



Trenčín

European Capital of Culture 2026

Second Monitoring Meeting
Report by the ECOC Expert Panel
Virtual Meeting, July 2024

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate Culture, Creativity and Sport
Unit D2

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Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting on 2 July 2024 between the Panel and the team of Trenčín, one of the two European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2026¹.

Trenčín was designated as European Capital of Culture on 8 February 2022 by the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic on the basis of the Panel's selection report². Its bid book is available on the Trenčín 2026 website³.

The previous monitoring meeting took place virtually on 20 September 2022. The relevant Panel's report can be consulted and downloaded on the European Commission website (see footnote n° 2). This report of the second monitoring meeting is addressed to the Trenčín 2026 team and will also be published on the same European Commission's website.

Attendance

The Panel members:

Jelle Burggraaff
Else Christensen-Redzepovic
Marilyn Gaughan Reddan (excused)
Goda Giedraityte
Suvi Innilä (chair)
Anne Karjalainen (excused)
Hrvoje Laurenta
Jorge Pinto
Toni Attard (excused)
Rossella Tarantino (rapporteur)

For Trenčín 2026:

Mayor of Trenčín
Vice-Mayor of Trenčín
Chief Executive Officer
Artistic Director/Head of Programme Section
Head of Policies and Strategies Section
Senior Programme Manager
Head of Finance Section
Head of Marketing Section
Head of Monitoring Department
European Dimension Head.

1 The European Capitals of Culture action is governed by Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union for the ECoC titles 2020 to 2033. The Decision provides for three formal monitoring meetings between designated cities and the panel. See: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.132.01.0001.01.ENG

2 <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/designated-capitals-of-culture/2026-finland-and-slovakia#Trenčín>

3 <https://www.Trenčín2026.sk/bidbook>

Also in attendance were observers from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture) and the Ministry for Culture of the Slovak Republic.

Report and presentation from Trenčín 2026

Trenčín 2026 submitted in advance of the meeting a comprehensive progress report, following the six evaluation criteria of the European Capitals of Culture. The report gives evidence of the important progress made by Trenčín 2026 since the last monitoring meeting, in spite of the challenges they had to face (new legislation, financing, changes in the senior management of the delivery agency and an internal audit).

The Trenčín 2026 delegation made a 15-minute verbal presentation, which supplemented and updated the information provided in the report. The presentation was introduced by the Mayor. He stressed the significant challenges since the last monitoring meeting, which delayed the implementation process, but have now been successfully solved for the most part. In this perspective, the Mayor, the newly appointed CEO, and the team addressed, among others, the following issues:

- A new European Capital of Culture Law was approved; its adoption took more time than anticipated, but it is an important achievement that will ease and accelerate the implementation phase.
- A new management structure of the delivery organisation (CIT) is now in place. With a newly recruited CEO bringing to the project the solid management experience acquired in leading Kosice 2013 and all key positions filled, it is presently based on solid foundations.
- New positions were created in the city administration, with a focus on marketing, public space, and participation. The rationale is to bolster the ECoC team and to pave the way for legacy.
- According to the Mayor, all these changes will enable to make up for the delays in the implementation phase. This will also be possible thanks to the fruitful and solid cooperation relations between the key local and regional partners (CIT, city, and region) and the National Government, represented by different Ministries (Culture, Regional Development, Investment and Informatisation).
- It was stressed that the ECoC project is closely aligned with the long-term strategy of the city and region, which places emphasis on citizens' participation and on public space, meant as a democratic place for curiosity and mutual respect. This is also confirmed by the intense working interaction between CIT and the municipality.

