



Timișoara European Capital of Culture 2023

**New Second Monitoring Meeting
Report by the ECOC Expert Panel**

Virtual Meeting, June 2021

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Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting on 23rd June 2021 between the Panel and the Team of Timișoara, one of the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2023¹. Timișoara was designated by the relevant Romanian authorities as European Capital of Culture on 25th October 2016 on the basis of the Panel's selection report², initially for the year 2021.

The first monitoring meeting took place in October 2017 in Brussels, followed by a monitoring city visit by two members of the Panel in June 2018. The second monitoring meeting was held in Timișoara on 5th June 2019. The two previous monitoring reports by the Panel can be accessed on the European Commission website³.

In December 2020, upon a proposal by the Commission, and taking into account the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the preparatory work of all three ECoC title-holders in 2021, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a Decision postponing - among others - the ECoC year in Timișoara from 2021 to 2023⁴. This postponement made it consequently necessary to organise an additional second monitoring meeting before the third and final one, due in late 2022.

The present report is addressed to the Timișoara 2023 organisation and will be published on the European Commission's website⁵.

Attendance

The Panel members:

Else Christensen-Redžepović, Suvi Innilä (Rapporteur) and Jorge Cerveira Pinto, appointed by the European Parliament 2021–2023;

Dessislava Gavrilova and Paulina Florjanowicz, appointed by the Council of the EU 2019–2021;

Jelle Burggraaff and Beatriz Garcia (Chair), appointed by the European Commission 2020–2022;

The Panel member designated by the European Committee of the Regions for the period 2020–2022, does not take part in the monitoring meetings with Timișoara since he became President of the Timis County in October 2020.

¹ The European Capitals of Culture action is governed by Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and the Council for the titles 2020 to 2033, which 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 See selection report at: <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/elefsina-timisoara-and-veszprem#timisoara>

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/elefsina-timisoara-and-veszprem#timisoara>

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020D2229>

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/elefsina-timisoara-and-veszprem#timisoara>

For Timișoara:

State Secretary, Ministry of Culture

Mayor of Timișoara

Counsellor on culture, Timișoara City Hall

Director, Timișoara Center for Projects

Executive Director, Timișoara 2021 Association

Programming director, Timișoara 2021 Association

Monitoring and evaluation officer, Timișoara 2021 Association

Volunteer, participation and capacity building coordinator, Timișoara 2021 Association

Coordinator, Office for culture, education, minorities, sports and cults, Timiș County Council

Also in attendance were observers from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture), the Romanian Ministry of Culture and the Romanian Permanent Representation to the EU.

Report and video presentation from Timișoara 2023

Timișoara 2023 submitted in advance of the meeting a comprehensive progress report, which was jointly prepared by the key stakeholders of Timișoara European Capital of Culture 2023: the Timișoara 2021 ECoC Association, the City of Timișoara, the Timiș County Council and the Ministry of Culture. The report reflected the process since the last monitoring, but concentrated also on the considerable challenges the project has faced, and which have hindered the progress and development as planned. In addition, the report presented some preliminary plans for overcoming these challenges.

Before the virtual meeting, Timișoara 2023 also delivered a 40-minute-long video as a substitute for the regular presentation that could not take place because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The new Mayor of Timișoara opened the presentation by ensuring the Panel of his personal commitment, and the commitment of the city to the ECoC project in terms of funding, values and objectives. He reiterated his will to find solutions to the present challenges. He also emphasised the importance of creating meaningful projects in line with the bid book, which will have an impact also after 2023, as well as of strengthening the European dimension of the programme. He mentioned challenges concerning funding, caused by the legislative situation in the country, delays in the infrastructural projects, and challenges in the operational authority of the Association. The Mayor announced that a new organisational entity had been established in March 2021 - the Centre for Projects - with the aim of becoming a permanent and transparent funding tool for culture at city level, which is also taking over the funding function for Timișoara 2023 programme.

The newly appointed State Secretary from the Ministry of Culture assured that Timișoara 2023 is a top priority on the national political agenda, and that the process of changing the

national legal framework in order to allow multi-annual funding for culture, is under process. He also emphasised the importance of good governance and nationwide impacts of the ECoC project. According to the progress report submitted, the two main scenarios envisaged at this stage at national level for the allocation of the national budget for the programme are as follows: i) transfer from the central authority to the local authorities with the National Cultural Fund Administration (NCFA) acting as a complementary agency or ii) use of the NCFA only. This will be addressed in the legal process mentioned above. These scenarios were confirmed during the meeting.

