



Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2030 in Belgium

Selection Stage

Expert Panel's report

Edited by

the international expert panel members

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of the expert panel (the “panel”) for the selection phase of the competition for the European Capital of Culture (“ECOC”) 2030 in Belgium. The competition is a European Union initiative that dates back to 1985.

The Ministries of the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community act as the managing authorities (the “managing authority”) of the competition, which is governed by Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 (the “[Decision](#)”) and by the Rules of Procedure adopted by the managing authority and published on its website together with the corresponding call for submission of applications¹.

In line with Article 2 of the Action, a panel of twelve independent experts was established for the selection process. Ten panel members were appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies (the European Parliament, the Council, the European Commission, and the Committee of the Regions). Two national members of the panel were appointed by the managing authority.

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

Bidding phases

The managing authority issued a call for submission of applications on 27 September 2023. Six applications were submitted by the deadline: Bruges, Ghent, Kortrijk, Leuven, Molenbeek, and Namur. The panel met on 21-24 October 2024 for the pre-selection meeting and recommended that the three cities of Leuven, Molenbeek, and Namur be invited to progress to the final selection stage. The panel’s report was published on the website of the European Commission².

The managing authority accepted the panel’s recommendation and invited the three shortlisted cities to submit their final applications (“bid-books”) by 15 July 2025. All three cities submitted their bid-books within the given timeframe.

¹ <https://www.ecoc2030.be/documents>

² [Pre-selection Report - European Capital of Culture 2030, Belgium - Culture and Creativity](#)

A delegation of four panel members undertook city visits on 17-19 September 2025, accompanied by observers from the managing authority and the European Commission. The delegation reported its findings to the full panel at the selection meeting.

Selection hearing

The panel met in person on 22–24 September 2025 in Brussels. Three panel members were excused for personal reasons. Representatives of the managing authority and of the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers did not take part in the panel's deliberations or decision-making.

All panel members signed declarations of no conflict of interest and confidentiality. The panel confirmed Mr Jelle Burggraaff as Chair and Ms Annick Schramme as Vice-Chair. Ms Else Christensen-Redzepovic was elected as rapporteur.

At the selection hearings on 22 and 23 September, each candidate city, in alphabetical order, presented its case (45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (75 minutes).

The Chair of the panel announced the panel's recommendation at a public event, live-streamed on 24 September 2025, in the presence of Elisabeth Degryse, Minister-President of the French Community, responsible for Budget, Higher Education, Culture, International relations and Intrafrench relations, Gregor Freches, Minister for Culture, Sport, Tourism and Media of the German-speaking Community and a representative of Caroline Gennez, Flemish Minister for Welfare, Poverty Reduction, Culture and Equal Opportunities, as well as Thomas de Béthune, the Head of the European Commission Representation in Belgium.

National context

The year 2030 will mark the fifth time Belgium has hosted a European Capital of Culture, following Antwerp in 1993, Brussels in 2000, Bruges in 2002 and Mons in 2015. The selection criteria for an ECoC have evolved considerably since Belgium's earlier titles. They now encompass a broader and deeper understanding of the role of culture in both urban and European development. A key new requirement is that candidate cities must have a formally adopted cultural strategy that incorporates the ECoC project. This ensures that the ECoC acts as a catalyst for long-term urban and cultural progress rather than as a one-off event, thereby strengthening the sustainability of its legacy.

The panel noted that all three Belgian bids were of a very high quality and ambition, reflecting the specific contexts of their respective cities and regions, while engaging meaningfully with the wider European agenda. It welcomed the progress made by all three candidates between the pre-selection and selection stages.

The panel appreciates that the bidding process has enabled the cities to embed culture and a European dimension in their socio-economic development. This already represents an important potential legacy of the ECoC competition.

The panel encourages all candidate cities to continue developing and implementing their cultural strategies in the spirit of the European Capital of Culture initiative.

Assessments of the candidates

In its assessment of the candidates, the panel took into account the general and specific objectives set out in Article 2 of the Decision, as well as the requirement in Article 4 that the application must be based on a cultural programme with a strong European dimension, created specifically for the title year.

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

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

A European Capital of Culture is not assessed on what the candidate city currently is, but on what it aspires to become, and on the impact it intends to achieve within a European context.

The panel emphasises that its assessments were based only on the overall content of the bid-book, the presentation session, and the subsequent question-and-answer session. The comments that follow summarise the main points of the panel's discussions during the selection meeting.

For the selected city, the panel provides specific recommendations intended to support the successful implementation of its European Capital of Culture year.

Leuven

Introduction

Leuven's bid, *LOV2030 - Leuven & Beyond*, positions the city as a space where living together is not a concept but an active, radical practice. Rooted in the Flemish notion of *samenleven* - to live together - it proposes a vision of society based on participation, care, and shared humanity rather than structure or hierarchy. Through *HumanNature*, Leuven explores what it means to be human in an age of ecological crisis, polarisation, and digital acceleration, inviting reflection on how humanity coexists with nature and one another.

As a vibrant and youthful international, and knowledge-driven city, Leuven seeks to extend its connections far beyond its borders, transforming its relationship with its surrounding region and Europe at large. *LOV2030* stands for *Leuven & Beyond* but also for *life* and *love* - values that underpin its ambition to foster radically new connections across divides. The bid presents a city that listens to Europe's heartbeat, combining intellectual legacy with contemporary urgency, and reimagines culture as a means of healing, connecting, and shaping a shared European future.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

Formally adopted in June 2024 and reaffirmed after the pre-election Leuven's long-term cultural strategy is convincing, explicitly European, and reflects a mature policy framework. The *LOV2030* concept aligns well with the strategy's core priorities – Human Nature, and Innovation – and is effectively translated into ten policy lines and five thematic Labs. Legacy planning is credibly embedded through the Inter-Municipal Cooperation (30 municipalities; structural Flemish funding from 2027) and the *LOV EU Academy*, which ensure durable structures for collaboration and knowledge transfer. The ambition to (re)build cultural relations with Ottignies/Louvain-la-Neuve is commendable and symbolically strong, yet its operationalisation within the strategic goals and legacy plans remains general.