- All infrastructure projects proceed as planned. Among the strategic projects, the Creative and Cultural Centre was mentioned as a successful case. It has already started its activities with the Fab Lab and aims to establish a European platform for innovative technologies.
- All the institutions work together to address accommodation and mobility issues. For instance, large-scale events will be organised in close coordination with the region to accommodate all the visitors. Pre-2026 major events like the U21 Euro Football championships in 2025 will serve to test and boost the ECoC visibility.
- Concerning the budget, all the public funds are now secured. There is an intention to raise additional funds to fill the current 6-million-euro gap resulting from an absence of private and EU funds, but in the meantime the budget for the cultural programme has been revised downward to match the present budget of 25 million euro. Additionally, the budget breakdown has been revised with an increase of the share of administration costs.
- The budget share dedicated to the programme has been reduced for the moment, but the bid book projects are confirmed. As to the current implementation status, 29 projects, including 4 flagships, are on-going (11) or in development phase (18). Around 30 open calls are planned.
- Regarding the European dimension, the adhesion to European networks, such as the Creative Placemaking network, and the exposure to international expertise in the capacity-building process were mentioned.
- Concerning the citizens' involvement, a thorough mapping and research work on residents and neighbourhoods was conducted as a preliminary step to build trust. Similarly, the volunteer programme was launched.
- The communication plan is based on the project's concept "Awakening curiosity".
- Significant progress has been made in the Monitoring and Evaluation activities, with the collection of baseline primary and secondary data, the creation of the civic board and the set-up of the monitoring and evaluation unit within CIT.

Discussion

During the subsequent discussion, the Panel sought clarification on the following issues:

- Since the last monitoring meeting, the Trenčín team has been confronted with a number of challenges, as properly highlighted in the report and presentation. The Panel thanked the team for their openness and asked what was the main concern they were facing now. The newly recruited CEO first of all highlighted the creativity

and energy of the team that he witnessed during his first month in office. While the first implementation period was spent to secure funds, to set up and stabilise the team and to find a legal solution to public procurement procedures, the next stage will be to implement the projects and to reinforce the European dimension by building cooperation relations with other ECoCs and partner cities and by developing cross-border links. The European dimension can be considered as the team's absolute priority in the future.

Long-term cultural strategy

- Concerning the monitoring and evaluation activities, the Panel appreciated that baseline research had been conducted. Yet, it sought more information on the plan (topics, team, methodologies, involvement of the civic board) and on the independence of the evaluators, considering that the monitoring and evaluation lab (Trenčín Cultural Living Lab-CULL) is now part of the delivery organisation. In their response, the delegation pointed out that the internal research team, composed of two postdoc scholars, was methodologically supported, and supervised by independent international and national evaluators and that this would ensure evaluation independence. Regarding the plan, they explained that the surveys conducted so far were essentially focused on the audience, but the intent is to enlarge the sample to people who do not normally attend cultural events. The methods comprise quantitative surveys (designed by independent experts) and qualitative focus groups involving the key city and regional stakeholders and some representatives of the population. The evaluation focus is placed on cultural participation, placemaking, economic and touristic impact, social value of the main transformative investments like the Cultural and Creative Centre, and European awareness. The civic board is involved both in the selection of the topics and the questions, and in the analysis of the findings; for instance, the issue of youth engagement in the research was put on the agenda.
- Inclusivity is a critical aim and dimension of Trenčín 2026. The Panel asked how the team intended to highlight this in the programme and to measure it. The team emphasised that their work in this respect was not visible so far, as the current mapping of minorities was aimed to better identify the issues they face, in order to build trust and thus engage them in the programme. The inclusivity strategy is based on the “cultural accessibility plan” which is being developed and will be launched by the end of the year. Access to culture is one of the crucial evaluation topics. All the findings of the surveys are meant to help the team better understand if and how to revise the audience engagement tools in order to enhance inclusivity.

