



Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2028 in France

Selection Stage

Expert Panel's report

Edited by

the expert panel members

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Introduction

This is the report of the expert panel (the “panel”) for the selection phase of the competition for the European Capital of Culture (“ECoC”) 2028 in France. The competition is a European Union initiative dating back to 1985.

The Ministry of Culture of France (the “Ministry”) acts as the managing authority (the “managing authority”) of the competition, which is governed by Decision 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “Decision”)¹ and by the decree (“décret”) n°2021-1824 of 24 December 2021 (NOR:MICB2138082D) and the notice (“avis”) of 28 December 2021 (NOR:MICB2138117V) (as modified by the notice of 13 October 2022, (NOR: MICB2229044V)) adopted by the Ministry and published on its website together with the corresponding call for submission of applications.²

In line with Article 2 of the Decree, a panel of twelve independent experts has been established for the selection process. Ten panel members have been appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies (European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions). Two members of the panel were appointed by the Ministry. The members of the panel were then formally appointed by the order of 7 February 2023 of the Minister for Culture (NOR: MICB2303210A).

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

Pre-selection round

The managing authority issued a call for applications on 31 December 2021. Nine applications were submitted by the closing date of 2 January 2023: Amiens, Bastia, Bourges, Clermont-Ferrand, Montpellier, Nice, Reims, Rouen and Saint-Denis. The panel met on 28 February – 3 March 2023 for the pre-selection meeting. It recommended inviting the four bidding cities of Bourges, Clermont-Ferrand, Montpellier, and Rouen to progress to the final selection stage. The panel’s report is published on the websites of the European Commission and of the Ministry.³

The Ministry accepted the panel’s recommendation and invited the four cities to submit final applications with a deadline of 3 November 2023.

The four cities submitted their final applications (“bid-books”) by the deadline.

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

² <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Demarches-en-ligne/Par-type-de-demarche/Appels-a-projets-candidatures/Capitale-europeenne-de-la-Culture-2028>

³ [Designated European Capitals of Culture | Culture and Creativity \(europa.eu\): https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Europe-et-international/L-action-europeenne-et-internationale-du-ministere-de-la-Culture/Capitale-europeenne-de-la-Culture-2028](https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Europe-et-international/L-action-europeenne-et-internationale-du-ministere-de-la-Culture/Capitale-europeenne-de-la-Culture-2028)

A delegation of four members of the panel took part in city visits on 4-8 December 2023. They were accompanied by observers from the managing authority and the European Commission. The delegation reported to the panel at the selection meeting.

Panel final selection meeting

The panel met in presence on 11-13 December 2023 in Paris. One panel member was excused for personal reasons.

Representatives of the managing authority and of the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers took no part in the panel's deliberations or decision. All panel members signed a declaration of no conflict of interest and confidentiality. The panel confirmed Ms Rossella Tarantino as its Chair and Ms Anne Tallineau as its Vice-Chair. The panel elected Ms Else Christensen-Redzepovic and Ms Goda Giedraityte as rapporteurs.

At the selection hearings on 11 and 12 December 2023, each candidate city, in alphabetical order, presented its case (in 45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (in 60 minutes).

The Chair of the panel announced the panel's recommendation at a public event, live streamed on the social networks of the Ministry, on 13 December 2023 in the presence of the French Minister of Culture, Ms Rima Abdul-Malak, and the Head of the Representation of the European Commission in France, Ms Valérie Drezet-Humez.

National context

2028 will be the fifth time France hosts a "European Capital of Culture" after Paris in 1989, Avignon in 2000, Lille in 2004 and Marseilles-Provence in 2013. The selection criteria for an ECoC have changed considerably since then. They now embrace a deeper and wider scope of the role of culture in the city and European development. A particular new requirement is for a city to have a formal cultural strategy adopted, which includes the ECoC project. This ensures that the ECoC is an element in the progress of a city and not a one-off event. It therefore enhances the importance of sustainable legacy.

The panel recognised that the four bids in France were of very high quality and ambition, reflecting the specific states in their respective cities and regions and taking into consideration the wider European agenda and the geo-political situation. It welcomed the strong development of the bidding proposals between the pre-selection and the final selection stages. The panel appreciates that the four cities have used the bidding process to reinforce their cultural strategies, to further involve their citizens in the cultural process, and to strengthen the role of culture and Europe in their overall socio-economic development. This is already a significant potential legacy of the ECoC competition.

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

Assessments of the candidates

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

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

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

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

Bourges

Under the title "Territories of the Future", Bourges' bid envisions a transformative landscape for small and medium-sized cities in France, Europe and beyond, emphasising a human scale, with people and nature at the centre. It embodies a narrative of overcoming challenges, resolving conflicts, and addressing pressing European issues, from the, sometimes, problematic reception of migrants and LGBTQIA+ communities in smaller towns to the urgent need for ecological sustainability.

Bourges 2028 emerges not as a solitary endeavour but as a part of an innovative matrix of smaller cities across Europe, united to co-create a new reality. With a systemic approach and a responsibility to combat climate change, Bourges 2028 intends to pioneer a paradigm shift, offering a visionary model for small and medium-sized cities, placing artists and citizens at the core of an inclusive, ecological, and innovative societal renaissance.

The bid includes the city of Bourges, the Bourges Plus conurbation, the Cher Department and the Centre-Val de Loire Region. All four political entities support the Bourges 2028 bid.

Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city:

- Bourges' concept remains unchanged. The summer riots in France, which also affected smaller cities like Bourges, unveiling societal fragmentation and the resentment of marginalised youth, underscores the urgent need for Bourges to transform into a place where people feel valued and in control.

