



Bad Ischl European Capital of Culture 2024

**Third Monitoring Meeting
Report by the European Capital of Culture Expert Panel**

Virtual Meeting, 6th October 2023

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Introduction

This report follows the virtual meeting on 6th October 2023 between the panel and the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 team, one of the three European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 2024¹. Bad Ischl was designated as European Capital of Culture on 20th December 2019 by the Austrian Federal Chancellery on the basis of the panel's recommendation in its selection report². Its bid book is available on the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 website publications section³. The first two monitoring meetings took place virtually on 25th September 2020 and on 29th June 2022, and the panel's reports can be accessed on the European Commission website⁴.

The present report is addressed to the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 organisation and will be published on the European Commission's website.

Attendance

The meeting was attended by the following individuals:

- The panel members (experts nominated by EU institutions):
 - Else Christensen-Redžepović, Suvi Innilä, and Jorge Cerveira Pinto (rapporteur), appointed by the European Parliament;
 - Marilyn Gaughan Reddan (Chair), Goda Giedraityte, and Rossella Tarantino appointed by the Council of the EU;
 - Jelle Burggraaff, Toni Attard and Hrvoje Laurenta, appointed by the European Commission.
 - Anne Karjalainen, appointed by the European Committee of the Regions.
- The panel member nominated by the relevant national authorities:
 - Dominik Nostitz.

The delegation of Bad Ischl Salzkammergut was formed of the following participants: Mayor of Bad Ischl; Head of Supervisory Board; Artistic Director; Managing Director; Head of Communication/Coordination Mobility and Tourism; Head of Programme Ecology, Agriculture and Social Affairs/Head of Evaluation and Head of Building Culture and Crafts (temporary replacement); Head of Programme Music, Youth and Community Building; Head of Programme History and Museums; International Relations responsible.

The meeting was also attended by observers from the European Commission and the Austrian Ministry for Arts, Culture, Civil Service and Sport.

Report from Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024

Prior to the meeting, the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 team submitted a detailed and comprehensive written progress report. The report was structured around the six criteria

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://culture.ec.europa.eu/fi/node/791#bad-ischl>

³ See <https://www.salzkammergut-2024.at/en/publications/>

⁴ See <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/fi/node/791#bad-ischl>

and presented in detail the major developments since the last monitoring meeting, while providing additional information related to some of the questions, recommendations and issues raised in the previous monitoring report.

The Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 team made a 20 minute verbal presentation, outlining their progress less than 3 months before the start of the ECoC year. During the presentation the team addressed, among others, the following issues:

- The award of the ECoC-title was granted just a few months before the Covid crisis. This had consequences that were difficult to foresee, and manage, and are still being felt.
- However, with just 3 months before the opening, the team believes that they will be able to deliver in time, while securing the cooperation of the 23 municipalities of the region, and in full alignment with the approved budget.
- The Artistic Director addressed the issue of lacking infrastructures, stating that an intense programme planning was undertaken, with most proposals being under the responsibility of external entities, truly reflecting a first inner-alpine ECoC.
- The 4 programme lines were presented (Power and Tradition; Culture in Motion; Sharing Salzkammergut – The Art of Travelling; and GLOBALLOCAL – Building the New) and generic updates provided. For each programme line, one or two projects were highlighted and briefly presented.
- The team also underlined the challenge of overcoming a significant degree of “stubbornness” and “fear of losing traditions”. This situation required significant attention and they believe that there is now a huge interest, curiosity and media awareness, which will help address these issues.
- The title has spurred a need for further regional collaboration, and the team believes that these aspects will become more important in the future. Additionally, the team stated that, upon receiving the title, national Governments should commit more, especially in terms of infrastructure, since the cities and regions will need additional funds, support, and time. The team also pleaded for an increased funding from the European Union, especially for smaller and peripheral municipalities, to further facilitate infrastructural projects and international cooperation. Finally, the team believes that the title will allow a reconsideration of the position of Europe in the new geopolitical scenario we are living in, by building a new culture-ecology and a new “promised future”.

Discussion

During the subsequent discussion, the panel sought clarification on a number of issues and offered experience and advice.

A. Long-term strategy

- The panel enquired on how the team planned to assess the objective of spreading tourism more equally over the calendar year. In their answer, the team mentioned that the objective was to first increase the number of days that each visitor spends in the region; to accomplish this, they have increased the use of digital tools, allowing the promotion of new locations and visitation places. This will be coupled with a focus on low seasons (spring and autumn) offers and increased public transport to facilitate accessibility. Methodologically, and with the support of the Tourism Board, the team will increase the monitoring efforts, tracking tourists and

visitors, using focus groups and capturing as much new data as possible. Cooperation is on-going with experts to extract data from focus groups, to compare among municipalities and identify differences. Finally, the team expressed the intention to model all these new insights, using a social return model, with the full support from academia – University of Vienna, Institute for Non-profit Management – reaching a high level of scientific quality.

