

Small

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a sám", Komunálne, výskumné a poradenské centrum, Komunitný domov Esther, Maker Space, Materská škola Hollého, Matersk
Pondus, Sašetky, Slovenské stredisko AITA/IATA, Šachový klub Zentiva Hlohovec, Škola umeleckého priemyslu Hlohovec, Trnavsk
á škola Vilka Šuleka, Základná škola Podzámska 35, Základná umelecká škola, Zámocký jazdecký klub Hlohovec, Združenie pri 3.
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Halásová Lucia, Halmo Roman, Hanáková Gabriela, Hanáková Zuzana, Hesko Jozef, Hesko Lukáš, Hodúlová Kristína, Hrabovsk
slav, Kamendyová Ingrid, Karnet Bosáková Monika, Karnet Róbert, Klostermannová Lívia, Kmeť Jakub, Kojnok Arnold, Kolišťan
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Small Towns Manifesto.

We are not on the front pages of lifestyle magazines, we are not the first in the offers of travel agencies, nor are we in the headlines of the daily news. But we are a place where one can daily feel the living roots of European culture. We are one of the tens of thousands of European small towns that may be invisible, easily overlooked at first glance from metropolises and tourist portals. However, we are a town where the key features of the European soul are being revived today and every day. We meet each other face to face, intimately, in neighbourhoods, in cooperation, and everyday multi-layered dialogue across generations, across social and cultural strata, is natural. ▶▶▶▶▶ We are writing a manifesto of towns, which, as a hallmark of the roots of the European way of life, are similar in scale and complexity, and thus meet our Hlohovec “HC” criteria. We write about these small and old towns because in them one finds the fundamentals of the culture of life in the EU. The small towns and cities are the bearers of traditions, the source of talent, and their small scale enables community life. ▶▶▶▶▶ At the same time, their smallness causes conflict and confinement. And this “balance on the edge” is a European theme that is manifested, for example, in the fact that in these cities one finds radicals and reactionaries, talents and visionaries, living next to each other and mutually intertwined. Therefore, in the space of our “HC” archetype of a town but also that of an European “HC” archetype, we can show ourselves and the EU how to cope with this type of balance and maintain it so that the town remains a town and does not become a village or an ordinary suburb of the town, both of which can mean the same thing – a hole in the middle, at the end, or on the edge. ▶▶▶▶▶ Balancing between these two poles – smallness and openness vs. smallness and confinement – allows us to monitor processes on the HC format scale, animate them, learn from them and set examples for the whole EU environment. Especially because HC-like towns are often ridiculed, stripped, squeezed, and condemned as places of hillbillies, places that are provincial, laid-back, and simply “outdated”. But for big cities, they are a source of residents, talent, and provoking minds. They bring a sense of order, tradition, and awareness of continuity to big cities, as a set of typical features of European life. ▶▶▶▶▶ It is about dynamics in tradition, and conflict in the motion of two worlds. In HC-like towns, it is possible to monitor, record and learn from this with relatively small investments, and to do this more quickly, through personal contact, non-anonymously, without barriers created by distance or relationships. In the global world, HC-like towns are in danger of being affected by changes – economic, environmental, and social – much more than large centres. ▶▶▶▶▶ That is why we are already preparing for a time which will mean the **Destabilization** of the environment, **Demotivation** towards relationships, a lack of respect for culture, the **Dehumanization** of the population, and a time that will enable the dominance of **Disinformation**. And we want to prepare for this together with other European cities and towns that will understand our manifesto and join us.

Hlohovec 2026 Candidate town European capital of culture

4	0/ Introduction (Q01–Q04)
13	1/ Contribution to the long-term strategy (Q05–Q09)
20	2/ Cultural and artistic content (Q10–Q13)
30	3/ European dimension (Q14–Q16)
37	4/ Outreach (Q17–Q19)
42	5/ Management (Q20–Q35)
54	6/ Capacity to deliver (Q36–Q38)

Hlohovec 2026 Candidate town European capital of culture

Slovak Towns and Municipalities and national organisations involved

Academy of performing arts//Bojničky municipality//Červeník municipality//
Dolné Otrokovce municipality//Dolné Trhovište municipality//Dolné Zelenice
municipality//Dvorníky municipality//Horné Otrokovce municipality//Horné Trhovište
municipality//Horné Zelenice municipality//Jalšové municipality//Kľačany municipality//
Koplotovce municipality//Madunice municipality//Merašice municipality//
Ministry of justice//National Non professional culture Centre//Pastuchov municipality//
Prison and Court Guard Service, Leopoldov//Ratkovce municipality//Regional Center
for Tourism Piešťany Resort//Sasinkovo municipality//Siladice municipality//
Slovak centre AITA/IATA//Tekoldany municipality//Tepličky municipality//The Faculty
of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology, STU//Town Leopoldov//Town
Piešťany//Trakovice municipality//Trnava self governing region//Žilkovce municipality

International and Slovak network, inspirations and advices

Eva Mair/AT/Bad Ischl//Kris Donaldson/AUS/Insead//Bram De Griebek/BE/De Panne//
Geert Vanthuynne/BE/De Panne//Victor Yankov/BG/Plovdiv 2019//Ivo Dimov/BG/
Dimitrovgrad//Jasho Minkov/BG/Dimitrovgrad//Dorian Celcer/CRO/Rijeka 2020//
Nino Preložniak/CRO/Varaždin//Sandra Malenica/CRO/Varaždin//Yannis Sakelis/CY/
Paphos//Georgia Doetzer/CY/Paphos 2017//Jiří Kudláček/CZ/Hranice//
Vladimír Juračka/CZ/Hranice//Lene Øster/DK/Aarhus/2017//Martin Lundsgaard–Leth/
DK/Ikast – Brande//Carsten Jensen/DK/Ikast – Brande//Erni Kask/EE/Tartu/2024//
Silvia Binder/ESP/Madrid//Imanol Galdos/ESP/Donostia – San Sebastian//
Jaime Otamendi/ESP/Donostia – San Sebastian//Reko Tammi/FI/Saimaallmio/2026
candidate//Anu Anette –Varho/FI/Saimaallmio/2026 candidate//Samu Forsblom/FI/
Oulu/2026 candidate//Henri Turune/FI/Oulu/2026 candidate//Piia Rantala–Korhonen/
FI/Oulu/2026 candidate//Petr Šimon/FI/Tampere/2026 candidate//Philippe Bouvier/
FRA/INREGU//Cécile Finot/Bourduche/FRA/Clermont–Ferrand/2028 candidate//
Nico Degenkolb/GER/Nurnberg/2025 candidate//Yannis Koukmas/GR/Elefsina 2021//
Angeliki Lampiri/GR/Elefsina 2021//Kelly Diapouli/GR/Elefsina 2021//Tóth Miklós/
HU/Vészprém/2023//Berecz Mátyás/HU/Eger/2023 candidate//Töröcsik Gábor/HU/
Eger/2023 candidate//Mikróczki Ádám/HU/Eger/2023 candidate//Marilyn Gaughan–
Reddan/IRL/Galway 2020//Patricia Philbin/IRL/Galway 2020//Rosa Tarantino/ITA/
Matera/2019//Claudia Di Perna/ITA/Matera/2019//Ana Kočegarova/LT/Kaunas/2022//
Daiva Jeremičienė/LT/Jonava//Kristina Jaskūnienė/LT/Jonava//Aiva Rozenberga/LV/
Riga/2014//Aleksandra Abramova/LV/Cesis/2027 candidate//Sarah Caron/LX/
Esch 2022//Philip Lingard/MT/Insead//Oeds Westerhof/NL/Leeuwarden 2018//
Mireille Pallandt/NL/Insead//Jurjen van der Weg/NL/Leeuwarden 2018//Sjoerd
Bootsma/NL/LF 2028//Henrik S Dagfinrud/NO/Bodo 2024//Andreia Garcia/PT/Guarda
2027 candidate//Pedro Gadanho/PT/Guarda 2027 candidate//Carlos Chaves Monteiro/
PT/Guarda 2027 candidate//Ștefan Teișanu/RO/Cluj Napoca 2021 candidate//Claudiu
Salanță/RO/Turda//Márton Mehes/SLO/Piran candidate 2027//Devor Buinjac/SLO/
Ljubljana 2025 candidate//Zora Jaurová/SK/Košice 2013//Michal Hladký/SK/Košice
2013//Svetlana Waradzinová/SK/Academy of performing Arts//Vuk Radulović/SRB/
Novi Sad 2021//Avakum Kvas/SRB/Irig//Fredrik Lindgren//SWE/Umea 2014//
Helen Marriage/UK/Artichoke//Claire McColgan/UK/Liverpool 2008//
Sandra Fogarty/UK/Artichoke

European organisations, towns and cities involved

Association Eustachia, SRB//Bad Ischl 2024//Bodo 2024//Cesis Municipality, LA//
Culturenext//Dimitrovgrad Municipality, BG//Donostia Kultura, San Sebastian, ESP//
Ikast – Brande Bibliothek, DK//INREGU Institute//Kimonos Arts Centre, Paphos, CY//
Leeuwarden–Fryslan 2028//Matera Basilicata 2019 Foundation, ITA//Mesto Hranice, CZ//
Municipality of Guarda//Municipality of Piran – Pirano, SLO//Nurnberg region 2025
Oulu 2026//P4 – centar za mlade i nezavisnu kulturu Varaždin, CRO//Public Library
of Jonava District Municipality, LT//Saima–ilmio 2026//Tampere Region 2026//
The city of Varaždin, CRO//The town of De Panne, BE

1/ Why does your city wish to take part in the competition for the title of European Capital of Culture?



M“My name is Michal, like that of the saint who protects the town of Hlohovec. They called me to see if I could help prepare our bid book. I work in culture; I was born here; I help when I can. I will be your guide through this application. I will tell you what I think of it, and I will tell you everything I know. If the corona crisis allows, I will also do this in person. But not until February. Either way, we'll see each other. My guiding words will be blue, like our coat of arms. Just like the mood I am in at the moment. I'm not sure we should be applying for this, at all. These days have been extremely overwhelming. The pandemic has been grinding us, and we don't know what's coming or how serious the crisis will be.

Michal has been protecting Hlohovecians for centuries. Therefore, I will be the devil's advocate for the project, if you will.”

Is it rude that a dwarf town makes a bid for such a spectacular project? Of course, it is. But it is in our genes. To be free and bold. The locals have known Hlohovec rather as “Frašták”. It is a reminder of the city's original name – Freistadt an der Waag, that is, Free City upon Vah.

Today, Hlohovec is named after a thorny bush growing in the hills above the town, hawthorn, *Crataegus laevigata*, or oxyacantha. Hawthorn is widespread throughout Europe. Its flowers, leaves and fruit are collected. They are used

to strengthen blood circulation and the heart and to increase overall physical activity. In other words – it has a positive effect on the symptoms of the current state of our town. And, it heals both female and male problems.



Hlohovec needs to find its own medicine. And yes, even those who are small have the right to dream big.

So, why are we trying to become the European Capital of Culture? Because we don't want our town to die.

When you start reading the *Atlas of Lost Cities* by Aude de Tocqueville, dozens of examples of places pass in a parade before your eyes whose *raison d'être* has ceased to exist at different times and for different reasons. And if what Tolstoy claims in the case of families is true, namely that “happy families are similar, but every unhappy family is unhappy in a different way”, then in the case of towns the opposite is true – failures are similar, and success is rather an exception.

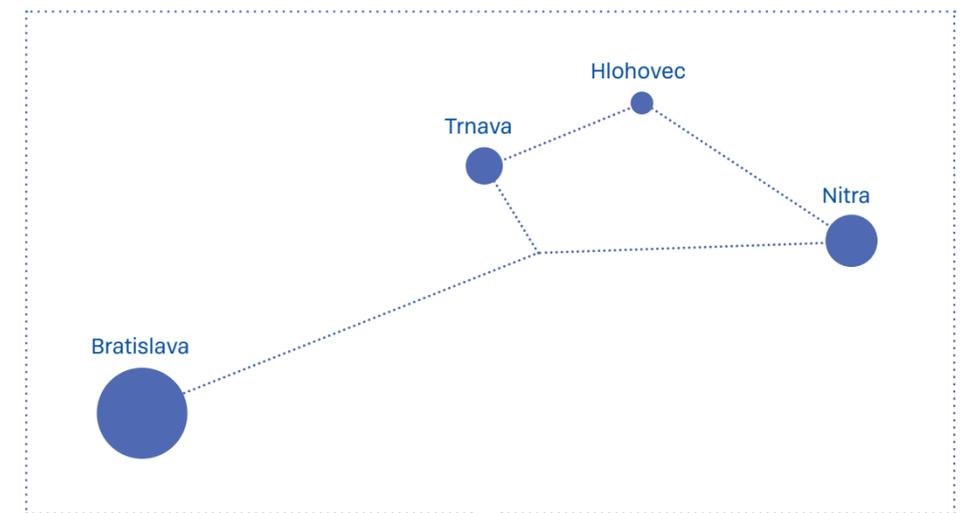
The era of industrial cities and towns is coming to an end, and at least in the West it will never return. We are just now experiencing the reverberations of the golden era of our town's industrial development, and we may even be currently at its peak. Why are we saying then that

we are dying? Perhaps because due to the fact that we have one of the two or three most powerful telescopes in Slovakia in our town, we are looking beyond the horizon, where it is clear that these times are coming to an end. And if we start solving the problem only when it becomes visible to the naked eye, then it will be too late. **Are we dealing then with threats that have not yet occurred? Yes, that too. But not only that.**

Since the end of 2014, we have been trying to reverse this development and give our town a new perspective. Our goal is to make it an inspiring, attractive town for a good European life with the prospect of surviving even after its current, five-decade long industrial phase comes to an end. We have opened our town to active, creative people, we have relied on participatory processes, brought native Hlohovecians back home from abroad so that they give a helping hand to the town.

On the one hand, we learn from the best – our first study trip was to the Copenhagen studio of the legendary architect Jan Gehl since we want to create a “city for people” through quality urban design. We were the first Slovak town that subsequently adopted the *Concept of Public Spaces* – a manual for the creation of public spaces. We have been following this manual in order to revitalize our public spaces. For two years, a well-known architect of Slovak origin, Peter Gero, has worked on this manual and on the new urban plan, together with our young architects, whom we have brought back home from abroad. For many years he was the head of urban development in Hamburg, Germany, and led the transformation of part of Hamburg's port into the new Hafencity district. We were small then but European enough to enter into this cooperation.

On the other hand, we have already inspired colleagues from the “old” democracies. Our strategic town management has started to interest colleagues from Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, when in 2017-2018 we became, as the



only participant from the former “Eastern bloc”, part of the international university project “Building competencies for effective governance in small and medium-sized cities”.

However, this is just a change in the hardware. We won't be able to make a move without an updated software. We have been working on smaller behavioural interventions in the life of the town in cooperation with the best academic teams in the country. As Edward Glasner writes in the *Triumph of the City*, successful cities are successful because a great deal of human capital is found in them. Some industrial cities managed to change their orientation in the past, and today they focus on the creation of ideas and concepts instead of manufacture.

However, any promising, innovative recovery of society, even if only on the scale of a city or urban region, must also take culture into account. After all, the European Parliament's declaration on the European Cultural Recovery states that culture is not only an important sector of the economy but also reflects our European values, diversity, history, freedom and our way of life; it contributes to the vitality of society, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue. But most importantly, culture has been recognized as one of the main accelerators of social change and of the creation of inclusive and resilient societies.

And that is why – the European Capital of Culture.

Have you already looked at the map?

We were asked this question when we announced our intention. Sure, we see three regional cities running for the ECOC within a 30-45-minute drive, and we also see the Capital City within less than an hour-drive from us. It would be most comfortable for us to sit back and relax and wait for those who will win; a small part of the town's cultural elite would be happy to go and effortlessly enjoy the great cultural life in the town of our neighbours. Until they won't return one day.

This is also the reason why we cannot just be onlookers. Today, one third of the population of the European Union lives in small towns like ours, and in Slovakia it is almost one half. If we are to remain a good place to live and maintain Europe's values of openness, sophistication, and cohesion, we need our best people to stay at home or return back. Then we can also be an inspiration for our larger neighbours.

Yes, we are running for this project because we are concerned. We are concerned that there will be a destabilization of our environment, and it doesn't matter if this is in terms of nature or the economy. Whether it is rivers drying

up or investors leaving our town, it is a change that will influence us. We are concerned that if such a change happens, and people find themselves in a place which cannot provide them with a safe existence, they will be demotivated to build a relationship with their environment, create values, and stay in a place that has disappointed them. A town full of disappointed people would turn into a **dehumanized** space, a place of social defence mechanisms, without a goal to make the environment around us thrive. This would be a place where the ultimate goal is to save what I can for myself, as an individual, who will eventually leave. And all this will be happening in the midst of an era with a crisis of truth, in an atmosphere where no one knows what is true and what is not because no one has to assume responsibility for using a “weapon of mass destruction” – simple words? – but everyone can use them for an attack. That is why we are afraid of the rule of misinformation which would send us into a space of ignorance, uncertainty, and distrust.

And yes, this will all be happening in a small and insignificant town. However, there are tens of thousands of them in Europe. Cities that no one cares much about, that exist and disappear, or get assimilated into larger units.

But that will not be the fate of Hlohovec, which is applying for the European Capital of Culture project! Is this the case of other similar Hlohovec-like towns across Europe? And is anyone else concerned but us? We believe there is. This is why we wrote the following **Small Towns Manifesto**:

Small Towns Manifesto

We are not on the front pages of lifestyle magazines, we are not the first in the offers of travel agencies, nor are we in the headlines of the daily news. But we are a place where one can daily feel the living roots of European culture. We are one of the tens of thousands of European small towns that may be invisible, easily overlooked at first glance from metropolises and tourist portals. However, we are a town where the key features of the European soul are being revived today and every day. We meet each other face to face, intimately, in neighbourhoods, in cooperation, and everyday multi-layered dialogue across generations, across social and cultural strata, is natural.

We are writing a manifesto of towns, which, as a hallmark of the roots of the European way of life, are similar in scale and complexity, and thus meet our Hlohovec “HC” criteria. We write about these small and old towns because in them one finds the fundamentals of the culture of life in the EU. The small towns and cities are the bearers of traditions, the source of talent, and their small scale enables community life.

At the same time, their smallness causes conflict and confinement. And this “balance on the edge” is a European theme that is manifested, for example, in the fact that in these cities one finds radicals and reactionaries, talents and visionaries, living next to each other and mutually intertwined. Therefore, in the space of our “HC” archetype of a town but also that of an European “HC” archetype, we can show ourselves and the EU how to cope with this type of balance and maintain it so that the town remains a town and does not become a village or an ordinary suburb of the town, both of which can mean the same thing – a hole in the middle, at the end, or on the edge.

Balancing between these two poles – smallness and openness vs. smallness and confinement – allows us to monitor processes on the HC format scale, animate them, learn from them and set examples for the whole EU environment. Especially because HC-like towns are often ridiculed, stripped, squeezed, and condemned as places of hillbillies, places that are provincial, laid-back, and simply “outdated”. But for big cities, they are a source of residents, talent, and provoking minds. They bring a sense of order, tradition, and awareness of continuity to big cities, as

a set of typical features of European life.

It is about dynamics in tradition, and conflict in the motion of two worlds. In HC-like towns, it is possible to monitor, record and learn from this with relatively small investments, and to do this more quickly, through personal contact, non-anonymously, without barriers created by distance or relationships. In the global world, HC-like towns are in danger of being affected by changes – economic, environmental, and social – much more than large centres.

That is why we are already preparing for a time which will mean the **Destabilization of the environment, Demotivation** towards relationships, a lack of respect for culture, the **Dehumanization** of the population, and a time that will enable the dominance of **Disinformation**. And we want to prepare for this together with other European cities and towns that will understand our manifesto and join us.

In our view, the European Capital of Culture project is not a project of short-term visibility and cultural enhancement of the city. It is just a short stop on the way to transforming the city's or town's culture. By changing the town's climate and direction towards creative industries, we will give people who can be an inspiration to the town and the drivers of urban development a reason to stay or come in or return to Hlohovec. And such a transformation can better prepare the rest of us to cope with the difficult value-related issues and practical problems of the next decade.

Our project is transferable to thousands of other cities in Europe – and we would start with this transfer to 26 European cities already during the project itself. This can be a valuable contribution to the debate on a European vision for culture and a guide on how to integrate cultural, creative, and artistic principles into all areas of our lives.

After gradually recovering from the anti-corona measures, it is important to realize that culture and art are not a luxury, but, on the contrary, they are a necessary condition for the survival of people

in the middle of European civilization.

HC *“And let's not forget to answer Michal: We are small, actually the smallest, but we are ready to go for it. As musketeers – not only for themselves but also for all similar European cities... you know what we are talking about, because.*”

Small towns matter.”

¹ Within the boundaries of the Hlohovec urban region, on 267 km², there are two towns - Hlohovec and Leopoldov, and 22 municipalities. All are within 15 km from the city centre. The region has a permanent population of almost 50,000, however, by 2035 there is a risk of a 4.5% decline.

2/ Does your city plan to involve its surrounding area? Explain this choice.

M “Speaking of cooperation, why didn't we join forces with our bigger neighbours? It is said that they were interested. We would have a better chance, and we would not be biting off more than we can chew.”

Here we must start with a counter-question: What kind of a question is that – whether we plan to involve our surrounding area in the project? We are so small that we cannot exist without cooperation in the region.

If we want to prepare ourselves for what is to come, then we cannot prepare for it only within the town but must do so within the entire urban region. **The first policy that was adopted after the change in the style of the city's management after December 2014 (the value revolution of November '89 basically did not take place in Hlohovec until 2014) was the strategy of development of the Hlohovec Urban Region.** For a simple reason it is our essential belief and life experience that real sustainable development is possible only on the ground of natural urban regions,¹ And a close cooperation of all the actors in the territory is anticipated.

Certainly, the mayors of the 23 surrounding municipalities looked at us as if we were apparitions when we told them – the experienced politicians, curious mainly about the financial benefits of such a cooperation – about the insufficient tapping of the natural and cultural

potential of our urban region, about its strengths and weaknesses.

Today we have spent six years getting to know each other and building cooperation. This is also why they no longer tapped their foreheads when we went to them with the offer to involve them in the ECOC initiative, and they gladly joined us. We know each other, we trust each other, and we know that we pull each other forward.

Six years ago, we identified the following weaknesses of our urban region:

- high representation of the population with a low level of education,
- below-average number of university graduates (for Slovakia as a whole the average is 13.9%, while for the Hlohovec Urban Region it is 11.1%),
- low number of cultural facilities,
- underdeveloped tourism,
- no joint promotion or marketing of the region,
- absence of an institution of higher education or university...

That is why we work hard for further cooperation. The triangle consisting of Hlohovec + Leopoldov and the spa town of Piešťany (lying just outside the borders of our urban region) has always been here, and there has always been local rivalry and/or cooperation. It is actually the town of Piešťany that gives us a chance to see the contours of world tourism on the face of a small town, and it is Leopoldov, with its railway junction (on the bastions of its fortress -- today a prison facility, which is "home" to the most serious sinners -- where once the fortune of Tatar raids was tested), from which we depart to go out into the world and to which we arrive when returning home.

Home, for us, is the Hlohovec Urban Region. As we say in Small Town Manifesto: "... we are writing the manifesto of towns that are the roots of the European way of life. **Therefore, we found 26 cities in the European Union which we call "HC-like towns".** Towns with a population

of 10,000 to 49,999, important district centres with a catchment area, without a university with full-time students, without a permanent art ensemble, located near regional centres, mostly with a manufacturing industry profile.