Cultural and artistic content

- The Panel expressed its concern regarding the present financial scenario, according to which the programme might suffer a nearly 30% budget cut, and asked how this would affect the international ambition of the programme proposed in the bid book, both in terms of quality and quantity of European collaborations. The team recognised this significant budget reduction but stressed that additional funds were expected in the future months. In addition, they highlighted that the European dimension was a crucial aspect of their programme and that all the projects would have European partners or would have a European relevance.
- Responding to a question about the Opening Ceremony, the team pointed out that its preparation was ongoing with the drafting of the basic outline of the programme. The concept, the multi-venue and multi-genre format and the lead partner as described in the bid book are confirmed. A conversation has started with Oulu 2026 to explore potential cooperation for their respective Opening Ceremonies. In addition, the intention is to also involve the project leaders in the programme (probably with the set-up of some exhibitions) as well as the local and regional actors. A specific participatory open call will be launched purposely.
- The Panel was interested in getting a more detailed overview of the status of the projects, specifically about the percentage of projects to be delivered internally, the ratio of local and international organisations that have been formally involved so far, the type and timing of open calls the team intends to launch. It finally asked if there was a clear time plan about contracting, pre-production, production, and delivery. The team emphasised the importance of the open calls as a priority, which would affect around 25-30% of the programme, with the aim of enriching it and engaging a wider array of cultural actors. A number of open calls is expected to be launched in the following years, like for instance the call for visual artists and architects to design installations in public spaces ("City reimagined project") or participatory calls to take part in a large-scale symphonic event or to perform on the new revitalised area as Fiesta Bridge. At regional level, a call is also envisioned to deliver contemporary installations and productions to attract new tourists. According to the team, in some cases, the open calls are designed to trigger off new projects and thus expand the programme, in full compliance with the strategy and bid book; in other cases, the goal is to appeal to a wider number of participants. The open calls are not specifically designed to attract more European artists and organisations, though the team foresees the launch of calls that could be more oriented to European producers. Concerning the status of contracts, around 22 out of a total of 60 projects are expected to be delivered by project leaders, called "direct implementers". So far, 3 contracts have been signed and additional 8 contracts are in the pipeline and supposed to be signed by July 2024. The projects leaders contracted so far are local

or national organisations, while in the future contracts will be signed also with international organisations.

- One of the major risks highlighted in the report is the external pressure to influence the specific content of individual projects; the response to this risk is the emphasis put on communication and involvement. The Panel wanted to know whether this kind of influencing had already occurred and what were the measures taken to safeguard the content of the projects and the ECoC. The team emphasised that the ECoC was an important transformative opportunity for a city of the size of Trenčín. In this perspective, they pursue two strategic lines: on one hand, to design a more sophisticated international programme, and on the other hand, to deliver a programme that involves all the cultural and social actors at local level also via small-scale projects and stimulate them to establish national and international links.

European dimension

- The Panel was interested in learning more about specific artistic and cultural projects planned that were expected to reflect and celebrate European cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and common aspects of European cultures, heritage, and history. The team highlighted “Destination all-inclusive” and “Global equality and hospitality” as two examples of projects that enhance diversity and intercultural dialogue: the first one, locally focussed, aims to understand the minorities’ needs and to design a multicultural environment open to all; the second one can rely on a stellar international curatorial team and is dealing with humanity, democracy, and intercultural dialogue. A project addressing common aspects of European relevance is for instance “New Peace”, aimed to investigate the cultural and social influence of military troops in the city. Trenčín has been the home of armies from Roman times to now and is exploring this theme with other cities that live with a military presence, such as Bodø in Norway. This theme is particularly urgent considering the Ukrainian situation. Finally, the team mentions “Modernism revisited” developed with Budapest and “Biennale of Jewish contemporary art” as two examples of projects that enhance the common aspects of European heritage and history. Generally speaking, the ECoC is providing plenty of dialogue and cooperation opportunities, as testified for instance by the cultural mobility exchanges between Norway and Slovakia.
- The Panel sought clarification about what percentage of the overall programme could be considered to have a solid European dimension. The team responded that, in principle, 100% of the programme would have a European dimension. They explained that they had developed a software to ensure that all project proposals were assessed against a series of compliance criteria, such as adherence to European values (e.g., gender equality), engagement with European themes such as the New

European Bauhaus or the European Green Agenda, and involvement of European partners. Furthermore, all project proposers are guided in defining what constitutes a European dimension within an ECoC project. The team acknowledged that, at this point in time, the advancement of the European dimension in terms of partners and cooperative projects within the Trenčín 2026 ECoC programme was in its early stage. However, they anticipate a significant improvement by the end of this year. The new CEO and the head of international relations recently hired have extensive experience in collaborating with international partners and will bring in a robust European and international network.

