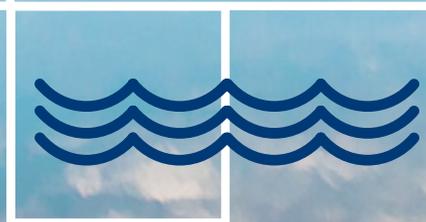
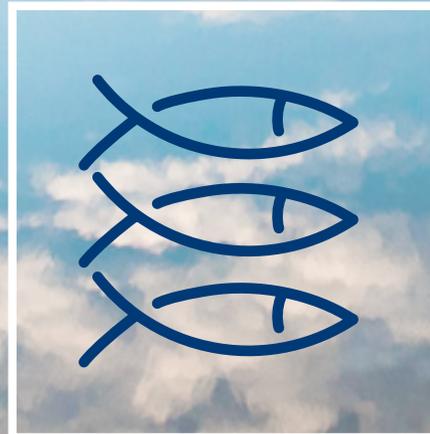
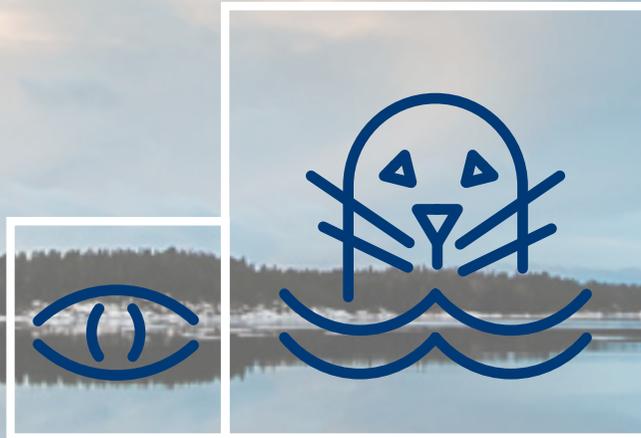


THE SAIMAA PHENOMENON

SAVONLINNA 2026 – EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE CANDIDATE CITY



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The four provinces comprise 53 municipalities and a total population of 674,408

FINLAND

Did you know that Lake Saimaa is the largest lake in Finland, and the fourth largest in Europe?

KUOPIO

JOENSUU

SAVONLINNA

MIKKELI

LAPPEENRANTA

Did you know that Savonlinna is located in the middle of Lake Saimaa and that one of the world's rarest seal species, the Saimaa Ringed Seal, swims in its waters?



Q1 Why does your city wish to take part in the competition for the title of European Capital of Culture?

We want to be the European Capital of Culture 2026, because we are phenomenal! People who reside here, the Savonians and Karelians, are known for their endearing characteristics: joviality, hospitality, open-heartedness and perseverance. During our year as European Capital of Culture (ECoC) we plan to share our attitude towards life - which we refer to as “Eastern Joy” - with all of Europe.

We are convinced that eastern Finland and the Saimaa region offer the world’s best place to live and thrive. Since the ice-age, the Power of Water has moulded landscapes and provided the people living in the area with a special kind of daring and ruggedness. The Power of Water has taught people the value of nature and has led them to settle in congenial places to build villages, towns and cities. Water has provided a strong foundation for the creation of eastern Finnish arts and has led to ground-breaking innovations.

The Saimaa waters connect the four provinces of North and South Savonia, North and South Karelia and the cities, municipalities, towns and villages - and above all - the people. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will strengthen the communal spirit, involvement, and identity of the people living in the four provinces. It will create new hope and help cultivate belief in a bright future. Just like 6,000 years ago, when the Vuoksi water system broke a new outlet near Imatra, from Lake Saimaa to Lake Ladoga, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is now gushing forth with the same force as the raging water; forcing obstacles out of its way and ushering in a new

renaissance for Finnish Lakeland. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is beneficial in opening our eyes to see the value of our roots and unique heritage and culture. It offers us an opportunity to examine and appreciate our folk music, cuisine, and dialects, and to use all of these as a foundation for innovation. We want to demonstrate this wealth of ours to the whole of Europe.