- "Territories of the Future" emphasises inclusivity and ecological sustainability. Despite challenges, Bourges 2028 aims to break the "climate change blockage" through innovative, low-carbon projects, offering a new model for small and medium-sized cities.
- The long-term cultural strategy in Bourges, officially adopted by the City Council on 6 October 2022, has undergone no specific alterations and continues to be implemented in partnership with all city stakeholders. The overall support from the Region has increased.
- Bourges 2028 aligns well with the cultural strategy priorities of encouraging artistic practices, addressing societal challenges, supporting resident-driven initiatives, and facilitating cultural access, emphasising inclusivity, ecological sustainability, and the role of artists in shaping new European narratives.
- In line with pre-selection panel recommendations, Bourges 2028's infrastructure strategy shifts to prioritise existing exhibition spaces in the city's historical centre, forming the Cultural Mile, including venues like Halle aux blés and Pavillon d'Auron. This approach enhances planning security, reduces carbon emissions, and aligns with ongoing urban renewal efforts and satellite venues.
- Bourges 2028 anticipates its long-term impacts, evolving into "Territories of Now" by 2029. The well-described strategy includes a European City of Artists, initiatives addressing climate change, and innovative creative districts contributing to a 5% increase in city GDP. The vision is for a human-scale city, part of a matrix of 25 similar cities in France and across Europe, emphasising inclusive urban design, governance, and increased civic engagement.
- The plans for monitoring and evaluation are overall strong, showcasing a robust assessment based on reliable baseline data. However, a notable area for improvement is defining clearer KPIs that align more precisely with the objectives and milestones of the ECoC. Further, although the plan outlines four measurement objectives – economic, environmental, social, and physiological – there is a noticeable omission of cultural considerations.
- The suggested timeline proposes setting a final pre-ECoC baseline only three months before the event, which according to the panel misses the opportunity to allow for a comprehensive evaluation of the ECoC's effects in the preparatory years.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The panel was inspired by the concept of the bid "*Territories of the Future*" from the pre-selection stage, relevant both on the local and European levels. The programme is very interesting, well-structured and modest in its "human scale". It is clearly linked to the overall theme and is coherent with the individual projects.
- The panel also appreciated the further development and simplification of the structure of the programme, which is now divided into three lines: *Lots of Neighbours*, *The Language of Europe* and *Right Here Right Now!* – and presents approximately 50 projects with sub projects. Each of them indicates experienced curators, commissioners, partners, as well as high-level French and international artists, and budgets.

- The programme presents a diversity of artistic forms as well as good and clear examples on how to combine cultural heritage with new experimental cultural expressions.
- The panel has been satisfied with precise calculations to estimate the carbon costs of the project. This makes a firm commitment to low carbon impact and follows the 2030 climate objectives of the European Union.
- A clear strategy is presented for how and on the basis of which main criteria future projects will be selected. Open calls will be directly linked to existing projects, but the main idea is to develop the projects and programme in partnerships. Budget-wise, the presented programme covers most of the overall programme budget.
- There is strong evidence of a deep involvement of local artists and cultural organisations. Such involvement is clearly described, and names of local partners are provided with information on their inclusion in concrete projects.

European dimension:

- The bid presents a compelling European dimension. It showcases a strong European focus and articulates well how it actively plans to promote European themes, integration, and intercultural dialogue.
- While some aspects of European culture and values are briefly touched upon, greater emphasis on showcasing activities that underscore these common elements was sought.
- Concrete examples illustrate connections with European artists, operators, and cities, extending to international cultural cooperation beyond Europe. Specific names of partners and highly reputed artists are provided.
- The bid exhibits a well-defined strategy to attract a broad European and international audience.
- The bid showcases strong and detailed collaborations with other ECoCs, establishing links between the cultural programme and counterparts to ensure alignment with the bid's objectives. The overall bid reflects a cohesive European mind-set.

Outreach:

- The key aspect of the audience development programme is based on participation and governance – “where people feel they matter and feel in charge”.
- A very strong involvement of the local population is validated with project examples and important tools to ensure wider outreach and governance, like the “European Citizen Council”, the “New Patrons” initiative, etc.
- The participation of less privileged groups is well described, paying special attention to elderly people and people with physical, mental, or economic difficulties, LGBTQIA+ communities, refugees, and immigrants, as well as homeless people.
- Bourges 2028 swiftly reacted to the summer riots, where the team developed reinforced attention towards the needs of the youth. The clear integration of youngsters into the programme as well as the allocation of a 5 million Euro budget to support ideas and projects of young people (from 0 to 25 years) is perceived as a strong commitment towards future generations.

- The digital strategy is based on the team's approach of both respecting carbon issues and ensuring strengths of digital technologies. Therefore, more downloadable content than streaming will be delivered to the audiences.

Management:

- The operating budget stands at 46.6 million Euro, reflecting an increase of 6 million Euro from the pre-selection stage (it reaches 50.8 million Euro when in-kind and in-skills contributions from the private and public sectors are taken into consideration). 84% of the budget is expected to come from public sources while the private sector should contribute the remaining 16%. The panel considers that the expectation is high, in particular because the strategy for securing private funding is not very convincing. Capital investment stands at 99.8 million Euro.
- The plan for securing EU funding is sound. The expectation to secure just 2.25 million Euro is considered quite low. However, a dedicated organisation has been set up to secure such funding.
- The allocation breakdown includes 66% for the programme, 21% for salaries, 12% for marketing and communication, and 1% for contingency. The high percentage allocated to salaries is justified by the challenge in attracting qualified staff in the region, necessitating competitive compensation.
- The governance structure is sound with clear descriptions of tasks, mandates, and responsibilities. The appointment of a Carbon Balance Commissioner is innovative. Recruitments are planned on national and international levels and include exchanges with other ECoCs.
- The risk assessment is well thought through with appropriate mitigation measures. This includes challenges with securing qualified staff. A contingency budget of just 1% might prove not sufficient.
- The marketing and communication strategy is well built with clear timelines, although its international part could be further enhanced. An international media manager will be hired along with a specialised agency for international marketing and communication. The way to highlight the ECoC as an EU action could also be strengthened.
- The staffing plan for the artistic programme spanning from 2024 to 2027 is quite low, given the magnitude of tasks anticipated during this period.

