improved literacy rates have transformed societies. Yet, there is another side to the story.

The transformative role of culture in urban development has gained increasing recognition, highlighted through numerous publications, conferences, networks, and expert analyses. Organisations such as the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), and Eurocities, have incorporated a strong cultural dimension, while the World Cities Culture Forum, a global network of civic leaders from 42 creative cities worldwide, and the UNESCO Creative Cities Network now include a high percentage of European cities - including past, present, or aspiring European Capitals of Culture - demonstrating the growing acknowledgment of culture's impact on sustainable urban growth.

Wars have returned to Europe. Fundamental rights, once taken for granted, are increasingly under threat. Climate change is no longer a distant warning; natural disasters remind us of its urgent reality - something artists, not only scientists, have long predicted. Artificial intelligence promises efficiency but raises concerns about our humanity.

Culture may not be a solution, but it can be a powerful antidote - one that must be safeguarded. In an era marked by social fragmentation, rising loneliness, youth depression, and persistent conflicts, technical solutions alone seem insufficient. What else can we try if not to foster a culture of dialogue, exchange, and mutual respect - both social and environmental? A culture where diversity is not seen as a challenge but as the very solution to our problems. We need antidotes. And we need European antidotes, if we want to preserve the EU as a space of cultural freedom and peace.

The ECoC is one of these possible cultural antidotes. Not only for the genuine energy and visibility that it brings to cities, but mostly for its capacity to enable cross-sectoral experimentation and changes. Arts and cultural spillovers, however difficult to measure, are being increasingly experienced in fields as diverse as mental health and well-being, environment and climate change, migration and social cohesion, and also digital technologies. These offer opportunities for a more humanised, democratic and critical use of culture.

The ECoC now faces one of its greatest challenges: staying relevant in the complex times we are living in. What began as a celebratory initiative has, through ongoing experimentation, risk taking, research and adaptation, evolved into a catalyst for urban and cultural revitalisation. Yet, its interpretation varies across cities, reflecting diverse contexts, capacities and ambitions. While there is consensus for keeping the format flexible, a unified voice emerges for the action to evolve in a way that cities can be better empowered to transform Europe from within. Culture is one important transformational sector, but its full potential depends on greater political recognition and stronger, long-term, commitments.

As one of the ECoC managers said, recalling Latvian people's ability to keep their dance and song tradition alive by continually innovating the Latvian Song and Dance Festival - one of the largest amateur choral and dancing events in the world:

“Tradition can live long only if it is combined with innovation.”

ECoC manager

What kind of innovation does the ECoC tradition need to stay alive and yet relevant for the next decades?

WHY A WHITE PAPER & WHY NOW?

This White Paper aims to inform EU decision-makers. It is the result of the research project “40 Recommendations from 40 Years of ECoC: Insights for the Capitals from 2034 Onwards”. Since a fourth legal basis for ECoC from 2034 to 2048 goes through its decision-making process after summer 2025, it comes at a crucial moment.

The research was initiated by the City of Chemnitz with the support of the City of Nova Gorica, the two European Capitals of Culture 2025. Its goal is to offer recommendations to inform decision-makers looking beyond 2033. By gathering insights from structured interviews with

managers and artistic coordinators from 64 of the 82 ECoC cities since 1985—as well as with international European experts and policymakers involved in the ECoC initiative over its 40-year history¹⁰—the research provides phenomenon-driven and actionable recommendations for future policy improvements. These perspectives were thoroughly analysed and distilled into 76 recommendations, which were then sent back to the same managers and artistic coordinators from the 82 ECoC cities through an online survey. This served as a “consistency check” to rank the recommendations and triangulate the interview findings. A response

¹⁰ For further details, see Annex (1) Methodology and (2) Tables of participants.

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rate of 56% was achieved¹¹. The White Paper was debated with the ECoC community of managers and artistic coordinators in Chemnitz on April 4th, 2025.

Three other initiatives are exploring the future of ECoC:

1. The European Commission has published its interim evaluation report of the ECoC action which mostly builds on the official evaluations of the ECoC cities and their evaluators.

2. The Culture Next network has recently published the report “Culture Next Role, Impact and the Future of European Capital of Culture”. This report gathers insights from another specific group that this network represents, candidate ECoC cities, whether successful or not.

3. Eurocities has consulted its city members on the same topic, gathering the most urgent needs among titleholders and potential or official candidates.

The research underpinning the present White Paper amplifies the voices of practitioners and experts by drawing directly from a very specific target group: the managers and artistic coordinators that have personally shaped, implemented, and managed the ECoC initiative, through making complicated and much needed major decisions.

This report takes a pragmatic approach, by identifying **19 recommendations** that can be realistically introduced **through the EU legal basis**, along with **21 additional “non-legal” recommendations**.

The implementation of the latter requires mobilising different policy tools and processes, not only at the EU but also at the national, regional and local level. The White Paper aims to make clear the collective efforts that are needed to change the ECoC action beyond what is feasible through the EU legal text.

Through extensive interviews and qualitative research, this study captures the perspectives of past and present ECoC managers, artistic coordinators, and policymakers, shedding light on both the successes and the systemic challenges faced by host cities. This bottom-up perspective ensures that the recommendations are relevant to the realities on the ground and actionable at different levels of implementation, rather than being abstract policy ideals. Ultimately, this study serves as a bridge between policy and practice, ensuring that future reforms to the ECoC initiative are rooted in the experiences of those who have worked within the system, rather than being dictated solely by top-down regulatory changes. By amplifying these voices, the research intends to contribute to a more adaptive, inclusive, and impactful ECoC framework.

¹¹ For further details, see Annex (1) Methodology.

WHAT WE ALL SUGGEST

POLITICAL MATTER 1. EUROPE IN EVERYTHING YOU DO

In times of geopolitical uncertainty, shaping a clear and compelling vision for the future of the European Union (EU) is more essential than ever. If the EU aspires to continue playing a role in the future, it must secure the support of its people. This support can only be built by focusing on what unites people, on their shared values and experiences.

That is precisely where culture and cultural heritage play a crucial role. Throughout history, culture and heritage have helped forge a common and enriching European consciousness.

Today, more than ever, they are vital in strengthening a sense of togetherness and reinforcing

belonging to a broader European community.

This vision has increasingly been embedded in the ECoC initiative - offering a unique opportunity to celebrate European cultures at the most local level while highlighting their shared foundations. The action should continue fostering discussion and debate, and giving voice to diverse perspectives on European challenges while reflecting EU common values.

The European dimension is about **connecting local identities to a broader and plural European narrative in a way that makes citizens feel and act as part of a wider community, and that enriches diversity in unity.**

Practically, and without being anywhere complete, the following eight approaches have been mentioned to put the European dimension at work:

- 1. Connecting locally relevant EU themes and strengthening them on the EU agenda**
- 2. Co-development, co-creation and co-implementation of cultural and creative projects to create EU narratives and actions**
- 3. Exchange of people (staff, citizens, artists, students, producers, journalists), artefacts and programmes**
- 4. Development of European cultural tourism**
- 5. Use of EU funds and joint capacity building**
- 6. Research cooperation, data sharing and use of common evaluation guidelines and indicators**
- 7. Development of the digital component of the ECoC as a collaborative space for European artistic co-creation and democratic exchange**
- 8. Making visible the EU flag and anthem, reviving or rethinking European heroes, and increasing the visibility of EU values**

While the ECoC's potential contribution to strengthening citizens'

sense of belonging to the EU is seen as the major added value of the action, according to the majority of the people interviewed, there is a risk that the European dimension of the action gets lost throughout the implementation stage. ECoC cities are subject to local political pressure, changing regional and city priorities and rising complexity due to the hiring and firing cycles of key staff. Another risk relates to seeing the European dimension "confined" to the ECoC programme implementation team, with citizens and their municipality/regional bodies not feeling necessarily more connected to Europe.

The following recommendations are intended to:

- Clarify the ECoC's ambition to bring Europeans closer to the EU and the EU closer to its citizens.
- Enhance Europe's contribution to the ECoC through all existing selection criteria, making sure the European dimension is not lost at the ECoC programme implementation stage.
- Update existing communication tools (logo and name) to better signal the European goals of the action in all ECoC cities.

Based on the results of our survey, 96% of respondents strongly agree that an ECoC should be a more active promoter of European values, by fostering inclusivity, diversity, and open debate on controversial social issues.

To keep the European impact high through the implementation stage, the following recommendations are put forward:

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE LEGAL BASIS



EU legal basis
Article 2 (Objectives)

Add a third general objective regarding the ECoC's contribution to citizens' sense of belonging to the EU.

Since 2014, the ECoC action has had two main objectives: the promotion of cultural diversity, bringing common elements to the fore - which has been there since the foundational year of the action; and the long-term development of cities - a major novelty introduced by the 2014 Decision. While the two objectives should be kept, there is a clear need to clarify the action's contribution to a shift in mentality, whereby our European identity becomes not just a complement to our national identities but a distinctive and enriching part of it.