- The Panel enquired about the programme highlights and corresponding communication plans to attract a broad European and international audience. The team provided examples of programme highlights they believed had the potential to appeal to a wide European and international audience. Foremost among these, there is the flagship project “Global Equality & Hospitality”, a large-scale international exhibition that will probably involve the highest number of international artists or there is the inherent touristic attraction of Trenčín Castle, which is planned to be reshaped into a Contemporary Art exhibition venue. Other highlights include the “Fiesta Bridge”: this project will transform the bridge into a multi-genre artistic platform with a floating stage for site-specific events; finally “Trenčín All Theatre” that comprises site-specific dance and theatre performances developed in collaboration with the Contemporary Dance Association. In terms of communication of the international highlights, European and international journalists will be invited to discover these attractive projects. Furthermore, influencers will collaborate with Trenčín 2026 to communicate its programme alongside international Culture Institutes and cultural institutions. All communications will target specific audience segments in relation to particular programme elements, like for example Jewish art. Slovakia Travel will play a crucial role in branding Trenčín 2026 within its international marketing strategy. Finally, Trenčín applied to host the European Placemaking Week conference in 2026, an event expected to draw a large European audience.
- Cooperation with EU and international artists and cultural organisations is crucial. The Panel sought information on the monitoring methodology adopted to keep track of the involvement of the European and international partners listed in the final bid book. In their response, the team explained that the programme software previously mentioned enabled them to have a global and updated overview of the effective involvement of international partners, checking those who had possibly withdrawn or those included as additional partners. In this way, they have an overall idea of the geographical or gender balance of their international partners.

Outreach

- It seems from the progress report that the outreach governance is shared between the City and the delivery agency (CIT). The Panel was interested to know who was responsible for the “Cultivating Accessibility Plan” and how the two entities were collaborating. In their response, the team confirmed the existence of two outreach entities: on the one hand, the Institute for Participation under the Mayor's office, which will stay as a legacy and, on the other hand, the “Participation and Inclusion” Department within CIT. The first one has three employees, and its main goal is active citizenship: researching, mapping, and working with municipality offices and their staff. In a way, the work conducted by the City Participation Department prepares the ground for the activity of the CIT Participation Unit, focussed on cultural participation, audience development and engagement with a specific attention to communities, volunteers, cultural ambassadors, and schools. This latter can count on four employees and is in charge of preparing the “Cultivating Accessibility Plan” in collaboration with the international company Impact Foundation. The Plan will be launched by 2025. They opted for this governance because they want to build a legacy on cultural participation, thus creating a strategic department and policy at city level for the future.
- Closely related to the community engagement activities, the Panel asked how many Cultural ambassadors had been recruited so far and how. The team underscored the role of Cultural Ambassadors in building trust and relations with citizens. They started with the initiative “Every Part Counts” that enabled them to map neighbourhood communities, to collect relevant data and scout out the trust holders in the communities. At present, they can rely on fifteen Cultural Ambassadors, but their intention is to launch open calls to enlarge this group and to deliver a specific training programme focussed on community management. They will be exposed to other successful experiences of community building, like in Kosice 2013. The team concluded that community engagement was not an easy task, but now they have information and expertise and can therefore go from mapping to action.
- The current social polarisation is seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. The Panel was interested to know how the cultural programme was addressing this and which specific initiatives were aimed at fostering social cohesion. The team provided a number of projects addressing this urgency such as “Every Party Counts”, “The New Peace”, “Destination All-Inclusive” and “Generations together”.