Capacity to deliver:

- There is continuous political and financial support for the candidacy from the City Council of Bourges, Bourges Plus Conurbation, the Cher Department, and the Centre-Val de Loire Region. However, the vote on their contributions to capital expenditure has been postponed until early 2024 due to the adjustments that have been made in the investment strategy for Bourges 2028.
- The plans for investments in cultural infrastructure are clear, with well-defined budgets and timelines listed. The panel appreciates the decision to focus mainly on pre-existing locations, requiring just limited work or renovation to avoid getting caught in a delay in the delivery. Therefore, with the exemption of the New Media Library in the Northern districts of Bourges, all projects are to be completed before 2028.

- To address accessibility difficulties in the city, Bourges has introduced free public transportation for its residents. Bourges 2028 has also designed cultural mobility projects that align with the ecological transition's challenges.

Conclusion:

Bourges 2028 presents a visionary narrative extending beyond local confines to address pressing European and global issues, emphasising inclusivity, ecological sustainability, and a "human scale". The bid innovatively tackles climate change through low-carbon projects, setting a model for smaller cities.

While the monitoring and evaluation plan is robust, clarity in KPIs, particularly regarding cultural aspects, is needed. The artistic programme, well-developed and coherent, features experienced curators, commissioners, and high-level artists. Its diversity showcases a strong blend of cultural heritage and experimental expressions.

The bid actively promotes European themes, integration, and intercultural dialogue, with robust audience development involving local initiatives like the "European Citizen Council" and the "New Patrons" initiative. The governance structure is solid, backed by continuous political and financial support from various entities.

Overall, the Bourges 2028 bid displays considerable strengths across the ECoC objectives and criteria with some shortcomings in the monitoring plan, recruitment plan for the artistic programme and areas related to the international aspects of marketing.

The panel recommends that the bid of Bourges is selected.

Recommendations for preparing Bourges 2028 for the title year can be found at the end of this report.

Clermont-Ferrand

The Massif Central – with its volcanoes, plateaus, forests, marshes, lakes, and peaks – is a mysterious land, full of legends and fantastical stories. But, according to the bid, for a long time, it “has been overlooked by the State, resulting in a number of land planning (in)decisions”. Therefore, grounded on the concept of the “Middle-Earth”, Clermont-Ferrand 2028 intends to bring urban and rural areas closer together, uniting all the inhabitants of the city and the Massif Central, as well as artists and audiences from afar, with limited access to culture, in a great cultural and social momentum to become European Capital of Culture.

More than 600 municipalities, 13 Departments and the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Region supported the candidacy of Clermont-Ferrand Massif Central 2028.

Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city:

- The concept of Middle-Earth has been maintained but has evolved, symbolising both a nod to J.R.R. Tolkien's creativity and a geographical description of the region. The city effectively justifies the shift by emphasising Middle-Earth as a collective commitment

to showcasing the Massif Central's unique cultural and natural attributes and to give central stage to inner mountainous areas.

- Clermont-Ferrand's cultural strategy has evolved post pre-selection, prioritising inclusivity, and targeted initiatives for marginalised audiences across four axes. These include artistic education (European mille formes network), support for creation (Lieu-Dit and artist residencies), diversity and disability (Museum Plan), and international collaboration (partnerships, Tourism Club). While the cultural impact of ECoC is touched upon, more detailed information on the long-term strategy was sought.
- Clermont-Ferrand aspires to be a cultural hub with sobriety, quality content, and inclusive education. Despite ambitious goals like quadrupling visitors and ensuring accessibility, the response lacks specific strategies and measurable milestones to achieve these objectives.
- The monitoring and evaluation plan outlines a clear timeline and includes examples of KPIs, but qualitative indicators seem not to be included. The evaluation relies on the UNESCO thematic indicators for culture. This monitoring framework is complemented by the data on visitors that are to be collected by the Capital's barometer. The dataset seems to cover all the areas but misses a focus on European cooperation, also with reference to the Forum of Massifs.
- The Capital's Barometer is recognized as a valuable tool with the potential to be a useful legacy for the region. However, its evolution from Visitor's observatory to Capital's barometer is not clearly fleshed out and its operation is not explained in detail.
- There is no independent evaluation plan with indication of the topics to be investigated and the general methodologies to be implemented. Instead, mostly self-conducted evaluations with an auditor are proposed. On the other hand, the proposal to creatively translate monitoring data into visually striking open-source resources and disseminate them for various audiences is valued.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The metaphor of Middle-Earth provides a poetic narrative to an artistic vision. However, the panel noted that it still does not resonate very well or easily as a main theme for the programme. On the contrary, it makes the structure of the programme very complicated and unclear. The division into 4 Grandes Traversées, each covering a period of 3 months (*Draw the Map, Give Ourselves a Story, Speak the Languages, Build a New World*) and joined by 8 themes reflecting the challenges, creates a lack of overall coherence even more.
- The programme covers different artistic forms, and approximately 36 projects with sub projects are presented, including information on the curators, partners and artists, and budgets. There are some interesting, original, and even edgy projects, especially linked to early childhood, colportage, folklore, and pastoralism. However, they seem fragmented, and not a coherent entity of the overall programme.
- The plans for the programme compilation are presented in the form of open calls that will be organised in relation to the existing projects. However, the explanation of how exactly events and activities will be chosen remains somewhat general. Budget-wise, the presented programme covers 80-85 % of the overall programme budget.

- Welcoming the design of the programme with a purpose to reach all the remote villages (many nomadic devices, festive moments, etc.), the panel remained concerned about the possible fragmentation of the programme because of its distribution in a large geographical area.
- The panel was satisfied with the strong involvement of the local cultural sector (this was already the case with the pre-selection bid). This aspect was strengthened by the addition of experienced French cultural actors as well as of high-level guest artists from all over the world.
- There is a solid combination between local cultural heritage and traditional art practices with new, innovative forms of artistic expressions.