The four impact ambitions are well defined and supported by a logical set of indicators, demonstrating a clear path toward greater cultural participation, social cohesion, environmental

awareness, and innovation-driven economic growth. Urban impact is convincingly addressed through distributed cultural spaces, sustainable infrastructure, and a supra-local cultural network across East Brabant. The partnership approach with KU Leuven, Louvain-la-Neuve, regional and federal institutions, and former ECoC reinforces the European dimension and enhances the systemic potential of the initiative.

The monitoring and evaluation framework is comprehensive, phased, and underpinned by credible partners (IDEA Consult, KU Leuven, Antwerp Management School, municipal and regional actors). Quantitative indicators are well specified, and dissemination channels through reports, academic research, and sectoral networks are clearly outlined. While several qualitative tools are mentioned such as storytelling, reflexive monitoring, outcome harvesting, and citizen science via SMILE, the approach to collecting and analysing qualitative data remains insufficiently elaborated.

Cultural and artistic content

The artistic vision of LOV2030 is convincing, coherent, and intellectually strong. Centred on HumanNature, it explores the interdependence between humanity, nature, and innovation, addressing major European and global challenges. Building on Leuven's humanist and research-driven identity, it translates reflection into artistic and civic engagement. The panel found the vision futuristic yet human, linking local realities to European themes.

The involvement of local artists and organisations is extensive and convincing. Each project includes a local lead partner, ensuring strong ownership and embeddedness. The Cultural Network of Leuven unites over 300 organisations with major institutions and grassroots actors. The panel viewed this engagement as a major strength and a solid basis for lasting impact.

The programme is coherent, diverse, and of high artistic quality. Organised around five LOV Labs - Democracy, Decolonisation, Sustainable Infrastructure, Digital Transition, and Culture & Education - it fosters interdisciplinary collaboration. The €47.12 million budget, with 80% allocated and €9.72 million for open calls, ensures solidity and flexibility.

The panel welcomed the Labs as tools for continuous development and reflection but asked how overlapping projects would be managed to ensure coherence. The team explained that shared leadership, academic documentation, and embedded PhD researchers would ensure

coherence. The panel found this thoughtful and reflective of Leuven's research culture and process-driven approach.

Spanning performance, music, visual arts, digital creation, and participatory work, the programme combines playfulness, experimentation, and citizen engagement. The panel praised its artistic quality and connection between innovation and everyday life.

Leuven integrates its heritage with contemporary artistic forms. Projects such as Paint It Black and the activation of the gothic town hall show how heritage sites become spaces for artistic and social dialogue. The integration of heritage and innovation was found coherent and artistically strong.

Half of the activities will take place in the surrounding region, with projects like 30 Ways to LOV and artist residencies extending reach and accessibility. The panel found this credible and praised strong regional collaboration.

With most of the budget committed, the Artistic Director will work through shared governance to ensure coherence and co-ownership. The panel found this consistent with Leuven's collaborative ethos.

The panel valued Leuven's commitment to accessibility and the diversity of its programming. Projects such as Paint It Black exemplify the blend of artistic ambition and public appeal. The panel agreed that the programme demonstrates both cultural depth and popular accessibility, giving it a strong overall artistic dimension.

European dimension

The European dimension of LOV2030 is very well developed, coherent, and convincingly integrated across the programme. It clearly demonstrates how activities promote Europe's cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, and mutual understanding. Programme lines such as Plays of Birth, Power to the People, and Crossroads include projects like 1,001 Stories, The World's Smallest Queer Museum, and Stadhuis - European House for Democracy, which explore Europe's plurality through shared civic and cultural experiences. The panel considered

these activities exemplary in their participatory and inclusive approach across languages, generations, and communities.

The bid convincingly highlights the common aspects of European cultures, heritage, and history while addressing current issues. Projects such as PastForward, Paint It Black, Alamire XR Studio, European Cinematic Heritage Odyssey, and Dancelab Experience Centre reinterpret Leuven's heritage in a European framework, linking the city's history to contemporary themes such as democracy, sustainability, and digital transformation. The panel found this approach coherent, intellectually grounded, and aligned with EU cultural and societal priorities.

The programme also demonstrates a strong commitment to transnational cooperation. It presents a clear and structured model engaging European artists, cultural operators, and partner cities through open calls and collaboration frameworks. Partnerships with artists such as Doris Salcedo, Dora García, and Begüm Erciyas, and with several ECoCs and candidate cities, were found convincing and strategically aligned with Leuven's European vision.

The strategy to attract a broad European and international public is comprehensive and substantiated. It proposes affordable and accessible experiences designed to encourage longer stays and regional exploration, such as forest concerts, farm residencies, and the 30 Ways to LOV route featuring public artworks accessible by bike. When asked which project would appeal most to visitors from abroad, the team emphasised the aim of offering a holistic, multi-day European experience rather than single-event tourism. The panel found this response coherent and well aligned with Leuven's sustainable tourism strategy.

As regards Leuven's ambition to extend cooperation through the LOV EU Academy, the team explained that the Academy, building on the Future Generation Lab, will empower socio-cultural organisations at the European level, strengthen capacities for EU funding and collaboration, and operate through networks such as European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC), Trans Europe Halles (TEH), EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC), and Culture Next. The panel welcomed this as a concrete and credible mechanism to deepen European engagement and ensure long-term impact beyond Leuven's region.