Together we create a vision of our program flagship – Small Towns Coalition with ECoC/EHcMK² 2026.

HC *"Yes, there were two of our competitors who sought cooperation. There was also a "courting round". But when we asked about the logic of our connection, the motivation, the common theme of cooperation, we did not receive an answer. That is, if it were not just to reduce the number of candidate towns. On the top of it, we don't play on the same pitch as our neighbours. But we keep our fingers crossed for them!"*

3/ Explain briefly the overall cultural profile of your city.

M *"Cultural profile? We have nothing that could be called a cultural profile.*

One closed house of culture and one castle? There must surely be fifty other cities in Slovakia more likely to apply for the ECOC.

And who will catch on if we happen to get it? Everyone just likes to talk about what is needed here, but no one can say how to do it..."

At the beginning of the 21st century, we made the headlines in television news as the town with the largest number of pubs per capita in Slovakia. Social and art life gradually ceased to exist, and investment in cultural infrastructure with it. Nothing ever happened in the pubs; people gave up looking for art and culture, and that's why what we had was enough. An old cinema, a crumbling culture house, a neglected castle. The first and last have already been renovated, and art is finding its way into pubs. In the last five years we have invested an average of more than 5 percent of the town's budget in living culture and cultural infrastructure.

The ECOC project will be the most fundamental intervention in the life of the town for many decades. Not primarily an infrastructure investment (sure, cultural spaces are needed, but the space for culture is the whole town), but a behavioural one.

What was also essential, when viewed from the cultural profile of the town, was the Erdödy family's gaining control

of the Hlohovec chateau. At the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries, they rebuilt the original 11th century castle (which the Turks turned into a border fortress at one time) and turned it into a Baroque manor house. They gradually collected many cultural artefacts for the chateau and then turned it into the first museum in the town. On the occasion of the emperor's visit, in 1802, they commissioned the Italian builder Pietro Travaglio to build an Empire Theatre, which saw Ludwig van Beethoven, among others, perform. "The" Beethoven, who, according to contemporary legend, stopped off here from his stay in the nearby Piešťany, which was already mentioned. The author of *Symphony No. 9 in D minor* with its famous final fourth movement. Though it may seem today that, "Wir singen die Ode mit zu wenig Freude". That is also why the ECOC project needs a new impetus if European values are to be spread through it effectively.

Maybe that's when for the first time Hlohovec was the cultural capital of Europe, if only for a moment.

Today, the Empire Theatre is the oldest surviving theatre building in Slovakia that still serves its original purpose. Together with the castle and the entire castle grounds as a cultivated public space, the Theatre forms the foundation of the cultural infrastructure of the town. Given its historical significance and multifunctional use, the Theatre transcends the borders of the town, region, and country. By the way, two years ago, after almost four million euro were spent on reconstruction, we have permanently opened the castle to the general public for the first time in its history as a cultural centre in the region.

Does this suffice for the activities that the ECOC project would require? Certainly not, but this is a small-town profile. It is so small that it is said "all quiet in Frastak". But we have five years to create an example that demonstrates our poten-

tial, which is above average in the small-town category, and in this way, we can show small towns everywhere in the EU how this is possible. And watch the "all quiet" rise from the dead through culture. Because if we have been able to invest EUR 6 million in the last five years in the renewal and construction of cultural infrastructure and cultural public spaces without the ECOC project, then we can handle multiples with this project.

But most importantly – **the ECOC project is a "never ending game" for us.** We do not see it as a final game with only a single goal that we must catch up to by 2026 with our tongues hanging out. It is a continuous and never-ending process of strengthening the human capital in the town.

We have strong communities of children and young people with whom we want to work so that in 2030 Hlohovec is a town that people move to and do not leave. The silver generation, which will be larger than the community of children in 2030, will become ever stronger. But by then, it will be a community that will not get lost in the digital world. Many cyclists and fishermen represent a large group of friends of nature, who not only use it, but also take care of it as a cultural space. Winegrowers are still an underappreciated category, and it is not for nothing that we are referred to as the "undiscovered Provence of Slovakia". In addition to the cultural festival, the punks from the Free Winemakers are conquering Michelin-starred restaurants in the world with their – "uncertified, thus illegal" natural wines from Slovakia. And at the entrance to the city, the inscription "Welcome to the city with a 1000-year-old wine tradition" awaits you. Honestly, we cannot say whether this claim is not more ambitious than this project of ours.

During the open call for project intentions for the ECC, we were in contact with 238 people about their interest in artistic and creative works. Almost 4% of the city's residents attend elementary

art school. They play, sing, paint, take pictures... Paradoxically, families with children are a strong group. And 23% of the city residents who have attended any cultural event in the city over the last year represent the "family background" of our project.

All these communities make up our cultural profile. Without always having professional ensembles surrounded by a stable community of fans and supporters. The creative industry here is mainly represented by architects, photographers, filmmakers, and youtubers. Two thirds of university students from Hlohovec study at humanities universities in nearby candidate cities. The expansion of the trans-regional secondary school of art and industry this year merely supported the ambition of creating a new centre for education in art in our region. The observatory with a planetarium, which is unique in Slovakia, has been transformed over the recent years into a centre for the popularisation of science with an international dimension.³

Hlohovec Museum of National History and Geography representing overall history of this region has been developed by reconstruction of the Castle to a modern organisation presenting an augmented reality of their artefacts and spaces for visitors.

And all this against the background of the wandering river Vah, Terra Vagus – the land of intertwining. The lands of no one and everyone.

We are a laboratory of Europe.

HC *"Yes, it may not be enough. Well, as we said, we're at the beginning. And we're not even quite at the beginning, we're "faking" the "all quiet" a little*

³ When mapping the needs of cultural policy, we found that in the urban region we have: 665 students at elementary art school developed, 28 art teachers, 5 kindergartens with art programs for children, 7 primary schools with art programs for children, 1 leisure centre offering art programs, 2 secondary schools with art programs, 1 high school with focus on art, 1 requalification centre with an art program, 1 art industry school, 134 individuals operating in the region in the creative industries, 23 individuals from the region working in the creative industries outside the region, 1 private art school 31 civic associations with a cultural program, 20 business entities operating in the creative industry, 2 organisations within the jurisdiction of the self-governing region offering a cultural program.

² Wordplay with Slovak abbreviation of ECoC – EHMK.

bit. We are already inspiring cultural Slovakia today. At the beginning of the pandemic, we were among the leaders in the struggle for the non-discrimination of culture in the introduction of restrictive measures. And when cultural institutions closed completely, we decided not to take money from artists, launching instead the Festival of (Un)Cancelled Culture – we're doing culture online so that the artists have somewhere and something to play for and we managed to bring culture into people's homes, at least indirectly. We also invited other towns to do so, and a few of them were inspired.

And 2030? This is our time and with us that of other small towns with their profiles. Time to prepare together for what is to come. Culture can help us with that.

And even then, the game doesn't end. The transformation of the culture of the town is a "never ending game".

4/ Explain the concept of the programme which would be launched if the city is designated as European Capital of Culture.

M "It would be great if we got it. Huge. But so huge that I don't know if we could do it. I guess it's too much. Honestly, I can't imagine it. But it would be great if we could. Finally, something would happen in Hlohovec. But isn't this year too much? I'm not sure myself."

The ambition of becoming the European Capital of Culture is motivated by the effort to respond to 4D. The four threats we have identified in the *Small Towns Manifesto* - **Destabilization, Demotivation, Dehumanization** and the dominance of **Disinformation**. We are building a defensive wall against such identifiable, suspected, and possible threats through culture and art.

Hlohovec, that in the past was a free town on the Vah river and to which the truly "wandering river" Váh and its beneficial location brought many influences and cultural impulses in the imagination, eventually closed in on itself. We are reopening Hlohovec with our project – as a training ground, a creative laboratory, and a place of inspiration.

We do not perceive this project as a one-off, but as a symbol of the continuous transformation of the town. That is why we have been creating it with a horizon of 10 years, and that is why it contains sustainable and ongoing projects that will be open to change and subject to verification, and

that is why the composition of individual teams will be fluid...

We have been designing the programme as a tool to change the nature of a small town. From a traditional, ridiculed, forgotten small town, we want to create an experimental ground, a laboratory, where the anticipated possibilities of the future can be verified and tested. That is why sharing is a key element for us. We will use the tools of experimentation, paradoxes, imagination to jointly prepare for a time that we don't know much about today. We try to turn the fact that we are a small town to our advantage – the impacts of the individual programme lines are easily verifiable; we can be more personal, and we can share the outputs more easily.

Small Towns Matter is our heading. We are not here for ourselves, but we want us to learn from one another and make progress together. We want our programme to be one from which a community of small towns across the EU can learn. We have been creating it so that it can be an inspiration, a stimulus, a catalyst, a platform for discussion, and a safe space for reflection and experiment with all our HC towns. We want to learn for the sake of small towns, and we want to be the ones the others learn from. We are not merely interested in a pompous presentation that no one will even look at a year after the ECOC is over.

We want to show how to counter the **destabilisation** of small towns by creating a safe environment, preventing the **demotivation** to live in small towns by providing hope, confronting **dehumanisation** by fostering humanity, all against the domination of **disinformation**, which we want to influence by strengthening trustworthiness in a space where anything can be doubted.

We dare to do all this, because in small towns, such big breaks can be achieved sooner, faster, cheaper, and perhaps the achievements will last longer.

And maybe not, but no one has tried it yet.

We have built four basic programme pillars, and we have gained 317 civic projects un-

der participation, based on which we have identified other important topics therein.

1. Safe environment vs. Destabilisation

The first programme pillar seeks solutions to the consequences of destabilising the environment we live in. We want to face the process of destabilising our known world by defining and creating a safe environment. The safe environment that forms the first line will not be a cage, a fence, a prison, a padded room, but rather a living agar, a garden, a grazing pasture, a test area, a workshop of change. The environment is defined, marked by signs of orientation, lighthouses, milestones, time (regular activities, physical space) and a stable, clear form. And at the same time, it is a space in which people can freely create, where no one will put them down, and where they will be heard. Freedom in free space. You can take risks, and you don't have to be afraid of making mistakes.

2. Hope vs. Demotivation

We face the loss of desire to participate in life together; the defence against the passive submission to change, against the haters and poisons of this world is the **cultivation of hope**. If we are to look for expression, articulation, then we find relationships, connections, and interconnections, and also an exceptionally live and sensitive space of interference, a diaphragm space of transitions and intersections between past and future, between generations, groups, interests, and departments. Bridging different horizons, these are extended hands and soothing and strengthening embraces, these are the ways we wish to explore, how not to lose illusions, visions, the desire to create and shape oneself and the world. Hope does not come just for free, but rather hope is welcomed, praised by activities, action, together on our common journey.

3. Fostering Humanity vs. Dehumanisation

This programme pillar responds to the gradual and progressive dehumanisation. We want to emancipate humanity again with regard to the belief in the irreplaceability and uniqueness of each of

us – **humaneness**. For us, humaneness is not just an ordinary abstract concept, it is every unique person who refuses to be just a part of the crowd, a wheel in a gear, a number, a bar code, a workforce, a form lining of abstracted progress. A person who uniquely perceives him- or herself vis-à-vis others and the world in specific activities, through their unique qualities, abilities, and skills.

It is the very skills that have become a central motive for us in the renewal of humanness. Skills that can be acquired, deepened, shared, taught, preserved. Skills are imprinted into the world through specific materials, working with them, shaping them.

Developing the human through skills leads to mastery. In our programme, we identify new masters of new skills. Our new masters cannot be people stuck in old routines, our new masters will be children, lunatics and dreamers, experimenters, involved experts, seniors, laymen and amateurs. Their meeting will fashion new situations for sharing new paths.

4. Trustworthiness vs. Disinformation

How to learn to live in a world where nothing of the past applies and nothing works as it has so far, in a world of the absolute relativisation of everything hitherto certain, fixed, and unchanging?

This programme pillar intersects with all others. It is the DNA of our direction, a central approach to life that permeates all. It has a model in **critical thinking**. We consider this a category that passes through everything, it is a way of life, a method of approaching the world. It is associated with **responsibility**.

We are looking for a way away from the formless amoeba of the flood of information permeated by the relativisation of values and irresponsibility from the disseminated "truths". This orientation is only possible through trust, through the opportunity to lean back, rest for a while, calm down. To begin believing in safety does not mean sinking into a soft submission. We perceive trustworthiness as an important

active work in learning about the world, which sets its image before us through the **media** and through behaviour and actions, which present the actors of various processes of informing the world about the world.

We approach the creation of the programme and its pillars with a long-term vision for the years 2021 – 2030. We will monitor the continuous progress of the town and the entire project according to the intentions of European not only cultural, but also artistic and creative values. The very year 2026 is not the only decisive criterion and measure for us. One is the European dimension, the other the ability to address and communicate our goals with the domestic public.

Each year will have its own new identity on the way to the overall transformation of the city's culture, to which the main programme lines for the given year will respond.

2021 – Audacity

Perhaps recklessness, but also courage.

The courage to dare to apply for the ECOC title as an outsider. The courage to overcome common stereotypes and the fear of what is still acceptable and what is not will be a challenge for thousands of other similar towns and cities, but also for every-one individually. There is the maximum potential in us, as we are at the beginning of the journey in many ways. This is our advantage over other cities, which are well advanced already.

2022 – Shame

That too may come. Shame to apply, because we feel like we are small, we don't have the disposition to compare ourselves with big cities.

We are provincial people, and that is why we close ourselves to the world, to external influences, but also to new trends and progress. Our protective shield is that we pretend that we want to develop "our" local "jewels" because they are essential and important for maintaining tradition

and continuity. In fact, we're just afraid that we don't have what it takes for more than just that. Stuck in thinking – “better not to do anything than do something again that will not be good enough, better not be visible and ridiculed.” However, survival and continuity are necessarily associated with change and progress.

2023 – Smallness

Smallness as inadequacy, incompetence, or even exaggerated ambition.

We want to relativise the centralism in culture and art and rehabilitate the periphery. The paradox that we want to uncover in this programme line is to emphasize the importance of non-central or peripheral areas and the periphery in the cultural-artistic process and development, and as a small town we meet the ideal conditions for this. And with us an additional 26 European Hlohovec-like towns. We do not perceive the emphasis to be on the creative potency of peripheral, fringe areas as idealized and utopian, but as necessary.

From a shoddy and centre-dependent phenomenon, the periphery is changing into an equal and specific partner in both culture and art, to which special attention needs to be paid. Egocentric attention to the developmental processes within the operation of the centres leads to a flattening and deformation of the balance of forces and influence in culture and art. The key moment for our candidacy is the fact of the historical variability of the peripheries – what is the periphery today could be the centre in 2026.

2024 – Spontaneity

Uncontrollability, savagery, but also naturalness, spontaneity, enthusiasm.

The locals do not trust us, for others we are the competition. The spontaneity and enthusiasm with which we approach the ECOC is what evokes feelings in people, whatever they may be. The path to them is creative and artistic freedom and passion that has both heart and soul.

Our way will be action art, based on the process (after all, like our entire application), on what is happening in space and time. Participation, meeting, assembly, and the creation of collective works. Art as a celebration and holiday that knows no division into performers and spectators. The festivities are not watched – the festivities are lived... Even spontaneously and passionately.

2025 – Stubbornness

Uncompromisingness, stubbornness, but also inflexibility, tenacity, and the ability to pursue one's goal.

We stubbornly pursue our goal of the cultural transformation of the town or the transformation of the culture of the town. We are stubborn and tenacious in fulfilling our intentions. Cultural facilities and creative spaces are important components of our development strategy. We are gradually building a creative space out of Hlohovec, which has an important symbolic meaning, but above all, a functional one. It is not enough to create a vibrant creative sector, but it is an extremely necessary precondition. That is why we stubbornly create this space and gradually fill it with people and content.

2026 – Hlohovec as a Dreamer, Bighead, Palalever⁴, Hlohovec as European Capital of Culture

Maybe a lunatic, a man with unreal ideas, but also a man who can fulfil his dreams.

This year will be unique in our strategy, but not because it is the only and main goal of the whole project. It will be the turning point, the peak of the Aristotle arc of drama, from which there is no return. The preparatory steps are behind us; Hlohovec is full of inspiration, interweaving of projects, meetings of people, unions, disciplines, and procedures. It is not a spectacular meeting, but a meeting of multi-layered dialogues, it is a fermentum, it is the fulfilment of the old name of the town – Frastak, Freistadt, Free City on Vah river. Free space of creation and inspiration.

2027 – Concentration

The second half begins, we have gained strength, spread our wings, gained experience, honed our skills. Now it's time to focus. Meditation and mediation await us, self-esteem. Reflection, methodology.

2028 – Cooperation

The closed town became an open and cooperating town. Cooperation as a characteristic feature of the programme and daily life. Intergenerational projects and projects overcoming social exclusion and division await us.

2029 – Support

We can offer what we have learned where it is needed so that others can grow. Through art and culture, we will follow the path to an open society, drawing on our experience of art in jeopardy in a country that has experienced a transition to democracy, as well as a struggle to maintain it – in cooperation with countries currently undergoing such a process.

2030 – Dreaming

Nothing ends here. We are merely at a vantage point high above the coast, these are the sails deployed for interplanetary flight, this is the new path to a new vision... Already as a result of the work of the Small Towns Institute.

HC *Answer to Michal: “Yes, it will be great if we could do it this way. However, any part of the whole project that is implemented would be valuable, since it will help change the culture of the town. And can we do it? We will talk about capacities in the following chapters.”*

5/Describe the cultural strategy that is in place in your city at the time of the application, including the plans for sustaining the cultural activities beyond the year of the title?

M “Again, it will all be made up, all about marketing, so that it looks good on Facebook. Lots of questionnaires and meetings. And the community centre is closed.”

The **HCulture 2030** strategy which we prepared during 2020 and which is in the finals of the legislative process at the town level, is part of a package of policies and strategies that we have been systematically developing since 2015 in line with the standards of modern European towns.

For us, strategic management is a tool for transforming a town into a pleasant town for living, a town with plenty of job opportunities, an innovative town the inhabitants of which are proud of. We started with the Plan for the Hlohovec Urban Region Development, followed by the Town Development Program until 2023, which was followed by ten other partial but interconnected strategies, concepts and policies, for example the schooling policy, the concept/plan of urban region development, the public space development policy (2016); the policy of inclusion of marginalized groups; the visual smog elimination policy (2017), the community plan for social services (2018); the public space design manual (2019); the plan for working with children and young people, the sports development policy, the **strategy for the development of culture HCulture 2030 (2020)**; and the housing policy and cycling strategy for the town and the region are in the pipeline (2021).

HCulture 2030

Hlohovec as the center of a region with almost 50,000 inhabitants lies in a rich Central European region with high concentration of industry and educated population. However, direct competition with the surrounding larger centers also limits development opportunities. Together with our history, these limits have become the basis for reflection on the transformation of a monofunctional town

into an attractive center of the urban region in which, in addition to the innovative industry, connecting history and the future through culture and creative industry will increasingly play an important role. We followed up on similar considerations in the strategic documents adopted before the corona crisis. However, the welfare period at the time did not put so much pressure on the implementation of the recommended changes. On the other hand, the coronavirus pandemic in the first half of the year which sent a shock wave through the certainties of everyday social and economic life, helped us increase the interest of the public in the debate how to better prepare for the expected new “coronaviruses.”

We we drafting the “cultural policy” of the town and the region with prospects to 2030 in the team of experts (internal experts from the strategy department, from the Municipal Research and Consultation Center, members of the ECOC 2026 project preparation team). However, we engaged other parties via participatory processes consisting of:

- individual and group meetings with stakeholders representing arts, local politicians, seniors, young people and creative, tourism and business sectors;
- a questionnaire survey for the general public;
- individual meetings with representatives of all municipalities in the urban region.

The questionnaire survey which was followed by a questionnaire focused on the work with children and youth, has brought the following findings:

- a positive evaluation of cultural awareness prevails;
- more than a third of the respondents have enough opportunities for their cultural activities, about 53% do not;
- respondents aged 61–74 (three quarters) and 18–30 years (two thirds) report the most about the lack of cultural events;
- almost two thirds prefer to seek cultural activities outside Hlohovec;

⁴ According to Bohumil Hrabal's (famous czech writer) Pábité/Palalevers.

- half of the respondents think that there is lack of cultural facilities in Hlohovec;
- almost two thirds believe that there is lack of events in Hlohovec for their age group;
- about 40% believe that the events in Hlohovec are of good quality, 34% think the opposite;
- 36% of respondents evaluate the diversity of events positively, 44% negatively.

In addition, the specific survey among children and young people (primary and secondary schools) showed that in this age group:

- more than a third of the respondents have enough opportunities for their cultural activities, about 53% do not;
- 55% prefer to seek cultural activities outside Hlohovec, 26.5% do not;
- 59% wish for more cultural opportunities for young people, 14% do not;
- 27% believe that there are enough cultural facilities in Hlohovec, 39% that there is not;
- one third wish for a Youth Club, 41.5% not.

The discussion highlighted the need to take measures to better prepare the cities and towns of the region for expected trends and changes. It turned out that **culture is perceived – in the broadest sense of the word – as a potential “second leg” of sustainable development – given the history of the area and the nature potential.**

Based on the SWOT analysis, we subsequently defined the principles of the HCulture 2030 strategy:

1. **The bearers of culture are those who make it.**
2. **Promoting culture, creativity and innovation is one of the crucial tasks of cities and municipalities in the region.**
3. **Respect for and promotion of freedom in culture are important.**
4. **The main criterion for obtaining public support must be quality and originality.**

5. **There must be diversity of culture and of its stakeholders, which must not, however, mean relegating quality to a secondary place.**
6. **The support should be effective and transparent.**
7. **Economical use should be made of public resources, and there should be an increase in the volume of foreign, private, and cultural resources.**
8. **Partnership and dialogue are needed as a tool for removing barriers and for long-term cooperation.**
9. **Political neutrality of support is a guarantee for the diversity and heterogeneity of cultural expression.**
10. **There should be support for a combination of “big” and “small” actors.**
11. **Culture should be open to foreign experience.**

Pillars of the HCulture2030 strategy

(The partial goals of the individual pillars and their connection to the ECOC 2026 project are described in question 7.)

Pillar	Stability, quality of life, sustainable development of the region	The Hlohovec Cultural Region	Cooperation in the region
Strategic goal	The region, especially the towns of Hlohovec and Leopoldov, is primarily perceived as industrial. The development strategy of the urban region implies the need not only to adapt industry to new conditions (innovation, research, development ...), but also to pay increased attention to supporting the specific features of the region. Given the location, history, and also the conditions (viticulture), there is an opportunity to develop services and culture in relation to the specific nature of the region. The professionalization of the entire cultural sector and the expansion of traditional culture with modern elements are prerequisites.	Win over audiences for the Hlohovec region	Establish the national and international significance of the region
Vision	To create and establish an internationally recognized cultural destination	Provide an anchor for culture and the creative industries in the region	Improve significantly cooperation in the region, and strengthen the sense of co-ownership and joint management

The Impact of the implementation of the HCulture 2030 Strategy

The evaluation of the implementation of the culture development strategy will be carried out at least once every four years and will be part of the communication to the City Council. The areas, in which the impact of the implementation of the “cultural policy” of the urban region in the mid-term should manifest themselves, are as follows (the long-term cultural, economic and social impact of the ECOC 2026 project itself are described in question 8, and the specific tools for monitoring and measuring the results are described in question 9):

1. **Quality of life**
The availability of high-quality and diverse cultural offerings increase the quality of life of the inhabitants of the towns. Currently, only half of the town's population believes that the cultural offerings are good, and so there is much room for improvement.
2. **Maintaining and creating employment**
The cultural and creative industries are generators of investments and jobs.