European dimension:

- Clermont-Ferrand anticipates a transformative shift in the historical symbiosis with its rural surroundings by placing the European "Massifs" (medium altitude mountain ranges) at the heart of the European project. The "Forum des Massifs" aims at bringing together citizens, artists, and representatives of mountainous areas across Europe. However, the panel failed to see a more central and horizontal role of this strong European project across the programme.
- The programme highlights European themes centred on mobility and the relationship between urban and rural areas but there is limited information on activities highlighting common aspects of European history and heritage.
- The bid articulates collaboration with European artists, operators, and cities, providing specific names of partners and some artists. Yet, the bid relies strongly on established city networks such as the Michelin network in the international strategy, lacking emphasis on European cultural networks, which are crucial for an ECoC. Moreover, the bid's objectives are unclear in the description of these collaborations and there is a lack of clarity in the relations of the current projects to the specific ECoC programme projects.
- The strategy to attract audiences from wider Europe with a tourism-oriented focus, lacks a comprehensive outreach plan for engaging new cultural audiences across the continent. Despite an overarching goal of attracting a broad European and international public to establish Massif Central as a leading tourism destination, the outlined practical steps appear to be insufficient.
- The bid demonstrates a solid strategy with the Czech Republic and strong connections with other ECoCs but more detailed information could enhance the understanding of the nature of the cooperation

Outreach:

- The involvement of the local population has been very strong, based on an ambitious statement of "the Capital of all territories and all inclusions". It is supported by clear statistics of the number of people who have been involved in the bid and diverse activities of their involvement. The panel was impressed by the contract with 600 villages, which is a major political outreach.

- The panel welcomed the participation of marginalised groups: refugees, elderly, disabled people, LGBTQIA+, youth and children. The emphasis on young people is very solid, including the Youth Assembly, the strategy for schools and universities, and/or 10 % of the programming budget to be allocated to the young people.
- A budget of 4 million Euro for open calls, focused on artistic and cultural education projects for isolated audiences, students in vocational training, workers and corporate employees, refugees etc. is appreciated by the panel, but it is hard to assess the content of these projects yet.
- The panel appreciated the idea of an accessibility charter to be signed by the Accessibility Ambassadors, the Tourism Club, and the Massif Central Pour Tous. However, it would have been even stronger if this charter had been signed by the time of submission of the final bid book.
- The bid book gives evidence of the bold attempt to bring culture to isolated villages via shared mobility, nomadic spaces, and tools of communication.

Management:

- The operating budget of 72.9 million Euro is considered sound, with a well-balanced division of 90% public and 10% private funding, unanimously approved by the City and Metropolis.
- Capital investment is at 153.9 million Euro, including 43 million Euro for ECoC-related infrastructure with five new venues, marking a 50 million Euro increase since pre-selection.
- The strategy for attracting private funding is solid and as from 2017 several companies have already financially supported the bid. The EU funding strategy is briefly outlined with a modest anticipated revenue of 2.3 million Euro. However, there will be a dedicated team installed in 2024 for this task.
- Operating budget breakdown shows imbalance, allocating only 56% for the programme, which is considered very low, and 23% for salaries, which is deemed quite high. It is encouraging to see 2% of the budget being allocated to sustainable development.
- A Public Institution (EPCC) will be created for the ECoC delivery, though tasks, mandates, and responsibilities within the organisation lack clarity in their description. The panel raises concerns about the combination of general and artistic director roles and the high anticipated staff and committee numbers.
- The contingency plan is extensive with well-thought-out risk assessment and mitigation measures for most risk areas and with a fair budget line for unforeseen expenditures.
- The marketing and communication strategy is solid, featuring the Chaîne des Chaînes media platform; however, the international level of the strategy is less convincing, though the approach to highlighting the ECoC as an EU action is sound with interesting elements.

Capacity to deliver:

- There is continuous and unanimous political support for the candidacy from the City of Clermont-Ferrand and Clermont Auvergne Metropolitan Area. The other regional authorities of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Region have also affirmed their commitment.
- The plans for investments in cultural infrastructure are clear, with well-defined projects and timelines listed. However, there is no information on the budgets for individual infrastructure projects. The panel appreciates that with the exemption of the Cité du Court and the Massif Central + Sonic, the infrastructure projects will be completed before 2028. accessibility.

Conclusion:

The candidacy of Clermont-Ferrand has been deepened, presenting improvements from the first bid book. However, the panel thinks that the concept still does not resonate very well or easily as a main theme for the programme. The artistic vision lacks a clear European dimension, and the structure of the programme could have been further simplified to provide a clear and concrete ECoC 2028 programme.

Developed over an immense territory, the “Middle Earth” programme is fortunate to have at its disposal a rich heritage, many festivals, exceptional landscapes, high-level cultural facilities, and a strong support from a committed local industry. Nevertheless, the vast programme suffers from its eclecticism and scale. More attention could also have been given to developing a digital strategy, which could have strongly supported the very wide regional coverage. Clear guidelines to ensure that the projects from the open calls are in line with the objectives and theme of the programme are missing.

The panel appreciated the strong involvement of the local population but emphasised the need for a stronger focus on activities highlighting common aspects of European history and heritage. The programme is well embedded in the long-term cultural strategy, has unanimous institutional support and a solid operational budget. However, the anticipated impacts are not clearly defined. The operation of the Barometer is unclear in connection to the Visitors' Observatory, and there is no independent evaluation plan with defined topics to be investigated.