Outreach

Leuven involves residents and civil society in a clear, step-by-step way from start to finish. Open calls (137 submissions), the Dreamers2030 group and the 300-strong Cultural Network of Leuven mean co-creation runs through the whole city and region, backed up by inter-municipal cooperation. When asked how different expectations will be handled, the team set out a simple “no one left behind” approach: Labs and shared leadership, community figures taking the lead in their groups, and hands-on network management to keep partners aligned while letting projects grow. The panel saw this as honest, practical and ready to use.

Participation is opened up across six focus areas – diverse, affordable, accessible, safe & proud, generations, and live & learn. In practice, that means plenty of free or low-cost options such as UiTPAS and pay-what-you-can, multilingual and “language-no-problem” formats, and strong access measures i.e. EU Disability Card parity, help with mobility, low-stimulus events, audio description and subtitles, plus streaming into hospitals and care homes. Volunteers are trained and supported as long-term ambassadors, and students are actively linked with local residents. The panel noted that opportunities for less-privileged groups are well defined, partners know their roles, and projects are mapped to each focus area.

Audience development follows three clear phases – activation, outreach and evaluation – ensuring that artistic and community goals progress together through the Labs. The education strategy is clear: every school in the region should establish a lasting link with cultural institutions. This builds on the Culture × Education Lab with SOM (79 partners), existing museum-school collaborations and the schoolmetcultuur.be platform for visibility and booking, reinforced by teacher networks and long-term partnerships rather than the platform alone. The panel sought clarification on how results would be measured, and the team confirmed their commitment to clear KPIs for schools and pupils, already developed in dialogue with education authorities to ensure wider take-up. The panel found this a well-structured and credible path from pilot initiatives to a sustainable, system-wide approach.

Management

Leuven’s figures are clear and sensible: €72.5 million to run the year, 86% public, 14% private, and €194.9 million in capital works. Public funding comes from city, province, region and state; the private part combines sponsorship, tax-shelter, patronage and self-generated income. EU

funding is included and supported by the LOV EU Academy. The panel judged the income timetable sound, the EU plan strong, and the private target ambitious but achievable given the detailed fundraising strategy. There are plans in place in case of less revenue, rises in costs and operational challenges.

The delivery body is LOV vzw which evolves from KU[N]ST Leuven. Day-to-day it works collaboratively, but if agreement cannot be reached the General Director has the casting vote. Regular coordination with the authorities is built in while keeping artistic and operational autonomy. On continuity, the team assured that LOV will focus solely on ECoC delivery; the production of the city's regular festivals will be taken care of by others in the organisation. Leadership will be recruited through open, Europe-wide calls for four directors (General, Artistic, Executive, Engage). The panel asked how they would ensure a smooth transition from the bidding phase to delivery and prevent the loss of tacit knowledge. The mayor explained that the current team will remain in place until around Easter 2026 to secure an effective handover to the new, strengthened delivery team.

Marketing and communications are already well shaped: clear objectives, phased roll-out, audience segmentation, CRM (Customer Relationship Management), and a flexible "Let's make LOV" brand that residents and partners can use. EU visibility is central (flag/logo and narrative). The panel found this professional and creative. The team has grown during selection and will scale in phases to 2033 through open hiring, coaching and diversity targets. Quality assurance, clear decision lines and risk controls are in place to keep a wide partner network coherent

Capacity to deliver

Political support is very wide, formal and up to date. There are unanimous city approvals in May 2025; province support confirmed in June 2025; 30 municipalities signed with a per-capita contribution model in June 2025; Flemish and federal support for the designated city in 2025; KU Leuven's commitment and a signed pledge from Ottignies/Louvain-la-Neuve. The panel described this as very strong support. On the question of a municipality stepping away, Leuven's approach is to prevent this by keeping partners active in shared projects and budgets.

On infrastructure, the two flagships -the Performing Arts Site and the repurposed Stadhuis -are funded in the city's capital plan with completion aimed for 2029. Most other sites complete before 2030, for example Park Abbey in 2026, the Vesalius Museum in 2025-26, Horst Castle in 2026, with the Furia Museum finishing in 2030. When asked about delays, Leuven assured the panel of suitable alternatives such as temporary and pop-up venues, re-phasing of premieres and use of the wider regional network.

Conclusion

Leuven presented a highly coherent bid where the concept of HumanNature threads consistently through strategy, programme design and plans for delivery. The artistic dimension is of an impressive high quality and breadth combining rigorous curatorial thinking with playful, accessible formats across artistic disciplines and the wider region. The European dimension is remarkably strong in thought and design with well-evidenced intercultural dialogue, clear links to common European heritage and current themes, and a mature network of transnational partners. Outreach is equally convincing with co-creation embedded from preparation through delivery, participation plans concrete and inclusive, and the link with education systematic.

Governance and management arrangements are credible and modern, pairing shared leadership with clear decision lines, while the marketing and communications strategy is professional, creative, and EU-forward. Funding plans are robust, public commitments are formal and current, private income targets are realistic with multiple levers identified, and infrastructure planning is advanced with the two flagship sites proceeding regardless of the title and workable contingencies in place.

Overall, Leuven's proposal is compelling, delivery-ready and well positioned to generate cultural, social and European impact.

The panel recommends that the bid of Leuven is selected.

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

Molenbeek

Introduction

Molenbeek's bid sets out a clear and confident story and a very powerful narrative. It begins with the choice to answer division with culture after the 2015 (Paris) and 2016 (Brussels) terror attacks and to keep going through the Covid pandemic. The idea at its heart is Creative Sadaka, a generous, mixed and practical way of working that treats culture as everyday care for people and place. The bid presents Molenbeek not as a problem to be fixed but as a young, superdiverse engine of European imagination, and invites partners from across Brussels, Belgium, and Europe to build with it.