3. **Promoting innovation**
The cultural and creative industries support innovation in various areas. Perhaps this is most seen in information and communication technologies. In our strategy, we see room for strengthening the role of the cultural sector in supporting innovation, investments and regional economic development.
4. **Education and democracy**
With our strategy, we emphasize the importance of culture and the arts for the positive, democratic, and a European, value-based development of society. Through it, we also open up to multi-regional, national and pan-European cooperation and to mutual enrichment via experiences, contacts and know-how.
5. **Reflecting on and supporting the search for the meaning of life**
Culture is a tool for reflecting on the accelerating social development and growing contradictions in the global world.
6. **Mental health**
Life today is demanding, strenuous, and full of stress, and our soul needs care. We not only perceive culture as a challenge, but it also makes us happy since it contributes to mental relaxation.

HC *“Each of the town's previous public policies has brought specific improvements to the lives of its inhabitants. There is no reason why the strategy should be any different.”*

6/Describe the city's plans to strengthen the capacity of the cultural and creative sectors, including through the development of long-term links between these sectors and the economic and social sectors in your city.

M *“We should be connecting everything. Well, it does not make sense to me. How would we connect factories with the Castle? Factories last supported culture here twenty years ago. I wonder how we can handle it, or if at all.”*

Based on the cultural profile of the town it is clear that we have a sufficient number of active communities and people for the size of a small town or urban region. But they are all fragmented and oriented to the individual needs of one's own self-realization, and not to creating conditions for self-realization. And thus, they are without the possibility of interconnection, not only among each other but also between sectors. Moreover, we are a homogeneous community that is looking inside itself (we have only two foreign activities, almost no minorities, no significant escalations of social issues). This community has not been forced to think about what will come and what will happen and how to grasp it. However, the 4Ds we define – Destabilization, Demotivation, Dehumanization and Disinformation – show us what to focus on and what to do in order to make

connecting the economic and social aspects with the creative ecosystem into a new tool for coping with the issues we expect will soon arrive.

It all starts with children. Our flagship **Childhood Institute** will not only mean the development of the generation from 0 to 11 years of age, but above all the creation of a system of education and competences for teachers who will organize and implement the programme itself through this institute.

In selected schools, we will introduce a subject called **Arts Entrepreneurship** – based on a strategic document from the Ministry of Culture. This subject will create a space for education and training for those who want to work in the creative industry, art or event management. We speak mainly about the local School of Applied Arts and Design, the Elementary Arts School, and the Grammar School. The partnership with the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava will help us to prepare a syllabus for the programme. This programme will be our source for leaders in the creative industry and arts for the next 10 years.

Institute of Innovative Development – in cooperation with the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Informatics of the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, we will create a kind of MIT of small towns focused on connecting topics that will be most in demand with respect to employment in 2025–2030. We will prepare voucher calls for proposals from local companies for innovators from all over Slovakia. AI, 5G, virtual reality, robotics, IoT, and additive manufacturing will be the themes that will be subject to the content of the creation of the syllabus for teachers upgrading programmes so that they can work on current topics in their teaching processes. This project will create a link between companies and those interested in upgrading their skills in these fields. The relationship between the industrial sector and the creative environment will be a partnership, not that of supplier-customer. In addition, it

will become the centre for programming the BELLA HC project in cooperation with suppliers. It will be a place where programmers, testers, graphic analysts and also traders or artists whose spaces will be part of BELLA HC will coexist and share, create with each other. Here they can learn and work on a new revolutionary platform for art and tourism.

MILLTECH PARK represents our effort to create an attractive space for the connection of art, history, and science into one structure, the aim of which will be to transfer popular science knowledge among all generations of visitors to Hlohovec. It will not only be **Technopark**, but it will also be a place for an unconventional point in the region's tourism where we will be able to explore the future through art and history with a scientific touch.

Venues for events and conferences will be offered in a new conference centre focused on conference tourism. This plan will be implemented by private investors, and its content will also include in part activities related to the ECOC title.

The flagship project of **HaCropolis** will offer a combined space for the implementation of events and internship programmes, creative stays or exhibitions and installations. Its spaces will remain available for SMALL TOWNS INSTITUTE projects after the end of the term of the ECOC title.

The SMALL TOWNS INSTITUTE will be a successor organization of the SMALL TOWNS COALITION. Its aim will be to map and influence trends in the development of small towns through culture and art. Its main activity will be to organize and implement exchange, education and research projects in the field of small-town development.

BELLA HC as our flagship will become a milestone in creative industry and in virtual and real tourism. Perhaps we will be the first to connect the reality of the whole town with a virtual dimension. It will be a space where we will learn how to promote Hlohovec as a virtual

living destination that you do not have to physically visit; however, it can be a space for creative activities, meeting people and artists, to which you can always return. It will bring the possibility of connection not via Skype, Zoom or MS Teams, but via Hlohovec, through the town as the first and only point that will be the same and unique for everyone.

The **Erdödy Club** will be an organization that will connect the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of large and medium-sized companies with the cultural events of the town. It will be a partner in creating CSR strategies for companies in the region. CSR plans will be interconnected through offers of individual categories of programmes – education, experience, and use of art. These programmes will be directed to the employees of companies that will use these offers in connection with the HC Card, where it will be possible to obtain benefits for visiting the programme. The Erdödy Club will also manage a grant fund to support the arts, financed primarily from the tax allocation of companies and their employees or crowdfunding combined with fund matching from public sources.

We will work with the town's largest communities – children and pensioners – in a the long-term as part of the **Unused Generation** project in which the experiences of those who have already lived their productive part of life are transferred to children and young people through art and creative activities.

HC *“One of the most iconic theater festivals in Slovakia is called Touches and Connections (Dotyky a spojenia). And we also wish to create strong and mutually enriching connections through the touches of the world of culture and art with the world of economic and social partners.”*

7/How is the European Capital of Culture action included in this strategy?

M *“It all seems to me to be well thought out so that it fits together. It is not just like designing one artistic year, as a one-time event. We are a small town here, and everything can be done here if one has the right contacts. That is, if one has got them...”*

The **HCulture 2030** strategy is part of a package of policies and strategies that we have been systematically developing since 2015 in line with the standards of a modern town in the European Union. It began with the Development Plan for the Hlohovec Urban Region, followed by the Town Development Program for 8 years until 2023, which was followed by a dozen other partial, but interconnected strategies, concepts and policies. The ECOC project has become an integral part of the cultural policy which was also prepared by people from the team that has drafted the ECOC application. The ECOC fulfills the objectives of the cultural policy in the following items (we list all the sections to make it clear in which areas of the strategy it is also being fulfilled through the ECOC project):

Pillar I.

Stability, quality of life, sustainable development of the region

Strategic goal: The region, especially the towns of Hlohovec and Leopoldov, is primarily perceived as industrial. The development strategy of the urban region implies the need not only to adapt

industry to new conditions (innovation, research, development, etc.), but also to pay increased attention to the support of the specific features of the region. Given the location, history, and also the local conditions (viticulture), the development of services and culture in relation to the specific nature of the region becomes an opportunity. The professionalization of the entire cultural sector and the expansion of traditional culture with modern elements are prerequisites.

Vision: To create and establish an internationally recognized cultural destination

Goals

1. **Creation of a “passport” for the town’s cultural infrastructure.**
2. **Modernizing the existing infrastructure in the region.**
3. **Adding missing elements to the infrastructure network.**
4. **Upgrading current public spaces and create new ones.**
5. **Establishing flexible management of culture and of a space for learning in the area of culture management.**
6. **Creating a model for the sustainable financing of infrastructure.**

In this strategic pillar, we will mainly use the projects of the program pillar **Safe Environment** and the **HaCropolis** and **Terra Vagus** flagship projects. In the pillar **Hope**, it will be the **MILLTECH** flagship, and in the pillar **Fostering Humanity** it will mainly be the program for drafting a syllabus for the educational program **Entrepreneurship in ARTS**, created in cooperation with the Academy of Performing Arts.

Pillar II.

The Hlohovec Cultural Region

Strategic goal: Win over audiences for the Hlohovec region

Vision: To anchor culture and creative industries in the region

Goals

1. Expand the offerings of events, culture for all.
2. Define the cultural highlights of the region.
3. **Better working conditions for cultural and creative people.**
4. **Education focused on specifics.**
5. Communication and work with the public.
6. **ECOC.**
7. **Art virtualization.**

In this strategic pillar, there will be overlaps mainly in the ECOC program pillar **Fostering Humanity** in its flagship – Childhood Institute, where we will develop the skills of children aged 0–11 and, at the same time, the skills of the teachers themselves. Another flagship of the same pillar of RE.ED.AA will develop the possibilities of using art to include juvenile delinquents and adult prisoners in society after their return from prison. As part of the virtualization of art, the flagship of the **Hope** pillar – the **BELLA HC** project will be the gateway not only to the town but also to the virtual creation of the town or virtual outputs of individual artists even after the ECOC 2026 title year. All conditions and processes should be improved through common learning during the ECOC 2026 preparation process and at the same time during the exchanges that will take place as part of the flagship program the **SMALL TOWNS COALITION**, in the pillar **Safe Environment**.

Pillar III.

Cooperation in the region

Strategic goal: To establish the national and international significance of the region

Vision: To improve, significantly, cooperation in the region, strengthen the sense of co-ownership and shared management

Goals

1. Establish network institutions and regional management (Association).
2. **Link projects with a regional cultural program.**
3. **Promote international exchanges and partnerships (deepen the old ones and acquire new ones).**
4. **Strengthen the sense of belonging to the region and restore a common identity.**

The project **Material** (the flagship of the **Fostering Humanity** pillar) will create the main space for increasing the sense of belonging to the region through the sharing of products and works of art made from materials with a local theme and of the local origin. In the project **Castpod** (the flagship of the **Trustworthiness** pillar) we will deal with the issue of sound in the local environment and its perception by the inhabitants of the region. International cooperation will be ensured by the ECOC itself and the Small Towns Coalition as part of which the exchanges of local artists and productions between cities will strengthen the sense of belonging to the town and the region.

HC *“All the world’s contacts are useless if you don’t have a strategy and a plan. You have nothing to use them for meaningfully.”*

8/If your city is awarded the title of European Capital of Culture, what do you think would be the long-term cultural, social and economic impact on the city (including in terms of urban development)?

M “I’m sorry, but I can’t imagine this at all. There will be more tourists, I guess, which is not such a big deal and perhaps there will be more art, but I really have no clue if it will have an impact on the economy. After all, we have always subsidized culture, and we have always been looking for sponsors.”

Cultural Impact

The project will bring a new level of education in the field of art management and will enhance the impact of art on the education of the new generation thanks to the **Childhood Institute**. It will affect the generation that will influence artistic creation in the town and the region, and not only there; also in all the small towns of the **Small Towns Coalition** – through exchanges and joint Leaders 2 Leaders programmes. Thanks to the new spaces and programmes, we expect an increase in the percentage of the population organizing cultural activities and events, similar to the HaCropolis programme, which will provide comprehensive spaces for leisure time activities in an environment that will allow them to create and produce.

We anticipate greater interest in participating in mainly international but also community projects which, thanks to foreign links, will be updated and upgraded by each other.

Social Impact

We are strengthening the type of community that will say to itself – “yes, I live well here, I want my children to grow up here, I want to grow old here, I want to learn and teach others here”. Already today, the Hlohovec brand evokes positive emotions such as “you do it well in Hlohovec”. Holding the ECOC title would extend this social effect of pride in people for the **Made in HC** brand.

Furthermore, we will enhance the club and community activity, and care not only for the environment and its entertainment but also for the environment in which it operates, ecology and indirectly the economy of the whole region and of all towns in the **Small Towns Coalition** through benchmarks that will create and by means of a know-how that we will share.

Economic Impact

Among the OECD countries, the **Slovak labour market is the most endangered by automation – by 2030, machines could replace 43% of all jobs in Slovakia**. Of course, we cannot replace all the jobs we’d lose in the event of the closure of the economic cycle in our territory, but we can create new ones. We expect a wave of small start-ups which will be established on the basis of our programme of the Institute of Innovative Education, which will also create a space where unemployed people will be able to upgrade their work skills to newer ones that are more applicable for the time.

The **BELLA HC** project will become an example for other towns of how to be accessible and how to create space for non-tourists who want to enjoy art in different parts of the town. It is **BELLA HC** that will be put in place to expand business in local communities, which

can sell their physical produce as well as virtual tickets to their events through virtual tourism (such as the artistic “Netflix”). It is creation, maintenance and content that will be the driving forces behind the complete change of a small town in the middle of everything.

As an unrecognized tourist centre of the region, we will awaken our attractiveness and, in combination with the newly built infrastructure (HaCropolis, MILLTECH PARK), we will be able to complement the economic focal points of our region with yet another – tourism and a creative industry. So that the expected changes would affect our region in the smoothest possible rhythm and prepare us at least partially for the coming economic changes.

The most lasting impact will be the fact that we will anchor ourselves on the map of Europe as a town from which other small towns have learned to improve life in functional urban regions through the cultural and creative industries.

HC “The cultural and creative industries account for almost 4% of GDP in the EU. Even in the case of Hlohovec, we are already talking about millions of euros.”

9/Briefly outline the plans for monitoring and evaluation.

M “It is said that over 100,000 visitors should come to visit us in that year. That’s a decent number, but will it improve the life in the town?”

We will build the system of monitoring and evaluation of the development of small towns through culture based on the many years of experience and methodology of the project of benchmarking Slovak towns of the KOM – the Municipal Research and Advisory Centre. Subsequently, we will develop the structure of the criteria for comparison as well as the processes of data collection and evaluation in the framework of the *Small Towns Coalition*.⁵ Benchmarking will be based on the already available knowledge and previous experience of other small towns with holding the ECOC (Bad Ischl, Esch, Matera, Elefsina) title. Based on this, the STC will be able to create a traffic light system for the implementation of the ECOC objectives.

This situation will be monitored every 9 months during the preparations for the ECOC title, during the ECOC and after the ECOC. Audits will be performed using the methodology of the *Small Towns Coalition* resulting in the reports on the status of implementation as well as recommendations for the upgrade or update of activities. Each audit will be virtually transmitted to all interested parties and will subsequently serve as

a source of learning and know-how for all towns involved in the *Small Towns Coalition*.

The outputs will be transparent and in accordance with the KPIs of the town’s cultural strategy and the KPI of the ECOC set out in the recommendation of the European Commission. Open feedback will be part of the project’s implementation in the coming years, even though it may be misused by politicians and their heavy criticism of the project. It is our experience with the public evaluation of the project that is important for other towns in the STC, as well as for public awareness as the project will progress. The outputs will also be presented during the **HiCon** conference, which is a flagship in the **Trustworthiness** pillar.

The successor organization, the *Small Towns Institute*, which will focus on the implementation of changes in small towns, will continue to operate after the end of the *Small Towns Coalition* programme.

HC “As a classic Slovak saying goes: You cannot substitute numbers for bread? However, the benchmarking data will clearly show how the town life improves through culture.”

Areas for Output Monitoring

Economic Readiness:	Social Readiness:	Cultural Readiness:
The state of revenue generated by tourism	The status of cross community projects	The implementation of artistic activities in the educational system
The state of revenue generated by creative industry	The state of social inclusion	The state of the feeling of belonging to the city/urban region
The status of employment in tourism	The involvement of local people in participatory processes	The state of conditions created for the implementation of artistic activities
The status of employment in tourism	The number of moving inhabitants from the town outside the district	The state of conditions created in order to foster cooperation between businesses and the creative industry
The state of start-ups in the town in the field of tourism and creative industries	The number of new residents	The status of attendance of cultural activities by visitors from outside the district
The status of support mechanisms for the implementation of revenue in tourism and the creative industry	The number of inter-district social activities	The status of international cultural activities
	The involvement of citizens in the creation of public spaces	

⁵ KOM has been implementing a benchmarking project for Slovak cities since 2004 (<https://www.komunal.eu/sk/projekty/benchmarking>). In the field of culture, it compares the following parameters: ¹ The number of cultural events organized or co-organized by the city. ² The number of permanent seats in cultural facilities financed by the city per 1,000 inhabitants. ³ Attendance of stationary cultural facilities (the number of visitors / the number of events). ⁴ The share of expenditures on culture in the city budget and organizations established by the city compared to total expenditure. ⁵ The expenditure on culture per capita. ⁶ The proportion of expenditure on culture in total current expenditure. ⁷ The proportion of expenditure on restoration and conservation of national cultural monuments (registered in the Central Register of the Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic, ÚZPF SR) to total expenditures. ⁸ The proportion of expenditure on restoration and conservation of monuments and historical sights not listed in the Central Monuments Register to the total expenditures.

10/What is the artistic vision and strategy for the cultural programme of the year?

M “The year 2026 is too far away, so far away that no one knows what will happen then. We should probably approach this with a claim “When it comes, it comes.” Such long-term plans are only unnecessary day-dreams.”

Wag yourself, Dreamer!

For us, the year 2026 is symbolized by the figure of an “palaverer”, the bighead, the dreamer. Hlohovec – the Dreamer embarks on things, with healthy audacity, that may be too much for him/it in the eyes of many, but he/it knows that they are necessary, knowing that the goal is possible to achieve. Hlohovec 2026 offers to experience, in the small town, in the community of twenty-seven small towns of Europe, something unexpected but not “worn-out” and provincial, or provincially shabby, rather something boldly experimenting.

Our vision of the European Capital of Culture 2026 – Hlohovec is based on a bighead-like attempt to take position at the centre of the European cultural and artistic public, to squeeze under the microscope of the European interest, to place on the Petri dish the most internal foundations of the European social and cultural background, the civil society of our neighbourhood, our interpersonal relations and personal desires. We wish to move consistently on **the edge of the countryside and the city, on the edge of nature**, represented by the stream of the “wandering” river Váh, and **the environment formed by people** for generations, on **the edge between art and education**. As in a polygon transparent from all sides, in Hlohovec we can try to verify, in a visible and less costly way, the bold and crazy ideas and dreams, and **animate the upcoming social situation the context of which we still have little idea about**.

The year 2026 will be a year when in Hlohovec and in the whole area of Terra Vagus more than five years of ongoing processes and activities that were gradually building that audacity to apply for the European Capital of Culture – Hlohovec will be completed: a time which will equip actors and perceivers with the knowledge that it will be possible, that something is going on, that change is coming. Uttered together with Aristoteles, we are at **the peak of the drama, at the top of the wave, at the very centre of the change**. It is the crisis from which new mishaps open the doors to new chambers and halls where we enter purified, with refreshed energy.

The year 2026 is a milestone, a signpost, a gate to which we have arrived and through which we pass with joy and daring audacity. For us, the year 2026 represents the reinforcement of a vault which we have been built for ten years, it is an imaginary tip of the iceberg, the pinnacle of development through the cultivation of commonness. It will be a year that will turn into a myth living in the minds of not only Hlohovecians and stay there for a long time.

With its audacity, **Hlohovec 2026 – Hlohovec the Dreamer**, leads us on the rope, through an unknown deep gorge. For us, this solid rope is four basic areas of interest, four response areas to the four threats we have identified: **destabilization, demotivation, dehumanization, and disinformation**. These are threats that can irreversibly break our society as we know it and as we love it: We respond to these **4Ds** by targeting a **safe environment**, creating **hope**, fostering **humanity**, and all-encompassing **trustworthiness** that leans against critical thinking. These dynamics of pair antagonistic terms defines our basic project areas:

Destabilization>
.....> Safe Environment

Demotivation>
.....> Hope

Dehumanization>
.....> Fostering Humanity

Disinformation>
.....> Trustworthiness

Art as a process of change and a means of opening, animating, and documenting social problems is a basic principle of our art scheme. This principle is an imaginary outrigger/lever beam of the dreamer to balance over the abyss. Therefore, artists, art institutions, ensembles and activities will be strongly directed towards connecting with education, with marginalized groups. In our program, we want artistic activity, works of art to stimulate the desire to be there and experience the ongoing changes, the desire to use the positive currents and stimuli of upcoming changes, to be active and to participate in them. We wish that art projects are built with an **emphasis on critical thinking, on skills that deepen humaneness, humanity, and solidarity**. We wish artists to be **explorers, discoverers**, entering the uncertain waters of the future as a vanguard.

HC “No one believed 6 years ago, how the town can be changed in 6 years. Today, no one remembers how it looked like back than. And today we are formulating new visions.”

11/Give a general overview of the structure of your cultural programme, including the range and diversity of the activities/main events that will mark the year.

M “Someone once told me that great artists come and go, and then what is there to remain here? Nothing, only those that are local and that matter, and we should focus on those in the programme. As for the others, it doesn’t matter, they won’t stay here anyway. “

The entire HC 2026 program is closely linked to our community of **Small Towns Coalition**, which has been being built since 2020. It will be the City of Hlohovec and the whole **Terra Vagus** that will become a test field for changes about which we know almost nothing today. With the courage of the star carriers, we have identified four key threats to the world as we live it today: **Destabilization, Demotivation, Dehumanization, Disinformation – 4Ds**.

The coping of with this potential, expected processes represents the main ropes from which we wish to weave a safe hammock, in which it is possible to collect strength for everything that may await us and certainly will not pass us by. These safety zones are the above-mentioned pillars for us: A Safe Environment, Hope, Fostering Humanity and Trustworthiness. With its activities, the HC Year will submit the



first visible report about our journeys, our searches, about the quality of this weaving entanglement. It is not just about the ropes – the arteries themselves, but these main arteries branch out into safely embracing nets woven from threads, fibres, capillaries.

Other principles of the Hlohovec 2026 programme structure

Our project is fragmented, lively and connected. It is most manifested in the sequence of **events** (festivals, workshops, symposiums, works of art, social and cultural public happenings – pilgrimages, marches, events, meetings). It will revive places (traditional, forgotten, current, special, real, mental, and virtual) and until now unsensed **interspaces** (projects “The Routes”, “Lego Robotic”, BELLA HC) and interferences.

The project restructures the timeline again (consolidates traditional items in the calendar, places new programme items). By means of HC 2026, new **groups** of users, creators, consumers, and collaborators are given fresh space, and new and innovated **actors** in creative dialogues are also taking the floor.

Dialogue, which was the key moment in the change of our society in 1989, is also a core principle of our project. It is a dialogue that is close (in a small space), personal (we all know each other here, everyone sees into everyone’s yard), intense (in unexpected teams), a dialogue across time (traditions meet risky experiments, children meet renowned artists, prisoners with free-spirited innovators, artists meet across forms and genres, across languages and cultures). Via our project we offer a network, a web, a breeding ground for dialogues which send our project along the vertical of time from the times long past to an unsuspected future, through the horizons of the landscape and the flow of the river Váh, through bubbles of groups, tribes and cultures.

In these dialogues, the groups continuously renew their common

voice of **the group**, identify themselves, find each other, in a unique sequence of events, in changing spaces and times, and confirm themselves in the interaction of the established ones and those that are just establishing themselves. Numerous dialogues are imprinted in the artefacts of our real world, and the matrix and the stamp are then various **materials (Forum Material project)**. In our project, these are mainly materials deeply connected with our town, our space and tradition – paper, ceramics, wine, hawthorn flowers or data sets or the human body or sound in its various forms (**Paper Biennial, Ceramics Open, CastPod (a festival of audio experiments), Body as a Visual Language**). **Masters** of their disciplines (experts and experimenters) manage to find and complete unique statements of artifacts in the materials and in our understanding, also the masters of daydreaming (children, lunatics, and fantasists) and masters of unusual and unexpected connections and perspectives (seniors, people with specific needs, laymen and amateurs, do-it-yourselfers and enthusiasts). Our programme will enable various meetings and presentations of various forms of mastery (symposiums, internships, creative workshops, masterclasses, art residencies and meetings of artists in unusual environments – schools, workshops, hospitals, prisons, educational institutions).