Montpellier

The city of Montpellier and its region are defined by their diverse population (to which thousands of tourists are added each year) as well as great economic and cultural variety. The aim of the ECoC project is to reinforce the inclusion of Montpellier and its cultural players at the heart of Europe. The initial concept of the bid “Our collective imagination” has been changed to “The Crossroads of our Imaginations”. Retaining the emphasis on multiple imaginations, the team believes that this approach is best suited to addressing contemporary environmental and societal challenges through the prism of culture.

The partnership with the neighbouring city of Sète and Montpellier wide urban area is at the origin of the ECoC bidding endeavour. Together with the Occitanie Region and the Hérault Department, 10 regional partners are founding members of the bid association. In total 154

municipalities covering a population of over 900,000 inhabitants are associated in this joint cultural action.

Contribution to the long-term strategy:

- Montpellier amended the bid's general concept for the final selection phase, transitioning from the initial concept of "Our Collective Imagination" to the revised version, "The Crossroads of Our Imaginations". Maintaining a focus on diverse perspectives, this approach is most effective in addressing contemporary environmental and societal challenges through culture.
- Long-term impacts are worked out in a clear and detailed manner, covering environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions. ECoC objectives are distinctly defined, intricately linked to relevant indicators and data sources.
- Montpellier's cultural strategy, unanimously endorsed by the Metropolitan Council and City Council in July 2023, serves as a manifesto for the Montpellier 28 area and outlines commitments and shared aspirations, notably in areas like youth, heritage preservation, and hosting artists. Concurrently, the Hérault Department and the Occitanie Region have adopted cultural strategies for 2028, aligning with the bid's key issues and the goal of making culture accessible to all.
- These strategies emphasise audience diversity, environmental considerations, and decentralisation. However, the integration of these priorities into the bid's programme themes of connection, action, and celebration may be perceived as overly complex.
- The oversight of monitoring and evaluation responsibilities falls under a multidisciplinary team of university researchers. Monitoring and evaluation encompass all three bid areas (connect/act/celebrate) through a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures, meeting the standard requirements for ECoC.
- The monitoring and evaluation process is divided into different phases, supported by a well-defined timeline. The results will be shared in European seminars.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The panel welcomes a slight change in the theme from the pre-selection bid, far more embedded in the region. The programme is ambitious and of high-quality. It is based on three pillars – *Connect, Act, Celebrate* – and divided into three lines: *Living Trails, Time Machine and Trans!*, which is coherent with the overall theme and the programme structure.
- The programme covers most art disciplines and presents approximately 49 projects, spanning various art disciplines, many of which involve partnerships, co-productions, and initiatives with African and European collaborators. The projects are indicated by the wide-ranged budget level, which makes it difficult to distinguish the real costs of each individual project. Budget-wise, the presented programme covers 70 % of the overall programme budget.
- Calls for projects in 2022 with a total budget of 700,000 Euro have been renewed in 2023 for the same amount. However, the selection criteria on which new projects will be added to the programme are not clear.

- The panel welcomes the strong involvement of the local cultural sector. Led by the M28 team, workshops, meetings, talks, and gatherings were organised to develop programmes in dialogue with the artistic scene. Names of well-known artists and experienced cultural organisations are provided.
- The panel is convinced that the programme has potential to create dialogue between Europe and Africa, given the strong and historic presence of Africa in the region. On a less positive note, the panel missed a stronger European focus in the projects.
- The connection between essentially popular projects linked to folkloric traditions with innovative and experimental modes based on collective design is convincing.

European dimension:

- The bid addresses various themes with a strong European relevance, such as the ecological transition, social equity and solidarity, the promotion of the values of humanity and peace in a time of wars, or the need to empower the young generation, which the panel recognises as very interesting issues for the whole European Union.
- Montpellier 2028 also ambitions to transform the city and the region into a forum for a fair debate – based on true reciprocity and equality – between European and African cities, in order to discuss, through cultural means, shared challenges related for example to memory, water management or environmental sustainability. The panel recognises this has the potential to set a valuable precedent in the ECoC history, especially in today's international geopolitical context.
- However, while the bid demonstrates clarity in its proposed cooperation with Africa, it could have provided more concrete examples illustrating how it plans to promote cultural diversity in Europe and enhance mutual understanding among European citizens. The panel would also have expected more specific instances highlighting common aspects of European history and integration.
- While the bid does articulate collaboration with European artists, operators, and cities and provides specific names, it could have enhanced the portrayal of wider Europe, even if the panel appreciates the efforts made since pre-selection to increase cooperation with Northern and Central Europe.
- Although collaboration projects with other European Capitals of Culture are mentioned, the bid could offer more information on the nature of the cooperation
- The strategy to attract a broader European audience through the cultural programme designed for the ECoC year may have benefitted from additional details on specific methods and initiatives. However, it does recognize and utilise the conventional cultural attractions in the region.

Outreach:

- The bid presents various initiatives to involve the local population and civil society in the preparation of the bid. The panel appreciated that this also includes usage of existing democratic foundations (development councils, the regional economic, social, and environmental council, the children's municipal council, the council of foreigners, etc.).

- The approach to outreach is based on responding to specific needs, adapting to each person's abilities, and taking all aspects of diversity into account. The panel appreciated a very good connection between the arts and health systems, smart ticketing system, adapted time scheduling of the events, capacity building tools, etc.
- The panel was also satisfied with a solid strategy to create new and sustainable opportunities that will enable citizens to attend, co-construct or participate in cultural activities, especially marginalised, disadvantaged people, including minority groups, young and elderly people, migrants, and refugees, LGBTQIA+ communities, etc.
- Digital aspect is also presented in the bid to provide information and ensure experiences with such tools as Ask Mona or augmented reality projects in museums as well as ECoC's TV coverage with the help of Culture Box.