We propose adding a **third general objective** to Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 2 (Objectives)**. This should highlight the **ECoC's contribution to strengthening knowledge of and positive attitudes towards EU identity and values**. It should be focused on familiarising the European people with the history and

values that underpin their status as EU citizens.



EU legal basis
Article 5 (Criteria)

Ensure that the European dimension is embedded across each selection criteria, instead of being treated as a stand-alone criterion.

Based on the results of our survey, 93% strongly agree that the selection process should prioritise the long-term cultural, social and economic impact, including urban development, and change of mentality that the title would have on the candidate city. A common challenge observed is that cities, once selected, often focus on presenting themselves to the rest of Europe rather than first fostering genuine European collaboration at the local level. The ECoC should not be merely a platform for self-promotion; instead, it must serve as a space where European partners are invited to engage in solving local challenges together - working "in the kitchen" before showcasing the results.

Without this foundational approach, the ECoC risks losing its true European dimension, reducing its impact to a series of cultural displays rather than a deeply integrated exchange. To ensure a meaningful European footprint, cities must prioritise co-creation



with European stakeholders from the outset, embedding collaboration into their cultural strategies before stepping onto the wider stage. The focus should shift from how the EU observes ECoC cities' efforts to how winning cities can actively engage a broader spectrum of European stakeholders to create value for all involved. This approach provides a stronger foundation, shifting the narrative from competition over resources to a collaborative effort that harnesses external energy to address challenges that might otherwise go unmentioned.

The discussions underpinning the bidbook preparation should be framed around two key questions:

- First, **How can Europe contribute to this initiative?** or even **Where is Europe in this?**, to encourage cities to connect local themes to wider European issues, recognising that solutions are stronger when tackled collectively.
- Second, **How can we better co-construct an ECoC project with and not only for Europeans?**, to ensure that Europeans are not just passive audiences but active stakeholders in shaping and delivering ECoC projects.

Questions like this would foster a **more constructive and solution-oriented dialogue**, transforming external engagement into an opportunity rather than a point of contention.

Specifically, the current six selection criteria in Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 5 (Criteria)** would be simplified and reduced to five, and the European dimension assessed in terms of a city's capacity to engage with Europe as an opportunity to reach its aspirations.

The revised criteria **should assess a city's capacity to: leave a legacy on European cities' readiness to face contemporary challenges** (Criterion 1, long-term strategy); **use EU funding opportunities** to support the title year and its actions (Criterion 2, capacity to deliver); **build and integrate relevant EU-related knowledge, competence and expertise** in the team (on EU policies, EU funds raising and management, etc.) (Criterion 3, management); integrate the **cultural diversity** of Europe into their programmes, while highlighting the **common aspects** of European cultures (Criterion 4, cultural and artistic content); and to engage with relevant **European networks** and attract the interest of a broad **European public** (Criterion 5, outreach).



EU legal basis
Article 14 (Prize),
Article 15 (Practical arrangements)

One logo for all designated ECoC cities should be mandatory.

Since the early years of the initiative, ECoC hosts have created logos and developed a corporate identity for their title year, applying it across various media to enhance brand visibility. The 2014 Decision

introduced a significant change in this regard, making it a formal requirement for the designated city's marketing and communication strategy - as well as its communication materials - to explicitly mention the Union action to qualify for the Melina Mercouri Prize (Decision No 445/2014/EU, Article 14, Prize).

However, the absence of a unified and yet flexible logo often leaves the European dimension of the initiative unclear to local audiences. We recommend developing a **standardised logo similar to what already exists, and including a customisable label** that each ECoC city can adapt while maintaining the core European identity. Its mandatory use to get the Prize would help bring Europe closer to the ECoC city and its citizens. The **combination of fixed and flexible design elements** would enhance the logo's effectiveness for both European and local communication purposes.

87% of survey respondents think that a strong ECoC brand with a unified identity, as with Erasmus, and actively promoted by the European Commission, would strengthen the project and maintain its prestige and global relevance.

We thus propose to revise in Decision No 445/2014/EU both **Article 14 (Prize)** and **Article 15 (Practical arrangements)**.



EU legal basis
Budget allocations stemming from the ECoC legal basis

Dedicate specific EU funding and expertise to professionalise the communication of the ECoC action, and collaborate with high-profile communication platforms and events, such as Eurovision, to further enhance outreach and engagement.

A consistent concern raised by ECoC managers is the limited and uneven investment in communication at the European level. In contrast to other EU flagship "Capital" initiatives – such as the European Green Capitals or the European Capitals of Innovation – ECoC cities receive less structured support in promoting especially the European dimension of their title year.

We recommend that the European Commission — particularly through DG COMM — **establish a dedicated budget line to reinforce the visibility and strategic communication of the ECoC initiative**. This funding should support:

- The development of a clear and coherent European-level communication strategy
- Access for cities to specialised consultants in branding, digital engagement, media relations, and audience development

- The creation of centralised tools such as a modern ECoC website, unified social media presence, and a professional press/media toolkit
- Better alignment with broader EU narratives and policy priorities
- Collaboration with high-profile communication platforms and events, such as Eurovision, to further enhance outreach and engagement.

This investment would not replace local communication efforts, but rather amplify and professionalise them, offering a shared European backbone that each city can adapt to its unique context. Enhancing communication in this way would **help foster a stronger connection between the ECoC programme and European citizens**, while reinforcing the **cultural and political relevance of the action** across borders.

This change can be introduced through a legal process, with budget calculations accounting for the necessary staff required to implement it.



EU legal basis
Budget allocations stemming
from the ECoC legal basis

The equivalent of 1.5 full-time staff should be added to the current team of two to become really European in every aspect of the activity.

The current ECoC team within the Commission is clearly understaffed, as it has been regularly pointed out over the past 20 years¹². The increase in staffing levels is a necessary condition to ensure that the ECoC action not only remains but its impact at the European level is amplified. The additional staff would be particularly crucial for the implementation of recommendations aimed at improving the selection, monitoring and communication of the ECoC action under Topics 1, 3 and 4, and most specifically recommendation number (20) introducing a fact-checking approach to ECoC selection.

This change can be introduced through a legal process, with budget calculations accounting for the necessary staff required to implement it.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEGAL BASIS

EU policy level - the European Commission should:



EU policies

Better Earmark EU Funding for European Capitals of Culture.

¹² See Palmer, R. (2004) European Cities and Capitals of Culture: Study Prepared for the European Commission. Brussels: Palmer/RAE Associates. (p. 191).

To strengthen the impact and sustainability of ECoC hosts, EU funding should be more strategically earmarked through three complementary actions:

- **Set aside EU transnational cooperation funds:**

The European Commission should reserve a specific percentage of the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes to support collaboration between past, present, and future ECoCs. This will foster cross-border cultural exchange, peer learning, and long-term partnerships.

- **Dedicate ESIF funding in national agreements:**

Member States should earmark a proportion of the five European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for ECoC-related initiatives in their Partnership Agreements with the Commission. This would ensure more coherent and consistent support for cultural development linked to the ECoC objectives.

- **Strengthen bidbooks with EU funding strategies:**

Cities applying for the ECoC title should be encouraged to include in their bidbooks a dedicated chapter outlining how they intend to seek seed funding as well as what actions they have already taken in terms of applications to competitive EU programmes such as Creative Europe, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, CERV or New European Bauhaus¹³. This will prove their

capacity and commitment to apply the European dimension since the bidding stage (see also recommendation 2) and therewith stabilise the European dimension of the implementation process. This will encourage early strategic planning and stronger alignment with EU priorities.

Together, these actions will not only reinforce cities' capacities to act on a European sphere, but also help bring more Europe into our cities—and our cities more actively into the European project.



EU policies

Introduce an annual meeting of city mayors and/or directors of culture of the ECoC cities, mirroring the Culture Next and ECoC family groupings. ECoC hosts are a valuable instrument to advocate for European cohesion. However, they seem to lack visibility in Brussels. To connect them more to political decision-makers, ECoC cities should regularly present their programmes together in front of the EU Parliament, Cultural Affairs Committee (CAC) of the Council and/or Commission.

¹³ See the "CulturEU Funding Guide. EU Funding Opportunities for the Cultural and Creative Sectors 2021-2027" for a full overview of relevant funding programmes: <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/funding/cultureu-funding-guide/booklet>.



EU policies

Provide clearer guidelines to ensure that the ECoC communication strategy remains truly European.



EU policies

Introduce a non-mandatory manual or a basic toolkit of evaluation methods that provide a common foundation for assessing European impacts. It should ensure comparability of results across ECoC cities while allowing for local adaptations. This would help address inconsistencies in current evaluation practices while maintaining flexibility for cities to tailor their approaches.