The cultural and artistic project brings space in its individual items for **events of wide international involvement** (international festivals, symposiums, the creation of new institutions) through **events of national importance** (festivals, unique art events, educational projects, inspirational institutions, **MillTec Park, Childhood Institute**, conferences and meetings) to a diverse constellation, **a dense network of capillaries of local neighbourhood activities** (feasts, carnivals, pilgrimages). Therefore, we place great emphasis on overlaps and connections (artist with prison inmates, creative intern at a community event in the local community, the possibility of

international projects for local creators and activists).

As we have already stated above, we consistently design our project as sustainable, for example, we build on and develop the **existing and traditional activities, we develop local spaces for local people (Castle Theatre, Biennial Papier, CastPod – the audio festival of experiments), Body as a visual language, HaCropolis – Living Castle, MillTec Park**). We design also new **original activities** as long-term and gradually progressing activities that are inspiring, modelling and projecting themselves to the future, (**Small Towns Institute, DISfest – dysfunctional topics in film documentaries), Mirroring, HiCon – Davos of small towns**).

Due to the specific nature of Hlohovec and its cultural and artistic infrastructure, for a significant part of the project we will open a **unique, nature-friendly and temporary ad-hoc space – PUNK NOMAD** in the space of the natural cultural district Terra Vagus, the waterfront of the river Váh. In connection with this, the activities for large, numerous audiences will be focused on open air opportunities (May – September) which will strengthen the bond to the unique natural character of our countryside and to our traditions - horticulture and flowers, water games and sports, soft tourism, multigenerational tourism – **The Routes**.

Four areas of interest, four areas of response to 4Ds

1/Safe Environment vs. Destabilization

Our dreamer faces the process of **destabilization**, uncertainty, and unveiling of our known world by defining and creating a safe environment. **A safe environment** is the first line of defence, but it will not be a cage, a fence, a prison, an upholstered room. It will be a living agar, a garden, nutritious pasture, a rehearsal space, a workshop of change. Environmental safety is provided by orientation signs, lighthouses, milestones. These, for us, are **time** (regular activities), physical space (we open new places, spaces, we cultivate the existing ones – for example, the projects **Terra Vagus, HaCropolis – Living Castle, MillTec, Routes**) and established forms and structures (conferences, symposiums, festivals, residences, such as **DISfest – International Documentary Film Festival on Borders, Boundaries and Breaking Points, The Paper Biennial**).

We are building a space in which people can **freely create**, where no one will put them down, where they will be heard. Freedom in free space. You can **take risks**, you don’t have to worry if you make a mistake, we **welcome mistakes**.

Examples of major projects (Flagship projects)

Small towns coalition (STC)

Aim: We wish that the Small Towns Coalition (STC), an association of 27 small European towns, will prepare together, under the ECOC 2026 Hlohovec heading, for a future in which even small towns would remain a good place to live. We want to make use of the fact that it may be not only easier to deal with various “viruses” but they will also be an ideal space to connect housing and work as part of new technological

challenges – digitization, new forms of mobility, growing importance of the local economy also in connection to new technologies and human behaviour, addressing climate change but also stabilizing security in the regions and preserving the democratic functioning of small communities. Through STC, the process of preparing for the challenges defined in the Small Towns Manifesto will take place.

Content of the Project: The creation of a coalition of 27 small towns – 27 European Hlohovec-like towns will, in addition to an easy-to-grasp exchange of member towns’ artistic productions, share the know-how and create tools to cope with expected changes to which culture and creative industries can respond. All solutions will be primarily linked to specific projects both in the preparatory period and during the ECOC year in Hlohovec and in the member towns.

The long-term outputs of the STC are realistically implemented cultural projects of change in the subject areas. These best practices will be shared with one another within a common network of towns and presented once a year at **HiCon – Little Davos of small towns** in Hlohovec.

Another output of the STC will be the monitoring of the state of preparedness of the town for the ECOC during the years, as described in question 9. Under the STC umbrella, a legacy organisation **“The Small Towns Institute”** will be established the mission of which will be to create, implement and share the know-how linked to the development of small towns within the whole of the EU.

Target groups: Experts in the field of community development, leaders of local governments in participatory processes, public artists, amateur local ensembles and artists, economic, social, and environmental activists.

Scope: long-term international, national, and local projects.

Project Partners There are currently 26 EU towns plus 2 non-EU cities with the STC membership.

Sponsor: Municipal Research and Advisory Centre, INREGU Institute Paris.

Example of a project in the location axis:

HaCropolis

Aim: The HaCropolis project (Acropolis Hlohovec) is to functionally connect the ongoing comprehensive reconstruction of the Hlohovec Castle and the entire castle area with preparations for an unforeseen future. We do not want the castle only as a museum preserving history but rather a **castle** that would be **a living cultural and educational centre**.

We will offer a **methodology example** of how approach cultural space in a small town in the 21st century. The aim is to connect the historical context with the vision of the future. The whole “castle hill” will be transformed into a **unique multi-layered cultural and social Acropolis**. We offer a functional project of long-term working synergies of a number of separate **projects and institutions that cooperate, coexist not only in space but also in joint activities**. We wish to **show the power of cooperation and openness**. In our vision, the hill with the castle has the ambition to become a long-term generator of other cultural and artistic activities.

Content of the Project: The unique landmark of the town of Hlohovec, the Erdödy’s Castle, which had been long-neglected and devastated by the communist regime, is undergoing a generous reconstruction. Already today, in addition to the traditional exposition of national history and geography (also with the use of augmented reality), it offers spaces for the town gallery – an exhibition hall (Kunsthalle), and representative training

and conference spaces and open air cultural area in the courtyard.

Through the HaCropolis project, other sites of the large area – the Castle park, the stables, the riding hall, the gardeners' house, the terraces and greenhouses, the Empire Theatre and also the Reeducation Centre, will be reconstructed according to the long-term investment plan contained in the town development strategy.

The **HaCropolis project addresses the multidimensional use of the entire area.** Already in the preparatory phases, we are to hold an international workshop of urban planners from 27 countries to generate ideas for not only historic but also contemporary use of the entire space that would be overlapping various functionalities. At the same time, civic projects that emerged from a call for submission of projects will be involved in individual phases.

We wish to present “live” (during the preparatory period and subsequently during the sustainability of the ECOC ethos) an example of a multifunctional space, a multilab, to a wide range of interested parties. What we have in mind is a year-round multifunctional space in which each part can function independently, with a different focus, a different organizational form, but together they will be connected to one living organism allowing us to take advantage of unique multilab opportunities serving as a “federation” of diverse activities.

Part of this long-term project will be ongoing evaluation and documentation of individual actions and their impacts on the town and the region. The project will significantly affect the participation and cooperation of members of the Small Towns Coalition. We will be using, consistently, international competitions and creative symposiums in key stages of the project.

Target groups: residents and visitors (domestic and foreign) of the Town of Hlohovec, representatives and partners

of individual interest groups, artists and creative people of various disciplines (theatre, dancers, artists, musicians), teachers, ecologists, urban planners and architects, landscape architects, gardeners, social and community workers, residents, interns, children, youngsters, pensioners.

Scope: long-term international, national, and local projects.

Project Partners Small Towns Coalition, Town of Hlohovec, Museum of Natural History and Geography, Municipal Cultural Centre, schools, and the Childhood Institute.

Sponsor: Trans Europe Halles (Finland: Cable Factory/Kaapelitehdas Helsinki), Antena, Nová síť.

2/Hope vs. Demotivation

Our Dreamer faces demotivation, the loss of desire to participate in the public life, the passive giving in to change, haters and toxicities of this world by **adoring hope**. If we are to look for a presence of hope, we find **relationships, bonds, connections and links**. With our projects, we will cultivate an exceptionally lively and sensitive space in-between interferences, a membrane space of transitions and overlaps between the past and the future (**MillTec Park**, folklore festivals, the **HaCropolis Project**), **between generations, and groups** (Spolkový dom/the Guild House) project, small local community centers in various municipalities of the region, re-education, the prison project **RE.ED. AA – Re-education Art Action**), **between interests, between fields of expertise (DISfest)**

Bridging different horizons -- these are the helping hands and soothing and strengthening embraces, these are the ways we have explored of how not to lose illusions, visions, and the desire to create and shape oneself and the world around us. Hope does not just come for free, hope is welcomed and celebrated

in activities, actions, that are carried out together on our common path (**Childhood Institute project**).

Examples of flagship projects

Bella HC

Aim: We will make Hlohovec accessible to all audiences and visitors, regardless of when they wish to visit the ECOC 2026 in Hlohovec. We will create a tool to prevent the situations occur like those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic today and, at the same time, we will enable art to smoothly run its intentions in the town and with audiences.

Content of the Project: Imagine you are in a computer game. You meet characters, visit rooms, walk down the street. Those characters are avatars of the ECOC 2026 visitors, you also have your own avatar. Those rooms are real shops, stages, exhibitions, the Hlohovec buildings and spaces of events held during the ECOC in Hlohovec. Your only obligation is to log in to the BELLA HC project, create your own avatar, and decide where you would like to look. And off you go.

You can invite your friends, too, with whom you can meet at the famous “promenade” street of Hlohovec or you can meet someone by chance in the **Castle Garden** or experience a concert in the **PUNK NOMAD space**. And all this in six years when the real transmission speed will be far beyond the 5G level. We are prepared even if travel becomes too expensive because of the carbon footprint or impossible because of pandemic.

Or you will want to look at the paintings in the **Kunsthalle** or you will even wish to buy them. Or even better, you will want to create them together at a workshop in the popularization technology centre **MillTec Park** on Váh. You will enter the space virtually, the avatar of the lecturer will welcome you, and you, together with others, can virtually carve a statue into

stone which will arrive at your home printed on a 3D printer as your work of art.

You will be able to experience what you would never experience otherwise, come where you could not, meet who you are waiting for. And it doesn't matter whether in the virtual world or in the real European Capital of Culture.

Scope: international project, intercontinental project.

Target group: artists in the field of AI, graphics, virtual environment, ECOC visitors, tourists, entrepreneurs and investors in the field of creative industry.

Sponsor: Creative Pro Group.

3/Fostering Humanity vs. Dehumanization

Dreamer replies to gradual and progressive dehumanization! Jointly with him, we must once again emancipate our belief in the irreplaceability and uniqueness of each of us – in **humanity**. For us, humanity means each and every **unique person**. It is everyone who refuses to be just a particle in the crowd, a gear wheel, a number, a bar code, a workforce, a lining to an abstracted progress. Dreamer finds such a person in someone who can perceive in a unique way, who manifests themselves in specific **activities** (for example, the **Tinkers Symposium** (Sympóziu drôtu) within the Plein Air Architect's Workshop – Leopoldov), through its unique qualities, abilities and skills.

Skills, primarily, have become a central motive for us in the recovery of humanity. Skills that can be acquired, deepened, shared, taught, preserved. Skills are imprinted into the world through specific materials, working with them, designing and using them (specific materials – the **Paper Biennial**, tinkering workshop).

Developing a human being via skill enhancement leads to mastery. In our program, we **identify new masters of new skills**. Old fans of routine cannot be our new masters, our new masters will be children, lunatics and fantasizers, experimenters, interested experts, pensioners, laymen and amateurs. Their meetings will create new situations for sharing new paths (**Childhood Institute, DISfest, the European Amateur Theatre Workshop**).

Examples of flagship projects

Childhood Institute

Aim: The aim is to implement art education and art education more effectively in the learning process in the town. Through this institute, we also wish to create a professional methodological and educational capacity in order to safeguard vocational and individual, continuous process of learning. The main goal of the institute will be to prepare teachers and educators to teach **aesthetic and educational subjects** with an emphasis on the development of children's relationship to art, so that they shape their relationship with themselves and with their immediate environment through art.

Content of the Project: Foundation of a centre for research, education and application of methods that are based on the principles of experience-based pedagogy, and the interconnection of art and education, which will directly transform educational reality through practical interconnection of creative and pedagogical theory (international conferences, symposia, research projects) and directly change the reality of the learning process via practical projects in re-education: **RE.ED.AA – Re-education Art Action**, in museum and gallery pedagogy: **MillTec Park**, in natural pedagogy, in an international context, as it will function as an international laboratory of creative and aesthetic-educational and artistic

teaching. An important subject of the Institute's activities will also be the educating of an active spectator, listener, reader, performer and critic (animation and reflection of artistic activities – festivals, events). The Institute will be an independent workplace of the tertiary sphere cooperating with academic workplaces, and thus will contribute to the strengthening of the educational image of Hlohovec and its surroundings.

Scope: Regional project with subsequent national and international multiple effect.

Target group: children up to 10 years; kindergarten and primary school teachers, teachers of leisure-time centers, teachers who prepare future teachers; pedagogy students; artists with experience in artistic and pedagogical tutoring; lecturers, special or therapeutic teachers, parents.

Partners:

Sponsor: Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra – Faculty of Education.

4/Trustworthiness vs. Disinformation

The Dreamer is looking for a way of moving away from the formless amoeba of disinformation, from the flood of information permeated by the relativization of values and irresponsibility from the “truths” being disseminated. This is where the Dreamer draws his living water. Here is the DNA of our direction, a central approach to life that permeates everything. It has its image in **critical thinking**; we consider it a category that passes through everything; it is a way of life, a method of approaching the world. It is associated with **responsibility**.

Orientation is possible only through trust, through the opportunity to lean back, rest for a while, calm down. Believing in safety does not mean falling into a soft committal. We perceive

trustworthiness to be an important active work in learning about the world, which sets its image for us through the **media** and through behaviour and actions, which present the actors of various processes of informing the world about the world.

Examples of major projects

(Flagship projects)

DISfest (dysfunctional topics in documentaries)

International Documentary Festival

Aim: Our intention is to create a unique platform for the presentation of film documentaries, for the meeting of documentary filmmakers and at the same time a space for networking for experts from various fields of social, cultural and scientific life. The festival will also contribute to the expansion of audience awareness of Slovak documentary production and can contribute to the growth of its quality and social prestige. The unique festival attracts annual attention to the town and its surroundings.

Project content: There is currently no separate documentary festival in Slovakia. Because we perceive documentary production as a unique bridge between science, education and art, we decided to offer space for documentary film.

The festival will include the **annual awards for Slovak documentaries** and their creators – **a showcase of Slovak documentaries for partners**. At the same time, every year the festival in one of the main lines of the show part of the program will be focused on some **marginal social topic** (disorders, crises, problem areas...). This line will enable the presentation of documentaries dedicated to specific topics (care for groups, disorders, minorities, subcultures). The social aspect of the festival will thus connect cultural and artistic personalities, experts in the field of science (such as doctors, researchers,

excellent practitioners) and other actors who are part of the topic, with artists and the general audience. The next line will be the presentation of important personalities and documentary schools.

Target group: Professionals in the field of documentary film, students at art schools, scientists from thematic disciplines, publicists, those interested in the relevant fields, teachers and the general public.

Scope: international, annual, 5 – 8 days a year.

Partners: Jihlava IDFF, ArtFilmFest in Kosice, One World, film and other universities, public media, academic community.

Sponsors: film associations, universities, national television broadcaster, distribution companies, Jihlava International Film Festival, One World festival.

Another example of an international project

HiCon – Davos of small towns

Conference on small town development

Objective: To publicly present the outcomes of cooperation in the Small Towns Coalition (STC). Creating a reflective space for thinking about the paths that small European towns take to face the challenges defined in our **Small Towns Manifesto**. Sharing know-how on how to address these challenges, provide guidance or argue about solutions that didn't work out, even though they looked good (FuckUp Night as part of the conference).

Project content: Discussion forums, solution presentations, online and onlive workshops, which can be created on site once a year in Hlohovec, or even virtually through BELLA HC. In the thematic panels, there will be space for speakers from STC towns (but not exclusively) and experts from the discussed areas.

The workshops will be open not only to STC members, but also to the lay and professional public who are interested in applying the skills acquired during the solution of STC challenges in real practice. The program will also include blocks of lectures focused on more abstract thinking about the culture of life in small towns and its development in the European context.

HiCon will host presentations by artists from STC sites, as well as a range of artists working on trends in the areas of site-specific projects, public spaces, audio visual or architecture, and fusion.

Scope: International project.

Partners: STC members, professional organisations, consulting organisations, artists from member towns.

Sponsor: Municipality Research and Advisory Centre, INREGU Institute Paris.

HC *“You are right, the ‘great artists’ will come and go, as they did before and as they will do later. And our people will meet them, bump into them, intersect with them... Yes, our people will also leave, but then they will return, since there will be a place and reason to return to.”*

12/Explain succinctly how the cultural programme will combine local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions?

M “Local customs and traditions are the foundation of every culture. After all, what other than traditions should we maintain and show others? And the chateau, not finishing it would be a shame. Though it's maybe more important that we repair the water pipes for the money... right? Well, it's half and half.”

Local cultural heritage and traditional art forms are an integral part of the program structure. With innovative education (**Childhood Institute**) we focus on the field of creativity, interpretive skills and education through fine arts (in all their forms and genres) and folk culture in an innovative manner in order to transform the cultural heritage of folk art. Also, in other projects we connect local folk traditions, and also local production, craft traditions with current stimuli (**Biennial Paper, Forum Material** – the project on wirework will certainly draw interest), we will also involve traditional pilgrimages, feasts, and minority culture (**Judaism** project).

One of the essential parts of the **Forum Material** project is working with clay as a material deeply connected to our region and the tradition that we

are still living today. Ceramics are not just faience or majolica. The bearers of the artistic dimension of work with this material are, for example, the important Slovak ceramicist *Jozef Susienka*, the representative of the local work of ceramicists is *Juliana Hadvigova* (projects that emerged from the participatory call for applications – ceramic paintings on building facades, ceramic house signs that complete the uniqueness of buildings and support the genius loci of specific locations). And as the most inspiring dimension and paradox that we want to use in the **Forum Material** project is the fact that ceramics are a unique material in the world of today's contemporary electronics. Other materials will be metal (wire), paper, wine, but also data that allow one to create a virtual world of materials.

An innovative approach to tradition and cultural heritage is also reflected in the **MillTec Park** project. At the basic level, it represents the preservation and access to traditional technological procedures (for example, unique floating wooden mills or the ferry on the Váh river), but in a non-traditional dress and designer-made practical implementation we would like to shift the memory towards experiential education about human art using the power of water and individual materials to multiply the power. We intend to sensitively incorporate these functional and activity-oriented exhibits into the waterfront parts of the Váh as part of the continuation of the launched process of the urban opening of the town to the river. So, it is not just about working with traditional technology, but about merging with art, architecture, contemporary approaches to working with public spaces, etc.

One of the widely perceived cultural phenomena important for Hlohovec and its surroundings is the cultivation of grapes and wine processing – a thousand-year history of grape cultivation in the region is traditional here. Be that as it may, the question is whether the wine industry, which, thanks to its long history, is considered

traditional, is able to reflect trends and satisfy the question of an innovative approach? This is also one of the motives we are trying to address in terms of linking the local cultural heritage with a modern approach in our programme structure.

Winemaking is one of the dominant branches of the town, and so we have included work with grapes and wine in the **Forum Material** project. Long-term local projects such as the **Frastak journey for wine, Vino Hlohovec, or Welcoming the summer in the vineyards** are projects that develop this tradition, and at the same time some of them work with wine in an innovative way, connect it more strongly with culture and address new target groups. For example, *Slobodne vinarstvo*, in addition to being a significant cultural point and probably the most significant space for the intermingling of world oenological trends in the region – with its natural (paradoxically “illegal” in Slovakia according to current legislation) wines breaks down boundaries and penetrates to Michelin-starred restaurants around the world.

Wine projects are also part of the line of interspaces and the **Route** Project, since wine tourism also takes into account the sports line of ethno-tourism. The program includes guided tastings of the products not only of local winemakers, but also of those working in partner and cooperating European towns, tours of wine cellars, and tours of vineyards. Certainly, there are more and more projects available of a similar type, but what we are building on is the uniqueness of every wine environment. In our case, the cultural landscape associated with wine growing is unique – the growers from our region still supply grapes to much more famous wine producers in the well-known, Small Carpathian winemaking region. A step towards interconnecting art, ethnology and the cultural landscape of the “undiscovered Slovak Provence” is the multi-genre project **Art and Wine** – may wine not only serve for consumption, but let it be an inspiration for art.

Creative and innovative “upcycling”, or the transformation or re-creative use and quotation of folk culture motifs in non-traditional styles, linking convention and tradition and experimentation – this is one of the topics that will be part of the **Small Towns Coalition** in specific forms and conditions of each partner town.

We also have this intention in the program structure in the area of specific reconstructions of historical urban buildings and centres. We emphasize with them not only the modern historical and period reconstruction of the buildings, but also a modern approach to the functional use of these buildings. The preservation of the historical, cultural and urban heritage requires a special mode of reconstruction, the optimal organisation of the urban environment, including public space, but we also emphasize the need to meet the requirements of modern society and to create suitable conditions for creative, cultural and artistic offerings that follow current trends and tendencies.

Examples of specific projects

Program Pillar:
Fostering Humanity vs. Dehumanization

Forum Material

The aim of this multi-layered umbrella project is to deepen the ability to work with materials specific to Hlohovec. We want to make artists attentive to mundane and often overlooked materials. We want to offer artists the opportunity to work with the paradoxes of our materials (paper – robot, ceramics – electronics, wire – nanofiber).

The content of the project is an annual multi-layered programme of art events, symposium residencies, professional internships and exhibitions or performers, which will always be thematized in relation to one of the Hlohovec materials. We consider Hlohovec materials those with which some important activity or workshop or

factory is connected in Hlohovec. This project will be based on purely domestic materials.

We perceive the material not only as a functional material, but also as an artistic material, as a space for discovery, the improvement of skills, knowledge, a space for materialising the cooperation of different disciplines and approaches, even in time (folk art and experiments with materials). Through the unique contribution of artful and skilled artists, a unique work of art is created from the material. The key materials for the **Forum Material** project will be clay (ceramics, brickwork, clay architecture, semiconductors), paper (structures, dimensions, graphics, fonts, typography, polygraphy, books, bookbinding), metal (especially wire, fences, chains, nets, nanofibers), wine (traditions, landscape, gastronomy, tastes, colours) and data (material for building a virtual world).

HC *“Yes, we had native wines here, Othello, Bily samorodak, Delevar, but also other varieties, especially Portuguese and Kadarka fluffy and sweet, but time will not return; much has changed. Today, the ‘world’ varieties Riesling Rhine, Traminer Red, Burgundy White, Sauvignon, Burgundy Blue and Frankovka (Blaufränkisch) are represented in the plantings. Europe has come to our vineyards as well.”*

13/How has the city involved, or how does it plan to involve, local artists and cultural organisations in the conception and implementation of the cultural programme?

M *“I have already said that – our people in particular should have been fully visible in the programme. So that they would be proud to have accomplished something. But they don’t have to do everything there, since they also have to live, not just focus on art.”*

Our candidacy is based on the need to prepare for the changes that await us. Art and culture should be one of the tools to change the culture of the town. Therefore, the whole project is based on the wide participation of local actors who naturally wish to participate in the cultural life of the community.

During the participatory processes of the preparation for the application and local capacity building, we received 317 project intentions – from 84 individuals (including members of the city council) and from 61 different local organisations or associations, from educational institutions, entrepreneurs, regional institutions and from cities and municipalities in the participating region. We have included these project intentions in some lines of the program, enriching the period of preparations

with them, whether they have already become a part of the cultural and artistic life of the town.