Over the past years the coalition behind the bid has grown. Political bodies have aligned, budgets have been prepared, and major institutions and community groups have joined. The team has tested methods through MolenFest and other pilots, showing how creation, hosting and public space can come together. The message is direct and hopeful. It aims to flip the script on perception by putting residents, especially young people, at the centre and by linking local realities to shared European questions. The bid looks beyond a single year and sets out legacies that run to 2040, carried by cultural practice, repurposed spaces and a network of European allies.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

Molenbeek's cultural strategy *Creative Sadaka 2025–2035* was adopted by the City Council on 21 May 2025 and endorsed by the Brussels-Capital Region and both Community Commissions. Priorities are well aligned with the ECoC bid, including a permanent reference institute, a Creative Sadaka Academy for capacity building, and long-term commitments to co-creation, inclusion, and sustainability. The strategy links cultural growth to neighbourhood development, intercultural dialogue, and youth empowerment, positioning culture as a driver for civic renewal and social justice.

Legacy elements are clearly defined, focusing on institutional strengthening, skills development, and a shared cultural infrastructure across the canal zone. The panel found these ambitions well-chosen but noted that operational details and governance mechanisms are not sufficiently presented to be entirely convincing.

The bid presents clear cultural, social, and economic benefits, alongside urban improvements that reinforce neighbourhood cohesion, employment, and access to culture. The panel considered the intended impact credible and grounded in solid regional cooperation, particularly with Brussels partners and European networks. It welcomed the focus on youth, women, and migrant communities but encouraged more clarity on how these groups will remain structurally involved after 2030.

The foreseen large monitoring partnership was discussed in detail. The team explained that roles, baselines, and timelines are defined, with an Observatory leading and an advisory committee providing guidance. The structure appears comprehensive, yet somewhat complex, and could risk dilution of focus. The panel appreciated the commitment to evidence-based evaluation and found the framework ambitious, though not fully convincing in its operational cohesion.

The panel suggested that a stronger qualitative focus on gentrification, cultural participation, and wellbeing would strengthen the legacy framework. Nonetheless, it recognised that the bid sets a solid foundation for a lasting transformation, embedding culture as a shared responsibility and creative catalyst for social resilience in Molenbeek.

Cultural and artistic content

Creative Sadaka plans four main seasons in 2030 - Equal, Natural, Creole and Daring - plus a year-round Digital strand. Each season is youth-led to ensure focus and continuity, with activities starting before and continuing after its peak moments. The concept is designed as a flexible framework for the Artistic Director to develop rather than reinvent, with room for collaboration and experimentation. The panel enquired about how the programme would ensure a welcoming and comfortable visitor experience. The team explained that events will take place in accessible and well-connected areas, supported by clear signage, trained stewards, multilingual information and local hosts. The panel found this approach well considered, noting that perceptions of the area will evolve through the programme's inclusive and open spirit.

The seasons address distinct aspects of Molenbeek's identity and its links to Europe. *Equal* explores social justice and gender equality, *Natural* focuses on ecology and circularity, *Creole* celebrates diversity and hybrid culture, and *Daring* highlights risk-taking, experimentation and

freedom of expression. The Digital strand complements these through creative technologies, archives and participatory tools, connecting local and European audiences. The panel found this structure coherent and imaginative, clearly rooted in Molenbeek's realities yet outward-looking and collaborative.

Local artists are deeply involved through MolenFest, creation labs and partnerships with Brussels venues such as KANAL, KVS, Ras El Hanout, Cinemaximiliaan and Circus Zonder Handen. Co-management, early matchmaking, clear selection criteria and shared quality standards provide consistency across partners. The panel regarded this as a strong and credible delivery model that empowers local voices while maintaining artistic excellence.

The programme's structure around Mills, Brooks and Valleys offers a clear hierarchy of impact and scale. Mills represent flagship and legacy projects, Brooks focus on artistic and community co-productions, and Valleys are open calls, including one for all nineteen Brussels communes. The panel noted the absence of detailed project budgets but acknowledged the explanation that each season will have four to five million euros, with precise allocations to follow. Risk management measures such as phased contracting, checkpoints and joint fundraising were considered practical and proportionate.

Heritage is approached as an active and evolving element of the programme. *Homes of European Sadaka* will transform churches, schools and industrial buildings into spaces for creation, housing and events. Key projects like the *European Gallery of Social Justice* connect art history with contemporary issues, while public parades and performances integrate culture into everyday life. The digital strand will unfold in stages through labs and collaborative tools with European partners. The panel found this concept strong and symbolically powerful, though the full scale of the digital ambitions may prove challenging to realise.

European dimension

The European idea runs consistently through the four seasons and the Digital strand, creating a coherent framework that links Molenbeek's local realities with broader European questions. Shared activities, parades and civic rituals are designed to connect people from different backgrounds, generations, and languages, making Europe tangible through lived experience rather than abstract concepts. The team explained that each season uses European values as an

entry point for wider topics such as migration, democracy, equality, cultural rights, and the ecological transition. These are explored through exhibitions, co-productions, artistic residencies, civic debates, and youth-led initiatives that combine artistic reflection with social engagement. The panel found this thinking convincing and intellectually grounded, noting that while the EU policy framework could be made more explicit, the spirit of European cooperation and solidarity is well embedded.

Heritage is treated as an active and connecting force between Molenbeek and Europe. Familiar spaces such as churches, schools and former factories are reimagined as creative venues for art, education and community gathering, linking everyday heritage to European ideas of reuse and sustainability. The European Gallery of Social Justice and Homes of European Sadaka exemplify this approach, connecting historical and contemporary struggles for equality and dignity. Parades, public art and performances in streets and squares reinterpret European rituals of celebration and solidarity. The panel appreciated how these artistic gestures bring together local and European narratives, making culture visible in public life. The digital strand reinforces this connection by developing participatory tools, open archives, and creative platforms for exchange rather than relying on symbolic branding.