EU policies

Establish a specific EC Unit to provide guidance and expertise to ECoC evaluation teams and participating cities. This Unit could be housed within the Joint Research Centre (JRC) - the in-house research centre of the EC - or another relevant EU body, ensuring

that cities have access to specialised support for conducting meaningful and methodologically sound evaluations.



EU policies

Require that all ECoC evaluations are conducted by external entities. While cities will be able to define their evaluation criteria in their bidbooks, the actual assessment should be carried out by independent experts who are not directly affiliated with the host city's ECoC team.



EU policies

Draw on science journalism and citizen science to share evaluation findings more widely and effectively

EU guidelines level - the European Commission should advise Member States to:



EU guidelines

Embed a European approach in monitoring and evaluation

The European effect of the action fully materialises only if being European is also embedded in the monitoring and evaluation process.

This would entail a number of specific actions:

- Ensuring that half of the **evaluation team is international**.
- **Encouraging benchmarking using transnational indicators** (e.g. from European Social Survey, OECD Better Life Index) to improve objectivity and comparability.

Importantly, **international collaboration can enrich local contexts** by introducing diverse analytical perspectives, stimulating innovation, and situating local experiences within broader comparative frame-

POLITICAL MATTER 2. CELEBRATE WHAT YOU CHANGE

The goal of the ECoC initiative goes beyond simply celebrating culture for its own sake; it serves as a catalyst for meaningful change. It encourages a shift in mentality, leading and helping cities to strengthen cultural ecosystems, empower communities, and foster long-term development.

works. This contributes to stronger institutional learning and more robust cultural governance at the local level, and leads to more grounded and insightful evaluations that support evidence-based decision-making by cities and their stakeholders.

A pan-European or international evaluation team enhances **methodological rigour, mitigates local political pressures, supports the development of shared standards, and enables peer learning across diverse contexts**. The use of international benchmarks particularly allows for better integration of datasets and comparability of results, ensuring that ECoC evaluations reflect transnational realities and support a unified understanding of culture-led impact across Europe.

However, the high-stakes competition for this prestigious European title can overshadow the opportunity for cities to reflect on and invest in their cultural strategies through a bottom-up approach. Not all stakeholders may fully grasp what is at stake or engage with the same level of commitment, leading to varying degrees of

strategic impact. Moreover, there may be a widespread absence of support for grassroots initiatives, which are essential for fostering local engagement and ownership. These initiatives can be pivotal in creating a more inclusive and enduring legacy, yet they often do not receive the necessary attention or resources. Finally, while cities have the flexibility to adapt the ECoC programme to their unique context, this freedom can sometimes lead to a loss of commitment to the long-term legacy objectives.

To drive a change of mentality, the following recommendations aim to:

- Ensure that **language** used (both in the legal basis and connected bidbook) reflects the **progressive nature** of the ECoC, clearly embracing and promoting artistic freedom, cultural rights and civic engagement principles.
- The ECoC recognises and builds on the **transformational potential of digital tools** for cultural production and consumption.
- Prioritise a **long-term strategic approach** over a short-term spectacle in the selection phases, whatever the results of the selection process.

“The whole focus needs to be more, not on the celebration of a Capital of Culture, but on the whole notion really focusing on long-term development and change.”

ECoC manager

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE LEGAL BASIS



EU legal basis
Article 8 (Pre-selection
in the Member States)

Revise concepts and language of the ECoC selection questionnaire to align with contemporary needs.

Currently, the selection questionnaire is perceived as outdated in terms of the language used and the focus of its questions.

“I was also very much disappointed by the jargon chosen by the EU in this process, I think we have to be very careful and selective in the words we’re using to describe certain things.”

ECoC manager

In the survey, 96% of respondents think that the bidbook should be updated to reflect current challenges that cities are facing, including the pressing issues of social, economic, environmental and cultural inclusion and sustainability. As well, it needs to reflect the ongoing grassroots initiatives promoted by civil society, focusing on a bottom-up approach that can embrace the city’s cultural and creative scene. The survey results indicate that 87% of respondents encourage the grassroots initiatives to ensure cultural projects resonate with local communities. In the application process, the questionnaire needs to

tackle these aspects, to enable a critical reflection by cities that are preparing bids.

There is also a call to include explicit statements in the regulation to protect cultural freedom and freedom of expression, ensuring that these values are upheld throughout the ECoC programme. 91% of survey respondents agree with this statement.

To do that, we propose a revision of the Decision 445/2014/EU, **Article 8 (Pre-selection in the Member States)** and selection questionnaire, with the goal of:

Modernising language and conceptual frameworks to emphasise inclusivity, gender equality and collaboration, removing outdated phrasing (e.g. on minorities, resident population, gender gaps).

“Questions are not as inclusive as they should be.”

ECoC artistic coordinator

Including grassroots initiatives that already exist in the bidding city.



EU legal basis
Article 5 (Criteria)

A “Digital dimension” criterion should be introduced, ensuring that digital tools are not just supporting mechanisms but also fundamental spaces for cultural production, consumption and exchange.

The Digital dimension must become a cornerstone of the ECoC, transforming it from a cultural showcase into an inclusive public space.

Digital platforms and virtual experiences can break down physical barriers, amplifying cross-cultural exchange and broadening citizen participation, instead of being mere marketing and communication tools. The Digital dimension should foster creativity and critical digital engagement, empowering citizens to navigate information responsibly, embrace European values, and counter misinformation. The potential for digital tools to democratise cultural production and develop digital preservation strategies must be explored, as well as innovative approaches to digital audience development and participation. Lastly, digital tools could play an important role in measuring and analysing cultural impact. By embedding media literacy and digital creativity, the ECoC can spark a more connected, participatory, and resilient European community.

To enhance the digital dimension of the ECoC action, we propose a revision to Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 5 (Criteria)** adding a dedicated selection criterion.



EU legal basis
Article 5 (Criteria)

Introduce “Sustainability” as a selection criterion, integrating culture as a driver and fundamental condition for economic, environmental, and social sustainability.

Building on international frameworks such as the UCLG’s Culture: Fourth Pillar of Sustainable Development (2010), the ECoC should recognise culture as a cross-cutting driver that is equally vital as the economic, environmental, and social pillars of sustainability. Culture shapes how societies develop, make decisions, and envision their futures, and must be integrated accordingly into development strategies.

From cultural heritage to the cultural and creative industries, culture acts as both an **enabler** and **driver** of sustainable development across sectors. To fully realize this potential, the ECoC framework should adopt a **multidisciplinary and integrated approach**, embedding culture into policy-making not as an isolated domain, but as a catalyst for inclusive, context-specific, and people-centred development.

More specifically, cities applying for the ECoC title should be encouraged to articulate how their cultural strategies align with and actively contribute to the goals of sustainable development. This could be

formalised through a strengthened selection criterion focused on cultural sustainability. Without being exhaustive, such a criterion could require cities to demonstrate actions including:

- **Demonstrating culture’s role in promoting behavioural change** and shifts in mindset toward sustainability, for example, through participatory practices, storytelling, or educational initiatives.
- **Applying and promoting green practices** within the cultural programme, drawing on existing standards, labels, and toolkits¹⁴. This could encompass sustainable event production, environmentally responsible art and cultural outputs, and sustainable infrastructure—such as the adaptive reuse of buildings, the use of local and recycled materials, and the adoption of circular economy principles.
- **Demonstrating leadership in cultural sustainability by sharing experiences and practices with other cities, showing how culture can be a transformative force for sustainability.** This could involve active participation in European and international networks (e.g., the European Green Capital Network¹⁵, NetZeroCities¹⁶), peer learning initiatives, or city-to-city mentoring, thereby helping to mainstream the role of culture in sustainable urban development.

¹⁴ Like the ones produced by Julie’s Bicycle, a leading not-for-profit, mobilising the arts and culture to take action on the climate, nature and justice crisis: <https://juliesbicycle.com/about-us/> or the 2023 Voices of Culture brainstorming report: Culture and creative sectors and industries driving green transition and facing the energy crisis prepared in the framework of the Structured Dialogue between the European Commission and the cultural sector, and showing opportunities to speed up the green transition and to address the energy crisis in and through the cultural and

¹⁵ <https://eurocities.eu/projects/european-green-capital-network-2/>

¹⁶ <https://netzerocities.eu/>

- **Integrating cultural policies with local SDG strategies**, ensuring coherence between cultural planning and broader urban sustainability objectives and policies.

In the survey, 84% of respondents agreed on the necessity to revise selection criteria according to contemporary societal challenges like sustainability. To enhance the cultural sustainability dimension of the ECoC action, we propose a revision to Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 5 (Criteria)** adding a dedicated selection criterion.



EU legal basis
Article 8 (Pre-selection
in the Member States)

During the bidding process, ask for commitments made for “Plan B” to assess the long-term perspective on cultural strategies of the bidding cities.