Management

- Concerning the budget, the Panel sought clarification about the specific funding gaps and the alternative funding sources that were being explored in the coming 18 months, with reference to the private fund-raising plan. Regarding public income, the

team stressed again that they secured 25 million euro, in line with the bid book budget. Purposely, all the supporting institutions guaranteed the financial contribution indicated in the bid (respectively 15 million euro from the Government and 5 million each from the City and the Region). The infrastructural budget is safe as well. Concerning private funding, the prospects of raising money are not optimistic, as the national economy is grappling with war, inflation and post-covid effects. In addition, the team underlined that in Slovakia, there was no sponsorship law and that it was technically difficult for private enterprises to financially sponsor cultural organisations. Therefore, their plan is to replicate the Kosice 2013 business cluster inviting companies to provide technical support and financial contribution also for the legacy phase.

- The Panel enquired about the communication and marketing strategies which have been mainly focussed so far on the local and regional levels. The Panel was interested to know the plan to lure an international audience. The team explained that their communication plan would have an international focus in the next two years, while the first two-year implementation period put the attention mainly on local and national audiences. Purposely to appeal to a new international audience, they will start a European-wide cooperation with Cultural Institutions and the ECoC network; equally, they will organise field trips for international journalists and influencers. In addition, they plan to “cultivate the curiosity” of those tourists having already planned to visit Slovakia, or some regional touristic magnets like the thermal baths. The European Under-21 Football Championships that will take place in Slovakia in 2025 will provide an additional opportunity to boost the visibility of Trenčín 2026. Finally, additional staff has been hired in the City to strengthen the Trenčín 2026 communication efforts.
- Regarding the organisational structure, the Panel sought clarification on the role of the Artistic Director and the placement of key resources, such as project managers and producers, which are considered crucial given that a significant portion of the programme will be internally produced. The team explained that the organigramme included in the report was reviewed. The correct organigramme was presented. It includes four areas that report directly to the CEO.

Capacity to deliver

- The Panel expressed concern about the fact that many organisations mentioned in the bid book as project leaders could not be contracted due to a lack of capacity to deliver their projects. The Panel sought more background information on this. It also wanted to know what was the percentage of the programme that was to be delivered internally, as a consequence. The team explained that this was a complex issue: it is partly due to the country’s legal and administrative framework and partly

to the small size of the initial project lead organisations that proved not to have the capacity and resources to manage high budgets or to cope with associated complex administration procedures. A flexible solution is being negotiated: some projects may be partially run by the organisations concerned, but with the support of CIT. Globally speaking, approximately 30 out of 58 projects will be developed by direct implementers.

- The Panel found it commendable that the infrastructure project list had been reviewed to focus on projects crucial for the delivery of the ECoC. It also appreciates the inclusion of a comprehensive list of infrastructure projects in the annex to the progress report, with budgets and deadlines. The Panel was interested to know if all the infrastructure projects essential for delivering the ECoC would be in place in time and eventually if there was a Plan B. The team responded that Plan B was somehow aligned with Plan A, as the majority of the events would be staged outdoors to encourage people to leave their homes and to engage with others in the open air. The team assured the Panel that all projects essential for delivering the Trenčín2026 ECoC would be completed in time for the start of the ECoC.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel appreciates the important steps ahead being taken so far by Trenčín 2026 in spite of the significant challenges they had to face. The Panel also positively acknowledges the Mayor's strong commitment to Trenčín 2026 and support to the team, as well as the very good coordination with the key institutions at regional and governmental level.

The Panel wishes to draw attention to the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1: Focusing on programme development and delivery**

The Panel appreciated that Trenčín 2026 initiated the legacy-building process at an early stage and recruited resources dedicated to this task within the city administration. While it encourages the city to proceed on this path, the Panel recommends the delivery agency to concentrate on programme development and implementation, putting the highest attention to its artistic quality and European dimension.