Our model for executing the ECoC, Connecting Bridges, brings the residents in the Saimaa region together to create a new tomorrow. Bridges signify meeting points; whose impact is evident in the area’s rich culture. Together with the four major cities of Mikkeli, Lappeenranta, Kuopio and Joensuu, Savonlinna will build a totally new way of working together, which will strengthen the entire Finnish Lakeland. This way of working together will become part of everyday life within the four provinces after the ECoC year is over.

Our Connecting Bridges will cross over the international border to include Russia as well. A mere 200 kilometres separates the southern shore of Saimaa from the St. Petersburg metropolis. Cities and municipalities within Saimaa partake in many joint projects with their Russian partners; we frequently travel to Russia, and the people of Russia often come here to enjoy the clean nature and peace and quiet of Lake Saimaa. As a part of our ECoC, we want to share with Europe and the rest of the world the many advantages inherent in our attitude of straightforward interaction.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 increases the well-being of residents and those who spend their leisure time in the Saimaa region. It will strengthen the identity of individuals and fortify them to handle future challenges. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 also contributes to the realisation of cultural sustainability. Through the arts, science and culture, we will enhance dialogue and understanding between people, strengthening diversity and putting an end to the polarisation of values. Through our

actions we will also contribute to sustainable development; we will act responsibly and with complete awareness of the impact of climate change on the environment. We will address the vulnerable environmental carrying capacity of Saimaa with the tourism and travel industry. In 2017-2019 South Savonia was actually the first Finnish province to have its carbon footprint of tourism calculated. Everyone, everywhere, is aware that Finland, Europe and in fact the whole world is facing vast changes in the upcoming decades. Now is the time to act.

Common challenges being confronted in eastern Finland today include regional diversification and the increased exclusion and loneliness of people. The region is encumbered by many structural problems common in all European peripheral regions: the migration of young people, and the increase of retirees in the declining population, and yet with high unemployment there is a lack of expertise. For example, in 2011, 304 babies were born in Savonlinna, but in 2019 the number of births was only 160. Urbanisation continues, even though there are some signs that people are moving to the countryside. Remote work also seems to be gaining in popularity. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 will most likely result in making a move to small towns or the countryside more attractive in the future. In the current situation, culture may well become a new and important driver of the economy.

Did you know that in 2014 the Wall Street Journal listed Lake Saimaa among the topmost beautiful lake districts in the world?



An aerial photograph of the Olavinlinna castle, a large stone fortress with several towers, situated on a small island in the middle of Lake Saimaa. The water is a deep blue, and several boats are visible around the castle. In the background, there are dense green forests and more islands in the distance.

Olavinlinna, built in the 15th century, is the cornerstone of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

Did you know that Savonlinna, founded in 1638, features a more extensive shoreline than Spain - totalling over 6,000 km?

Savonlinna and the whole of eastern Finland need the title of European Capital of Culture to strengthen the economic and social attraction and retaining power of the entire region. The title will increase the vitality and well-being of Savonlinna and all of Finnish Lakeland, helping to attract new residents to the shores of Lake Saimaa. It will support the operational prerequisites of the creative industries, strengthen the rate of employment, create new business opportunities, and increase sustainable and all-year-round tourism.

Viewed from the sky, Finnish Lakeland appears as a mosaic of blue and green, split by a network of intricate cultural and historical routes. The essence of Finnish Lakeland is a unique blend of water, forests, history, culture, and sense of community, with a touch of international curiosity. Newcomers and novel ideas have always been welcomed here. The ECoC project will raise the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region to a totally different level; making it more intriguing and exceptional than ever. As European Capital of Culture 2026, Savonlinna and the Saimaa region will share their success story with the entire world.

Saimaa Phenomenon ushers in the Decade of Saimaa!



Sauna in a tent by Lake Saimaa.
Photo: Mikko Nikkinen / gosaimaa.com



Did you know that several million guests visit the Saimaa region annually?

Q2 Does your city plan to involve its surrounding area? Explain this choice.

From the very beginning, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has been a joint effort of the four provinces of North and South Savonia, North and South Karelia, and their respective capital cities: Kuopio, Mikkeli, Joensuu, and Lappeenranta, with Savonlinna as the centre point. The creation and starting position of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is the word *phenomenal*. This may well be the first time in the history of The European Capitals of Culture initiative, that larger cities of one region have come together to support the smallest city as a candidate for ECoC.