- The panel requested additional information regarding the long-term impact of the ECoC, especially about the proposed legacy model and structure. In their reply, the team clarified that although there is not a clear organisational model – the legal form has not been determined – they are fully committed to address these issues and identify the best possible way forward. Additionally, the team mentioned that a cooperation forum and network exist, and this is the best context to address the issues of long-term legacy.
- Concerning the proposed monitoring and evaluation plan, the panel requested additional updated information regarding the collection of baseline data and the evaluation plan. Furthermore, the panel wanted to know who would follow-up and disseminate the results, given that in June 2025 the delivery organisation is supposed to be dismantled. The team reiterated that they are following the planned approach, and that a conscious decision had been taken to use the end of 2022 and the start of 2023 as the baseline, therefore mitigating any interference from the Covid pandemic. The evaluation methodology is based on the concept of social return analysis, and the team feels this has huge potential in terms of the cultural sector. This is being coordinated by Vienna Economics University, Institute for Non-profit Management. The various data sets will be collected and given to the university to build the baseline and analyse changes and results. The team expects to release results at the end of 2024, while at the end of 2025 a report will be published on the impact of the investment in the various sectors, culture and beyond it. Focus groups are the main tool for collecting information. Finally, the team informed the panel that one person recently joined, to coordinate this work and they expect that the University will own the results and provide open-source access to other organisations.

B. Cultural and artistic content

- The panel inquired with the team about examples from the ECoC programme that could make potential visitors/tourists opt for a stay in the low season in Bad Ischl and region rather than the popular winter/summer months. In their reply, the team provided some examples of projects that will run in the low season months, adding that around 50 such projects are planned.
- Concerning the programme, the panel flagged that besides the 178 curated projects – which is already a very high number – there are over 100 associated projects included in the programme and more might still be added. The panel wanted additional information concerning the criteria used when selecting the associated projects, and how the team plans to ensure the expected quality, given the high number of projects. In their reply, the team confirmed that the criteria were the

same for associated programmes or projects, and that these projects came out from the open call, so they want to ensure that as many as possible can be integrated.

- Furthermore, the panel enquired about potential new projects, since the report suggests that new projects could still be added. In their reply, the team confirmed that some new projects in the visual art field might be added to fill in gaps – *Silent Echoes: Dachstein* with the artist Bill Fontana was the example given of a new project added. The objective is also to add as many local projects as possible, thinking ahead of time, and to keep the new spaces with programmes, beyond the ECoC year – e.g. the railway project is already committed to keep the spaces open to artists after the end of ECoC.
- The panel asked the team to identify one example of a project that they expect will have the strongest and the most long-term impact in the region on a European level. In their reply, the team mentioned the *SCALA (Salzkammergut Craft Art Lab)* project in terms of impact and long-term, with extensive impacts in the region and across different topics, with potential impacts going up to 2026. The second project mentioned was the *Tavern Lab*, which could operate as a model on a European level in terms of strengthening the culture of democracy.
- The panel wanted further explanations regarding the digital platform called *On Stage*. In the previous progress report, it was stated that it was to be developed and that a database for the platform was being collected. However, now we read that the required framework conditions for implementing *On Stage* were not established. This included challenges in securing the necessary financial capital and ensuring the involvement, co-design, and co-financing of European partners, such as cultural regions or ECoCs. Issues were also reported with the *Hidden World Expanding* project, involving artworks by Gmunden-based artists exhibited at the Kondas Centre in Estonia in autumn 2023. Regrettably, the art workshop's planned exhibition showcasing international positions was cancelled due to significant staff problems. Given the importance of these issues, the panel wanted further information. In their reply, the team confirmed that they had to cancel the digital platform because they were not able to find a suitable partner for the project. Also, there were concerns that the project was too ambitious. The solution was to develop smaller and easier projects and a simpler mobile app that will still address the same issues. Regarding the team/staff issues, the team confirmed that this is a real problem, since these were cuts imposed by the central Government.

C. European Dimension

- The panel inquired with the team about the activities around the theme of hyper-tourism, and if they were further elaborated at European level. In their reply, the team informed that this topic is being addressed via an Interreg project with partners/regions facing similar problems. It is a project that will go until 2025, through the sharing of experiences and approaches and with workshops that are continuing at European and inter-regional level.