Hence, the Panel suggests revising the overall planning for the full programme delivery. This should include a detailed schedule with milestones about contract, pre-production, production, and delivery in order to make up for the delays occurred so far in implementation. Likewise, it is important to have a detailed overview of the status of all the projects and a clear plan for potential open calls or other ways to complement the programme. In this regard, while open calls are important to enlarge the spectrum of participants, the team must be aware of the risks of a programme fragmentation, of the time-consuming procedures involved and of the

current budget constraints. The main focus should remain on delivering the programme as outlined in the final selection bid book.

*The Panel invites the Trenčín 2026 team to submit a detailed and comprehensive overview of the status of the projects along with an updated budget by **mid-December 2024**.*

- **Recommendation 2: Reinforcing and finalising European cultural cooperation partnerships**

The Panel encourages the team to strengthen and finalise European and international partnerships, primarily with artists and cultural organisations.

In addition, it is important to enlarge the scope for cooperation beyond the neighbouring countries, through tailor-suited artistic cooperation, so as to embrace more diversity. Finally, the Panel recommends ensuring that a European mindset is integrated into the overall programming and activities associated with Trenčín 2026.

- **Recommendation 3: Strengthening programme management and strategic visibility**

The Panel congratulates the Trenčín team for having laid solid foundations for a new organisational structure. Yet, considering that in the upcoming months the team has to concentrate more on the cultural and artistic programme and its management, and bearing in mind that it has to produce internally more projects than anticipated, the Panel suggests reinforcing and giving a central role to the programme management and production unit. Likewise, it is recommended to give a more visible position to marketing, communication, and fund-raising.

- **Recommendation 4: Prioritising implementation of community engagement plans**

Building trust and actively involving the minorities and remote communities is one of the most challenging tasks for an ECoC. The Panel appreciates the impressive research and mapping work on communities and neighbourhoods conducted so far but prompts the team to prioritise action and concentrate on the delivery of the Accessibility plan and of the scheduled activities, possibly reinforcing partnerships with grass-root organisations.

- **Recommendation 5: Enhancing international communication and marketing strategies**

While the overall communication and marketing strategies are sound for the local and regional levels, with effective elements on an international level, the Panel wishes to emphasise the importance of further developing and strengthening the international communication and marketing strategies and rolling out European-wide communication and marketing plans as soon as possible.

— A marketing and communication plan with a European coverage, which is able to allure audiences from all the EU countries, could ensure maximum international exposure for Trenčín 2026 and give higher visibility for potential private partners, thus easing the private fund-raising as well.

- **Recommendation 6: Boosting fundraising efforts and resource allocation**

The Panel recommends intensifying the efforts in its fund-raising campaign, while at the same time being prepared to seek for alternative funds from other sources. Simultaneously, the Panel advises the team to ensure that a significant portion of any additional resources raised is allocated specifically to the development and execution of the cultural and artistic programme.

Next steps

The Panel remains available for questions and advice, through the Commission services.

The Commission will call for the third, and final, meeting in the autumn 2025. At the end of the third monitoring meeting, the Panel will make a recommendation to the Commission on whether to grant the Melina Mercouri Prize to Trenčín 2026.

The conditions for the payment of the Prize are specified in Article 14 of Decision 445/2014/EU:

“The prize money shall be paid by the end of March of the year of the title, provided that the designated city concerned continues to honour the commitments it made at the application stage, complies with the criteria, and takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports.

The commitments made at the application stage shall be deemed to have been honoured by the designated city where no substantial change has been made to the programme and the strategy between the application stage and the year of the title, in particular where:

- (a) the budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-quality cultural programme in line with the application and the criteria;
- (b) the independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
- (c) the European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final version of the cultural programme;
- (d) the marketing and communication strategy and the communication material used by the designated city clearly reflects the fact that the action is a Union action;

____(e) the plans for the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the title on the designated city are in place.”

The Panel would like to thank the Mayor of Trenčín and the Trenčín 2026 team for a very informative discussion and looks forward to the next developments of the European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending Panel's members