Partnerships show a good balance between local depth and international reach. Residencies, co-productions, and joint curation are planned with BOZAR, KANAL, KVS, Ras El Hanout, Cinemaximiliaan, Circus Zonder Handen and several European Capitals of Culture. The panel sought clarification on how these would ensure genuine co-creation rather than symbolic exchange. The team explained that multi-year agreements, shared governance and joint evaluation will secure balanced partnerships. The panel found this credible and well structured, while noting the importance of keeping Molenbeek's role visible.

The audience strategy focuses on inclusion, trust, and curiosity as foundations for engagement. Each season offers clear reasons to visit, with free and affordable options and accessible routes connecting Molenbeek to the wider Brussels region. Multi-day visitor itineraries link exhibitions, neighbourhood walks, concerts, and outdoor performances, encouraging longer stays and cross-cultural exchange. Key attractions include the season peaks, EuroFestival, major exhibitions and the opening of Mills, coordinated with the 2029 and 2030 ECoC hosts. The panel found the plan realistic and well aligned with sustainable tourism goals, highlighting

its capacity to attract both local and European visitors through authentic, participatory experiences that reflect Molenbeek's openness and creativity.

Outreach

Molenbeek aims to involve residents and civil society at every stage. The process engages young people, families, seniors, LGBTQIA+ groups, Roma and Dom communities, volunteers, and sports organisations. Themes were developed with strong youth input and expanded through dialogue with other groups. The bid also highlights neighbourhood forums, creative assemblies, and citizens' labs as tools for continuous participation, helping residents shape projects and test new ideas in their own communities.

In response to questions on accessibility for all, the team explained that opportunities are offered to diverse groups through free or low-cost access, easy-to-understand materials, accessibility measures, buddy schemes and volunteer exchanges between locals and Europeans. Activities will be decentralised across neighbourhoods and supported by intercultural mediators, ensuring a presence in both formal and informal settings. The panel sought clarification on how these measures could be ensured given the independence of venues and noted that while the intentions are strong and credible, implementation across all settings may present challenges.

Audience development is phased and closely linked to schools. Every school in Molenbeek is intended to connect with cultural institutions and described collaboration with education services and school networks to reach both French- and Dutch-speaking systems, eventually extending beyond the municipality. Cross-generational learning and family participation are also encouraged through arts residencies and after-school programmes. The panel sought clarification on specific targets for schools and pupils and how scaling would work outside Molenbeek. The response was considered clear and compelling. The overall direction is convincing, though targets and baselines are only briefly outlined in the bid.

On staffing, the panel noted that one Outreach and PR post sits in the core team. The team explained that this role coordinates a wider network of delivery partners, neighbourhood mediators and youth ambassadors. This approach seems appropriate provided coordination remains effective as activities expand and community demand grows.

Management

The total operating budget is €97.951 million, with 63% for programme delivery and €9 million from private sources. Public funding is led by the Brussels Capital Region with about €38–40 million, as well as €4 million channelled through the city. Capital spending totals €255.595 million, mainly for cultural buildings, with commitments confirmed. The panel saw the plan as solid whereas they questioned whether the digital budget is realistic. Contingencies are included, and EU funding is planned for all stages.

The delivery body is planned as a Foundation of Public Utility by January 2026, with a Board, management team and advisory, patronage and remuneration committees under public oversight. The panel acknowledged the substantial progress made toward securing the highest level of political commitment achievable at this stage.

Recruitment will be open and European in scope, including senior roles for Artistic, Business, External Relations and Operations. Mills are developed in-house, about half the Brooks are also in-house, and Valleys are led by partners. If partners cannot meet co-funding goals, activities will be phased, re-scoped or jointly fundraised.

Marketing and communication strategies are clear and targeted. The plan dedicates a larger share of funds to address perception, builds media partnerships, uses citizen voices and ensures EU visibility. The panel found the plan strong overall, though some visibility actions may be optimistic.

Staffing will reach around 77 by 2030, covering artistic, production, outreach, finance and monitoring roles. Recruitment will mix local and international hires. Training, mentoring and secondments are planned, along with routes for volunteers to move into paid roles. Responsibilities and risk management are clearly defined.

Capacity to deliver

The bid has wide political support across Brussels, with backing from the Brussels-Capital Region, both Community Commissions and partner cities. The panel noted that financial commitments are not yet fully secured, though the coalition is strong for this stage. Further, the panel took into consideration the risks associated with the absence of a government in Brussels and the resulting instability.

Most cultural infrastructure projects will be ready before 2030, with only a few continuing after. Five key buildings are due in 2029 and directly linked to the programme. If any are delayed, the team plans to use other Brussels venues as a contingency plan.

Conclusion

Molenbeek 2030 presents a sincere and compelling vision built on the idea of Creative Sadaka, a generous, human and practical approach that uses culture as a form of care and connection. The concept is deeply rooted in local realities yet speaks directly to Europe today, addressing themes of diversity, trust and coexistence that are central to the European project. The bid conveys authenticity, courage, and hope, showing how culture can foster belonging and shared responsibility. Its coherence between vision, governance and community engagement is convincing, supported by political commitment and credible partnerships to the extent possible at this stage.

The panel recognised the clarity and integrity of the vision, while noting that the ambition sometimes runs ahead of the operational detail. The absence of project-level budgets makes it difficult to fully assess the balance and feasibility of the programme in relation to the overall budget. Some participation strategies and partnership mechanisms also need further clarification, as coordination across such a broad network will be complex. The European perspective is genuine and important, though it could be more explicitly linked to broader EU themes and frameworks. Financial and infrastructure planning appear broadly sound, though greater precision would reinforce confidence in delivery.