- The panel sought insights from the team on how they plan to ensure that many of the benefits and contacts of the various collaborations will stay in the city and region after the ECoC year. In their reply, the team explained that most of their core team members were from the region, and so retention was not a problem. However, the team confirmed that they faced some challenges in recruiting and keeping some specific members, for example, production staff.
- Regarding the EU visibility and EU perception in the whole Salzkammergut in 2024 – apart from many artists from abroad coming to perform and leaving again – the panel wanted to know how people in the region will feel more European as a consequence of the ECoC year and what will be the legacy of the European dimension in the years after 2024. In their reply, the team highlighted the emotional connection and link – beyond marketing level – which they hope will increase European feelings among all people. This will also allow a change in terms of perceptions and a new spirit of an open region, to oppose the concept of enclave. The team expressed their feeling that this is already happening, mentioning the example of the communication strategy that will be critical to attract international audiences and raise the international profile of the region. This communication will continue beyond the ECoC year. Furthermore, the team mentioned that the projects are really engaging with the local population and this dialogue is happening, while European links are being created by connecting the local and regional culture scene with international scenes.
- The panel asked the team to briefly explain what will be the legacy of Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 to Europe. In their reply, the team highlighted the fact that the ECoC will allow further conversations about the future of rural peripheral regions, and their role in the European project. At the same time, they will address Euro-scepticism and demonstrate that you can be European and pro-European also in these regions. Finally, the European Green Deal project and its values were mentioned.

D. Outreach

- The panel wanted to know more about the capacity-building initiatives, what scale they were expected to have (what was the total number of participants that were expecting to take part in these initiatives) and whether some of them will continue beyond the ECoC year. In their reply, the team confirmed that capacity building is a challenge since the culture sector is mostly based on volunteering in the region. For now, the initiatives are confirmed throughout 2024, and depending on the legacy organisation, there is the intention to continue with similar actions, as it helps not only to develop skills, but also to increase networking.
- Regarding the digital dimensions, the panel wanted further information about the project *Cultural Education App Salzkammergut 2024 by hublz*. This was presented “as a tool to transfer analogue projects from the programme of Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 to the digital realm” and the percentage of the programme that will be available online. The team confirmed that there is a special focus on

immersive content, and all the projects will have a digital dimension in the app, but only a few will have an enhanced and deeper digital presence.

- The panel enquired about the strategies and efforts to be implemented or already being prepared to reach out to marginalised groups and people in the region who are not used to participate in cultural events, even if they are free of charge. In their reply, the team confirmed that some projects specifically target young people – for example, *Next Generation You* is a platform for young people that can be accessed by anyone, and it provides the youth with a voice. There are also specific projects that target migrants and people with disabilities, developed by organisations that have experience in working with marginalised groups. Finally, the team mentioned several volunteering projects that will involve anyone that wants to join and will allow them to interact with all the programmes, while connecting with other people. Volunteering is at the very core of the year.

E. Management

- The panel congratulated the team on the fact that they have secured an additional 1.6M euros to cover some of the increases in costs due to the steep inflation and energy costs. However, it is mentioned that if the inflation and energy costs rise again there will be a need to further reduce other costs. The panel enquired about where the cuts would be made. In their reply, the team informed the panel that they are following up this issue, also with the Government and that some financial reserves exist in response to these challenges. The team also hopes to attract additional sponsors, which, if confirmed, could mitigate some of the risks. Their priority, before any further cuts, is to increase revenues, thereby safeguarding the programme.
- One further question related to the VAT deduction, not yet approved by the Austrian Tax Authorities. The team mentioned that they are confident this will be approved. In the unlikely case it is refused, this would result in a budget gap that would have to be discussed with the project's funding authorities and owners.
- Concerning the marketing and promotional activities, the panel enquired why the international promotional strategy has been so limited, with cities and countries close to the city not being targeted. In their reply, the team mentioned that they are working with their tourism partners and the ECoC promotion is integrated in their efforts. Several priority markets have been identified and since March there have been several promotional actions, which will be intensified in the coming months, including actions with embassies.
- The panel reminded the team about the recommendation in the previous report that underlined the importance of consistency when communicating about the ECoC and explained that the title was awarded to a city in a regional context. However, although the panel could see mentions of Bad Ischl Salzkammergut, the name of all socials is Salzkammergut, as well as the name of the digital app. Therefore, the panel asked the team to explain what the reasoning was for not fully following up on its recommendation. In their reply, the team explained that since the beginning,

the project had been regional in essence and the region had been always present. They will make sure to always mention the city and the region together, as was the case for past ECoC cities sharing the title with their regional counterpart. Furthermore, the region is funding the ECoC to a large extent and therefore the team cannot just emphasise one of the 23 municipalities involved. They also stressed that they believe this is something good to have such a collective endeavour and support for the ECoC all across the rural Salzkammergut region.