However, we want to open this interest of local cultural organisations, artists and creators, as well as active individuals, to national, European and global cooperation. Building new relationships supports the path of change that we are preparing for; the diversity of artistic and cultural perspectives supports the sustainability of our intentions against the background of mutual inspiration, the opening of horizons and revitalizes our cultural offer.

Both amateurs and local creators will continuously learn from foreign residents; on the other hand, their local perspective will be a revival of the programme offering and a guarantee of encouraging the interest and involvement of local residents. In order for the locals to believe in the project and be open to the changes it brings, they need to have supportive and strong points that they trust, which they are not afraid of and with whom they have relations. This can encourage them to embark on new journeys, explore unknown artistic and cultural territories, and build confidence in the new relationships and changes they bring.

Examples of real involvement by local actors are several projects that are part of the framework of the program structure:

- The impact of the local environment will also be reflected in the **Small towns coalition** project, which is an example of local and European cooperation. The institution will not only focus on the specific problems of small towns and will address them with the intentions of the specifics of such towns, but above all it will involve local actors. The principle of connecting 27 towns (27 “HC” towns) is to connect the local with the European, building partnerships, sending local experts, artists, creators and organisers to

partner towns for experiments, and developing their skills.

- It is also important to mention the creation of a sustainable infrastructure for cultural and artistic activities, which will open in the Vah basin by adapting the environment and adding simple and functional equipment (the **Terra Vagus** project). The opening of new opportunities for local creators to meet new audiences and for mutual inspiration will provide an exceptional space for art, which is based on the **PUNK NOMAD** project.

- The **MillTec Park** project presupposes the supervision of two regional institutions (the National Museum and the Observatory with the M. R. Stefanik Planetarium). The project is a fusion of art, technology, education, architecture, history and tradition. It is history and tradition that are key in terms of the local criterion.

- The outputs of the **Childhood Institute** project will be applied in the first phase to the teaching project of educational institutions in Hlohovec. The project will involve all local kindergartens and primary schools with their teachers and children.

- The **Forum Material** project treats folklore as a mental and intangible material as one of the categories. Folklore, as a set of people’s knowledge, which is realised in various forms, represents phenomena that are linked to a specific location, collective and to a specific group of people. This is what gives it a unique character and nature. We have a rich source of actors in the region in this area.

However, folklore appears not only in the **Forum Material** project, but in virtually all projects based on elements of traditional folk culture. They have only a seemingly marginal significance, due to their high degree

of spontaneity; they are connected with the life of the local community.

- We also involve local actors in the projects of primarily civic, interest and amateur associations (**International Amateur Workshop – The Club House**).

Examples of specific projects

Programme pillar:
Safe Environment vs. Destabilization

Project: TerraVagus
(land of intermingling)

Objective: Terra Vagus is a comprehensive intention to create the spatial and mental focus of our project. It is a reclamation and rehabilitation of the area in the triangle of Hlohovec, Piešťany and Leopoldov. We intend to transform the place in the Váh floodplains, which carries many spatial possibilities, into a meeting place for various programme components. At the same time, we want to offer an environment that also inspires ad hoc informal social activities. This place will offer space for large visits of up to tens of thousands of people, as well as for small family activities. In our **Terra Vagus** project, we interconnect ourselves in our programme ideologically (Small Town), but also in time (the historical place – the living castle versus the new Terra Vagus space), and also spatially (horizontally – Terra Vagus versus vertical of the Chateau).

Project content: Terra Vagus is a piece of land that does not belong to anyone and all have equal status there (Frastak – Freistadt – Free City on the Vah river). A place that has the potential for interference – a place of interconnection – a large marketplace. It is an open space for intermingling, it is a place of fermentation. Terra Vagus, an open space, includes space for large open-air festivals, fairs, a planned eco-festival, but is also divided into nooks for everyday use for a variety of activities from recreation, small family

and community gatherings, sports and cultural events of various groups, societies and associations. The project includes a close link with nature (with a specific emphasis on water, and water and waste management) with ecological practices and examples of sustainable and non-burdensome urbanism and architecture. In our approach to this space, we are preparing an open international competition, workshops and open-air events with inspiring personalities in sustainable and ecological construction. The key sub-project is the unique central building of **PUNK NOMAD** (the details of this will be answered in the following question).

Target groups: architects, urban planners, members of societies and associations, ecologists, organisers of summer festivals, food markets, social gatherings and events, families and friendly groups, the towns of Hlohovec, Leopoldov, Piešťany, cultural institutions.

Scope: international, national and local projects, long-term, year-round.

Project partners: associations of architects, schools, architecture students, ecologists, urban planners and gardeners, social and community workers, artists.

Examples of other projects:

Programme pillar:
Safe Environment vs. Destabilization
(Regional projects)

Club House

The project is based on the requirements and wishes identified in the participatory call for applications. **The aim** of the project is to provide a functional background for local cultural activities. On the principle of a culture house, where all groups can perform. The professionally animated program will offer club rooms, rehearsal rooms and work studios, as well as simple accommodation and a basic equipped hall. The administration and organisation

will be based on the significant role of the societal self-government and will accept the cooperation of individual associations. The Societal House will also act as a **methodological centre for grant or administrative assistance to emerging projects** and will become an inspiration for local community centres in districts and connected villages and towns. We see an important role in the field of information, documentation and evaluation of the societal cultural and artistic activities. Ideally, it will connect the building itself with the open surroundings (the yard, the garden).

Programme pillar:

Safe Environment vs. Destabilization
(International and regional projects)

House of artists

The aim of the project is to create a sustainable background to support original artistic creation and a space for international creative meetings. There will be a physical and mental space created to support original creative work. Premises for creation, studios, residences, rehearsal rooms, club rooms, shops, cafes, presentation spaces. The ideal location is in the premises of Hlohovec Chateau as a partial activity of the umbrella project **HaCropolis**.

HC *“Exactly as you say – our local people of culture and art will be a natural part of the programme, of course – adequate to the size of the whole project. So, at the same time, they will receive many opportunities and inspiration from encounters with the European dimension of art and culture in an order of magnitude greater “viral load” than we have been used to so far.”*

14/a/Give a general outline of the activities foreseen in view of: Promoting the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding between European citizens



M “I guess I need a bit of explanation. After all, we are in Europe, we are in the Union, but there are many nations in it that have never come into contact with us, have never been here and do not know who we are and what we are. Please, do we want to bring each one of them here to the square, though?”

The impact of the cultural environment, the results of artistic creation and the whole creative ecosystem on the mental state of society is fundamental. They best reflect European values and the shared ethos of mutual European cooperation. In his *Semiological Adventures*, reflecting on the semiology and planning of the city, Roland Barthes defines the city as a discourse, as a scenario, and considers everyone who moves in it to be an independent “reader” and an actor in this story. We are convinced that our scenario can be an inspiration for many similar towns and their inhabitants in the European Union, and that we can therefore write it together as a project to fundamentally change the town’s culture, with the ambition of fundamentally changing its spirit.

Of course, we have also prepared several international, European festivals, symposia, exhibitions, and meetings for the period of the candidate process and for the “famous year of HC 2026”, and also for the period continuing until the end of the third decade. But the main thing we see as fulfilling our European dialogue and international dimension is our key project, our flagship **EHcMK 2026 – Small Towns Coalition** linked to the legacy project – **Small Towns Institute**. This unique structure is designed to reflect and connect the ambitions of small towns across Europe and to jointly transform European ideals and directions towards local civic communities.

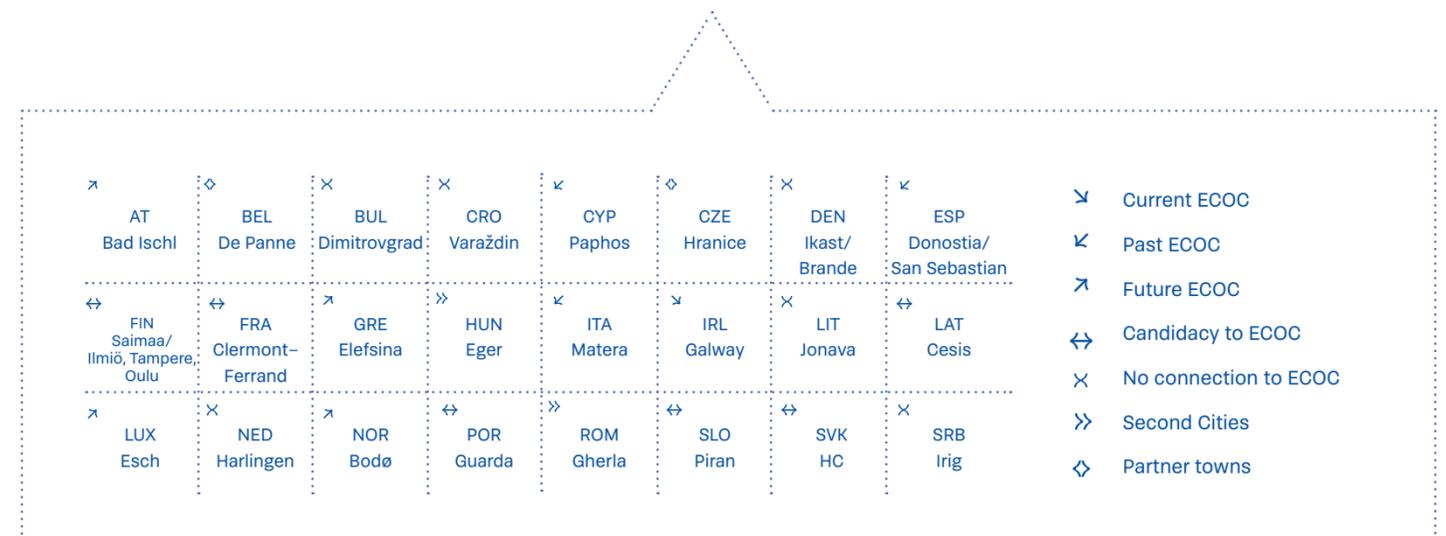
The Small Towns Coalition is a network of 26 towns similar to Hlohovec, representing their country, which (with some exceptions) meet at least one of the following limiting criteria:

- they have from 10,000 to 49,999 inhabitants,
- they do not have a university or a permanent university network,
- they do not have a permanent professional art ensemble,
- they are industrially dependent or are decisively economically dependent on regional centers.

With such a connection, which is not a mere temporary project, and by creating a permanent union of small towns with its **HiCon – small DAVOS of small towns**, we want to deepen understanding not only between small towns themselves, but above all to show European regional centres and regions how they can coexist and cooperate in a horizontal line with functional vertical connections, and thus better prepare for what awaits us.

We want to emphasize the importance of natural **urban functional regions**, i.e. “cities”, with coordinated development at the level of micro-regions, oriented towards public services, public benefit activities and a higher degree of local cooperation with regional self-government and inter-municipal cooperation, even with the smallest municipalities – each one has the right to life as it relates to its centuries-old history. If local governments move towards cooperation and integration, the closest possible cooperation with their neighbours, will gain greater stability, bringing greater efficiency to their activities, and together they can shape local economic and public policies that extend to EU programs and values.

It is all the more relevant these days because the coronavirus pandemic has added to the economic, social and environmental conditions, impacting



the cultural sphere in a particularly painful manner. However, we believe that through culture, creativity and art it is possible to prepare much better for the future. These things contribute to the vitality of society and enable all layers of society to express their identity, thus contributing to social cohesion and intercultural dialogue, and paving the way for an increasingly entrenched European Union.

The Small Towns Coalition – STC is not the only a tool with which we will try to promote understanding among the citizens of the countries of the Union. Our gateway to active intercultural dialogue will be local projects, which we will gradually bring to life for STC members (volunteers, leaders, artists, residents). It is the small local projects that have emerged from the open call that will be our bearers of understanding through exchanges and participatory activities between representatives of different European nations.

A major event that we are preparing for 2021 is a live event with representatives of all the STC towns. Irrespective of whether we move forward in the selection of the ECOC, such a platform makes definitely sense for us and similar towns. in EU countries, and we will implement it regardless. Through our programme and the concept of transforming the town culture we want to become an inspiration for partner small towns – for their inhabitants, activists, businesses, but also for the local public authorities, not only in the innovativeness of the programme, but also in town planning and administration, in pointing out how we want to work with minorities and the historical legacies in our town and region, how we intend to use the potential of civil society that is so important for us in the EU.

As stated in the European Parliament resolution on cultural renewal in Europe of 17 September 2020, the recovery and revitalisation of European cultural policy after the pandemic are closely linked to the other challenges facing the

European Union and the world, starting with the climate crisis. The future cultural policy must be deeply linked to social challenges, as well as to green and digital transformation. We add that the continuous professional and public discourse, the urban scenario according to Barthes, which can be carried only by the spheres of culture, the media and the actors of civil society, supports and activates the processes necessary for the effective implementation of reforms. In principle, their stakeholders must also become their active participants – otherwise the success of the transformations is very unlikely.

Additional projects meeting the following requirements:

- **Naplava** – an annual international festival of ecology ranging from technology to art, taking place in the floodplain of the *Terra Vagus* triangle. A combination of works of art with the topic of ecology and climate justice connected with a trade fair dedicated to sustainable technology and architecture.
- **Flowers, roses... and what about hawthorn?** – a large international exhibition of fine arts with the theme of flowers. The exhibition in the area of the Chateau Kunsthalle will be connected with a large exhibition of horticulture and garden architecture in the area of the chateau greenhouses and the chateau garden. The project presents different notions of the relationship to flowers, in time and in varied cultural contexts.

14/b/Highlighting the common aspects of European cultures, heritage and history, as well as European integration and current European themes

Representatives of various cultures have travelled and settled through the Váh valley for millennia. *Terra Vagus*, the place where they mingled, lived and died, formed a gradually varied cultural sediment. Our projects are rediscovering this history, not only for the inhabitants of Hlohovec and the region themselves, but also for partner towns in EU member states and all visitors.

Nearby, Marcus Aurelius wrote his *Conversations with himself*. The Stoic emperor of the European superpower, sitting on the banks of the Hron river and contemplating the meaning of life, is a fact that took place in this territory almost two thousand years ago. He then wrote in the subtitle of the work: “Written in the land of Quadi on Granna (Hron)”. Thus, from antiquity and the Quads through Roman troops, Germanic and Sarmatian tribes, Slavs, German settlers, Hungarians, Jews, Ottomans, Austrians and then in the twentieth century Czechs, all cultural layers left traces that form a varied and unique history of Central Europe. They would merge for centuries creating new formations only to be covered by the grey dust of the socialist period, and unfortunately decimating it considerably in the process.

Our projects uncover these deposits, patiently searching for clues and complementing the missing and suspected parts of the mosaic where possible.

Examples of projects under preparation meeting the following criteria:

- **MillTec Park** – a popular science park by the river Vah. On the one hand, it will document the relationship of people in the river basin to water, to the technologies of managing water power from prehistory to the present to various functions in different cultures (the axis will be Hlohovec floating mills on the Vah river flow). On the other hand, it will be an experiential educational centre based on the principle of a science park, and a children's museum and a game museum that will be an internationally attractive tourist destination.
- **The body as a visual language** – a long-term cycle of creative relationship between the body, space and body sign codes. We started the project in 2020 and it includes creative residencies of foreign artists and ensembles, the work of international groups, creative symposia and presentations of various approaches to this topic. In the future, we anticipate the creation of original choreographies by international groups that will represent our ideas on international stages and festivals.

If somewhere in Europe it is possible to find a model of peaceful and creative “union” coexistence of many nations and nationalities, cultures, aesthetic concepts, religions and churches, then it is our *Terra Vagus*. And so, our programme naturally emphasizes those projects that follow the integration concepts of the Union, which in its post-war concept defies the traditional concepts of states as atomized, self-sufficient units, declaring openness to cooperation with foreign entities and creative designers who can find shattered fragments of their own culture and art in our town and region.

The European Parliament resolution of 17 September 2020 on Europe's cultural

renewal states, inter alia: European cultural and creative actors preserve and promote cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe and contribute to strengthening European identity at all levels; these actors are an invaluable force for social cohesion, sustainable development and economic growth in the European Union and its Member States and are an important source of global competitiveness. It further calls on the Commission to propose an ambitious and inclusive communication and promotion policy for culture in Europe that would enable European cultural content, events and spaces to have a truly European and global reach.

Examples of projects under preparation meeting the following criteria:

- **CastPod (experimental sound events)** – An umbrella project, one of the flagship projects of our HC 2026 programme, focuses on working with sound as a unique material for expression. The project includes various forms of cooperation in the field of sound design, audio production, sound art. We are interested in creating and searching on the threshold of language and sound, counting on the transcultural circle of creators and their outputs. The central project under this umbrella activity will be the renewal of the International Festival of Sound Experiments.
- **Vagus spectaculare (international competition for theatrical performances)** – The project includes an international call for original drama works – a competition for an original drama text with contemporary European theme and in the context of European visions and strategies. The victorious play will be studied by an international residential creative team (Jazdiaren/Riding Hall residential area – part of the main HaCropolis project). The final production will be presented over a year in the production of the project on stages and festivals in Slovakia and abroad.

- **Hlozie (international creative workshop for theatre amateurs)**. Summer creative workshop in cooperation with the international federation AITA/IATA. A meeting of amateur theatre performers with interesting inspiring personalities of contemporary European theatre. The annual project will start in 2023.

14/c/Featuring European artists, cooperation with operators and cities in different countries, and transnational partnerships.

We are not part of any established international networks and structures operating in the field of culture. However, we know that the ECOC is an opportunity for us to finally become a part of them. We have much to build on, having fair expertise and connections at the national level.

- In **community planning** that we have been organizing since 2016, we will be inspired by the activities of the **Centre for Community Work** in the Czech Republic (CpKP), we will also participate in activities developed through **URBACT**, which Slovak cities are a part of, we will also be inspired by best practice examples presented on the **Community Planning.net** platform as part of projects in our pillar *Demotivation vs. Hope*.
- In **public spaces** and related artistic interventions, we will cooperate with the **A10 new European Cooperative platform** (a network of journalists, theorists and bloggers working in the field of architecture), and we will learn from **reSITE** (project member team attended the reSITE 2017 and 2018 conferences on the topics of *Invisible City* and *Accommodate*), or activities developed by **Foster the City**, which is one of the successful projects of ECOC Pilsen 2015 (we will share experiences related to visual smog), we will also join the **European Council of Spatial Planners** (ECTP) using the experience in our *Safe Environment* pillar.

- As part of the **development of young people and young leaders**, we will be part of the **European Youth Parliament**, which will be an important part of our *Human Development*. In cooperation with the organization **People in Need**, we will bring a pilot project *Looking for LEADr* to Slovakia (in the past, a member of our team launched the Slovak version of their Student Elections project).
- In the field of **theatre**, we cooperate with the Slovak branch of the International Association of Amateur Theatre **AITA/IATA**.
- We will prepare **audio-visual and music** projects, inter alia, in cooperation with program exchange within the **European Broadcasting Union** (EBU) in cooperation with the Slovak Radio and Television (national public service broadcaster – RTVS).
- For **contemporary music** projects that have a tradition in the Hlohovec Empire Theatre, cooperation with the Slovak section of the **ISCM** (International Society for Contemporary Music) is prepared.
- In the field of **cinematography**, we have prepared a cooperation with the International Film Festival **Cinematik** in Piestany, which is ready to create a special program structure for the ECOC project.
- Our **DISFest** will have the ambition to cooperate with the **Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival**, the **DAFilms.sk** film portal, which is primarily focused on local content. We will become a member of the **European Documentary Network** (EDN), a global network for professionals working in the field of documentary film and television productions.
- In the area of **Smart city principles** in small towns, we will become part of the **SmartEnCity Network**, whose experience will continue to help us in urban planning and

the implementation of the town development programme.

- In the field of **urban virtualization**, we have not yet found the appropriate association for our **HC Bella**, which gives us the opportunity to create such an organisation.
- The **Observatory with Planetarium** will become part of the network of the **Association of Science and Technology Centres** and the **International Planetarium Society** and will introduce its intentions in the Technopark project.
- As a new **tourist destination with cultural potential**, we will join the **European Tourism Cultural Network**.
- Cooperation within the **European Forum for the Arts and Heritage** (EFAH) will help us in the field of preservation and development of **tangible cultural heritage**
- Our **museum** will become a member of the **Network of European Museum Organisations** (NEMO) and the **International Council of Museums** (ICOM).
- **Technological monuments** will seek support in their development and promotion in the **European Route of Industrial Heritage** (ERIH).
- For **innovative education**, we will look for initiatives developed under the **European Schoolnet** title.
- And as part of the **broad support of our seniors**, we will look for partners in the *Unused Generation – Age Platform Europe* project.

HC “Each of our flagships and programme headlines within the strategy of opening Hlohovec to the learning process leads to unification and anchoring within associations and communities. And this is an example of how to be in constant contact with the outside world as a town, regardless whether there is a corona or a social network pandemic.”

15/Can you explain your overall strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international public?

M “How do you pronounce the name of your town, please?” HLOHOUVECK, HLOHUVÉCH, LOOUVEČEK? Have you noticed how much fun they have with how difficult it is to pronounce it? What if we could do with only the abbreviation of our district – HC?”

For lovers of various arts, “HC” is clearly “hard core”. In any form. For us, it is an acronym that can distinguish us from the others in Europe. Well it’s not hard core, it’s HC. Happy city, honest creativity, hidden circles, human care... many acronyms that can hide behind HC.

Fortunately, they can be sufficiently discovered, as tourism in Hlohovec, but also in the adjacent regions of Trnava or Nitra is not currently at a high level. We don’t have a problem like Bad Ischl, we’re not like Matera. We are undiscovered. The rich surroundings of the vineyards, full of history and stories suffer from this, but it is also healthy so far that we are not able to connect, selling or showing our environment more. We are like a closed Russian doll matryoshka from which hundreds of nooks and crannies can jump out, but they will not do so unless the largest one of them is opened. Therefore, our strategy at the time of preparation and implementation will be to open this Russian doll.

Open it gradually, first through **alliances** in the *Small Towns Coalition*, to avoid burning through the beginning and have enough time to finish what we need to be able to sell experiences. These small partnerships will create a network of references about the town and its surroundings, so that they can be ambassadors for our efforts in Europe. We will work **with future ECOC** through **marketing activities directly during their main events**. We will create partnerships with strategic transportation carrier in the region (ARRIVA) and with accommodation portals (booking.com, hotels.com) so that during the visit to Slovakia all find out that the ECOC 2026 is in Hlohovec and that everyone can get to HC experiencing in it all that can be experienced.

All this is on the condition that we will be able to visit and travel as before the corona. But regardless of the pandemic, within our **Trustworthiness** pillar, we will create a virtual environment through which we will communicate with partner towns broadcasting events, artefacts, information throughout Europe. At the same time, this studio will create an interaction between the audience and the ECOC through on-line events and event broadcasts to friendly destinations. Virtual identity of the town will consist of a typical virtual environment only for EHcMK 2026 and will accompany us throughout the years of preparation and implementation.

One doesn’t need to have higher education, acquaintances or a lot of money for that, and you don’t even have to be from a big city. Anyone with an idea, stamina and determination can become a successful youtuber, food blogger, toublogger. This is what our project has in common with youtubers. Therefore, we would like to establish cooperation with successful Slovak and European youtubers (we started with this when presenting the project at home), to give them space to get new interesting content for their videos in Hlohovec and partner cities. And, of course, to get the attention of hundreds

of thousands of their fans and a well-targeted campaign to meaningfully influence the opinion on HC and ECOC 2026 as an initiative that transcends the boundaries of small towns in the EU.