Management:

- The operational budget, now standing at 67 million Euro, has increased by 5 million Euro since the pre-selection phase, which the panel sees as a positive development showing strong commitment. The allocation of 90% public and 10% private funding remains well-balanced. Capital expenditure is set at 124.8 million Euro, showing a reduction of almost 30 million Euro since the pre-selection phase, though remaining at an ambitious level.
- Public sector revenues, excluding State and EU contributions, have been confirmed.
- The strategy to secure private sources is robust, approximately 18% of the planned 6 million Euro, has already been secured, and sponsors are actively involved in two projects. The bid's approach to attracting EU funding is solid, offering a clear overview of European Union programmes and associated projects; however, the anticipated amount of 1.3 million Euro from EU funding appears relatively low. But a M28 Europe Task Force will be set up to help local stakeholders increase their European and international networking and to provide training on EU funding opportunities.
- The breakdown of operational expenditure is well-distributed, with 64% allocated to the programme, 15% to salaries, and administration, 16% to promotion and marketing, and 5% to contingency. The 5% contingency, while relatively high, could benefit from further explanation.
- Montpellier 2028's delivery mechanism is an established association, with a simplified governance structure since pre-selection. The planned personnel for programming and production may seem low given the magnitude of the task. The General Manager and Creative Director are already engaged with the Association.
- The explanation of how the organisation will collaborate with local authorities could be more detailed. The risk assessment plan and mitigation measures are very general.
- The marketing and communication strategy is well-conceived, with the cooperation with French TV considered a significant asset. The way to highlight the ECoC as an EU action could have been strengthened.

Capacity to deliver:

- There is continuous and unanimous political support for the candidacy from the City of Montpellier and all the local authorities and public authorities for intermunicipal

cooperation (the Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole as well as by all inter-municipal cooperation bodies).

- The plans for investments in cultural infrastructure are clear, with well-defined projects and timelines listed. The panel appreciates that most of the projects are to be completed before 2028 but expresses some concerns for (some parts of) the projects for which this is not the case.
- To encourage usage of public transport, the city has introduced it for free for the citizens. In the same spirit, the Occitanie Region develops plans in providing tickets on regional trains (TER) at a cost of €1 for all the key moments of the ECoC programme, which the panel welcomes as a very positive endeavour to develop accessibility.

Conclusion:

The bid is very strong and based on a solid long-term strategy, complemented by a sound operational budget, unanimous institutional support, and a solid network of partners. Long term strategies emphasise audience diversity, environmental considerations, and decentralisation, which are reflected within the ambitious and high-quality cultural programme.

The panel recognises that the bid's ambition to transform the city and the region into a forum for a fair debate between European and African cities on shared issues has strong potential and could set a valuable precedent in the ECoC history. It welcomes this close cooperation with Africa and encourages Montpellier to continue working on this dimension. However, while appreciating the prominence given to themes of European relevance such as the ecological transition, social equity and solidarity, or the promotion of the values of humanity and peace, the panel was also expecting further details about how Montpellier 2028 would promote cultural diversity in Europe, enhance mutual understanding in Europe and put to the fore common aspects of European history, missing a stronger European focus in the projects.

The outreach plan contains many interesting outreach tools and a very good audience development plan, confirming that this dimension has been among the main concerns and objectives of the entire process. On the other hand, the strategy to attract a broader European audience lacked elaboration on specific methods and initiatives.

The panel considered the convincing political union and the strength of the team also as factors of successful management. It finally appreciated that most of the infrastructural projects are to be completed before 2028.

Rouen

The bid presented by Rouen Seine Normande 2028 (RSN28) emerges as a profound exploration into the challenges of harmonising Nature, Science, and People. The bid's core vision revolves around urgent global issues such as climate disasters, rising inequalities, and social tensions. Positioned as a dialogue between peoples and territories, RSN28 envisions rivers as dynamic areas fostering economic, environmental, climatic, social, and democratic changes.

This bid seeks to transcend the Anthropocene by initiating a dialogue and coalition among Europe's and the world's rivers. RSN28 proposes a unique perspective, both rooted in local realities, addressing risks along the Seine, and extending to a broader vision with European and international dimensions. Embracing rivers as symbols of transition and change, the bid underscores the necessity of reconciliation, cultural exchange, and dialogue between diverse cultures, territories, memories, artists, and populations.

The bid represents Rouen, the Seine Normande, and the entire valley, from Giverny to Le Havre and Honfleur.

Contribution to the long-term strategy of the city:

- Rouen's bid emphasises reconciling Nature, Science, and People, focusing on rivers as a new geography for dialogue. The bid adopts principles of polyphony, fairness, and responsibility to address societal rifts and planetary boundaries, with a methodological approach to meet the 21st century challenges.
- Rouen's cultural strategy has evolved significantly since pre-selection, as reflected in the unanimous approval of a joint cultural strategy, "Culture in an era of transition", and the doubling of the Culture budget by elected representatives in June and September. The strategy is built on three pillars: a culture of cooperation, diversity, and ecological transition. It is refreshing to see a shift of focus from attractiveness to habitability.
- The joint strategy of the city and the metropolis was unanimously approved. The Seine Maritime Department voted on a policy 2023-2029 that aligns with the bid and is recognised in the Seine Valley development plan.
- Rouen 2028 aims for a transformative legacy, prioritising the Seine, slow tourism, and sustainability.
- The monitoring and evaluation plan is excellent and robust in scope. An independent evaluation committee is in place, featuring a broad representation of Rouen 2028 stakeholders, organisations, research partners, as well as representatives from Skopje 2028 and Budweis 2028.
- The baseline year is set for 2024, a positive approach to capture the preparatory phase of Rouen 2028. The plan provides a clear overview of objectives, linked to indicators, data sources, and responsible entities and partners. The bid aims to prototype methodologies, focusing the evaluation on aspects of reconciliation through polyphony, fairness, and nature.
- The strategy for disseminating results on the EU level includes involving all cultural stakeholders and inviting European partners, such as friendly river-cities and the EU funded Culture Next network, to share in the results.