This amendment reinforces the ECoC’s role as a catalyst for long-term cultural development across Europe no matter the outcome of the selection process. It ensures that all candidate cities continue to contribute to the broader goals of sustainability, regional cohesion, and European cultural integration, thus fostering lasting impact and growth beyond the title year. Currently, cities invest heavily in their ECoC bid, but if they are not selected, their cultural strategies often lose momentum due to a lack of continued commitment.

To enhance the long-term cultural impact of the ECoC action, we propose a revision to Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 8 (Pre-selection in the Member States)**.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEGAL BASIS

Local implementation level - ECoC cities should:



Local implementation

Establish agreements in advance with relevant local stakeholders, as well as regional and national authorities, to roll over any potential budget surplus at the end of the ECoC year to fund long-term cultural initiatives. By securing commitments from local and national authorities to match remaining funds, cities can ensure that unspent resources are reinvested in sustainable cultural projects rather than being returned to general budgets.



Local implementation

Use the bidbook drafting process as an opportunity to address core societal questions through the ECoC programme (e.g. the future of our youth and intergenerational fairness), and encourage small, impactful cultural encounters instead of just large or mainstream events.



Local implementation

Foster and implement long-term support mechanisms for cultural professionals and the cultural sector at the local level to sustain the momentum generated by the ECoC year. This can be achieved, for example, through dedicated funding programmes, capacity-building initiatives, and strategic partnerships that ensure continued artistic innovation, community engagement, and economic benefits beyond the ECoC year.

EU policy level - the European Commission should:



EU policies

Revise the EU Evaluation Guidelines to better align to contemporary policy urgencies.

The existing common guidelines should reflect the more in-depth understanding that we have nowadays of culture as the backbone of the value, behavioural and mindset change that the UN 2030 Agenda requires to fulfil its objectives. The revised guidelines should **embrace culture's capacity to address contemporary policy dimensions such as a humanised digital transition, environmental sustainability, and the promotion of healthy lives and well-being for all.**

In addition, the guidelines should explicitly **address how digital and AI tools are used in bidbook preparation, data collection, analysis, reporting, and interpretation**, with safeguards to prevent manipulation or fabrication of data.

This update should also ensure **alignment with wider European policy frameworks and acknowledge emerging societal challenges**, thus making the evaluation process more relevant, forward-looking, and ethically robust.

POLITICAL MATTER 3. MAKE IT SIMPLE AND TRANSPARENT

Commission President von der Leyen seeks to simplify EU programmes. The current ECoC selection and monitoring process is often seen as overly complex and bureaucratic, placing a significant burden on cities. While maintaining the two-stage selection process, we make recommendations to introduce significant changes that simplify the process. The recommendations aim to:

- Ensure **a fair and transparent process applicable to larger and smaller candidates.**
- **Assist cities** in considering a bid, and then to prepare candidates for the bid.
- **Reduce the pre-selection requirements.**
- Introduce an **independent evaluation** of a **candidate's capacity prior to selection.**

There is a need to streamline the selection and monitoring process - inspired by the simpler selection processes put in place in the UK or Italy for their national cultural capital programmes. This will ensure that cities can meaningfully reflect on their cultural capacities and long-term goals, while also avoiding wasted resources and

promoting effective, evidence-based decision-making. This would ultimately lead to better preparation, more impactful outcomes, and sustainable cultural growth for the cities involved no matter the outcome of the selection.

The ECoC selection and monitoring process should be fair, efficient, and outcome-driven, ensuring that all candidate cities - whether selected or not - benefit from the experience and investment made. The revised framework should align with the EU's broader cultural policy objectives by focusing on substance over the process and providing clearer guidance.

Additionally, there is a widespread perception that the current procedure does not adequately prepare cities for the ECoC year, nor does it provide the necessary tools for cities to critically assess and strengthen their cultural strategies. With cities investing significantly in the bidding process, not winning the title has potential negative effects on the city management and on the investments made on human and social capital. This issue is further stressed by the lack of training and information from national authorities, which hinders cities in self-assessing their capacities and readiness to embark in such a process.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE LEGAL BASIS

22

PM3....

Reduce the questions in the first round. The focus should be put on the Vision, the European Concept, Governance, and Legacy of the project, sharpening these aspects in the second round.

Questions in the bidbook should be different at the pre-selection and selection stages, each with a different rationale. In the first round, the focus should be on the foundational elements of the proposal, including the Vision and the European Concept guiding the candidacy, its Governance model and its expected Legacy. The second round should enable the city to delve into the details of the cultural programme, in line with the foundational elements defined in the previous stage.

We thus suggest an amendment to Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 8 (Pre-selection in the Member States)**.

EU legal basis
Article 8 (Pre-selection
in the Member States)

23

PM3....

Replace the selection panel's visit to candidate cities with a fact-checking report.

EU legal basis
Article 9 (Selection
in the Member States)

This approach would help recognise demonstrated efforts and stakeholder engagement rather than relying solely on hypothetical plans.

To implement this recommendation, we propose replacing the current city visit at the final selection stage with a more structured meeting designed to assess the actions taken by the city. A fact-checking report should be prepared by a city referee (such as an independent consultant or administrative head) to guide the meeting, ensuring a thorough, focused and evidence-based evaluation. This report should go beyond superficial observations. It should provide an assessment of evidence of work in progress rather than just a proposed future plan. The panel should discuss this report before they meet with the shortlisted cities.

To assess the commitment without building an additional evaluation grid, we propose that a structured Pre-Visit Assessment Report should be prepared by an Independent Expert. This report will provide fact-checked, outcome-based insights, ensuring a focused and evidence-driven evaluation. This report should:

- Analyse the city's cultural and creative scene, assessing actual changes rather than projected or potential impacts.
- Evaluate whether and how the city has driven innovation in environmental sustainability and economic development.

- Exclude superficial or marketing-driven improvements, ensuring that the assessment reflects structural transformations.

Similarly, the chapter of the selection questionnaire on the Cultural and Artistic Concept should demonstrate the applicant's ability to organise the year effectively. The focus should be on identifying - at least three years prior to the application - ongoing interactive interventions, target audiences, potential international collaboration, and the multiplicity of events planned during the title year. The application should showcase the professionalism of the team, and any proposed changes should not only be feasible but also justified in their implementation.

“I would strongly stress that there should be a way to really assess the commitment of a city to be an ECoC and to its capacity to understand that this is a long-term effort. So it shouldn't be a marketing exercise. It should be for real.”

ECoC manager

Alternatively, we recommend that the entire panel (instead of just a few members) spends two days in each shortlisted city, engaging in comprehensive meetings with a variety of stakeholders. These should include the core ECoC team, politicians (including opposition), cultural leaders, the tourism and business sectors, creative industries, public authorities, and civil society. This extended visit will provide an

opportunity for all panel questions to be addressed directly. As a result, a second oral presentation would not be necessary. The panel will then make its decision based on the insights gathered during the city visit.

We recommend a revision of Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 9 (Selection in the Member States)**.



EU legal basis
Article 16 (Evaluation)

Add fact-checking reporting activity to the Commission's call for tenders for post-ECoC evaluation.

This revision would ensure that evaluators collect data on ECoC cities from the early stages, strengthening the quality and feasibility of longitudinal evaluation reports covering the five years leading up to the title year.

Implementing this recommendation would require amendments to Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 16 (Evaluation)**.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEGAL BASIS

EU policy level - the European Commission should:



EU policies

For the selection panel, prioritise people having direct experience with managing an ECoC and who have been involved in setting up at least another one. This expertise will strengthen bid evaluations and ensure cities receive actionable advice for programme planning and execution.

“There is a very specific skill set and knowledge that only people who have designed, developed and delivered an ECoC will have, that’s just fact, and they are best placed, in my humble opinion, to support others and to understand.”

ECoC manager



EU policies

Develop a comprehensive set of tools (e.g. a handbook, methodological framework or decision tree) to support cities throughout the ECoC application process. These tools would help applicants navigate the complexities of bidding, ensuring greater clarity, consistency, and information accessibility.



EU policies

Establish clear regulations and transparency standards to prevent conflicts of interest by defining the roles and limitations of consultants and current or former ECoC jury members.

Jury members must remain fully impartial and independent throughout their mandate. In the survey, an extremely high share of respondents (88%) agreed on this recommendation. This requirement for neutrality is therefore crucial, especially given the high stakes and economic impact of ECoC selection.

To avoid conflicts of interest, a mandatory buffer period should be established:

- **Before joining the jury,** individuals who have worked as consultants or staff for ECoC candidate cities or title-holding cities must observe a cooling-off period of 2 years.
- **After serving on the jury,** former members should not engage in consultancy or advisory roles with ECoC cities for a period of 2 years.

