

Bielsko-Biała, under the banner *City of Weaves*, has officially confirmed its candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture 2029. On 14 September the city's vice-president, Adam Ruśniak, and the head of the Department of Culture and Promotion, Przemysław Smyczek, submitted a competition bid in the form of a 'bidbook' to the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in Warsaw. In keeping with procedure, electronic versions in Polish and English were also sent. The bids will be assessed by a panel of independent experts, comprising ten people appointed by the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the European Committee of the Regions, as well as two specialists appointed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. There will be a pre-selection meeting and competition interview with representatives of the candidate cities at the end of October. The panel of experts will then determine a short list of cities selected for the next stage - the final selection, tentatively scheduled for mid-2024. Other Polish towns and cities bidding for the ECoC title are Bydgoszcz, Jastrzębie-Zdrój, Katowice, Kielce, Kołobrzeg, Lublin, Opole, Płock, Pszczyna, Rzeszów and Toruń, twelve in total.

The European Capital of Culture is one of the most important European Union cultural programmes. The title has been awarded to towns and cities since 1985. The European Capitals of Culture 2023 are Veszprém in Hungary, Eleusis in Greece and Timișoara in Romania. Increasingly these days it is smaller and unknown towns and cities that are selected, places with potential that have ideas of how to develop creatively. **One Polish and one Swedish city will become European Capitals of Culture in 2029.** To date, two Polish cities have won the title: Kraków in 2000 and Wrocław in 2016.

What is the titular *City of Weaves*?

Bielsko-Biała derives the concept for its motto and agenda from its textile traditions, which have shaped the surrounding area and the fortunes of Bielsko's inhabitants to their advantage for years. Today, the *City of Weaves* is a metaphor for a creative place where people and ideas come together. The towns of Bielsko and Biała - the only twin-town candidate - have become entwined through the history of this borderland region, braiding the city with the mountains, culture with nature, tradition with modernity, the energy and courage of the young, and the experience and wisdom of the old; weaving together the Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Jewish faiths, as well as fusing the history of Bielsko residents with the history of other European cities. It is a communal area for people who have chosen Bielsko-Biała as a place to live. The *City of Weaves* is the voice of residents who in surveys, consultations and meetings have talked about their dreams and aspirations, but also about their problems and the need for change. The residents of Bielsko-Biała are proud of the place where they live, but at the same time they also detect the challenges that are often representative of global issues: war, migration, pandemic, climate change, inequality and crisis of values. **It is for this reason that the primary objective of the City of Weaves is to achieve wellbeing, i.e. satisfaction in various aspects of life, through cultural and artistic activities and by addressing themes important to us, to society and the environment.** An important part of the programme will be to pay attention to the mental health of children, young people and the elderly, as well as to try tend to them through what is culturally on offer. This would include strengthening social relationships and building communities, contact with art, closeness to nature and drawing attention to the threats of virtual space: fake news, cybersecurity, filters distorting reality, and learning how to deal with them. People all over Europe require wellbeing. It is so difficult to achieve it today, despite the extraordinarily rapid developments and the resources at our disposal. **The projects planned for the *City of Weaves* initiative combine culture with other areas of life and reference other important concepts and values such as community, freedom, identity, imagination, knowledge, skills, nature, urban and digital space.**

Why are we making this bid?

The European Capital of Culture involves putting on numerous events throughout the winning year (2029 for Poland) such as concerts, exhibitions, performances, artistic interventions in city space - in other words, joint celebrations. It will produce beneficial promotion for our city both in Poland and on a European scale. This will mean a greater attractiveness of the region for tourists, and, as a result, better revenues for the catering, hotel and event industries, as well as an increase in investment potential. But it is also something else. **It is primarily an opportunity for the city to develop through culture and through the process of changes initiated from the moment we begin to bid for the title.** Work has commenced on the preparation of our Cultural Development Strategy for Bielsko-Biała until 2030 document in tandem with the decision to take part in the competition. Local artistic circles, architects, cultural and business sectors came together. Meetings were held with representatives of people with special needs and marginalised groups. Young people expressed their willingness to become involved. **Compared to other candidate cities, the residents of Bielsko-Biała have demonstrated extremely high commitment to the initiative.** Over 100 ideas for ECoC implementation were submitted via www.bb2029.com, and an equivalent number of projects was submitted by our Policy Council and in the course of meetings when preparing the competition bid. Some of these are already being implemented in the form of prototypes,

and some have a chance of implementation even should Bielsko-Biała not advance to the next stage of the competition. One of the important objectives of our planned activities includes improving accessibility to urban spaces and the opportunity for people of various ages, social groups and with disabilities to be able to take advantage of what is culturally on offer. There are no plans to build additional infrastructure beyond that which is already provided for in the city's development plans to implement the scheduled artistic agenda. These plans include Pedanteria, a complex of multifunctional cultural space, and a new base for the Banialuka Puppet Theatre.

The programmes of European Capitals of Culture incorporate attempts to deal with the existing dominant problems common to all Europeans, regardless of where they live. Threats from climate change are a very important issue. Thanks to its location and proximity to the mountains, Bielsko-Biała is in a quite comfortable situation, which does not mean that we do not feel an obligation to develop good habits. We want to take care of our river, something that was highlighted by residents when submitting their ECoC projects, as well as care for the biodiversity of the region. **The bid submitted by the City of Weaves includes many ideas for the use of modern technology and artificial intelligence, offering an opportunity not only to design the future, but also to reference our heritage.** Following further archaeological research, the Abandoned Town project will present the history of the forerunner of our city in the form of a multimedia exhibition. Thanks to VR and AR we will be able to reconstruct the appearance of the former fortified settlement and show what life was like there in the past. The bidbook also tells us of the Master Craftsmen project, being a nod to tradition. It is a response to mass production that is harmful to our environment and contributes to the disappearance of craft skills, a phenomenon we know as dying professions. It is an incentive to discover the potential of crafts, to recognise the benefits of creative activity, and to develop practical skills. To begin with, long-term regular workshops dedicated to theatre crafts are planned. These may eventually evolve into a school of theatre crafts. The Bielsko-Biała master craftsmen of puppetry, wig-making, carpentry and other skills will teach people from all over the world how to create various elements associated with the theatre. The role of education is highlighted in the bidbook in several places, both in the realms of culture - workshops, discussions, conferences open to residents, with a particular emphasis on children and teenagers - but also in the creation of a programme for improving the skillsets of staff within the cultural sector run by local government and also by independent bodies.

Bielsko-Biała has also established new fruitful international contacts which it definitely wants to maintain by participating in international projects and programmes. One of these is the Dead Streets Network initiated by our city, intended to support the development of city art as a means of revitalising deserted and neglected streets, even districts. Helsinki and Copenhagen have already confirmed their participation in the project, and talks are underway with five potential partners - Belfast, Leeds, Essen, Vienna and Žilina. The BB2029 social media profiles, www.facebook.com/bb.esk2029 and www.instagram.com/bielskobiala2029 will provide information about recruitment for artists and cultural institutions to be involved in the international artistic projects in which Bielsko-Biała is to participate.

The European Capital of Culture initiative creates opportunities for development not just for the winning city, but for all candidates, their partners and their sponsors - even now, at the preparation stage. Bielsko-Biała wants to continue talks, to develop international contacts and to work on proposed solutions to build the wellbeing of its residents through culture, to create a better living space and to be a city friendly to visitors from Europe.

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