Cultural and artistic content:

- The panel reaffirmed that the concept of the bid "Time to Meander" presents a beautiful and coherent poetic narrative, having a strong connection to the local area, its history and identity, but also relevance on a European level as well as qualitative mixture of nature and culture.

- In the core of the artistic vision is the idea of Seine as the artistic director and a new method for compiling the programme in a collective and open way. The idea of creating a new method for programming based on concepts and collective processes is interesting, but difficult to connect with the ECoC process.
- 20 larger projects are well presented with several sub projects including schedule, method, partners, and budgets. The overall programme is conceptually quite strong and rich in content, but part of the projects (due to the open approach) are still more concepts and ideas, than developed events to be evaluated. Budget-wise, presented projects cover 85% of the overall programme budget.
- At the same time the structure of the programme is not very clear and easy to adjust. The projects are divided into two programme lines, eight transfigurations (linked to space) and twelve chapters (time related), with insufficient clarity as to how and if they converge.
- There is a strong involvement of the local cultural sector with names provided, but the choice of major European artists will be made only from 2026. The panel is positive about the approach to organise programmes in other parts of Europe but misses clarification on how this will be done exactly.

European dimension:

- The bid covers ways of working on promoting cultural diversity and common European cultural values especially in the context of current challenges like the climate crisis, tense international geopolitical context, populism, and science denialism. It emphasises its strategic, long-term choice to contemplate culture on a European scale and preserve the Europe-Culture connection. More concrete examples on how this is translated into cultural programmes and projects could have been provided.
- The theme of the rivers is presented as an opportunity to share commonalities with major rivers worldwide – not just in Europe, which the panel considers positively. Rivers are used metaphorically to address challenges across Europe and the world, linking them to broader issues such as environmental risks, political and cultural interests, and societal needs. The bid lists rivers involved in the dialogue and the specific challenges each represents across Europe.
- The strategy to attract the attention of the European and international audience is described in quite general terms. It includes the so-called 11th Port of Call that is envisioned to connect with audiences from afar digitally.
- It mentions transnational partnerships from Aveiro to Hanoi establishing bridges and partnerships globally. This international approach aligns with the goal of creating a dialogue that transcends geographical boundaries.
- The bid provides a long and impressive list of cooperation agreements with ECoCs, offering, however, minimal details on the envisioned nature of the cooperation against the objectives of the Rouen bid.

Outreach:

- The panel appreciated the approach to use already existing experiences of expert organisations working in the field, for instance concerning volunteering, or make

community councils (like the Seine Assembly, the Archipel or the Wisdom Council) active partners and even responsible partners for parts of the programme.

- Special attention is paid to youth and the panel welcomes the establishment of the Youth Participation Now (YPN) network and other initiatives. However, several of them are quite abstract in their descriptions.
- Further the panel questioned the inclusion methodology of disadvantaged and/or marginalised groups. Clarification was given that the governing inclusion methodology indeed encompasses safe spaces of expression for these groups.
- A digital strategy is in place, including the 11th Port of Call or a forum for experiences, information, and interactivity. Part of the programme will provide possibilities to be experienced online, not in a way of live recordings and broadcasts, but in collaboration with artists creating remote experiential art.

Management:

- The operational budget stands at 80 million Euro. The allocation of 92% public and 8% private funding is well-balanced. Public sector revenues, excluding State and EU contributions, have been confirmed.
- The strategy to secure private sources is well thought through. 6.4 million Euro, 50% financial, 50% in kind is planned. So far around 30 business partner clubs signed cooperation with Rouen 2028 (representing more than 5.000 companies, and 15.000 craftsmen). A sponsorship strategy could have been worked out in more detail with sponsor house principles for example.
- The strategy to obtain funds from European Union programmes for operational expenditure is clear. The anticipated amount expected from EU funding of 1.6 million Euro is not very ambitious.
- The breakdown of operational expenditure is well-distributed with 63% for the programme, 18% for the salaries and administration and 14% for marketing and promotion. 5% for contingency is very high and may pose a risk if not broken down. The doubling of the city and metropolis cultural budget (in case of a successful ECoC application) until 2028 is a very positive development and an indication of their commitment to culture.
- Capital investment figures are not clearly presented. At the pre-selection stage, an amount of 79 million Euro was allocated for infrastructure projects. Various projects across the region are presented.
- The overall governance structure is very clear. A Public Interest Group (GIP) will be established and there is a clear plan for transition from the present association to GIP. A wide section of actors is represented in the General Assembly. Roles and responsibilities of key staff are clearly set out. There will be open calls with the possibility of applying in pairs. This is seen as a very interesting and innovative approach.
- The risk assessment plan and mitigation measures are very detailed and solid.
- The marketing and communication strategy is well thought through. It is very innovative to invite people to experience the ECoC instead of selling Rouen 28 as a marketing tool. Potential partners are listed and the collaboration with regional newspapers from other river cities is interesting.

- Communities and target groups are identified, there are clear plans and timelines and the international strategy - Bridges to Rouen - to attract audiences from wider Europe is solid and interesting. The strategy to show the ECoC as an action of the EU is very strong.

Capacity to deliver:

- There is continuous political support for the candidacy from the City of Rouen and other Cities along the Seine including Le Havre, the Normandy Region as well as several Departments and conurbations in the region.
- The plans for investments in cultural infrastructure are clear, with well-defined projects budgets and timelines listed. The panel appreciates that most of the projects are to be completed before 2028 but expresses some concerns for the projects for which this is not the case.
- Free public transport is already available in the Rouen Metropolis on Saturdays and for major events. Together with transport and urban-planning partners, new tools are also being developed, including low-carbon mobility solutions, with attractive rates.

Conclusion:

The Rouen Seine Normande 2028 bid demonstrates a compelling vision in addressing global challenges, particularly in harmonising Nature, Science, and People. Its commitment to multifaceted issues such as climate disasters, inequalities, and social tensions is evident, positioning itself as a dialogue platform for diverse communities.