These provisions should be formally integrated into the contractual documentation signed by all experts serving on the jury, specifically:

• **Annex II** – Declaration of No Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality

• **Annex III** – Code of Conduct for Experts

These annexes must explicitly state the buffer period requirements and define what constitutes a conflict of interest. Drawing inspiration from the Horizon 2020 expert contract model, the following situations should be considered automatic conflicts of interest and be clearly listed in the contract:

- Having had, within the last five years, a scientific collaboration, rivalry, or a mentor/mentee relationship with a key individual involved in the ECoC proposal.
- Employment by, or contractual involvement with, any of the applicant cities, their partners, or related third parties in the past three years.
- Participation in a management or advisory structure, research collaboration, or funding relationship with an applicant or partner organisation during the last three years.
- Any other circumstance that could reasonably be perceived to impair the expert's impartiality.

EU guidelines level - the European Commission should advise Member States to:



EU guidelines

Introduce an Artists' Code of Practice which ECoC cities' bidbooks should align with.

The ECoC has proved to be an opportunity to reimagine and reposition cities and regions through artistic and creative exploration. ECoC cities thus act as cultural R&D spaces, using the arts to reshape how communities experience their past, present, and future. While artistic projects may not directly solve problems, they change perspectives, expand public imagination, and foster new forms of collective engagement.

Artists are central to this process. Yet their position remains vulnerable. Across Europe, artists and cultural professionals often face precarious working conditions, insufficient compensation, and limited access to decision-making spaces.

To address this imbalance and strengthen the cultural integrity of ECoC initiatives, we recommend the Commission to introduce a **Code of Practice on Artists' Working Conditions**, which all ECoC bidbooks should align with. This Code will help ensure that artists are not only celebrated in public programmes but respected and supported structurally throughout.

The proposed Code includes the following core principles:

- **Fair Practice & Fair Pay:** Artists must receive fair compensation for their work, time, and creative input, aligned with sector standards.
- **Early and Ongoing Involvement:** Artists should be involved from the outset of project development and remain engaged throughout delivery and evaluation.
- **Protection of Rights:** Artistic copyright and intellectual property must be safeguarded at all stages of ECoC planning and programming.
- **Strategic Integration:** Artists should have a role in shaping the long-term cultural strategies of the host city or region, beyond the ECoC year.
- **Balanced Representation:** Programmes must include a fair balance of local, national, and European artists to promote exchange, mobility, and diversity.
- **Artist Presence in Governance:** At least one member of each ECoC board should be a professional artist.
- **Artist Representation in Jury Panels:** A minimum of 51% of ECoC jury panel members should have a clear background in the arts or cultural sectors.

In line with recent Creative Europe's calls for projects¹⁷, applicants should be encouraged to take inspiration from the European Commission's report "The Status and Working Conditions of Artists and Cultural and Creative Professionals" and embed its principles into the foundation of their proposals. Adopting this Code of Practice is not just about protecting artists – it is about unlocking the full potential of culture-led transformation.



EU guidelines

Introduce a standardised self-evaluation tool and workshop series, in cooperation with the European Commission, to assist cities in assessing their readiness to candidate for the ECoC title.

¹⁷ See Call for Proposals "European Platforms for the Promotion of Emerging Artists" https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/crea/wp-call/2024/call-fiche_crea-cult-2024-plat_en.pdf

POLITICAL MATTER 4. KEEP YOUR PROMISES

To ensure the **effective and sustainable implementation** of ECoC programmes, stronger **structural stability** is needed at the local level. The current process is **too vulnerable to political changes** and **financial instability** which can undermine long-term cultural development.

The recommendations in this section aim to:

- Introduce stronger mechanisms for **monitoring compliance** from the ECoC.
- Enhance the **accountability** of the cities' proposals by maintaining consistency between the bidding, development, and delivery phases.

A major achievement of the ECoC action has been its capacity to attract the interest and commitment of small and medium-sized cities, including rural areas in some cases. Over time, the ECoC has thus become a tangible opportunity for all kinds of cities to embrace new perspectives on culture-led development. Yet, cities face **significant challenges in securing early funding at the local level and ensuring continuity** throughout the title year and beyond. The 1.5 million euros prize awarded under certain conditions by the European Commission - the **Melina Mercouri Prize**

- is **awarded upon title designation and has a very high symbolic value. However, the funds are only disbursed in March of the title year**, creating **financial strain** in the early phases. Additionally, **bidbook commitments are not legally binding**, allowing deviations from initial proposals. Furthermore, **national governments have no obligation to support the candidate or winning cities and only occasionally provide support**. Finally, the **EU Commission's engagement has weakened over the years**, reducing oversight and strategic guidance.

While increasing EU engagement remains a major challenge, changes are needed to stabilise and make the implementation process more impactful.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE LEGAL BASIS



EU legal basis
Article 13 (Monitoring)

Transform bidbooks into binding commitments.

Bidbook proposals should become **contractual obligations** between the **European Commission and the designated ECoC city** to ensure **accountability and continuity**.

Instruments such as Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) could at least be considered to protect the implementation teams from unforeseen changes due to the changes in the technical or political staff.

“I'd like to see more consistency between bid design, bid development and delivery, and some continuity because that also gives trust to the sector. It gives trust to the process, and it gives trust to the projects.”

ECoC artistic coordinator

We therefore propose to revise Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 13 (Monitoring)** to transform bidbooks into contractual obligations.



EU legal basis
Article 14 (Prize)

Revise the Melina Mercouri Prize into two payments.

A first €500,000 should be paid after the title designation and upon setting up of a legal structure, to support early hiring and project structuring.

“For cities with a small budget, it can be important to get this money as soon as possible.”

ECoC manager

The remaining €1 million should be dedicated to long-term legacy projects, requiring clear sustainability plans, with this second payment made at the start of the ECoC year.

In Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 14 (Prize)** should thus be revised accordingly.



EU legal basis
Article 14 (Prize)

The Melina Mercouri Prize should remain strictly conditional on what is written in the bidbook, and on the designated city fulfilling its commitments from the bidding stage, with direct reference to that.

Specifically, it should be possible for the European Commission to revoke the prize in the absence of satisfactory evidence of fulfilled commitments. **Article 14 (Prize)** of the Decision No 445/2014/EU should thus be revised.



EU legal basis
Ad hoc article to be introduced

Ensure that national governments engage in supporting ECoC cities upon designation.

Formal national commitments to support the winner - upon designation - would prevent insufficient engagement that could weaken the candidacy and implementation process. Support could take at least two forms: first, the design of self-assessment workshops by the national Ministries of

Culture, in cooperation with the European Commission, to help cities assess their readiness to apply. Second, a very desirable option would be for a much stronger form of support coming from co-funding: ensuring that the designated Member States cover a fixed amount, or proportion of the ECoC budget of the winning city.

Based on the results of our survey, the consensus for securing formal national government commitments to support the winning city, was agreed by 98% of survey respondents. Similarly, the level of consensus is very close to the more specific recommendation requiring Member States to co-fund the programme (89%), confirming the direction and overall agreement on the importance of national support. The survey results also show that 84% of survey respondents agree with prioritising early engagement of ministers and sponsors to secure financial support and prevent delays, which is especially crucial for smaller cities with limited budgets.

To introduce this change, we propose adding an ad hoc article to the new Decision.

Alternatively, when national Culture Ministries issue the formal call for applicants, they should at least commit to their own administrative procedures treating the ECoC as a single project, not a collection of events each requiring separate approval. At pre-selection, the Ministry must state in a letter to the Commission that they will provide support to the winner over the relevant period.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEGAL BASIS

Local implementation level - ECoC cities should:



Local implementation

Finalise and secure budgets from all government levels at the time of designation, to ensure financial stability. Clear guidelines should be established to prevent post-selection funding disputes and ensure that cities can effectively plan and deliver their cultural programmes.

POLITICAL MATTER 5. STOP MAKING THE SAME MISTAKES

Capacity building and knowledge transfer are essential for the long-term success of the ECoC action. Many ECoC cities struggle with governance inefficiencies, skill gaps, and knowledge retention. Without structured support and standardised

- mechanisms for sharing expertise, valuable institutional knowledge is lost, and opportunities for collaboration are missed. In this section, the recommendations focus on:

- Ensuring that applicant cities undergo structured mentoring and support throughout implementation and legacy planning.
- Securing institutional and financial support for mentoring, training and networking.
- Ensuring public accessibility to ECoC knowledge, which fosters equal access to expertise.

Many first-time applicants struggle to navigate the complexity of the ECoC process, and past learnings are often underutilised. Furthermore, collaboration between cities tends to end once the title year concludes, instead of fostering long-term partnerships that could strengthen European cultural cooperation.

“What was the point of spending all that money if we cannot keep on exchanging what we have started for the sparkle of the ECoC year?”

ECoC manager

Although networks such as **Culture Next**¹⁸, **Eurocities**¹⁹ and the **ECoC Family Network** facilitate peer-to-peer exchange, and the University Network of European Capitals of Culture²⁰ has been able to link universities from ECoC cities, their voluntary and decentralised nature results in fragmented efforts.

“The ECoC family is not really a network of cities, because most of these people no longer have strong influence in the cities that they were representing.”

ECoC manager

This absence of an institutionalised EU-supported structure leads to a lack of standardised training, and no centralised knowledge repository.