Overall, Molenbeek 2030 offers a thoughtful and timely proposal. Its focus on solidarity, diversity and cultural care touches on themes of high European significance, giving the bid both emotional depth and political relevance.

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

Namur

Introduction

Namur 2030 presents itself as a city of Confluences - a meeting point of rivers, histories and ideas - where dialogue and difference are transformed into creative strength. Built on the symbolism of water and the city's geographical position at the confluence of the Meuse and Sambre, the concept embodies a commitment to unity over division. It seeks to counter polarisation through cultural action that fosters empathy, participation and experimentation.

The bid emphasises resilience against fear and fragmentation by positioning Namur as a laboratory for Europe, exploring how art and culture can bridge contrasts between past and future, local and global, and social tensions and attentions. Its programme is grounded in humility and openness, drawing energy from the city's diverse communities and natural surroundings. Supported by broad political consensus and an engaged territory of half a million inhabitants, Namur 2030 turns the idea of confluence into both a method and a vision that invites Europe to join in creating new confluences.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

Namur's cultural strategy was unanimously adopted by the city council in January 2024 and aligns with the city's long-term planning cycle until 2033, with the next phase to be developed up to 2044. It builds on the Agenda 21 for Culture Pilot Cities programme and reflects broad participation from cultural actors, community groups and territorial partners. The link between the ECoC and the city's strategic framework is well established, embedding sustainability, digital transformation and community engagement as key priorities. The legacy of Namur 2030 is clearly positioned as the foundation for the next cultural strategy and a structural transition for the territory.

The envisaged long-term impact is comprehensive, addressing cultural, social, economic and urban dimensions. The bid presents a coherent vision of culture as a driver for inclusion, sustainability and regeneration. The city's collaboration with the university and the strong political commitment across different levels add credibility to its ambitions. The alignment with Belgium's bicentenary in 2030 is seen as an opportunity to contribute to a forward-looking cultural narrative, while awareness of potential overlaps suggests a prudent, well-considered

approach. The strategy is regionally relevant and structured over three interlinked periods that connect culture, territory and sustainability in a consistent way.

Monitoring and evaluation plans are clearly outlined, with responsible actors, timelines and baseline data defined. Quantitative indicators dominate, while qualitative research, though mentioned, remains less developed within the indicator system. The panel enquired about this aspect, and Namur confirmed that themes for qualitative inquiry are planned, even if still at an early stage. The creation of the Confluence Panel, bringing together citizens, private stakeholders and experts, adds a reflective dimension by questioning whether the right issues are being addressed and understood by all. Dissemination is foreseen through public reporting and academic collaboration, ensuring transparency and knowledge sharing across the city and region.

Cultural and artistic content

The artistic vision of Namur 2030 is centred on the idea of *Confluences*, positioning the city as a creative space where differences meet and transform through dialogue and artistic expression. The panel recognised that the concept had gained depth and coherence since the pre-selection stage and that the new structure linking past and future, local and global, and tensions and attentions strengthened its clarity. The vision was viewed as conceptually strong and inclusive, though the very broad use of *Confluences* across several interpretations may slightly blur its distinctiveness.

Local artists and cultural organisations were actively involved in developing the programme, which grew from broad consultation across the territory. The panel valued this participatory approach and the commitment to strengthening Namur's creative ecosystem, particularly the ambition to encourage young artists to remain in the city. The goal of having around one fifth of projects led by local artists was considered realistic and relevant, given the scale of the regional cultural scene. Collaboration between linguistic communities was also well appreciated, with the *Namur–Namen* project and related initiatives seen as constructive and forward-looking. The intention to expand these exchanges to include the German-speaking region further confirmed the inclusive ambition of the programme.

The programme includes twenty-seven main projects, complemented by outreach activities and annual events, making a total of around forty. It presents a wide range of artistic disciplines, including exhibitions, performances, dance, fashion and participatory formats. The panel considered the artistic quality and diversity convincing and found the programme thematically coherent and rooted in local identity. The inclusion of existing annual events was viewed positively, though the panel encouraged the team to ensure that these familiar events offer audiences a distinctly renewed experience in 2030.

The overall programme budget of about fifty million euros, representing two thirds of the total, was regarded as substantial and well aligned with the scale of ambition. However, the very wide budget ranges for individual projects make the overall assessment of the programme slightly challenging. While the programme's three implementation methods are clearly described and give confidence that further development will proceed in a structured way, the panel would have welcomed a more detailed indication of project costs.

The combination of Namur's heritage with contemporary and experimental forms was highlighted as a strength. The approach bridges traditional and modern expressions in meaningful ways and extends Namur's cultural dialogue across linguistic and European contexts.

European dimension

Activities promoting Europe's cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding are well developed and clearly linked to the concept of *Confluences*. The programme includes projects on language, migration, media and coexistence that reflect contemporary European realities. The panel appreciated the clear examples of cross-cultural dialogue, and the way Namur connects artistic creation with social cohesion. The depth of European themes was considered solid, though some descriptions remained broad and could have further illustrated how shared experiences are transformed into creative exchange.

The panel found that common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history were well addressed through projects exploring inequality, dialects, shared memories etc. The inclusion of European integration and current European themes such as climate change, polarisation and fake news reflects an awareness of Europe's challenges. However, the presentation of these

themes was sometimes perceived as somewhat general, with a need for stronger narrative links showing how the programme contributes to a shared European heritage.

Collaboration with European artists, cities and operators is extensive. The bid provides a detailed list of partners, including many former and future European Capitals of Culture, and describes the forms of exchange and co-creation planned. The panel welcomed this depth of information and the clear transversal knowledge exchange on governance, communication, infrastructure and sustainability. Projects such as *True Stories* and *The Rocket* were highlighted as good examples of how Namur addresses common European concerns through creative collaboration. The programme includes notable artists and partnerships across Europe.