First we will create a **Virtual HC** – based on the **BELLA HC** platform (we described it in more detail in question 11, through which we will gain a much wider audience than the number of regular visitors during the ECOC year itself and we can attract not only viewers from the EU but also from other countries of the world thus enabling them to get to know European culture as presented by a small Central European town).

Together with our project partner, **Creative Pro** (part of the **27Names** family, uniting progressively independent live communication agencies throughout Europe), we will create a unique environment that will allow us to approach even in conditions where physical approach may be impossible, get to know, see each other, even if we don't see each other.

HC “Sure, we will name Hlohovec ECOC experience as HC experience. HardCore experience. Thanks Michal, that's great Idea.”

16/To what extent do you plan to develop links between your cultural programme and the cultural programme of other cities holding the European Capital of Culture title?

M “On Facebook, we have already introduced all the cities that were, are and will become ECOC. People have stopped watching it. Sometimes it gets on my nerves too. Even the mantra that we have to unite. Hey, but only now and then. I guess I'm afraid that foreign people and things will flood this place, and it won't be as nice here as before.”

We have contacted cities that have won the ECOC title in the last ten years, who will implement the ECOC in the coming years, or are applying for the title with

the question of whether they can help us find partners and connections in their project within our concept. We know that we must first offer them a platform to work with us, and only then will we know where we can help each other and learn from one another. That is why we will use STC again here as a tool for mutual cooperation. With Galway 2020, Elefsina 2021, Esch 2022, Bodø 2024 and Bad Ischl 2024, Nurnberg 2025 we agreed to work together to find the founding members of STC in close cooperation and follow-up to their programme. The same counts for Matera 2019. We will cooperate with the Novi Sad 2021 project at the level of local culture development. Saimaa-Ilmiö 2026 and Oulu 2026 will help us to find partnering towns and municipalities connected to their bids.

Our STC idea was delivered to every EU country via connection with former, present or future ECOC cities and thanks to help of **Culturenext.eu** (candidate cities) which are fulfilling their dreams with their Plan B.

You have already had an opportunity to find out the preliminary result of our efforts from the table in question 14/a. This shows the connection of individual cities, past or future ECOC, and their recommendations to other cities with whom they cooperate within their programmes or candidacies. The Small Towns Coalition is becoming a good foundation. The table shows which ECOC helped us to connect to other cooperating cities or became STC partners themselves:

In addition to connecting through the Small Towns Coalition, we would like to follow up on the Matera 2019 project, which inspires us with its approach of involving our own residents (volunteer program or Lucanian project, through which locals offered visitors private accommodation) and visitors (Temporary Citizen initiative 2019 Passport).

Our **Punk Nomad** project will follow, among other things, projects introduced under the Rethink concept, such as Rethink Activism or Rethink Urban Habitats, implemented in Aarhus 2017. The internal connection with Punk Nomad also includes The NO99 Straw Theatre project – temporary architectural installation and Blackbox theatre, which was commissioned by the NO99 Theatre as part of the Tallinn 2011 project.

Definitely, we are very interested in the way in which the current or future ECOC have dealt with or are dealing with COVID-19 constraints, namely Rijeka 2020 or Kaunas 2022. The implementation and preparation teams of both cities responded to the unexpected constraints relatively quickly and were able to adapt to new conditions.

We have established cooperation with the Finnish candidate cities of Oulu, Saimaa-Ilmiö 2026 and Tampere on the basis of their programme. Oulu and Saimaa-Ilmiö have shown interest in cooperating with the Small Towns Coalition within the small towns that are part of their application. As potential STC partner from Oulu bid has been finish-swedish border town Tornio identified.

The **IID** project is a good resource for Oulu to develop techniques for creative activity and creative thinking for generations that will emerge after 2025. It is interesting for Saimaa-Ilmiö 2026 to participate in the **BELLA HC** Creation Project as a platform for art and event virtualization as part of their project.

Together with Tampere, we will focus on cooperation in the **RE. ED. A. A. Re-education in artistic actions**, on the Finnish side it specifically involves the

Vilppula Prison, which profiles itself as a primary educational prison working strongly with families. The program pillar **Safe Environment** will involve cooperation and mutual inspiration in the field of ecology and culture (Punk Nomad – HC and ART IN NATURE – Tampere).

Last but not least, we plan cooperation between the skater communities from Tampere and Hlohovec within our project **Skateboard anti Deterrents**. In this project we use the specificity of the skate community and the unique inspirational equipment of this subculture. With the project, we want to create relationships and a space that will be open, free, where people will not be afraid to express themselves and will be able to be natural in their normal environment, which will not be moderated, but will be safe and developing.

We have confirmed that Piran 2025 wants to work with us on our *Safe Environment* programme line. Together with Saimaa-Ilmiö 2026 and Cesis 2027, we cooperated in the preparation of a mini project on the occasion of the European Day of Languages.

But our first visit was in Košice (2013). Thanks to Košice's know how we have been able to find the way how to manage all the bidding process and how to transform ECOC experience into Hlohovec reality. By the way meeting was in very first day when covid hit Slovakia with all his power (lockdown). What a symbolic meeting it was.

HC “You are right, but if all our D's will happen it will not be a problem ECOC being in town, it will be a problem of a social crisis in town. Is that what we want? “

17/Explain how the local population and your civil society have been involved in the preparation of the application and will participate in the implementation of the year.



- ↔ Current or Past ECOC
- ↔ Candidate for Future ECOC
- ⏪ Past Candidate for ECOC

↔ AUT Bad Ischl 2024	↔ GER Nurnberg 2025	↔ BUL Dimitrovgrad (Plovdiv 2019)	↔ CRO Varazdin (Rijeka 2020)	↔ CYP Paphos 2017	↔ DEN Ikast/Brandø (Aarhus 2017)	↔ ESP Donostia – San Sebastian 2016
↔ FIN Saimaa/ Ilmiö, Tampere, Oulu 2026	↔ FRA Clermont- Ferrand 2028	↔ GRE Elefsina 2021	⏪ HUN Eger 2023	↔ ITA Matera 2019	↔ IRL Galway 2020	↔ LIT Jonava (Kaunas 2022)
↔ LUX Esch 2022	↔ NED Harlingen (Leeuwarden 2018)	↔ NOR Bodø 2024	↔ POR Garda 2027	⏪ ROM Gherla (Cluj Na- poca 2021)	↔ SLO Piran 2025	⏪ SRB Irig (Novi Sad 2021)

M “I have also submitted the project and I am proud of it. I wanted us to rebuild the old model of the chateau, which was destroyed during the reconstruction of one building. I hope it will be possible. Maybe they’ll pick me. But I don’t want to wait for the year 2026, I’d rather build it myself in a year.”

As we have already explained in question 3 on strategic town management, since 2015 we have been continuously adding interconnected strategies and town policies for individual areas, that emerge out of a participatory process and in discussion with citizens and organisations. Since 2016, we have had a participatory budget in the town (it was the first participatory budget approved in any small town in Slovakia). Since then year after year, in addition to public registration and voting on projects for the town and civic projects that people implement themselves, we have also been doing participatory planning for public premises.

We have also been approaching the creation of the ECOC concept from the very start. The original three-member team working on the introductory concept gradually expanded to more than a ten-member team composed of domestic actors with a few exceptions. The time for public involvement came in the spring of 2020 with an open call for project intentions, which could only be communicated in person. Therefore, we held either personal or virtual interviews with 348 town residents, members of the city council, heads of cultural, educational and social facilities, 23 mayors of towns and municipalities in the region, explaining what the ECOC is, what is going to happen, and how they can contribute with their own ideas.

And they contributed. We received 317 ideas from 146 proposers –

61 organisations (14 schools, kindergartens, and secondary schools, 22 civic associations, 5 organisations in the town and region, 6 municipalities and 14 businesses), the rest were individual residents of the town and region. We have broken them down into 6 areas based on the EU strategic frameworks in the field of culture (contracting authorities were able to enter 2 categories where the perceive their specific project to fit).

How do we preserve our cultural heritage in the long run?	144
How do we create cohesion and the so-called good living in the area of our town and region	224
How do we create an environment to support artists and professions in the cultural and creative industries	137
How do we create and maintain European content	76
How do we promote gender equality	25
How do we develop international cultural connections and relations	95
Other	26

In June 2020, we launched a questionnaire survey on the state of culture in the town, from which we received 226 responses. We supplemented this with 6 focus groups, which were attended by 46 respondents - representatives of entrepreneurs, the public and the arts.

The program team consisted of 10 local experts who discussed the open call projects with everyone who submitted a project. This team then came up with a design for the framework of the programme as described in the previous sections. The logo and visual identity were created by Jakub Svetlík, a graphic designer from HC, **has won 2 times Gold Young Lions Slovakia Award and has been nominated for Cannes international creativity festival.**

Meanwhile, outside the ECOC, but based on meetings to prepare for the ECOC, the community of skaters, writers and young volunteers created the YoungHC platform and held three new events - Go Skateboarding Day (part of a worldwide network of events), literary reading and community day “With chalk in the park”.

We provided training sessions for the involved volunteers on the topics of Social Skills and communication.

HC was the only town informing regularly via Facebook, Instagram and local newspapers (Life in Hlohovec) on all about ECOC. It started with presentation of whole ECOC, open call, presenting ECOC Cities back 2010 till 2025, presenting every cultural call for application within grant schemes and application schemes from various organisations, offering a look on candidate cities in Finland and Slovakia. The presentation of every author of the bid book, every cooperating organisation from HC, Slovakia or Europe, every individual from Europe which helped us, was a cherry on the top of the cake. All that was warmly welcomed by community of followers which was not produced via payed services of any of social networks.

We involve artists for preparations for the ECOC from or associated with the town who have expressed an interest in returning to their hometown at least through the ECOC project, such as one of the Lonely Runners, the poet Ivan Strpka and the singer Richard Muller. Five coaches from within the team helped personally explain the ECOC ideas to those who seemed to look for any reason to reject the project. Local winemakers asked us if we could help them find a new space for the second largest multi-genre festival in Slovakia, GRAPE. During the entire cultural summer and subsequently also of the “Covid” **Festival of (un)cancelled culture**, the visual identity of the ECOC attracted the attention of spectators and visitors of the planned project as part of the cultural identity of the city. Two members of the regional parliament held talks on supporting the region for the ECOC. Two volunteers worked on the Saimaa-Ilmiö 2026 and Cesis 2027 projects on the occasion of the European Languages Day and generated more than 6,000 views of their videos, including two audio-visual artists working on the urban landmark mapping project. Head of local museum, together with online content creator and photographer made series of videos for European Heritage Day with

more than 14,000 views in September. And this was just the beginning.

We will continue with this volunteer base in 2021 and all subsequent years in preparation for the ECOC 2026. The volunteer program will focus on working with each category of volunteers who will be in charge of specific programs and projects. Students and graduates of the local secondary art school will be trained in the subject of “entrepreneurship in arts” for future positions of production managers and producers or program managers. The direct actors of the Childhood Institute will be teachers and students of 6 kindergartens and 6 primary schools in the city who will come into contact with their European colleagues, which represents a potential for their professional growth.

The Open Call of project intentions was successful, and so we will continue this with more detailed targeting. Every two years we will announce open calls for individual ECOC program pillars. Testers and programmers from the city and the surrounding area will find work at BELLA HC, as well as entrepreneurs and artists who will be involved in the project. Each of the 2020 open call projects was used as inspiration for local and regional projects as well as selected flagships. Since 2022, we have been preparing capacities that strengthen education for the implementation of our own project intents - in the field of production, management, fundraising or marketing. With the aim of involving as many “dreamers” from 2020 as possible in the implementation of the ECOC in 2026, we will create a space in the program lines for the presentation of their outputs (including HiCON or DIS Fest).

HC “Every single project plan from domestic sources makes us happy. And now we will create a space for you and help you acquire the skills so that you can implement your projects yourselves.”

18/Explain how you intend to create opportunities for participation of marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

M “I do not think that is a problem for us. Yes, we have problems here, but it is far from those of other towns.”

One of the town policies that we adopted in 2017, as the first town in Slovakia, was the *Town of Hlohovec Policy for the Inclusion of Marginalized Population Groups*. Of course, it focused primarily on the social, educational or health dimension, but integration into the cultural life of the town is a natural continuation of this.

Therefore, the guiding thread passing through the ECOC HC 2026 project is art, artistic creation entering into risky social interactions, and both the reception and research of these situations. We are interested in art as a means of social adaptation, rehabilitation, and re-education. The **Hope** program line is fully focused directly on projects in this direction.

Our largest marginalized groups are seniors and children. They are the focus of our **Childhood Institute** flagship and the **Underutilised Generation** programme stream. Our regional highlight – the **DIS Fest** – is a festival of documentaries focusing on disorders of any kind. This will be an artistic reflection on the problems of people with disorders. It came from the idea of the programme intent from the open call to organize a festival of films focused on eating disorders in today’s youth.

Another of our flagship projects is **REED.A.A.**, which is focused on working with children and adolescents from the re-education institute, as well as with prisoners from the Leopoldov prison. The arts are thus used for re-education, to provoke the possibilities and abilities of people. The project focuses on preparing for the return to or discovery of a regular form of life.

In the years 2026 to 2030, a whole group of people who will lose their jobs in factories due to the business cycle will certainly be a disadvantaged group. It is on them that our flagship project, the **Institute of Innovative Development**, is focused. It is intended to prepare them for a new way of life after the change that will occur in their lives during the years of the ECOC.

Another priority emerging from the open call is working with groups with special needs in terms of securing space for these communities. Varied types of therapies (art therapy and dog therapy) for children with eating disorders and Asperger’s syndrome, a day hospital for autistic people from the region, as well as work in groups of abstinent alcoholics and drug addicts - these were topics from open call, all of which take place in our regional programme – *Social House*. Working with children with various disabilities associated in a special kindergarten and primary school is included in our **Childhood Institute**.

Volunteer work for seniors is included in a project called *Proximity*, which aims to bring youth and senior communities closer together. In 2026, this will be easier thanks to the skills of future seniors in mastering technology. The amphitheatre for this community is planned in the Harmonia Facility for the Elderly, on its land in the middle of housing estates. By watching art production with people from around the centre, including children from the neighbouring kindergarten, we will be able to interconnect communities and generations.

Today, young people between 13 and 19 years of age is also an endangered group. At the time of the submission of the application, the **Concept of Development of Youth Work Development of the Town of Hlohovec for the years 2021-2026** will be approved in a participatory process with young people. This also responds to the defined threats of this generation. One of the key areas is the very use of culture and art in developing children and young people, building on our flagship **Childhood Institute**.

We are already implementing the **Culture and Art project as a tool for the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in the town of Hlohovec**, as a tool for strengthening the inclusion of marginalized groups and that of tools for deepening the tolerance and empathy of the majority population towards them.

Project example

Programme pillar:
Hope vs. Demotivation

REED.A.A. Re (-construction, -qualification, -socialisation, -humanisation) -education Art Actions

Aim: We want to make use of the unique situation of connecting the prison environment (especially the Leopoldov prison with a large symbolic tradition and other institutions of correctional care) and artistic intervention together with the work of social and creative educators. We want to create a methodology that will be applicable anywhere else. We want to offer reasonable best practice examples and open up space for original artistic creation as well as for the creation and verification of methodological procedures. The goal is to create, document and explore art in interaction with the environment of institutionalised non-freedom.

Project content: The project includes an annual **cycle of symposia, conferences, scientific workshops**, and also **original**

stage production. The structured programme will map and further develop artistic procedures and socio-pedagogical methodology for working with people that are serving a sentence, with young people in protective education, but also with people in an excluded environment, or with other groups in an unfavourable social situation. It will also include the **regular residence** of creative personalities and groups in the prison environment or other institutions and organisations involved in the project.

Regularly provided scientific (research) and creative (artistic) scholarships will have an international focus. The professional public (social educators, trainers, and social curators, probation officers, animators and coordinators of community experts in the field of andragogy) and artists will work together on methodological procedures that can be applied to all prisons. The project will contribute to the development of social re-education and will develop and reflect on a long-term set of procedures that can be applied **to other marginalized groups**. A specific part of the programme will focus on the creation of **political prisoners and their presence**.

Scope: international, annual, a total of 60 days a year

Target groups: Professionals in the field of social pedagogy, andragogy, academia, artists of socially oriented work, teachers, educators and the general public.

Project partners: Ministry of Justice of the SR, Directorate of the Prison Service, management of the Leopoldov prison, Re-education Centre Hlohovec, universities, public media.

Professional guarantee: Kolektyw Kobietostan, Wrocław, Poland; JOHAN Plzen, Czech Republic, Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in the Czech Republic; Institute of the Nation's Memory of the SR, Faculty of Drama Theatre of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, Grotowski

Institute Wrocław, Osrodek Teatru Osmego Dnia Poznan

HC *“The experience of the shrewd is clear: long-term and systematic improvements in the quality of life of marginalised and disadvantaged groups in any community significantly improve the quality of life of the majority population as well.”*

19/Explain your overall strategy for audience development, and in particular the link with education and the participation of schools.

M *“I don't know if there aren't too few of us. To be attending so much culture all year long. One also has to rest in order to enjoy the art. And not to attend an event weekly.”*

Our entire strategy is based on building up a new audience that in turn will generate more and more of an audience. We do not build this on an existing audience that disappeared in the late 1990s and has never been rebuilt. Programmes in the pillars **Hope vs. Demotivation and Humanity Development vs. Dehumanisation** are aimed at creating new communities of program users. We are creating a practically new childhood institute and new spaces for culture (HaCropolis) and for the promotion of science and art (MillTec Park), which should not only create spectators locally, but cross-regionally, since there will be spatial and content attractions, which are unparalleled in the region.

Moreover, we are right in the middle. 25 kilometres away from the regional cities of Trnava or Nitra, 25 kilometres from the spa town of Piešťany. 60 kilometres from Bratislava, 90 kilometres from the borders with the Czech Republic and Hungary. The central location in the urban region makes us accessible within 15 minutes for every inhabitant of the region.

In 2020, as part of our offer of artistic activities, we also experimented more substantially with minority genres and non-traditional spaces, which we have offered to the audience during the summer, the first post-corona wave. Of the spectators who attended these events, 40% were domestic and 60% were “foreign”. This was both good and bad news. The good thing is that people outside the region know about our activities and have the will, energy and finances to come. What's worse is that our domestic audience is likely not quite ready to accept these genres more significantly or to attend the non-traditional cultural spaces. But this is the current situation when we are experimenting and looking for forms of such programme that would be co-created or would be attended by the local audience.

For 2026, our strategy is to target individual programmes to individual groups of children, young people, adults, seniors and families with children.

The child spectator is connected with our programme immediately, from kindergarten in the form of the already mentioned flagship initiative of the **Childhood Institute**. Either as a participant, a creator of works or as a spectator. Most importantly, guides to the world of the child (apart from parents) are also the creators and users of the entire series of our programmes at the Childhood Institute.

The young viewer, who will have experienced the Childhood Institute, will be addressed mainly through the flagship project **BELLA HC**, which will make the environment of live culture more attractive to the generation bred on smartphones. By connecting to a virtual world with intimacy close to where they live, it will allow young people to get to know their own town and its programme, visit it and co-create it.

The adult viewer, as an actor and at the same time a promoter, is the largest group in the region and in the town. The path to it leads through two “weak”

spots. Through children and through the possibility for the children, and their ability, to create their own work or through their partial participation in the programme. Important for them is to create a space which they could use or in which they could create art, and this is what our **HaCropolis** programme together with its *Social House* sub-program are doing. Activities of a regional nature (wine, flower, ecological events) are directly implemented by the citizens of the town and the region.

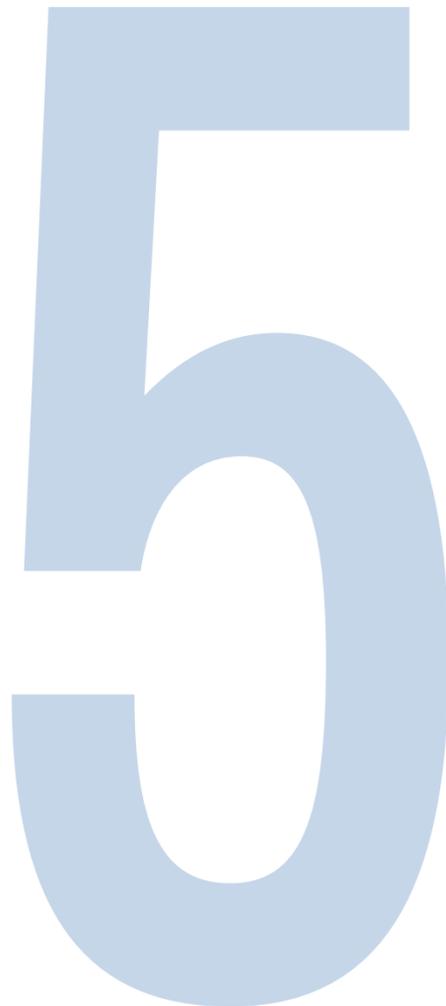
The **EHcMK Card** will serve as a motivation for the concentrated use of the ECOC 2026 offer. This also creates space for the business sector in the region and its CSR programmes and for their connection with the motivational programmes of the local government for domestic residents, but also for visitors to the town. The aim is to connect families and people of working age with an audience that will be able to choose more freely in investing their finances for culture in the home environment as well. The experience today shows that no small part of the region's population is willing to invest in culture even at the cost of traveling outside it.

Seniors are a numerous group that needs to be involved in the use of the programme offer. On the other hand, it is this very population group that develops the most active social activity (one fifth of them are organised). And it is also the strongest group (especially the so-called young pensioners), that is commenting on what is happening in the town and the region. In some cases, it is really the local influencers who significantly impact the decision-making processes in both the town and the region. We are going to bring an offer directly to them, by placing part of the programmes in selected public spaces that are close to them - both physically and mentally. We assume that in 2026 a new wave of digitally-literate pensioners will be active in the virtual space, also using the **BELLA HC** project or **Underutilised Generation** programme stream.

For young families with children, we create space for the implementation and use of art in the flagship projects Technopark, Terra Vagus or HaCropolis. And those needs that are not met by art and culture will be covered by nature, in which we have planted part of the projects (Punk Nomad), where families with children will be able to go and create in them.

HC "There is just the right number of us. Everyone will enjoy as much culture and art as they like. But if they don't want to, they don't have to bother with art and culture. But it will be unavoidable. It'll come to them. In architecture, in public space, in communication."

20/What has been the annual budget for culture in the city over the last 5 years (excluding expenditure for the present European Capital of Culture application)?



M "Our people say this will be a major bummer. No one will approve of this for us, no one at all. It has been a problem already, and now it will be an even bigger one. I'm worried about that."

Over the last five years, the town has invested approximately 7.5 mil. EUR (which was almost 40% of all the town's investment expenditures during the current period) in living culture and in accordance with the *Town Development Programme* and its Strategic Objective No. 3 - *Attractive town in the department Revitalization of cultural heritage, high quality public spaces, quality services* in reconstruction and renovation of cultural infrastructure and public spaces serving culture in addition to its dominant function. More than 75% of this comes from municipal sources, and we obtained the rest from external sources: from the "Let's renew our house" programme of the Ministry of Culture of the SR to support the restoration of historic buildings, the Integrated Regional Operational Programme from the EU Structural Funds and a small part from private foundations. Among other things, we restored and made functional the premises of the chateau that had been neglected for decades, also with help of augmented reality reconstructed and digitised the cinema and revitalised a series of public spaces also through participatory interventions. We were able to implement these investments because we figure among the cities with the healthiest public finances - in 2016 we were the best managed town among the 50 largest towns in Slovakia

Year	Annual budget for culture in the town (in euros)	*
n-4	887 208 €	4,91
n-3	1 009 076 €	4,68
n-2	3 070 282 €	12,03
n-1	1 441 697 €	5,89
Current	1 192 727 €	4,87
Total	7 600 990 €	

* Annual budget for culture in the city (in % of the total annual budget)

21/In case the city is planning to use funds from its annual budget for culture to finance the European Capital of Culture project, please indicate this amount starting from the year of submission of the bid until the European Capital of Culture year.