“The learning really has been insufficient and insubstantial, which is the reason why the cities continue to make the same mistakes, even the ones with the best advisors.”

ECoC manager

18 <https://culturenext.eu/>

19 <https://eurocities.eu/>

20 <https://unecc.org/>

To maximise the impact of the ECoC action, the EU Commission should introduce dedicated funding, structured training programmes, and formalised knowledge-transfer systems to ensure a sustainable legacy beyond the title year.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE LEGAL BASIS



EU legal basis
Article 5 (Criteria)

Capacity building programmes should be a requirement for applicants, so that everyone can address skill needs in the five years before the title.

To address these challenges, the ECoC action should be reinforced with structured, long-term, capacity-building mechanisms that ensure equitable support for all cities. Applicant cities should be required to participate in structured training programmes at least five years before the title year. This would help equip them with the best **set of skills in governance, cultural strategy, project management, and financial planning.**

In Decision No 445/2014/EU, **Article 5 (Criteria), Criterion 6** under the “Management” category, a revision is necessary to ensure that capacity-building becomes a formal requirement.

When the Call for Applications is out **National cultural ministries** should also organise preparatory workshops with past ECoC experts to help interested cities evaluate their strengths and areas for improvement.

Capacity-building should not end with the selection process. Structured mentoring should be provided throughout implementation and legacy planning, ensuring cities receive ongoing support beyond their title year. Stronger support mechanisms should be introduced to address common challenges such as **stakeholder management, crisis response, and the retention of cultural professionals in host cities.**



EU legal basis
Recital 18 of the
EU Regulation 2021/818

Allocate Creative Europe funds for mentoring, training and fostering partnerships.

The EU Commission should allocate Creative Europe funds for mentoring, training and fostering partnerships. A precedent for this type of support can be found in the European Heritage Label (EHL). **Recital 18 of the EU Regulation 2021/818²¹** allocates Creative Europe funds to the European Heritage Label, a network of heritage sites across Europe, to collaborate, exchange expertise, and strengthen their visibility. A similar funding model should be applied to ECoC, ensuring that cities not only receive financial support for cultural pro-

²¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council

gramming but also benefit from structured capacity-building efforts. This investment aligns with Creative Europe's broader objectives of fostering cultural cooperation, innovation, and inclusion. Strengthening training programmes would enable ECoC cities to build stronger networks, leverage cultural investments more effectively, and amplify the social and economic impact of the action across Europe.



EU legal basis
Article 15
(Practical arrangements)

Establish an ECoC official online repository for documenting ECoC projects, sharing data, and promoting best practices. This accessible database should include bidbooks, evaluations, and best practices, helping first-time bidders navigate the complex ECoC process.

93% of survey respondents agree with the idea of creating a digital platform that should serve as a **comprehensive and continuously updated resource**, compiling bidbooks, evaluations, case studies, and best practices from past, present, and future ECoC cities. Unlike traditional static documents, this hub should feature interactive elements such as forums, webinars, and expert-led discussions, enabling real-time exchanges between cultural operators, policymakers, and city representatives.

22 <https://culturenext.eu/ecoc-archive/>

Article 15 (Practical arrangements) of Decision No 445/2014/EU states that the Commission should foster the exchange of experience and promote the dissemination of evaluation reports and lessons learned. However, knowledge transfer remains fragmented, with valuable insights often lost after the title year. Typically, **bidbooks** are submitted to national ministries, which take ownership of them. Instead, the Commission should collect these bidbooks and make their **publication mandatory** (see also recommendation 35) in a well-structured online platform that would systematically collect bidbooks, evaluation reports and success stories. This would provide future applicants with a clear roadmap, helping them navigate the complexities of the process, refine their cultural strategies, and anticipate potential obstacles. The Culture Next Archive of the European Capital of Culture, which features information about every ECoC from 1985 to 2026, including pre-selection and final-selection reports, represent a very suitable starting point for establishing a more extensive and stable archive²².

Beyond documentation, the hub should facilitate structured mentorship by connecting first-time bidders with experienced ECoC professionals who can provide **guidance on governance, stakeholder engagement, financial planning, and long-term cultural impact**.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE INTRODUCED THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEGAL BASIS

EU policy level - the European Commission should:



EU policies

Promote public accessibility to ECoC knowledge and opportunities for involvement through dedicated platforms. These platforms should offer a space for citizens and cultural professionals to engage with the ECoC initiative, contributing to its sustainability and fostering broader community participation.



EU policies

Establish a six-month mentorship, by managers who have just finished the title year (many are looking for other opportunities,) for new ECoC teams. Such mentorship would help develop truly European expert ECoC teams, not just competent individuals.

EU guidelines level - the European Commission should:



EU guidelines

Require Member States to maintain and ensure continued accessibility of bidbooks, making them readily available to the public and stakeholders. This will help foster long-term engagement and transparency, ensuring that the knowledge generated by each ECoC is not lost after the event. Additionally, in order not to block financial negotiations, it is recommended that ECoC candidate cities provide budget ranges for main, medium and small projects, instead of budget figures for each specific project.

40 RECOMMENDATIONS IN A NUTSHELL

The following table provides an overview of all the recommendations outlined in this White Paper, categorised by implementation layer.

Recommendation	Relevant recitals/ article(s)/tool	EU legal basis	EU policies	EU guide- lines	Local imple- menta- tion
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POLITICAL MATTER 1. EUROPE IN EVERYTHING YOU DO

1 PM1....	Add a third general objective on the ECoC's contribution to citizens' sense of belonging to the EU.	Article 2 (Objectives)				
2 PM1....	Ensure that the European dimension is embedded across each selection criteria	Article 5 (Criteria)				
3 PM1....	One logo for all designated ECoC cities should be mandatory.	Article 14 (Prize), Article 15 (Practical arrangements)				
4 PM1....	Dedicate specific EU funding and expertise to professionalise the communication of the ECoC action.	Budget allocations stemming from the ECoC legal basis				
5 PM1....	The equivalent of 1.5 staff should be added to the current team of two to become European in every aspect of the activity.	Budget allocations stemming from the ECoC legal basis				
6 PM1....	Better earmark EU Funding for European Capitals of Culture.					
7 PM1....	Introduce an annual meeting of city mayors and/or directors of culture of ECoC cities.					
8 PM1....	Provide clearer guidelines to ensure that the ECoC communication strategy remains truly European.					
9 PM1....	Introduce a non-mandatory manual or basic toolkit of evaluation methods.					

	Recommendation	Relevant recitals/ article(s)/tool	EU legal basis	EU policies	EU guide- lines	Local imple- men- tation
1						
2						
3						
4						
5	10	Establish a specific EC unit to provide guidance and expertise to ECoC evaluation teams and participating cities.				
6	PM1....					
7						
8						
9	11	Require that all ECoC evaluations are conducted by external entities.				
10	PM1....					
11						
12	12	Draw on science journalism and citizen science to share evaluation findings more widely and effectively.				
13	PM1....					
14						
15	13	Revise concepts and language of the ECoC selection questionnaire to align with contemporary needs.				
16	PM1....					
17						

POLITICAL MATTER 2. CELEBRATE WHAT YOU CHANGE

21	14	Revise concepts and language of the ECoC selection questionnaire to align with contemporary needs.	Article 8 (Pre-selection in the Member States)				
22	PM2....						
23							
24	15	A "Digital dimension" criterion should be introduced, ensuring that digital tools are not just supporting mechanisms but also fundamental spaces for dialogue, creativity, and cultural exchange.	Article 5 (Criteria)				
25	PM2....						
26							
27							
28							
29	16	Introduce "Sustainability" as a selection criterion, integrating culture as a driver and fundamental condition for economic, environmental, and social sustainability.	Article 5 (Criteria)				
30	PM2....						
31							
32							
33	17	During the bidding process, ask for commitments made for "Plan B" to assess the long-term perspective on cultural strategies of the bidding cities.	Article 8 (Pre-selection in the Member States)				
34	PM2....						
35							
36							
37	18	Establish agreements in advance with relevant local stakeholders, as well as regional and national authorities to roll over any potential budget surplus at the end of the ECoC year.					
38	PM2....						
39							
40							
41							
42	19	Use the bidbook drafting as an opportunity to address core societal questions (e.g. future of our youth and intergenerational fairness).					
43	PM2....						
44							
45							

Note: Political Matter 1. Europe in everything you do; Political Matter 2. Celebrate what you change; Political Matter 3. Make it simple and transparent; Political Matter 4. Keep your promises; Political Matter 5. Stop making the same mistakes

Articles refer to Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014, establishing a Union action for the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033, unless otherwise specified.