The newly elected President of the Timis Council confirmed the regional support and commitment to the ECoC project. He assured there is will to overcome the challenges, which are mainly underfunding, insecurity in implementation and lack of communication. He emphasised the importance to increase trust towards the ECoC project among the local cultural sector as well as citizens. The county is committed to the project also through funding: they have recently opened a funding call for the Timișoara 2023 programme projects. The County President also explained the situation regarding the infrastructural projects: due to the challenging circumstances, many infrastructural projects are delayed and will not be finished by 2023. However, he stressed the commitment to proceed with these projects with the aim of finalising as many of them as possible by the end of 2023.

The Monitoring and evaluation officer of the Timișoara 2021 Association explained the situation. Some quantifiable data has been collected, processed and reported periodically by the internal staff of the Association. Steps were taken in 2019 and 2020 to establish a Monitoring & evaluation framework as described in the bid book, but this could not be delivered due to the complex context and overall lack of funding made available to the Association.

The Programming director of the Timișoara 2021 Association explained the situation in terms of programme development. The delayed funding from the three public levels of territorial governance (State, City and County) to the Association and a lack of a common legislative framework regarding the financing of the ECoC have led to delays in the implementation of the programme, especially in the development of the large-scale bid book projects. The postponement of the ECoC year led to a wide consultation round with the project partners with the aim of recalibrating the programme for 2021-2023. At the same time, three main directions were confirmed for the programme: inclusion and civic engagement; a greener and more sustainable city; and digital transformation. In addition, a draft of the highlights and the Opening event has been recently made.

The Volunteer, participation and capacity building coordinator of the Timișoara 2021 Association told the Panel about the Volunteering programme, where delays have also occurred. The lack of funding and the Covid-19 outbreak meant that the Volunteering programme could only be implemented partially in 2020, and many of the activities were postponed to the years 2021-2022.

A communication consultant for the project explained that in 2019 there had been 3005 mentions of the ECoC project in the media, most of which were positive or neutral. In 2020 there were 677 monitored media appearances. In connection to the postponement of the ECoC year, modifications to the logo and changes in the visual presentation of the programme were also made. In addition, a more specific brand manual and a clearer way to high-light the logo as a programme logo have been developed.

The Executive Director of Timișoara 2021 Association explained the management situation of the project and some of the challenges that have occurred since the previous monitoring meeting. She introduced the background for the administrative problems of the Association, caused by the dismissal of some board members without a regulative system

to replace them. This led to a year-long blockage of the board's functioning between summer 2020 and June 2021. Besides the already mentioned challenges, there have also been difficulties to hire new staff for the Association due to the unpredictability of the funding and the open question concerning the Association's role in the ECoC process in the future.

The report, together with several detailed annexes, offered a more thorough description of the activities and challenges mentioned in the presentation.

Discussion

The Timișoara 2023 ECoC preparation has suffered from serious organisational difficulties. A major problem that prevented the smooth preparations of the ECoC is a consequence of the Romanian administrative legislation, which prevents multi-annual funding for cultural organisations. Therefore, the aim of the progress report and the video presentation was to assure the Panel that the Timișoara 2023 ECoC was back on the right track, and that the existing problems were being solved with joint efforts of the different parties involved. However, after the production of the progress report and the video presentation, and before the virtual meeting, some changes had already occurred, especially regarding the planned role of the Association in implementing the programme.

In the discussion, which took place as a virtual meeting organised on 23rd June 2021, the Panel expressed major concerns about the status of the process. As the discussion and the Panel members' questions concentrated mainly on challenges related to management and capacity to deliver, there was in practise no time to discuss the progress related to long-term cultural strategy, cultural programme, European dimension or outreach. It was also impossible to state whether any of these questions and answers would have been feasible, given the planned structural changes only 18 months before the beginning of the ECoC year.

The Mayor presented a plan of distributing the ECoC tasks and responsibilities to different organisations and thus creating a wider ecosystem for the delivery and implementation of the year. Partly this process had already started in March with the foundation of the Centre for Projects. Also, as there has not been an artistic director since summer 2019, the plan was to recruit a small group of curators to re-evaluate the programme in the near future. However, the responses to the Panel's questions concerning the management and the programme development left a degree of uncertainty; and the Panel is therefore concerned that it will take quite a long time before a functioning organisation and structure for the delivery of the ECoC year is in place.