The town of Hlohovec does not have the ambition to use the regular budget for both the local culture and to finance ECOC 2026 projects.

22/Which amount of the overall annual budget does the city intend to spend for culture after the European Capital of Culture year (in euros and in % of the overall annual budget)?

The town is planning to regularly use 4% of the budget (approximately 1 million euro per year) for culture in the years following the ECOC. Due to the fact that the cultural infrastructure will be completed, the funding will entail resources directed exclusively to living culture.

Part of the 2030 cultural strategy is also to change the funding of culture in the town with the aim of increasing cultural spending by creating a new fund to support the culture of the town. This fund will bring together resources from the town, business and non-governmental sectors, including the citizens. The strategy also includes the transition of cultural infrastructure management to the community facility services centre. This organisation will professionally manage all infrastructure facilities - both refurbished and newly built - and funding for facility management will no longer be calculated as an expenditure for culture. Therefore, 35% more financial resources will be available for the creation and presentation of cultural content than in 2020. In addition, this instrument will make it possible to make cultural funding free of unprofessional and politically motivated projects.

23/Please explain the overall operating budget (i.e. funds that are specifically set aside to cover operational expenditure). The budget shall cover the preparation phase, the year of the title, the evaluation and provisions for the legacy activities.

Total revenue to cover current expenditure (in million EUR)	29,50
From the public sector (in million EUR)	27,00
From the public sector (in%)	91,50
From the private sector (in million EUR)	2,50
From the private sector (in%)	8,50

24/What is the breakdown of the income to be received from the public sector to cover operating expenditure?

Public sector revenue to cover current expenditure	in mil. EUR	in %
National government	20,00	67,7
City	1,00	3,3
Region	5,00	17,00
EU (apart from Melina Mercouri Award)	1,00	3,5
Other	2,5	8,5
Total	29,5	100,00

25/Have the public finance authorities (city, region, state) already voted on or made financial commitments to cover operating expenditure? If not, when will they do so?

We will answer this question together with question 29.

26/What is the fund-raising strategy to seek support from private sponsors? What is the plan for involving sponsors in the event?

M "...and what do you think, do you expect Bekaert or Saneca to give you money for this project of yours now? A member of the city council announced at 00:45 at night, when the ECOC project with its impacts and work with local communities and entrepreneurs were discussed at the city council... And I think she was right."

Given that we anticipate a change in the business environment, we cannot rely entirely on resources from large manufacturing companies and their suppliers. But what we can rely on will be establishing an environment that will build an affiliation with the region and the community. The manner of achieving this, as I see it, is as follows:

- **Erdödy club**
A club of local and regional entrepreneurs, whose goal will be to work closely together so that local business owners know how they can and are able to use the arts and creative industries for their development. The cultural strategy defines the precondition for the creation of a fund to support culture, where both private and public resources will be collected. This fund, as a tool to divert political

influence, will remain here even after the end of the ECOC and will benefit from the good partnerships created in 2022-2026.

- **Strategic partnerships**
They will be built on combining European and global branding with the ECOC. We have 4 pan-European brands active in our territory, which we will want to connect with their European employees so that they can come and enjoy the results of our work, and connect their brand with a pan-European event to connect Europe and connect their brand in individual countries.
- **CSR activities**
These will include activities for employees and communities in individual companies in the region. Through CSR activities focused on education, team skills development and community activities for members of work teams or for communities in the plants themselves (Roma, Serbian minority, employees at the end of their productive age, physically disadvantaged colleagues) we will ensure the supply of audiences and users of our programmes and thus revenues by employers.
- **Advertising partnerships**
We are planning to develop them mainly in the form of product benefits, or discounts for users of our services and products (for example, transport operators – transport packages, telecommunications operators – the creation of infrastructure for BELLA HC and holographic events).
- **Partnerships on local events**
For example, at the regional event Forum Material, we will focus precisely on the producers of the material that will be the topic of the forum.
- **3rd party financing**
We will enter into partnerships with tourist portals and ticketing portals, and through them we will raise additional funding through commissions for arranging accommodation or the programme.
- **Crowd funding**

In specific cases, we will support project implementers in crowdfunding campaigns for their projects, and in some specific cases we will combine crowdfunding from private sources with matching funding from public sources (one euro from public sources for each private euro).

HC *"Well we are talking about long term relationships. Relationship with meaning for community and private sector. At the end of the day, we live here in on place, sharing one space. There is no other choice."*

27/Please provide a breakdown of the operating expenditure, by filling in the table below.

Current expenditures are based on the philosophy of sustainable development and a sustainable programme. We want the programme, which will be designed for 2026, to be subsequently sustainable from the audience's point of view, and people working on the project will see in the project a long-term purpose and source of livelihood.

In our organisational structure, we are counting on 3 top management positions that will be active during the entire 6 years of the project (2022 - 2027), 4 senior management positions that will be available during 5 years of the project, 14 positions in middle management for 3 years and 100 team members during the final 2 years. All employees will form the undergrowth of the SMALL TOWNS INSTITUTE team for the city and the region.

Program expenditure (in million EUR)	15,62
Program expenditure (in %)	53
Promotion and marketing (in million EUR)	7
Promotion and marketing (in %)	23,7
Salaries, overheads and administration (in million EUR)	6,78
Salaries, overheads and administration (in %)	23
Other (please specify) (in million EUR) staff	0,1
Other (please specify) (in %)	0,3
TOTAL	29,5

28/What is the breakdown of the income to be received from the public sector to cover capital expenditure in connection with the title year?

Public sector revenue to cover capital expenditure	in mil. EUR	in %
National government	20,00	64,50
City	1,00	3,2
Region	5,00	16,1
EU (apart from Melina Mercuri Award)	3,00	9,7
Other	2,00	6,5
Total	31,00	100,00

29/Have the public finance authorities (city, region, State) already voted on or made financial commitments to cover capital expenditure? If not, when will they do so?

At the state level, there is a discussion between the Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatisation, which manages European financial resources, and the Ministry of Culture, on how to finance the ECOC project at the national level. According to the most up-to-date information available at the time of the submission of the application, the amount of 40 mil. EUR for the ECOC project from European sources is calculated in the Partnership Agreement for the programming period 2021 - 2027. An additional approximately 30 mil. EUR should be obtained from national funds. However, this amount has not yet been confirmed by any official act at government level.

At the level of the Trnava self-governing region, there was no official budget commitment for the following years at the time of the submission of the application. We assume that after the decision is made which cities will be shortlisted for the selection round of the ECOC (two cities from the Trnava region are candidates), the policy of funding the implementation of this project through the regional budget will become clear.

Also, at the town level, no commitment has been made yet with regard to funding the years of preparing and implementing the ECOC. If our town is shortlisted for the selection phase, the Council Members will decide on funding when approving the economic results of the town for the year 2020 in spring 2021.

30/What is your fund-raising strategy to seek financial support from Union programmes to cover capital expenditure?

The capital expenditure plan on cultural infrastructure required for the ECOC project is based on the mapping of the status of existing infrastructure in the town and its surroundings, which we have been implementing continuously since 2015 and the investment plans resulting from the ECOC programme focus. We already have building permits for some capital investments and for some project documentation. For others we are at the level of study, and for new investments resulting from the ECOC programme lines we are at the level of project intent. Additional project preparation of these investments will continue in the 2021 - 2022.

External funding sources will be state resources, EU Structural Funds, investment credit sources and private and endowment sources.

We are constantly continuing our efforts to finance the restoration of the historical cultural infrastructure from national sources from the **Let's Renew Our House** fund of the Ministry of Culture programme.

Under the new programming period 2021-2027, we will apply for funding for the restoration of historic cultural infrastructure from **Objective 5 of the Cohesion Policy, a Europe closer to citizens**. From this fund, we will also strive to obtain resources for other cultural infrastructure within the framework of integrated territorial investments. Therefore, in November

2020, we included project intentions for cultural infrastructure for the ECOC project in the **investment pool of the territorial integrated strategy of the Trnava self-governing region for Partnership Agreement 2021 - 2027**. The co-financing of projects suitable for financial support from EU programs and funds will be supported chiefly from the city budget funds.

In addition to supplementary funding of capital expenditures from available endowment sources, we plan to proactively use the **funding available from international financial and banking institutions**, which is not a common practice in Slovakia yet. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the Council of Europe Bank, the International Investment Bank (IIB, Slovakia being a co-owner of this bank) have the resources to fund the infrastructure projects we plan to examine for 2021 - 2022, and together with bank experts we will prepare individual plans for financing or co-financing.

The main rule of investing will be that unless we have the funding sources covered, we will not go ahead with the project. This rule will allow us to carry out years of preparation so that we are credible and trustworthy for our partners and supporters, artists and spectators.

31/If appropriate, please insert a table here that specifies which amounts will be spent for new cultural infrastructure to be used in the framework of the title year.

We will answer this question together with question 38.

32/Please give an outline of the intended governance and delivery structure for the implementation of the European Capital of Culture year

M “What I’m most afraid of is whether we will be able to make it with our people. Whether we succeed, we are small and not everyone will know how, not having the skills for what they need to do. I don’t know if that’s even possible...”

The main goal of this setting of the organisational structure is for it to be able to work in the form of agile project management. In order to do this, we must be able to manage the project in the form of substitutability with an emphasis on the motivating factor of people who should come primarily from the local environment. The more skills they acquire, the better they will be able to realise their dreams and their life or professional intentions after 2026.

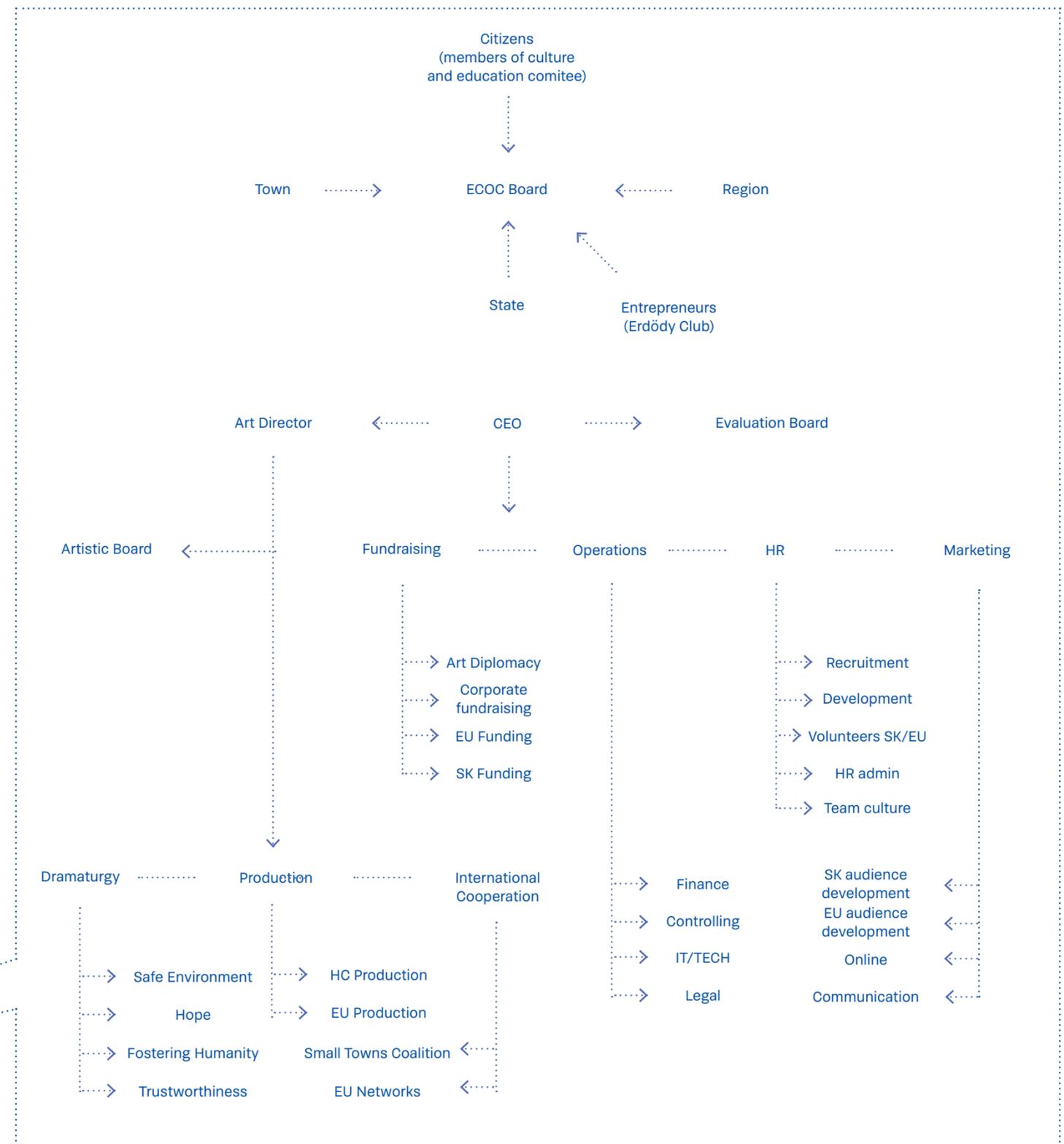
For this, it is necessary that the board of directors of the organisation EHcMK2026 include all stakeholders who will be involved in the implementation of the project. The CEO will be tasked with creating an evaluation team that will

map, evaluate and create a reflective space for the entire organization to learn from the first day of the implementation of the project (January 2022). The structure will also include the position of HR Manager, who will be in charge of the sustainability of the organisation from the perspective of people working on the project.

If we win the ECOC 2026 title, we will want to approach diverse stakeholders from other registered cities to become part of the whole event in some form, as we know that there is the potential of organising 2 or 3 ECOCs within a radius of 60 km. Part of the brief for the CEO will include the sustainability of the ECOC organisation, which will be transformed into the legacy organisation SMALL TOWNS INSTITUTE, which will operate from HC throughout the EU as an instrument for the development of small towns in Slovakia and the EU.

This is the scheme of the final structure for 2026, but its creation will gradually evolve so that all the roles and responsibilities will be covered by at least two members of the whole team. The team will thus be strengthened in versatility and will be more resistant to crises since several of its members will be able to handle more functions in the case of a failure, and there will be no huge gap if someone from the team needs to be replaced. Thanks to strong HR, the transfer of know-how to new people will also be ensured, and thanks to the evaluation board, the rhythm of reflecting on the facts recorded by the team taking care of the team’s culture will be constantly observed. In this way, we would like to avoid negative experiences caused by the frequent rotation in the team that comes in the case of a project such as the ECOC.

HC “We have six years to learn, those who will help, we are close for experienced ones who can help, we have a school here to find new talents. It looks impossible, but it is doable. And that counts most.”



33/What are the main strengths and weaknesses of your project? How are you planning to overcome weaknesses identified?

Strenghts					
International network	Program concept	Infrastructure	People	Financing	the ECOC as a tool fortown development
Know-how based on ECOC best practices from all countries organising ECOC	Concept supported by 28 states within the SMALL TOWNS COALITION stream	More than 10,000 seats available at one time for events	High involvement of the population and local organisations in the open call	Government pledge of 40 mil. € achieved by our mayor	The concept is based on and reflects the strategic PRM and HCulture 2030 documents
Connectivity and visibility at each ECOC in each EU member state	LEGACY program set up from the beginning in a unique form, which has never worked within the ECOC with such a target group	Basic culture infrastructure being reconstructed for less than 5 years	High support of the young generation for the project in the form of follow-up activities in the town after the open call	Current experience with refinancing reconstructions for the renewal of cultural infrastructure	Reconstruction of premises for the ECOC in the long-term plan of strategic documents
Involvement of all ECOC in the program (past, present and future)	The program is strongly focused on the use of holography and virtual space tools for avoiding covid like situations	A dense network of cultural and educational infrastructure in the urban region	Supporting the idea of all managers of educational and cultural institutions in the region	High success rate in grant applications in the SK and EU calls for the restoration of cultural heritage	The program is based on basic EU documents in the field of urban region development
Weaknesses					
HC as unknown environment for foreign partners	Solution of problems that can be easily copied from Slovakia by any other ECOC candidate town	Hlohovec is an unknown tourist centre in the SK and in the EU	Only 1% of the population is engaged in an activity whose output is a creative or artistic work	Poor predictability of public sector revenues in the post corona period	Ignorance of Hlohovec as a cultural centre and region in Slovakia and in the EU
Lack of English language skills by local artists of the older generation	Ignorance of Hlohovec by foreign partners through their creation	Little accommodation capacity right in the town	A huge silent majority without opinion and activity in the community or public space	Little connection of the local and regional community of entrepreneurs to the support of culture	
A small number of foreign financial resources for events in the last 5 years	A concept containing "only" 45,000 citizens at the venue	No infrastructure for an event for up to 10 000 people in one space	Few people with international experience working in the field of art	Unreadable situation in public resources during the planning of the programming period	

Steps for elimination of weaknesses					
Implementation of joint virtual ON-LIVE events during the second phase of selection process	The link between the twinned towns is so strong that the SMALL TOWNS COALITION exists before the closing of the second application	Creating a tourist identity of the town, as an unknown place amid the known	Increasing the potential of creative outputs through the Fostering humanity pillar		Creation of the Hlohovec brand as an artistic destination,
Creating a volunteer body of English-speaking members as assistants to local community representatives	Creating a comprehensive profile of Hlohovec as an artistic destination connected with the issue of small towns	Creation of container accommodation during the years of implementation, which will subsequently become community and residential centres. Creation of a tent camp on the river bank	Activating the population through programmes in the Hope for relationships pillar	Creating an alliance of entrepreneurs - Erdödy Klub and launching a fund to finance culture based on the HCulture 2030 strategy	
Education for regional actors in culture and organization of on-live training for grant applicants	Activation of small towns in Slovakia (20) as another group that will be affected by STC	Creating an E-infrastructure for events to a similar extent.	Involving young people and creative people in creative cross-border and foreign programs through the Fostering humanity pillar		

M "We may have more weaknesses than strengths. It doesn't matter, if it goes on like this, hopefully we will be able to eliminate them. Perhaps we'll be ready."

HC "Basic thing is to be aware of our weaknesses. Once we are aware, we can reflect on it. So, we can prepare. Exactly as in our concept – we are preparing."

34/Please provide an outline of the city's intended marketing and communication strategy for the European Capital of Culture year.

M “We have both good visuals and a good title, I don't think this will be something we should have a problem with. We are good in praising ourselves for what we are doing and shall do. That's a fact.”

As part of our marketing strategy, we communicate two basic messages:

1st message **Small towns matter**

We will communicate in an open and slightly provocative form the message that small towns are “sleepy” and no one will do anything about it, but at the same time we will communicate that we are going to do something about it. That we know how to do it. That we are not afraid, we have determination, ideas and excellent domestic and European partners in other towns.

2nd message **HC+26**

In addition to Slovakia, some more 26 countries are EU members. We will have one partner from each country of the Union, for a total of 26 partner towns. The fact that the ECOC in Slovakia will take place in 2026 affords the opportunity to use the coincidence of the number 26 - the number of partner towns and at the same time the last two digits of the year when the ECOC project will be held in our country.

We can also communicate the involvement of the 20 partner small towns from Slovakia by means of the formulation 20 + 26: 20 domestic small towns + 26 partner representatives of the Union.

But that is the second plan.

To give our project with even more credibility, we will create a Small Towns Coalition and draft a Small Towns Manifesto. In the memorandum, we will make it clear to both Slovakia and the EU that although we are aware of the disadvantages of a small town, together we want to change that and under the leadership of Hlohovec as the ECOC, we will succeed together.

Tone of voice communication:

Sincerity

We need to make it clearly known that we are aware of the current situation. That small towns are underrated and the people who live in them do not believe that anything can change. We must show them that we know about this, and we are playing with open cards when we try to change this state.

Simplicity

Small towns matter. We want this message to stay in people's minds forever. We want it to return to them long after the ECOC project is over. Therefore, all the activities presented above must contain this simple, strong message.

In Hlohovec, we are already feeling a big shift in this regard, according to how people perceive the ECOC. At the town council, they already use the ECOC as a tool - if we want to be the ECOC, do this, or we have to reconstruct that.

Self-confidence

We believe that we will be able to change our town and that this will serve to launch changes in other similar Slovak and foreign towns. And we also want to convince people to trust us. Therefore, we steer clear of any excuses, unclear and vague messages and formulations. We will be ready to answer any question. We will be friendly, straightforward, determined. We managed the first step – making everyone familiar with the ECOC in

Hlohovec. And the corona taught us that what really matters is human contact. Not whether you are liked or disliked, but rather the human touch, which should manifest itself in the form of a connection directly (virtually or in person). Therefore, our strategy will be personal relation, because that really matters. This line will also find expression in our programme pillar **Hope**. Only a relationship, a personal relationship will bring one to a place or allow one to function in that place, but it also motivates you to change the place.

Therefore, we will rely on:

- Building relationships with partner cities in the EU.
- Creating relationships between individual artistic actors.
- Building relationships among the inhabitants of the EU twinned towns.

With these three points we will achieve three goals:

- Knowing Hlohovec as an ECOC destination.
- Knowing Hlohovec as a tourist destination.
- Knowing Hlohovec as an artistic destination.
- All that in order to point out that **SMALL TOWNS MATTER**.

So that we are capable of communicating at times when people may not be able to travel or people may not want to travel, we will need people to be able to “touch” us. That is why, through the HC Bella project, we will create a space where people can meet regardless of the physical environment. This will create a unique experience and also a brand for the town. Town - where you will meet, even if you don't have to be there.

By interconnecting 26 small towns in the EU, we will have a meeting space based on regular events - festivals, as is the case in our programme line **Hope vs. Demotivation**. Street food festivals, art events or meetings of experts from cities on a given topic will make HC a destination for tourism and art. Against the background of the meeting of this target group (the members of the Small

Towns Coalition), the programme will provide space for joint productions, which will be regularly formulated in a virtual ECOC studio, and of course everything will be on the web in a virtual environment.

Following the example of the Emirates, we will create a channel with our partners in which we will talk about what is happening in the ECOC and what will happen next. Though this channel will be a virtual one, it will also serve as the main source of information for tourists who either fly or take a train to Slovakia.

We cannot flood the market with an abundance of information on the ECOC, but it is the Small Towns Coalition that allows us to precisely target ECOC actors and users. It was the overhyping of campaigns and information that led to a partially negative response to the ECOC in June 2020 in such a small town as Hlohovec. That is why we must let people choose the connections they want to make. Just as in the HCulture strategy - we want to create a connection to connect and not to merely create a connection.

HC “Well we are good in local scope, but we would like to be good in international scope. That will be our biggest challenge.”

35/How does the city plan to highlight that the European Capital of Culture is an action of the European Union?

M “... and now imagine all that can be on God's finger... I told my wife when sometime in April we discussed how people accept the ECOC.”