Recommendation	Relevant recitals/ article(s)/tool	EU legal basis	EU policies	EU guide- lines	Local imple- men- ta- tion	
						1
						2
						3
						4
20 PM2....	Foster and implement long-term support mechanisms for cultural professionals and the cultural sector to sustain the momentum generated by the ECoC year.					5
						6
						7
						8
21 PM2....	Revise the EU Evaluation Guidelines to better align to contemporary policy urgencies.					9
						10
						11

POLITICAL MATTER 3. MAKE IT SIMPLE AND TRANSPARENT

						12
						13
						14
22 PM3....	Reduce the questions in the first round. The focus should be on Vision, the European Concept, Governance, and Legacy.	Article 8 (Pre-selection in the Member States)				15
						16
						17
						18
23 PM3....	Replace the selection panel's visit to candidate cities with a fact-checking report.	Article 9 (Selection in the Member States)				19
						20
						21
24 PM3....	Add fact-checking reporting activity to the Commission's call for tenders for post-ECoC evaluation.	Article 16 (Evaluation)				22
						23
						24
25 PM3....	For the selection panel, prioritise people having direct experience with managing an ECoC and who have been involved in setting up at least another one.					25
						26
						27
						28
26 PM3....	Develop a comprehensive set of tools (e.g. a handbook) to support cities throughout the ECoC application process.					29
						30
						31
						32
27 PM3....	Establish clear regulations and transparency standards to prevent conflicts of interest.					33
						34
						35
28 PM3....	(28) Introduce an Artists' Code of Practice which ECoC cities' bidbooks should align with.					36
						37
						38
29 PM3....	Introduce a standardised self-evaluation tool and workshop series, in cooperation with the European Commission, to assist cities in assessing their readiness to candidate for the ECoC title.					39
						40
						41
						42
						43
						44
						45

Recommendation

Relevant recitals/
article(s)/toolEU
legal
basisEU
policiesEU
guide-
linesLocal
imple-
menta-
tion

POLITICAL MATTER 4. KEEP YOUR PROMISES

30

PM4....

Transform bidbooks into binding commitments.

Article 13
(Monitoring)

31

PM4....

Revise the Melina Mercouri Prize into two payments.

Article 14 (Prize)



32

PM4....

The Melina Mercouri Prize should remain strictly conditional to what is written in the bidbook.

Article 14 (Prize)



33

PM4....

Ensure that national governments engage in supporting ECoC cities upon designation.

Ad hoc article
to be introduced

34

PM4....

Finalise and secure budgets from all government levels at the time of designation.



POLITICAL MATTER 5. STOP MAKING THE SAME MISTAKES

35

PM5....

Capacity-building programmes should be a requirement for applicants, so that everyone can address skill needs in the five years before the title.

Article 5 (Criteria)



36

PM5....

Allocate Creative Europe funds for mentoring, training and fostering partnerships.

Recital 18 of the
EU Regulation
2021/818

37

PM5....

Establish an ECoC official online repository for documenting ECoC projects.

Article 15 (Practical
arrangements)

38

PM5....

Promote public accessibility to ECoC knowledge and opportunities for involvement through dedicated platforms.



39

PM5....

Establish a six-month mentorship by managers who have just finished the title year.



40

PM5....

Require Member States to maintain accessibility to bidbooks, including budget ranges instead of budget figures per each specific project.



Note: Political Matter 1. Europe in everything you do; Political Matter 2. Celebrate what you change; Political Matter 3. Make it simple and transparent; Political Matter 4. Keep your promises; Political Matter 5. Stop making the same mistakes.

Articles refer to Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014, establishing a Union action for the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033, unless otherwise specified.

WHAT NOW?

The recommendations contained in this report will be shared with key EU institutions to help them shape the future of the ECoC initiative, namely:

- The **European Commission**, who will take the lead in drafting the initial proposal based on the findings and recommendations presented.
- The **Committee of the Regions (CoR)**, who will contribute by issuing a non-binding opinion, providing regional and local perspectives on the proposed changes.
- The Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from the **Committee on Culture and Education (CULT)** and the **Council's Cultural Affairs Committee (CAC)**, who will review the proposal, propose amendments, and work towards adopting the final text.

While this research has prioritised changes that can be introduced through the legal basis, future research should provide further guidance to candidate and winning cities, focusing on the following strategic Topics:

Metrics of European impact:

Explore a typology of European engagement, including collaborative creation, knowledge and know-how exchange, and addressing shared European challenges. Concrete metrics should be established for evaluating European impact beyond counting international partnerships. This valuation should be based on case studies from previous ECoC cities that exemplify effective European integration in different contexts, and offer tangible models for future Capitals.

MODELS TO BE EXPLORED AND IMPLEMENTED:

Artistic Excellence vs. Accessibility:

Explore how ECoC cities can balance innovative artistic programming with broad public appeal and bottom-up community involvement. Based on that, develop frameworks to measure cultural participation beyond attendance metrics.

Cross-Sector Collaboration:

Investigate collaboration guidelines between cultural organisations and other sectors, as advocated by the New Agenda for Culture (SWD(2018) 267 final), and explore governance models that promote integration and societal transformation.

Legacy Framework: Research institutional models that sustain ECoC momentum, with governance and funding mechanisms to bridge the post-ECoC gap.

Governance Innovation: Examine participatory governance models that extend beyond traditional stakeholders and address power imbalances for more inclusive implementation.

Environmental Sustainability:

Develop protocols for environmental impact assessments and explore how climate themes can be integrated into cultural programming and sustainable event management.

Academic-Practitioner Partnerships:

Identify successful academic-practitioner partnerships and explore how to embed research into ECoC programming to inform policy and practice.

Cultural Diplomacy through ECoC programming:

Address global challenges through cultural exchange and successful examples of engagement with non-European partners, for positioning European culture in global contexts.

CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

The world has undergone significant changes since the last legal framework was established, with climate change, COVID-19, and AI among the factors, contributing to an ongoing polycrisis. While the future remains uncertain, culture continues to have a pivotal role for social development, serving as an effective platform to negotiate peace and harmony in our societies: lack of dialogue is too often the unrecognised origin of misunderstanding and conflict.

This research applied a stakeholder-driven approach to enhance the ECoC initiative's impact and sustainability. By combining qualitative interviews, policy analysis, structured key stakeholders engagement and survey results, the project has produced politically viable recommendations that will inform future EU cultural policy decisions. The final outcomes, which are presented in this White Paper, aim to strengthen the ECoC framework, ensuring its continued relevance and effectiveness for future generations.

The recommendations provided in this paper aim to preserve an open and flexible model for the ECoC

while strengthening its sustainability in response to the dynamic and complex challenges that cities face. By aligning cultural policies with evolving societal needs, we aim to structurally equip cities to address these challenges effectively in their authentic context. This approach will enhance the resilience and adaptability of urban environments, ensuring that cultural initiatives can continue to play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion, innovation, and long-term sustainability.

The ECoC initiative is at a crucial turning point. With the upcoming revision of the legal basis, we have a unique opportunity to shape the ECoC's future by securing long-term funding, improving governance, and aligning the initiative with contemporary EU priorities. Taking action now will ensure that ECoC continues to drive cultural innovation and promote European unity for decades to come. To contribute to this effort, it is vital to engage with stakeholders, consult with ECoC cities, cultural operators, and researchers, ensuring that policy changes reflect the real needs of the communities involved. Advocating for structural reforms is also of

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paramount importance, particularly in pushing for funding changes and governance mechanisms within the European Parliament, Council, and Commission. Promoting partnerships between ECoC cities and EU institutions, universities, businesses and civil society can further strengthen the initiative.

Throughout this research, we have explored feasible options for improvement, aimed at preserving an open and flexible model for the ECoC while strengthening its sustainability in response to the dynamic and complex challenges that cities face. This has not been an easy task. Over 460 recommendations have been collected. As a research team, we spent hours analysing and testing their feasibility, strongly motivated by the collaborative relationships we have built - not only with ECoC managers and artistic coordinators but also with decision-makers themselves. They took the time to engage with this research, carefully listening to us and generously sharing their successes, frustrations, doubts, and, most importantly, hopes.

The possibility of transforming these hopes into actionable advice has been a major driver of the countless hours spent on this work. The legal basis is not the most exciting read, yet this research has allowed us to use it as a strategic and consensual tool, helping us find common ground where divergent views arose. It has challenged us to find concrete ways to turn ambition into action.

Of course, this work would not exist without the invaluable contributions of those who shared their time and insights. The input of those who have contributed directly - and those who are still willing to engage - is more than welcome. Not only are we open to receiving constructive comments, but we actively invite you to debate our approach and results, organise discussion forums, and share any feedback that can help us build a collective, strong, convincing, and unified message. This is why we deliberately decided in the first released version of the White paper to stop our selection to 35 recommendations : five more were co-developed with around 200 managers, artistic coordinators and panel members during the conference in Chemnitz in April 2025.

