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The Commission Rewrites The Rules for Europe's Capitals of Culture

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The European Commission has proposed a sweeping overhaul for the European Capitals of Culture scheme. Starting in 2034, new rules will switch the focus from a single year of festivals toward building long-term community legacies.

The European Commission has proposed a sweeping overhaul of the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) title, marking 40 years of the scheme by shifting the emphasis from a single glittering year of festivals towards a longer, harder-to-fake test of what a city leaves behind once the bunting comes down.

The proposal, adopted on September 10, would govern the title from 2034 to 2047, once the current legal framework expires. It must still be negotiated with the European Parliament and the Council of the EU, with the two institutions aiming to agree a final text by the middle of 2027.

A city holds the title for a single year, but Roxana Mînzatu, the Commission's Executive Vice-President for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness, argues that host communities should feel "the benefits for a generation." She is steering the reform alongside Glenn Micallef, the Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, who said the redesigned title would bring "broader territorial participation, stronger youth involvement", along with fresh opportunities for artists and a sharper focus on what endures once the title year ends.

What Brussels wants to change

The Commission's own factsheet sets out seven priorities behind the redesign:

Plan for what lasts. Cities would have to set out what should remain after their title year at the application stage, with that

legacy monitored throughout rather than assessed only in hindsight.

Reach beyond one city. Clusters of cities—including cross-border partnerships—would find it easier to bid jointly, building on the precedent set by Nova Gorica in Slovenia and Gorizia in Italy, which shared the 2025 title as the first "borderless" European Capital of Culture.

Build more inclusive and resilient cities. Sustainability, inclusion, social cohesion and "European values" would carry greater weight in how programmes are judged.

Bring more people and Europe in. Citizens, young people and civil-society groups would be given a stronger hand in shaping and delivering programmes.

Strengthen governance and support. The Commission is considering clearer rules, stronger accountability and potentially a dedicated European Capitals of Culture secretariat or bureau to support the process.

Make the commitment count. The Melina Mercouri Prize—currently worth €1.5 million—would be linked more closely to whether cities actually deliver on their promises, rather than simply reaching the title year.

Make the process simpler and clearer. The Commission wants fewer, more focused selection criteria, tighter expectations for applicants and stronger monitoring once a city is designated. The draft law names four criteria categories — long-term strategy and legacy; cultural and artistic content; outreach, communication and citizens' participation; and management and capacity to deliver — with the "European dimension" running through all four rather than standing as a category of its own.

Non-EU cities are not newly invited to the party, either. The title has already gone to cities outside the EU three times and is due to do so again in 2030 and 2033, under the framework now in force; the new proposal continues and formalises that practice into the 2034–2047 period, opening entry to EFTA/EEA states, EU candidate and potential-candidate countries, and other countries linked to the EU's culture-funding programme — currently Creative Europe, due to be succeeded by a proposed "AgoraEU" programme once the next long-term EU budget is agreed. Britain is not among the eligible pool today: the UK has not been a Creative Europe participating country since Brexit, and a campaign group is petitioning the government to seek associate membership from 2027 — the kind of step the

proposal's eligibility rule would require before any future British bid.



Four decades, 85 cities

The scheme has run since 1985, when Melina Mercouri, then Greece's culture minister, persuaded her fellow EU ministers to back the idea, with Athens becoming the first title-holder. Since then, 85 cities have carried the title, most recently Oulu in Finland and Trenčín in Slovakia, which share the 2026 crown; Évora in Portugal and Liepāja in Latvia take over in 2027.

The Commission's own evaluation, covering capitals assessed between 2013 and 2022, found that a typical title year involves 1,000 to 1,200 cultural events, draws about 38.5 million attendances across that period and lifts visitor numbers to the host city by an average of 30 to 40 per cent. Commission officials also argue the scheme punches above its weight financially: an EU contribution of roughly €3 million to €5 million a year is said to have helped leverage around €900 million in wider cultural investment across Europe over the same decade.

Brussels points to cities that turned their title year into something more permanent. Lille's 2004 programme seeded a network of venues in former industrial buildings that still operates today as Lille3000; Aarhus 2017 drew all 19 municipalities of Denmark's Central Region into a cultural partnership that outlasted the title year; Košice's 2013 title left the Slovak city managing 13 cultural centres in former barracks and neighbourhood buildings more than a decade on; and Leeuwarden-Fryslân's 2018 title evolved into Arcadia, a recurring province-wide cultural programme in the Netherlands, with its next edition due in 2028.

Whether the redesigned title delivers similar results at scale — across cities with very different budgets, political cycles and cultural infrastructure — is now a question for the Parliament and the Council rather than the Commission alone.

Image: Courtesy of the EU Commission.
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