The main challenge and question seemed to be, besides the legislative and structural issues, the mistrust between the management of the Association and the public authorities involved. The Association defended its role as the responsible body for the implementation of the ECoC year, while restructuring of the implementation roles seems to indicate mistrust towards the Association by the other parties involved.

The Panel appreciates the open discussion that took place between the parties involved in the project, and saw willingness to work towards the success of the European Capital of Culture year in 2023 in Romania. However, the Panel remained highly concerned about the situation given the lack of a clear plan on how to overcome the challenges as quickly as possible.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel appreciates the strong commitment of the key stakeholders to the project, and acknowledges that there have been efforts to find solutions for the deliverance of the ECoC project. However, the problems related to management and especially capacity to deliver were signalized by the Team already during the previous monitoring meeting in 2019. For example, the legal problem with assigning public funds was known already then (and even before), and the Panel is surprised to see that it has not been solved yet, while being a serious impediment to any progress in the delivery of the ECoC year.

The Panel considers the Timișoara 2023 to have such crucial difficulties that it is highly concerned for the outcome of the ECoC year. The Panel therefore wishes to draw attention to the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** The Panel strongly encourages the key stakeholders of Timișoara 2023 to take immediate action for solving the situation. The focus should be on delivering a solid European Capital of Culture year in 2023. There is no more time to use obstacles and challenges as excuses for not taking necessary action and to look who is to blame. It is high time for solutions to be implemented and all stakeholders should join efforts to achieve this goal.
- **Recommendation 2:** Finding a solution for the multi-annual funding structure is crucial for the delivery of the ECoC year. The process for legal reformation to secure the multi-annual funding is underway at the governmental level and is supposed to be finalized by end August 2021. In order to ensure a solution for the ECoC funding even in the case the legal process would not provide a positive result, it might be advisable to find optional structures simultaneously with the legislation process.
- **Recommendation 3:** It appears that communication and trust between the authorities and the Association is at a low level. This raises serious concerns and the Panel recommends immediate action to be taken to resolve this problem. Strong backing from the main political stakeholders is a condition for success. Experience shows that being caught up in party politics is severely damaging for the prospects of an effective ECoC and carries an innate risk of jeopardizing it.
- **Recommendation 4:** An organizational model, where different functions of the ECoC implementation are spread throughout several institutions, should be avoided due to the intensity and special character of the ECoC process, as well as the lack of time, especially concerning the development and implementation of a coherent programme in line with the vision and main aspirations of the bid book. The model chosen must also ensure a local ownership of the ECoC.
- **Recommendation 5:** Given the underdevelopment of the ECoC programme and the severe time restraints for its completion, the Panel recommends that all efforts are exerted on preparing the basic programme based on the projects presented in the bid book. Therefore, the pre-2023 programme should be limited and additional open calls should only be made once the basic programme for 2023 has been secured.
- **Recommendation 6:** As the programme should have a good balance between the local (diverse) cultural potential and the top international scene, ensuring the

necessary European partnerships as well as a high artistic quality should be a top priority when developing the programme further.

Next steps

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

The Commission will call for a third (and final) monitoring meeting in autumn 2022.

Prior to that, the Panel requests a **Project Plan to be submitted by 1st September 2021**, setting out the following details:

- Organisational structure with clear mandates and responsibilities for each entity involved as well as a description of the communication channels put in place to ensure coherence and a *modus operandi* based on team spirit;
- Programme development plan with clear indications of: 1. Who will make decisions about the content and funding of the cultural projects; 2. Which projects will form the basic programme for 2023 based on the second bid book and the status of these projects; 3. How will the European dimension of the programme be ensured; 4. Once the basic programme is secured, what would be the structure and principles (e.g. open calls) used to complement this programme in case this is possible;
- Realistic evaluation of the main infrastructural projects and their expected status in January 2023;
- Feasible Monitoring & Evaluation framework;
- List of main tasks and to do's including a timeline from 1st September 2021 until 31st December 2023 with deadlines for each task;
- The length of this Project Plan must not exceed 7 pages.

The Panel will decide about possible requests for other midterm reports or meetings after having received the Project Plan.

At the end of the third monitoring meeting in autumn 2022, the Panel will make a recommendation to the Commission on whether to grant the Melina Mercouri Prize to Timisoara 2023.

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 Culture State-Secretary, Mayor of Timișoara and the Timișoara 2023 Team for a very informative and frank discussion, and looks forward to the next developments of the European Capital of Culture project.

(Signed) all attending Panel's members