We have gathered additional valuable feedback and recommendations other than the 40 retained. The ones that have not been incorporated into the final White Paper can be grouped into three types:

- **“Status quo recommendations”,** are those that do not introduce real change, like the ones suggesting broadening the definition of culture to include science, heritage, and gastronomy, encouraging multidisciplinary (this already happens in practice).
- **“Controversial recommendations”,** are those that collected minor consensus such as the one recommending renaming the initiative as “Capital of European Cultures” to further emphasise its European dimension. Or the one recommending having only one capital per year with a 5 million euro prize to maximise impact and relevance (40% disagree, 7% neutral, 53% agree), the one recommending eliminating the fixed calendar for countries and organising open competitions (33% disagree, 27% neutral, 40% agree), or the one recommending a shift to a broader “European Year of Culture” format, focusing on policy-relevant themes each year, and encouraging cities to collaborate on common cultural plans (42% disagree, 9% neutral 49% agree).

- **“Recommendations requiring further refinement”,** these may find strong support from the survey respondents but are difficult to translate into concrete actions or are out of the scope of this research, such as the one recommending introducing measurable indicators of European impact.

Collective effort will be crucial to ensure that the White Paper reaches the right decision-makers, with the right arguments and the most feasible recommendations. Decision-making is at the heart of our democracy. The process can be long and frustrating, which is why we decided to start early. The results can be immensely rewarding. Although 2034 may seem far away, and the future is difficult to predict, this is our joint opportunity to make a difference and elevate culture’s relevance even further. This is our chance. Let’s not waste it.

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ANNEXES

(1) METHODOLOGY

The research project aims to provide actionable recommendations for the future development of the ECoC action by analysing its implementation over the past four decades. The project is promoted by the City of Chemnitz, with the support of the City of Nova Gorica, and was structured across three key phases. Each phase incorporated rigorous research methodologies to ensure stakeholder engagement, policy relevance and actionable outcomes.

PHASE I: TEAM SELECTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN (FEBRUARY TO JUNE 2024)

The initial phase focused on assembling a highly qualified research team and establishing a robust research framework. A concept and impact lead, a lead researcher and three research assistants, and a project manager were recruited to deliver the project.

As a first step, a comprehensive policy review was conducted to position the research within the broader EU cultural policy framework. This included an analysis of:

- EU legal texts defining the evolving objectives and governance of the ECoC action.
- EU-level studies and reports evaluating ECoC.

- Policy documents and guidelines outlining the selection and monitoring mechanisms.

Following on from this, twelve scoping interviews were held with key stakeholders of the ECoC action (ECoC managers and artistic coordinators, policymakers, and cultural experts), as well as with the policy officials within the European Commission working on the ECoC action. These discussions and insights helped refine the research scope, identify priority areas for improvement, and shape the methodology for subsequent steps.

PHASE II: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS (MARCH 2024 TO JANUARY 2025)

To gain deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of those directly involved in the ECoC initiative, a qualitative research approach was employed. This phase aimed to capture first-hand accounts of the challenges, successes, and areas for improvement as perceived by key practitioners.

The second phase focused on gathering qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. A total of 64 interviews were conducted with an initial sample of 82 ECoC cities from between 1985 and 2028. This corresponds to a 78% response rate from key stakeholders, including CEOs, managers, and artistic coordinators of ECoC cities, from the first editions (1987, Amsterdam) to the latest addition (2028, Skopje).

A standardised interview protocol was developed to ensure consistency across discussions. The collected data was transcribed, analysed, and categorised into key themes, focusing on the professional experiences of interviewees in the ECoC initiative; the identified challenges in governance, funding, and implementation of ECoC; what elements within the current ECoC framework are to be changed; and lastly, the concrete recommendations for improving the ECoC action.

The recommendations extracted from the interviews (463 in total) were systematically categorised by their most suitable implementation level:

- EU Legal Basis – Changes requiring amendments to EU legislation.
- EU Policies – Elements to implement operational guidelines within existing frameworks.
- EU Guidelines – Recommendations relevant to national authorities implementing the action.
- Local Implementation – Adjustments in city-level execution and governance.

PHASE III: DATA TRIANGULATION AND ADVOCACY (JANUARY TO JUNE 2025)

The final phase aimed to validate findings, refine recommendations, and advocate for their adoption. First, an online survey was distributed to key stakeholders, including the ECoC managers and artistic coordinators representing the 82 ECoC hosts of the past 40 years. A total of 58 responses were collected. For a matter of consistency with the research methodology, the results reported in the White Paper only refer to the 45 responses collected from managers and artistic coordinators. The survey helped prioritise key recommendations and assess their feasibility. Recommendations were then compiled into a White Paper, which is presented as a roadmap for future ECoC governance and policy improvements. A major workshop in Chemnitz (April 2025), designed to bring together over 200 ECoC stakeholders to refine recommendations and build consensus over the preliminary draft of the White Paper.

In parallel, targeted advocacy meetings were held with EU institutions, including the European Parliament, European Council, European Commission, and SEDEC Committee. These engagements confirmed alignment with legislative processes and enhanced the likelihood of policy change and its adoption.

	A	B	C	D	E
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6	Year	ECoC	Country	Interviewee	Position in the ECoC²³
7					
8					
9	2014	Riga	Latvia	Aiva Rozenberga	Artistic Coordinator
10	2014	Umeå	Sweden	Fredrik Lindegren	Artistic Coordinator
11	2015	Mons	Belgium	Yves Vasseur	Manager and Artistic Coordinator
12	2015	Pilsen	Czech Republic	Jiří Suchánek	Manager
13	2016	San Sebastián	Spain	Pablo Berástegui	Manager
14	2016	Wrocław	Poland	Krzysztof Maj	Manager
15	2017	Aarhus	Denmark	Lene Øster	Manager
16	2017	Paphos	Cyprus	Georgia Doetzer	Artistic Coordinator
17	2018	Leeuwarden	Netherlands	Tjeerd van Bekkum	Manager
18	2018	Valletta	Malta	Jean Pierre Magro	Manager
19	2019	Matera	Italy	Paolo Verri	Manager
20	2019	Plovdiv	Bulgaria	Viktor Yankov	Manager
21	2020	Galway	Ireland	Marilyn Gaughan Reddan	Manager
22	2020	Rijeka	Croatia	Irena Kregar Šegota	Manager
23	2022	Esch-sur-Alzette	Luxembourg	Nancy Braun	Manager
24	2022	Kaunas	Lithuania	Virginija Vitkienė	Manager
25	2022	Novi Sad	Serbia	Sara Vuletić	Artistic Coordinator
26	2023	Elefsina	Greece	Michail Marmarinos	Artistic Coordinator
27	2023	Timișoara	Romania	Alexandra Rigler	Manager
28	2023	Veszprém	Hungary	Friderika Mike	Artistic Coordinator
29	2024	Bad Ischl	Austria	Elisabeth Schweeger	Artistic Coordinator
30	2024	Bodø	Norway	Henrik Sand Dagfinrud	Artistic Coordinator
31	2024	Tartu	Estonia	Kuldar Leis	Manager
32	2025	Chemnitz	Germany	Andrea Pier	Manager
33	2025	Nova Gorica	Slovenia	Stojan Pelko	Artistic Coordinator
34	2026	Oulu	Finland	Piia Rantala-Korhonen	Manager
35	2026	Trenčín	Slovakia	Lenka Kuricová	Artistic Coordinator
36	2027	Évora	Portugal	Paula Garcia	Manager
37	2027	Liepāja	Latvia	Inta Šoriņa	Manager
38	2028	Bourges	France	Pascal Keiser	Manager
39	2028	České Budějovice	Czech Republic	Anna Hořejší	Artistic Coordinator
40	2028	Skopje	North Macedonia	Kristina Depo	Manager
41					
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45					
					<p>²³ For the purposes of this research, we have standardised the position (Manager or Artistic Coordinator) according to our interpretation of their roles in ECoC.</p>
					59

INTERVIEWS WITH INTERNATIONAL EUROPEAN EXPERTS AND POLICYMAKERS

Interviewee²⁴

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Team leader for Cultural and Creative industries at the EU Commission

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Head of Cultural Department and Institutional Lead Chemnitz ECoC 2025 on behalf of the City of Chemnitz

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Steve Green

Former Head of Business Deveopment at the British Council, Panel member, (Chair)

Rolf Noras

Director of Cultural Affairs fo the municipality of Stavanger

Beatriz Garcia

Senior research fellow, Associate Director at the Centre for Cultural value, Evaluator, Data Analyst, Panel member

Sylvia Amann

Culture and creative economy policy development expert, Advisor at the European Commission, panel member

Tanya Hristova

Chair of SEDEC Commission and Rapporteur of CoR opinions related to CCS issues

Andrés Tobias y Rubios

Administrator at the Council of the EU (Cultural Affairs)

Hannes Heide

Member of the CULT Committee on Culture and Education

Bogdan Zdrojewski

Vice-Chair of the CULT Committee on Culture and Education

²⁴ By chronological order of the interviews.

IMPRINT

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 Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung
für Kultur und Medien



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40 YEARS OF EUROPEAN CAPITALS OF CULTURE

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