The strategy to attract a broad European and international audience is well elaborated and supported by specific flagship projects. The panel considered this approach convincing, citing large-scale and visually striking projects such as *Dolce Vita*, which combine artistic and scientific collaboration and invite longer stays in the region. The plan to position Namur as a European meeting point through targeted promotion, strong communication and partnerships with other cities was viewed positively. The bid also links its European message to broader EU themes on climate and digital transition, showing awareness of shared policy. The panel found the overall European dimension convincing and inclusive, though with some aspects still requiring greater depth to ensure that the European perspective extends well beyond francophone and neighbouring networks.

Outreach

The panel recognised that the involvement of the local population and civil society in preparing the application was extensive and well documented, with around five thousand citizens contributing through the *Petites Confluences* process. This participatory model, built on dialogue across neighbourhoods and associations, was praised for its inclusivity and realism. The continuation of this approach into the implementation phase through community partnerships and local projects was viewed as convincing, though the panel noted that it was not fully clear how the strategy would also attract people who do not usually engage with cultural life.

The inclusion and accessibility strategy were seen as strong, addressing social, financial and physical barriers. A dedicated outreach department and volunteer programme are in place, involving schools, youth networks and local associations. The panel valued the attention given to young people and to marginalised and disadvantaged groups, including minorities, people with disabilities and the elderly. Accessibility was described from multiple angles mobility, affordability, and communication, which the panel considered comprehensive and credible.

Education and audience development are clearly prioritised. The panel noted that many projects, including *True Stories*, *Alternative Routes*, *Dolce Vita*, *The Climate in Us* and *Playground*, directly involve schools. The panel asked for clearer targets on how many schools and students will be involved. Collaboration with *Parcours d'Éducation Culturelle et Artistique* is being formalised, with some pilot collaborations between Namur and Flemish schools under way. The panel sought clarification about scaling up beyond Namur and ensure participation goes beyond compulsory school activities to which the team responded that this was included in the planning. A dedicated communication plan for children and families was seen as a good initiative to promote voluntary engagement and to encourage families to attend other cultural events together.

Management

The panel found the financial and fundraising strategy sound and realistic. The operational budget of €75 million is balanced, with 89% from public and 11% from private sources, and 67% allocated to the programme. Capital expenditure of €59 million is 70% secured. The plan to seek support from Union programmes was well structured, and the fundraising strategy with local enterprises and banks was seen as credible. Some concern was expressed about the projected €2.8 million from tickets and merchandise, though the reference to past ECoCs made it acceptable. The contingency plan was adequate with a focus on governance, security and climate risks.

The governance model was viewed as clear and credible. From 2024, a dedicated non-profit organisation will manage the project, ensuring coordination between the city and Namur 2030. The panel noted strong political commitment and valued that the current team will remain to ensure continuity. Cooperation with local authorities is active, though day-to-day practice could

have been described in more depth. The creation of a Europe and International Partnerships Department was well received.

The marketing and communication strategy was considered correct although quite traditional. The slogan *Together, let's create new confluences* was viewed as clear yet unmemorable. Media partnerships and citizen ambassadors were well outlined, whereas the use of social media and international outreach could be more innovative. Coordination with VISITWallonia and the communication of the ECoC's Union identity, including logo use, were not sufficiently detailed to be convincing.

The delivery structure was seen as solid, with an experienced multidisciplinary team covering management, finance, partnerships and production. The panel found the staffing plan proportionate, noting that 15 staff will manage programming with co-producing partners. Although this number seemed high, the co-production model justified it.

Capacity to deliver

The panel confirmed that Namur's bid enjoys strong and broad political support, with nearly unanimous backing from the City and firm commitments from regional and national authorities. This continuity of engagement was seen as a solid basis for delivery and long-term sustainability.

Namur has already completed or renovated over 13 cultural venues in the past decade, and five major projects are due by 2029. The panel appreciated the clear overview of infrastructure plans but noted that the RIV creative centre will not be finished before the title year and that the *Tribune* project depends on ERDF funding foreseen for 2028–2035. Namur assured the panel that they have alternative plans in case of delays or lack of funding.

The panel recognised ongoing challenges in retaining artists and cultural professionals due to limited venues and support structures. The bid's focus on capacity building and infrastructure development was therefore considered both timely and essential, though the city's starting point in this respect remains relatively fragile.

Conclusion

Namur 2030 offers a poetic and mature vision of a city of Confluences, where culture becomes a bridge between communities, histories and ideas. The concept is coherent, inclusive and deeply rooted in Namur's identity, supported by strong political commitment, solid governance and a credible financial plan. Its artistic and cultural programme is diverse and locally grounded, reaching confidently towards Europe through meaningful partnerships and an ethos of dialogue and sustainability.

Yet the breadth of the Confluences idea, while enriching, at times risks blurring its uniqueness. Some European themes would benefit from clearer narrative links, and the monitoring framework leans more on quantitative than qualitative insight. The communication strategy, though well structured, feels rather unadventurous, and collaboration with the Flemish education system remains limited. A few infrastructure projects depend on future funding and may not be fully realised by 2030.

Despite these points, Namur 2030 stands as a thoughtful and credible bid, guided by openness, artistic integrity and civic engagement, with the potential to make its confluence of culture and community resonate well beyond its borders.

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

The panel's decision

The panel was presented with three very high-quality yet very different bids from significantly diverse cities, each with its own specific challenges and opportunities. The panel debated the merits of each city against the two objectives and six criteria, and, in the final discussion, the applications were weighed against each other. The panel assessed in depth the criteria across the three cities' bid books, presentations, and answers to questions. The city visits provided a valuable three-dimensional view of the bidding cities but did not form part of the formal assessment.