The “God's finger” is a dominant building. It is the tallest building in the town. And it's an apartment building. It will welcome everyone to the town and will be shrouded - in the EU flag. And it will welcome all visitors. Because it's the first thing you'll see at the highway exit. But there are two more dominant buildings that are visible even on the highway coming from Bratislava. The castle, whose roof can be seen from afar and the wire mill chimney.

Three symbols of the town, three symbols of the transformation of the town from a rural and agricultural centre of the region to an industrial district town. These three dominant elements will now be the symbols of the EU. And they will create the feeling of being at home for everyone who attends the annual summit of leaders of the Small Towns Coalition. That they are in the EU.

And it is the annual summit of the Small Towns Coalition that will be the focus of attention throughout the years of the ECOC, even once the ECOC is over. Our project Small DAVOS of small towns is a meeting of think-tanks on the topic of small town development in the EU and the development of small towns in the world. Every year, delegations of foreign and domestic central and local

politicians, together with philosophers and artists, will talk about how life in small towns affects diversity, democracy and the environment throughout the EU. And all this as the backdrop of the ECOC and also beyond the ECOC. We do not think that 2026 will be the end of the European dimension here. We look at it in such a way that the EU will stay with us even after 2026. Because we are the EU.

In addition to that, we will carry out multiple activities

- **Virtual**
BELLA HC – the introductory loading sequence BELLA HC will talk about the fact that Hlohovec is located in the EU and comes from the EU, and so all visitors to this virtual space will know that they are in the EU.
- **Visual**
The entire marketing production including ATL and BTL promotion activities, in both offline and online environments, will use a visual identity that will include clear elements of the EU (spots, videos, events, press materials, OHH). Equally, in all communication channels of the town of Hlohovec (web, letter and e-mail communication, the EU flag on the building of the Municipal Office and municipal organisations...).
- **Integrating the EU into everyday life**
Here are some creative things we can do:
 - We will translate the name Hlohovec into all EU languages; given the fact that the basis of the word is HLOH (hawthorn), it should be doable.
 - Distributing Hlohovec wines from the year 2026 with the label Europe.
 - Planting flower beds in the shape of the EU flag.
 - Illumination of selected buildings with an EU motif.
 - Creation of a memorial place on Sianec - the highest point of Hlohovec.
 - Dedicating individual trees in the Chateau Garden (the largest sycamore grove in Central Europe) to one EU state each (with a plaque

- with a brief description of the state next to the tree, and one tree would contain the entire history of the EU).
- Real objects from EU partner cities would be dispersed throughout Hlohovec, (they would have Portuguese cookies in the confectionery, they would plant a typical Bulgarian tree in the park, we would make a ground for playing a typical Latvian game)... in brief, the Union would be integrated into the everyday practical life of Hlohovec.

- **Auditory**
- In radio performances, podcasts, but also in videos, a part of the EU anthem can be used as a musical background, part of the EU anthem will be used at the beginning or end of a spot, etc. On the train line from Bratislava to Kosice a sound recording will be played while passing through the Hlohovec district, which speaks of Hlohovec and the Hlohovec region as the ECOC for 2026. At the Leopoldov station, a separate EU theme song will be played as an audible alarm accompanying announcements of the train's current location with the motif "ECOC region".
- **Verbal**
Information provided in the Information Centre, in the client centre, by ambassadors, cultural leaders, and members of the ECOC team.

HC *"That is a perfect idea. It is gonna be the highlight..."*

36/Please confirm and supply evidence that you have broad and strong political support and a sustainable commitment from the relevant local, regional and national public authorities



M *"Do you really think that such a big project in such a small town will enjoy the necessary support?"*

We realize that local support is key to the success of the ECOC 2026 project. The project has the maximum support of the mayor of the town, who is directly elected by the citizens of the town and of the Townhall (four managers were involved in the writing of the application). We also have an equally strong support from the mayors of the towns and municipalities in the larger region.

We consider the inhabitants of the town and the region to be the most important dimension of support at the local level. They have expressed this support by participating in the open call for the submission of bids for the ECOC 2026 project – allow us just to repeat that we have received 317 project proposals.

The members of the City Council were continually informed, in detail, about the structure and status of the project preparations at the meetings of the City Council. We also conducted personal interviews with them about the project. Six of the 17 deputies submitted a project proposal as part of the open call, and another 4 expressed their personal understanding of the significance of the ECOC 2026 project for the city. At the end of the process, they were presented with the final form of the project, which they took note of by voting.

Support from regional self-government is certainly equally important. Based on the Memorandum of Cooperation, the Regional Parliament of the Trnava Region expressed its full support for Hlohovec's candidacy for the ECOC 2026. They also participated financially in the preparation of the project application.

Support at the national level is a basic prerequisite for the implementation of the ECOC 2026 project in Slovakia. The Mayor of the City, as the Vice-Chairman of the Committee of the

National Council for Culture and Media, participates in "facilitating" the dialogue concerning the adequate support for the ECOC 2026 project between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Informatics, Regional Development and Investments, which manages European funds for the new programming period. The fact that both ministries are aware of the importance of adequate project preparation has been confirmed by the forthcoming Partnership Agreement 2021 – 2027. As the Vice-President of the Union of Slovak Cities, he also promotes the interests of candidate cities (all candidate cities are members of the Union) in communication with central state authorities. We also have the support of the Ministry of Justice through the management of the Leopoldov Prison as part of cooperation on the RE.ED.AA project.

HC *"It already did get the support, but yes you are right, it might not be as big as the project. But wait, until we get to the second round. To finals. It was the same in Košice 2013."*

37/Please confirm and provide evidence that your city has or will have adequate and viable infrastructure to host the title. To do that, please answer the following questions:

37/a/Explain briefly how the European Capital of Culture will make use of and develop the city's cultural infrastructure.

M *"It's probably all going to be for something, we'll probably be able to build those things, we have already managed in the past. And many good things will stay, most likely. Or I hope so."*

Over the last five years, we have invested almost 8 million euros in the revitalization of our cultural infrastructure – the vast majority of the funds came directly from the city budget. The overview of new infrastructure projects in the pipeline until 2026 – also in relation with the implementation of the ECOC 2026 project – is presented in the table under Question 38. Here we wish to briefly describe the use of the existing and planned infrastructure directly for the purposes of the ECOC 2026 project.

- Our current most valuable cultural heritage – the Castle and its adjacent buildings together with the Castle Garden – will be used as the base for the flagship projects of the Small Towns Coalition and HaCropolis, and the stables will be used for the RE.ED.AA project: for young people from the re-education centre; the renovated amphitheatre will be available for music (experimental music) and film events (DIS Fest).

¹ Professional organization uniting 53 largest Slovak cities.

- The premises of the Cinema Hall – The Smile (Kino Úsmev) will also be used for the DIS Fest flagship project.
- The reconstructed Observatory with the Planetarium will serve as the centre for popular science projects such as Technopark until the new MillTech premises will be opened on the Váh River.
- The building of the old cultural house will be transformed into the Club House, which will cater to the needs of special interest groups.
- The premises and buildings of the Museum of National History and Geography will be used for local events and activities that have historical and educational potential.
- The Empire Theatre will be home to the Mirroring project and for amateur theatre and theatre productions. Experimental sound projects will have the possibility to test the best acoustics in Central Europe in this theatre.
- The premises of the old football stadium will be assigned to the Terra Vagus project.
- The new Punk Nomad project (see Question 38) will find new uses for the floodplain zones.
- Accommodation facilities, which we will build from large containers, will serve as community centres for each town district in individual localities after the period of the ECOC has ended.
- The reconstructed square will become the centre for open projects linked to exhibitions in public spaces.
- Wine makers will make use of their space via open vineyards projects, which will be connected to cycling routes.
- HiCon and IIV will find a place in the premises of a new conference centre built by utilizing private funds.
- In the context of the ECOC Hlohovec, we, for the first time, speak about a completely new type of infrastructure – BELLA HC – which is a new virtual infrastructure of the town, which will serve the town, art interventions, tourism and

conference tourism in correlation with the cultural background against the background of art.

HC *“If we managed, even without the ECOC, to rebuild the city’s cultural infrastructure, that was once standing on wobbly feet, and have it stand today on healthy feet, it will be a piece of cake to manage it with the ECOC’s help.”*

37/b/What are the city’s assets in terms of accessibility (regional, national and international transport)?

M *“But we are just a hole in the middle of nowhere. Who would come to see us anyway?”*

Hlohovec is a town in the “middle”. It’s close for us to go anywhere, and it is close to come to us from anywhere. One of the goals of the project is to turn centrifugal currents into centripetal ones.

We are in the middle of the West Slovak region, with the city centre less than five kilometres from the highway connection to Prague and Budapest, to Vienna and Krakow. We have the Piešťany Airport at our disposal, only 25 km away from us, which provides for international charter flights. 60 km close to us lies the Capital City Bratislava with the biggest airport in Slovakia. 120 km from us is the Vienna Schwechat Airport, and within 200 km there are airports in Budapest and Brno. And if the Piešťany airport is our gate, the town of Leopoldov with its prison facility is our train gate to the world. The centre of Hlohovec is less than 4 kilometres away from the main railway junction to the Bratislava – Košice route, which connects the West and East of Slovakia.

The proximity of four major cities (Bratislava, Vienna, Prague, and Budapest) makes us a logistics centre. Hlohovec is also an imaginary centre among the largest regional centres in Western Slovakia. We are 20 – 25 kilometres from Trnava and Nitra and 60 kilometres from Trenčín and Bratislava. We are located at the start

of the Vážská cycle route, connecting Hlohovec and the Strečno Castle – a 187-kilometer-long cycle route that connects Hlohovec with the north of Slovakia. When navigability allows, the Váh river connects Hlohovec with other destinations in the range of 30 kilometers.

HC *“It seems are a ‘hole’ in the middle of it all. Everyone can reach us easily. We simply must provide a good enough reason for them to come.”*

37/c/What is the city’s absorption capacity in terms of the accommodation of tourists?

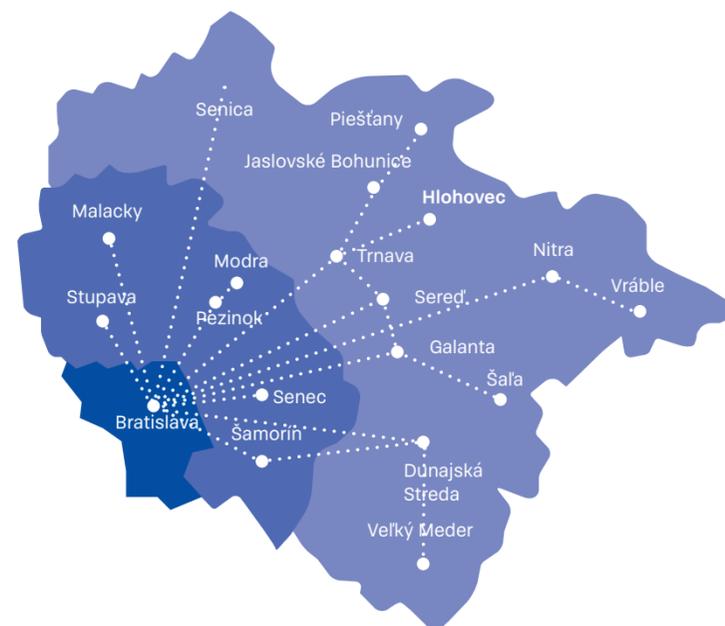
M *“This is worse, we don’t offer much accommodation here. But Piešťany, Nitra and Trnava do. And they are close to us. This won’t be a problem at all. Everything can be solved if there is a will.”*

It is limited, so far. We have 500 beds available in the town. But in the immediate vicinity (within 20 – 30 minutes), in the cities of Trnava, Nitra and Piešťany, there are 9,008 beds. Not enough? Within 45 minutes, there are 11,000 beds in Bratislava and another 2,000 in Trenčín. And in one hour and a half you are in Vienna by car.

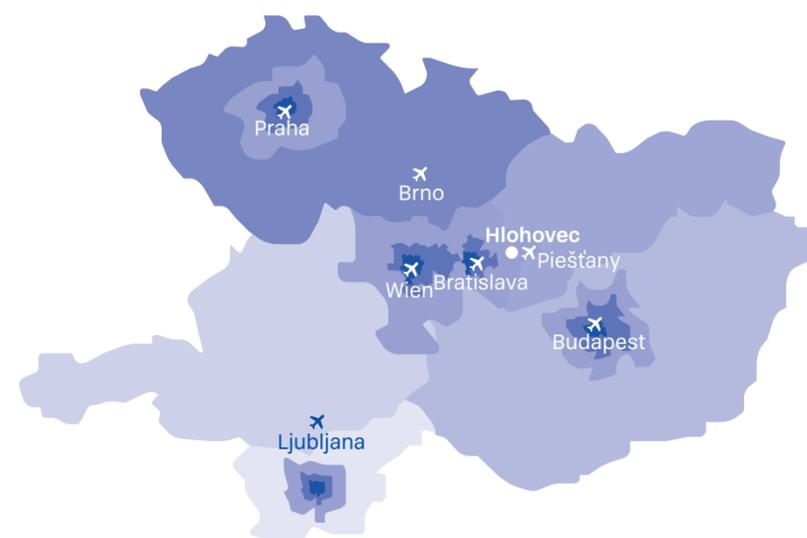
Still not enough?

- The program includes the creation of four container community centres in various parts of the town. These will serve as places of accommodation during the year.
- We are creating a new space for water sports lovers – a boathouse with a camping area for backpackers.
- And finally – most people in our country live a bubble? We complain that life is no good here. And how about taking the example of the town of Matera and their project Lucanian By Choice and accommodate guests in our homes? How about demolishing imaginary fences or gates and open our beautiful courtyards? Also, in this way we can build the pride of our town. As a spin off, we will keep this know-how for sustainable tourism –

Hierarchical and reciprocal commuting – Bratislava MR



Metropolitan Territory of the POLYCE Capital Cities



how to build necessary capacities ourselves – even after 2026.

Still not enough?

We also have an answer in case some capacities are still missing, or in case – as we witnessed during the past months – anything, such as another pandemic, would prevent you from coming to Hlohovec in person. HC will, therefore, come to its audiences. Maybe without accommodation, but permanently. Maybe without the physical experience of the place but with the sense of the place's brand and with the desire to come in person, once this is possible. This will be our largest capacity – BELLA HC. You don't need to travel, you just need to change your mindset and go virtual.

HC *“As a Slovak proverb goes: Good people fit in everywhere.”*

38/In terms of cultural, urban and tourism infrastructure what are the projects (including renovation projects) that your city is planning to carry out in connection with the ECOC action between now and the year of the title?

M “Now that I reached this point in the reading of this paper, I am beginning to feel that we will manage. But it will be a slightly different Hlohovec.”

The list of projects of new cultural, urban and tourist infrastructure and refurbishment of the existing ones is presented in the summary table below. These are projects that follow from the City Development Program (CDP), the Cultural Strategy, and participatory processes. Most of these projects have been proposed to be part of the regional Partnership Agreement (PA) 2021–2027 for the new programming period of drawing on the EU funds. At the same time, this overview also includes projects prepared by the regional self-governing body (the Trnava Region) and private investors.

To understand the philosophy which we have been applying to the revitalization of

cultural infrastructure for several years and which is fully in line with the intentions of the New European Bauhaus movement, we present an example of a project linked to the ECOC project.²

Model project:

Program line:
Safe Environment vs. Destabilization

Punk Nomád

Aim: PUNK NOMÁD is a key project of the central development of a multi-purpose pavilion for large social events. PUNK NOMÁD is a mega-tent, a temporary large hall, an open agora. It will be eco-friendly because it will be temporary, there will be markets, theatres, and all kinds of events. We want to show a completely new option for civil engineering; we wish to confirm that culture and art can have a minimal carbon footprint. The PUNK NOMÁD project is also an example of the possibility of implementing development projects and making them functional in the floodplain area.

Content of the Project: For the PUNK NOMÁD project, we were inspired by the structures and the shelters of nomadic Indians, Berbers and Tuaregs. With the PUNK NOMÁD project, we wish to offer an exceptional structure for the purpose of organizing cultural activities and supplementing the missing infrastructure. It will be a structure connected with a specific site made of natural and recyclable materials. An important part of the PUNK NOMÁD project is also the focus on the project selection process and the construction itself, which will be offered as an open masterclass of ecological civil engineering for students of architecture. At the same time, the structure will be built from local materials. At the end of the season, the structure will be taken out of operation and recycled with minimal traces.

Target groups: The architectural community, students of architecture, pioneers of ecological civil engineering as well as small private DIYs and those interested in eco-buildings (for example, the architect Zdeněk Fránek from the Faculty of Architecture, Technical University of Liberec).

Scope: international, national and local projects, long-term, and also seasonal (summer) projects.

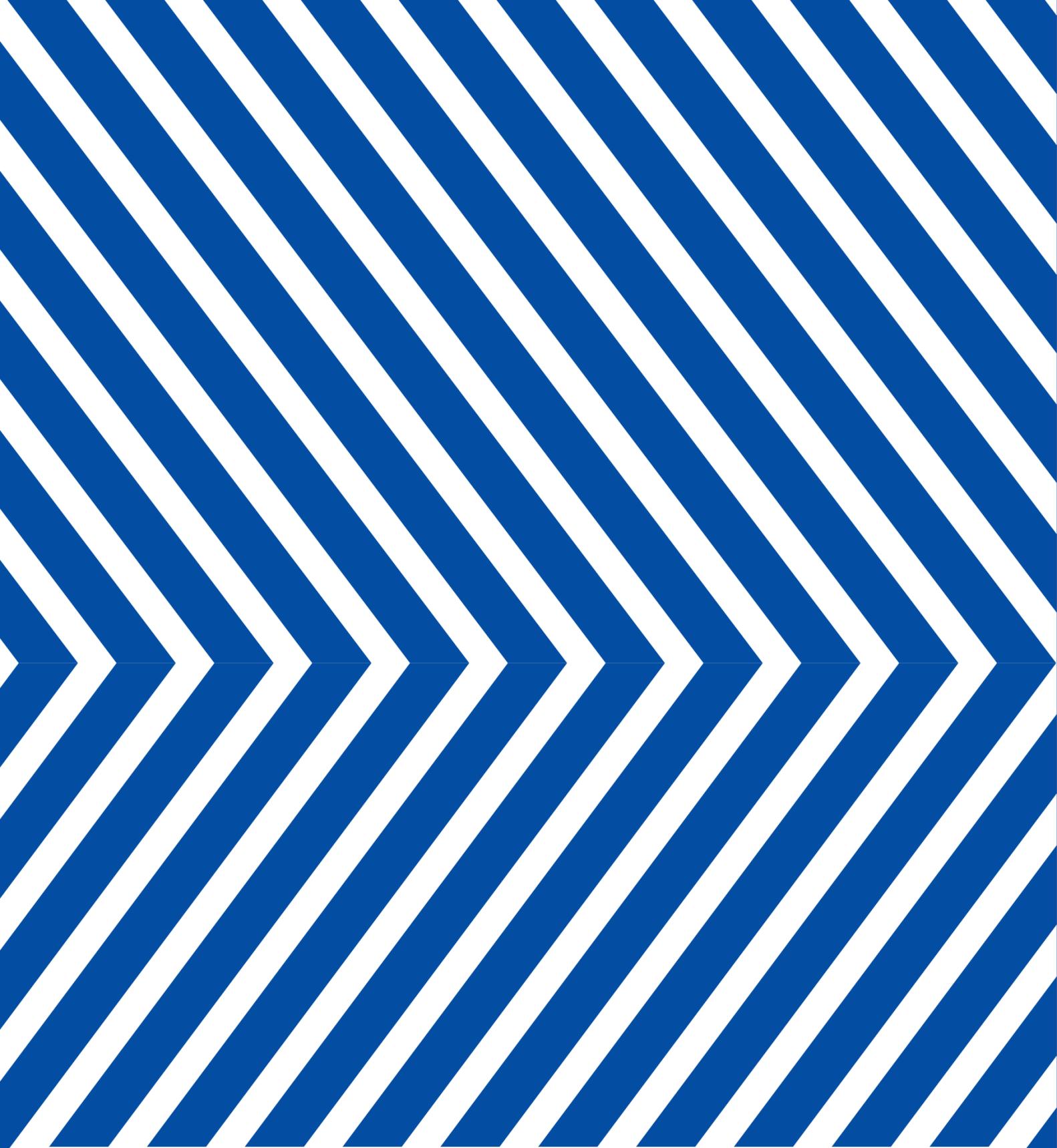
Project Partners: The towns of Hlohovec, Leopoldov, Piešťany, cultural institutions, ecological engineering companies, companies working with local materials.

HC *And the last reply to Michal: “That boy is right.”*

Overview of the planned projects of revitalization of cultural, tourist and transport infrastructure 2021 – 2026

Project	Initiator	Type of infrastructure
1. Punk Nomád	ECOC 2026	Cultural infrastructure
2. MILLTECH – Mills on the Váh river	ECOC 2026	Cultural infrastructure
3. BELLA HC	ECOC 2026	Virtual Cultural Infrastructure
4. Hlohovec Castle – completion of the refurbishing project	ECOC 2026, CDP (City Development Plan), cultural strategy, PA (Partnership Agreement) 2021–2027	Cultural infrastructure
5. Castle Riding Hall – renovation for RE.ED.AA.	ECOC 2026, CDP, cultural strategy, PA 2021–2027	Cultural infrastructure
6. Reconstruction and reprofiling of the Culture House – Club House	ECOC 2026, CDP, cultural strategy, PA 2021–2027	Cultural infrastructure
7. Reconstruction of the historic town hall and the “golden alley” – artists' residences	ECOC 2026, CDP, cultural strategy, PA 2021–2027	Cultural infrastructure
8. Community centres – temporary container accommodation	ECOC 2026, CDP, cultural strategy, PA 2021–2027	Cultural infrastructure
9. Reconstruction of the Observatory and Planetarium – Science Park	ECOC 2026, the Trnava Region, CDP	Cultural infrastructure
10. Revitalization of St. Michal Square	CDP, cultural strategy, PA 2021–2027	Cultural infrastructure
11. Revitalisation of the remaining buildings (the amphitheatre, the riding hall, greenhouses) and the infrastructure of the Castle Garden	CDP, Cultural Strategy, PA 2021–2027	Cultural infrastructure
12. Hlohovec – a town upon the Váh river: revitalization of the R. Dilong Park	CDP, Cultural Strategy, PA 2021–2027	Cultural infrastructure
13. Hotel + Congress Centre	Private investment, CDP	Cultural infrastructure
14. “Vista” Spot Šianec	CDP	Cultural infrastructure
15. Completion of the Váh River Cycle Route (on the left bank of the river Váh)	CDP, PA 2021–2027	Cultural infrastructure
16. Boathouse and camping on the Váh river	Private investment, CDP	Cultural infrastructure
17. Reconstruction of the bridge over the Váh river	The Trnava Region, CDP	Cultural infrastructure
18. Reconstruction of intersections on the main road in order to increase the traffic capacity of the town centre and shorten the access to the town	The Trnava Region, CDP	Cultural infrastructure
19. Construction of parking places of the Park-and-Ride/Walk type	CDP	Cultural infrastructure

² The New European Bauhaus movement launched in October 2020 wants to be a bridge between the world of science and technology and the world of art and culture. It is about a new European Green Deal aesthetic, combining good design with sustainability. The New Bauhaus is about bringing the European Green Deal closer to people's minds and homes and about making the comfort and attractiveness of sustainable living tangible. Good design can improve lives. The New European Bauhaus will demonstrate that the necessary can also be beautiful. The New European Bauhaus will be a space for thought and experiment. The New European Bauhaus is part of our broader vision: Building the world of tomorrow for a tomorrow that is greener, more beautiful and humane.



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