While the bid envisions a transformative legacy with the Seine as the artistic director and a focus on sustainability, challenges arise in program clarity and convergence of projects. The bid's open approach to artistic direction whilst innovative and interesting makes it difficult to assess the overall programme, which is required for the ECoC selection process.

The bid's strong European dimension, and using rivers metaphorically to connect globally, is compelling; however, it could benefit from more concrete examples translating this into cultural programmes. Outreach initiatives demonstrate inclusivity, and the bid's digital strategy aligning with modern trends is strong.

Overall, Rouen Seine Normande 2028 presents a strong, comprehensive, and very ambitious bid, with its strengths lying in its concept, long-term vision, European dimension, commitment to dialogue, and innovative approaches, while the panel regrets the lack of details and clarity regarding the programme along with also insufficient information regarding international cooperation agreements.

The panel's decision

The panel was presented with four very high quality but also very different bids from significantly diverse cities and each with its own interpretations of the ECoC criteria. The bids tackled issues of great urgency for Europe and the world at large. All four bids had their strengths and weaknesses. The panel was looking, according to Decision 445/2014/EU of the

European Parliament and of the Council, at the programme specifically designed for the ECoC year and with a strong European dimension.

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

The panel reached a decision by secret vote to recommend to the French Ministry of Culture to designate Bourges as European Capital of Culture 2028 in France.

This report has been sent to the managing authority and the European Commission. Both will publish it on their websites. In accordance with Article 11 of the Decision, the Ministry will proceed to the designation of the ECoC 2028 in France based on the recommendation contained in this report. It will then inform the European Parliament, Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions. This formal designation enables Bourges to use the title “European Capital of Culture 2028”.

Melina Mercouri Prize

The panel recommends that the European Commission award the Melina Mercouri Prize to the designated city based on this report. The payment of the 1.5 million Euro Prize is however deferred until 2028, in line with Article 14 of the Decision. It is conditional. The ECoC Expert panel will make a further recommendation to the European Commission in late 2027 at the end of the monitoring process on whether to make the payment.

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

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

Reputation of an ECoC

A city awarded the ECoC title receives considerable international attention from the selection recommendation extending well beyond the ECoC year. It has a responsibility to uphold the

reputation of the ECoC brand for the benefit of those previous titleholders and future ones. City administrations should be aware that decisions taken (and not just in the cultural sector) might attract formal media and social media attention far beyond what they are used to handling. This adds a special and new aspect to decision taking in the city over a wide full range of issues much beyond culture only.

The monitoring phase

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

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

There are three formal monitoring checkpoints (autumn 2024, mid 2026 and autumn 2027) when the ECoC will meet with the panel under the auspices of the European Commission. Prior to each meeting the European Commission will invite the ECoC to provide progress reports. The European Commission will indicate areas that specifically need to be addressed in the reports.

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

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

The panel’s recommendations

The designated ECoC now moves to a transition period from a set-up suited to a bid campaign to the more formal ECoC delivery structure that is independent of local city administration. The panel expects Bourges to develop cooperation with other bidding cities and the wider artistic and cultural community in France. The ECoC in France in 2028 provides a national opportunity, which will reflect internationally not only on Bourges but also on the country as a whole.

The panel will expect the first progress report in autumn 2024 to consider the recommendations and comments in the assessment of the bid, as stated above and below.

Long-term strategy

- The panel recommends enhancing the effectiveness of baseline data collection by initiating the process earlier, enabling a comprehensive measurement of the ECoC’s impact in the preparatory years leading up to 2028.

- The panel encourages refining the definition of Key Performance Indicators for monitoring and evaluation to align more precisely with the specific objectives and milestones of the ECoC, ensuring a clearer and more accurate assessment of its progress.

Cultural and artistic content

- The panel suggests looking at all the exhibitions carefully once again and programme them in such a way that they do not have to compete for the attention of the visitor.
- The panel recommends alignment with the EU's policy on collaboration with the cultural sector from Russia. In accordance with the EU Council Regulation 2022/576, Article 51, it shall be prohibited to provide direct or indirect support, including financing and financial assistance or any other benefit under a Union, Euratom or Member State national programme and contracts within the meaning of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046, to any legal person, entity or body established in Russia with over 50% public ownership or public control.
- The panel invites the Bourges team to detail the Youth programme and its operation scheme and in general to review the projects budget analytically.

European dimension

- The panel encourages the Bourges team to take the lead in establishing relations with other ECoCs and European and global partners to best connect the cultural sector in the city and region with peers internationally.
- It is also recommended that there be an increased emphasis on conveying activities that underscore common aspects of European culture and values.

Outreach

- The audience development program should continue emphasising participation and governance, ensuring that people feel they matter and are in charge. Tools like the "European Citizen Council" and "New Patrons Initiative" to maintain wide outreach could be strengthened.
- The digital strategy should be continually refined. While respecting carbon issues is commendable, more specific details on how digital technologies will be leveraged effectively could be provided. Consideration could be given to enhancing the streaming aspect while still maintaining a low carbon footprint.

Management

- The panel recommends clarifying the curator's role in connection with project management.
- It is advisable to reconsider and potentially increase the staffing plan for the artistic program spanning from 2024 to 2027, considering the significant magnitude of tasks anticipated during this period.
- Given the high expectations for private sector support, the panel recommends conducting thorough work to refine the strategy for securing these contributions.

- Experience has shown that successful ECoCs use the first year after selection to establish all the governance, management and administration structures and systems. This allows the subsequent two years to focus on programme development in time for the full programme to be in place by mid-2027.

Capacity to deliver

- Experience from other ECoC shows that strong commitment to producing the necessary venues in time for the title year from the designated ECoC city and the institutions supporting the project is pertinent for the delivery of a successful ECoC.

Thanks

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

Signed:

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January 2024