Following extensive deliberation, the panel reached consensus to recommend to the three Ministers of Culture of the Flemish, French and German-speaking Communities of Belgium that **Leuven** be designated as **European Capital of Culture in Belgium for 2030**.

This report has been sent to the managing authority and the European Commission and will be published on their websites. In accordance with Article 11 of the Decision, the Ministers will proceed with the designation of the European Capital of Culture 2030 in Belgium based on the recommendations contained in this report. They will then inform the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission, and the Committee of the Regions. This formal designation authorises Leuven to use the title **“European Capital of Culture 2030.”**

Melina Mercouri Prize

The panel recommends that the European Commission award the **Melina Mercouri Prize** to the designated city. The payment of the €1.5 million prize is, however, deferred until 2030, in line with Article 14 of the Decision, and is conditional. The ECoC Expert Panel will make a further recommendation to the European Commission in late 2029, 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 the commitments made in the application;
- It complies with the two objectives and six criteria governing the European Capital of Culture action;
- It takes into account the recommendations contained in the selection and monitoring reports;
- There have been no substantial changes to the programme or strategy set out in the bid book, in particular:
 - The budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering the high-quality programme and ECoC plans described in the selection bid book;
 - Governance is secured at a strong, stable, and sustainable level to ensure successful delivery of Leuven 2030;
 - The independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
 - The European dimension continues to be at the core of the overall programme and project;
 - The marketing and communications strategy ensures effective outreach and impact in Belgium, Europe, and internationally, and all material clearly reflects that it is a European Union action;
 - Effective monitoring and evaluation are ensured as set out in the bid.

Reputation of an ECoC

A city awarded the ECoC title receives considerable international attention from the moment of selection, extending well beyond the ECoC year itself. It carries a responsibility to uphold the reputation of the ECoC brand, for the benefit of both previous and future titleholders. City

administrations should be aware that decisions taken across all policy areas, not only in culture, may attract media and social media attention far beyond what they are accustomed to handling. This visibility brings a new level of scrutiny to decision-making in the city across a broad range of issues, extending well beyond culture.

The monitoring phase

Once a city 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 expertise.

The bid book at final selection becomes the *de facto* contract between the designated city and its citizens, the Expert Panel, the Ministers and the European Commission. It also plays a crucial role in determining the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize. The panel expects close alignment with the bid book during both the preparation phase and the ECoC year. Any significant variations from the bid book should be discussed with the panel, via the European Commission, before decisions are made.

There will be three formal monitoring checkpoints—**autumn 2026**, **mid-2028**, and **autumn 2029**—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. After consultation with the panel, the Commission will indicate areas that should be specifically addressed in these reports. In addition, the panel may, with the agreement of the European Commission, decide to visit the city to observe progress.

The panel's reports following all three meetings will be published on the European Commission's website. The ECoC may also choose to publish its own progress reports in the interest of transparency.

The panel's recommendations

The designated ECoC now moves into a transition period—from a structure suited to a bid campaign to a more formal ECoC delivery organisation that is independent of the local city administration. The panel expects Leuven to develop cooperation with other bidding cities and with the wider artistic and cultural community in Belgium. The ECoC in Belgium 2030

provides a national opportunity, which will reflect internationally not only on Leuven but also on the country as a whole.

The panel will expect the first progress report in autumn 2026 to consider the recommendations and comments in the assessment of the bid, as stated above and below.

Recommendations for Leuven

- Leuven should continue to ensure close alignment between the ECoC and the city's long-term cultural strategy and overall strategy.
- The cross-linguistic partnership with Ottignies/Louvain-la-Neuve should be translated into measurable outcomes for joint programming and audience development.
- The panel recommends that Leuven ensure a clear and meaningful connection between its European Capital of Culture programme and Belgium's bicentenary, using the anniversary as an opportunity to highlight shared national and European narratives and foster collaboration across regions.
- Strengthening qualitative monitoring tools and shared indicators across partners would further reinforce the credibility and long-term value of the impact framework.
- The panel recommends maintaining coherence across overlapping projects to ensure the effective delivery of the five Labs, which provide an interesting framework for experimentation and reflection grounded in Leuven's research culture. It also advises that the Labs should not be treated as the structural backbone of the programme but as one of several valuable components, and therefore should not receive a disproportionate share of resources or attention.
- The panel encourages the team to preserve artistic independence within the shared-leadership model and to continue refining curatorial focus as new projects are added through open calls.
- Leuven should capitalise on its already exceptional European partnerships by ensuring that the LOV EU Academy remains active throughout implementation and post-2030. Continued attention to long-term collaboration and mobility within these networks will secure lasting European relevance beyond the title year.
- The "no one left behind" approach should remain a guiding principle. Leuven could further strengthen outreach by documenting and sharing the methods that prove most

effective in reaching underrepresented groups, and by ensuring sustained participation of schools and young people beyond compulsory involvement.

- Leuven should ensure that the governance structure established for delivering LOV2030 maintains a strong and continuous alignment with the city's overall strategy, safeguarding coherence and stability even as team members or political contexts evolve.
- The city should ensure a stable and transparent leadership framework for the delivery body, with an empowered CEO and open recruitment for the senior positions, to guarantee accountability, and consistent delivery of the LOV2030 vision.
- Continued solid investment in communication capacity and innovation will be important to ensure European wide visibility and audience engagement.
- Leuven should maintain its excellent inter-municipal coordination and political commitment, ensuring that all partners remain actively engaged throughout delivery. Regular review of infrastructure timelines and risk management plans will help sustain momentum and avoid pressure on the 2030 schedule.
- The panel encourages Leuven to ensure continuity of experience and networks when moving from the bidding phase into the implementation phase

Thanks

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

Signed

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