- Concerning the ECoC budget, the panel asked for further explanations regarding two issues: operating expenditures had a reduction of 19.4% in programming from the bid book forecast and doubled the expenditure in administration; also, it states that further inflation in 2024 may lead to additional cuts. In their reply, the team explained that there were three reasons for this. First, they had to add 7M euro for staff, when they realised that the initial budget was not enough to cover all related costs. This increase is significant, but necessary to be able to attract the people needed. Second, the income for EU projects is significantly less than originally planned (0.32 million instead of 3 million). Also, marketing increased significantly together with administrative costs. Regarding programme costs, the effort is to try to maintain them at the planned level.
- The panel wanted further explanations regarding the drafting of a legacy plan. In their reply, the team informed the panel that the strategic legacy plan will be published at the end of 2025 linked to the city and region 2030 and beyond plans. Although the responsibility will stay in the city regarding the future legacy, the team stated that they want to ensure that all municipalities will be part of this, and other sectors, beyond the cultural sector, will also benefit. A reflection on the legacy plan and on the legacy organisation is still ongoing.

F. Capacity to Deliver

- The panel wanted the team to address the risks associated with severe snowstorms and other weather conditions that could negatively impact the opening, by halting mobility, since no contingency plan was proposed. In their reply, the team declared that they do not consider this a major risk, since most planned events are indoors, and the public services in the region are used and well prepared to deal with severe weather conditions.
- The panel reminded the team that, as they themselves state, the infrastructure programme is highly dependent on the municipalities and delivering on time seems to be of concern; therefore, the panel requested further explanations on how they were working with the various municipalities to monitor progress and how they were managing the infrastructural expectations. In their reply, the team informed that they can only suggest and try to positively influence the municipalities. The infrastructure is challenging since there is no obligation from the Government to support these municipalities, while most of the latter are small and therefore with very limited resources. They also recognise that political alignment is complicated. However, the team are confident that there is a strong alignment of the regional

municipalities and no surprises are expected that could significantly impact the programme.

Conclusion and recommendations

In summary, the panel expressed the following:

- The panel has concerns about the legacy strategy and governance model for the period after the title-year, since no decisions have been taken so far. Linked with this, and due to the fact that there is not a direction to retain some of the ECoC staff, the panel is concerned that much of the expertise and experience accumulated in the preparatory period will be lost after the end of the ECoC year. Therefore, the panel recommends dedicating some specific resources and time to reflect and elaborate a legacy plan, also on the basis of the first evaluation results and of the embedded knowledge of the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 team.
- The link between evaluation and legacy was not satisfactorily explained and the panel considers this a major shortcoming that must be clearly addressed. Likewise the panel recommends to place special attention to the widespread dissemination of the monitoring and evaluation results both at local and international levels. In this perspective, for instance, the focus on hyper tourism and the social return investment analysis model applied to the arts and culture could produce interesting and innovative insights and results that can resonate at European level.
- Although the panel was pleased with the explanations given regarding the budget and the existence of financial reserves, there is a need to continue monitoring this and ensuring that last minute budget reductions do not translate into programme cuts and reductions.
- There is a need to continue the efforts made in the improvement of the European dimension, especially in terms of increased number of collaborations, involvement of European networks and international communication and promotion efforts.
- There is a need to significantly increase the marketing and promotional activities around the ECoC year, so that it gains a truly international and European dimension in terms of audiences.
- There is a need for reassurances and commitments that the capacity building programmes and open calls will continue beyond the ECoC year and be a legacy of the year.

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Based on the report submitted by Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 as well as the hearing with the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 team, the panel considers that the conditions regarding the payment of the Melina Mercouri Prize, as specified in Article 14 of Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, are met. Consequently, the panel is pleased to propose to the European Commission that Bad Ischl receives the Melina Mercouri prize.

The panel would like to remind the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 team that, in line with Article 14, its marketing and communication strategy and its communication material have to clearly reflect the fact that the European Capital of Culture is a Union action, as well as that, in line with Article 16 of the same Decision, it will have to draw up its own evaluation report of the results of its ECoC year and transmit it to the European Commission by 31 December 2025.

The panel would like to thank the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 team for a very informative and interesting meeting and looks forward to a successful realisation of the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut European Capital of Culture project in 2024.

All panel members (signed)