The common denominator of the area is Saimaa. The Saimaa region includes modern town centres, as well as wilderness, which extends all the way to the utmost eastern border of the European Union. Savonlinna is the oldest city in the region and is located in the centre of the Saimaa lake basin. From here spring the main themes of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026: The Power of Water, Connecting Bridges and Eastern Joy.

The entire Saimaa region will reap benefits from the ECoC project. As recipient of the European Capital of Culture 2026 designation, we will be afforded unique opportunities to: build new ways of working together, find new ways to bring the residents of the four provinces closer to each other, and create different types of networks that will function efficiently regardless of borders. Our cultural ecosystem will be strengthened, all-year-round tourism will increase, and the knowledge and interest in local culture will be broadened to take on new dimensions and meaning among the full-time residents and multiple dwellers who inhabit the region.

Savonlinna as a nominee for the ECoC has created positive and beneficial discussion throughout the entire

region. The project has motivated the cities to work together towards a common goal. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has created mutual confidence among the cities and has awakened a new impetus to bind together for the benefit of all. A team named Bridge Builders, has been established for implementing the project. The various regional councils and central cities have appointed their own representatives on the team. This bid book has been compiled by the Bridge Builders and two project coordinators. The University of Eastern Finland has provided various expert materials for the bid book.

Three Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 ambassadors, whom we refer to as Trailblazers, have been appointed to provide residents of the area with inspiration, energy and impetus. These three phenomenal Trailblazers have toured broadly around the provinces, communicating about the ECoC project. All of our Trailblazers have strong ties to the Saimaa region, and each, in their own true and authentic way, exemplify the personality of an eastern Finn. All three exhibit a genuine commitment to advancing the strength and vitality of the region.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has been well-received and warmly embraced by the residents of the four provinces. Numerous events in and around eastern Finland and more than 20 workshops have been held in Savonlinna, Mikkeli, Kuopio, Joensuu, Lappeenranta and Imatra, to stimulate creative ideas for the ECoC year. These organisational meetings have brought together over one thousand people. Our organisational meetings have encouraged people to ponder and reflect upon the special cultural characteristics of the Saimaa region, and to think about various ways that lackadaisical attitudes can be transformed into positive thinking and action. People participating in the events and workshops have inspired and encouraged the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 project organisation to continue forward in their work.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has received broad

acknowledgement and recognition in both the national and local media. Regional and local newspapers alike have provided coverage and have published articles and editorials concerning the project. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 actively communicates via its website and maintains a lively presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Diverse channels of communication and promotional material have been created to promote the project. A communications team comprised of communicators from the various organisations involved, coordinate the publicity measures.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has provided the groundwork to extend previously developed cooperation across provincial and city boundaries and has been instrumental in bringing people together in an entirely new manner. Our efforts have included the entire Saimaa region and have extended to all residents, heralding a clarion call to action on behalf of their own culture. These efforts bring hope and strengthen our confidence in future success. This is essential for achieving our ambitious goals and objectives. In the process of compiling the programme lines in the bid book, the Bridge Builders and other expert groups utilised an “Idea Seine” to solicit and gather together nearly 600 different visions and ideas. A seine is an ancient fishing device, which has been used for centuries to catch fish on Lake Saimaa. Now we have engaged the seine in a symbolical way, as a tool to gather ideas for future cultural activities and events in the region.

As a result of the ECoC year, a new communal way of working together will be set in place, and this culturally sustainable network will continue its meaningful and successful activities throughout the entire Saimaa region - long after the end of 2026. A major goal is to strengthen cooperation that extends beyond provincial boundaries in a manner that will support cultural sustainability in the entire Saimaa region.



Q3 Explain briefly the overall cultural profile of your city.

Savonlinna presents itself as a cultural city in its finest form. Its image is built on a long history, filled with exceptionally beautiful nature and equally exquisite musical tones. The phenomenal cultural life of Savonlinna adheres to the four seasons of the year. A summer in Savonlinna is steeped in steamships sounding their whistles, the ripple of conversation in the busy market, and the glimmering water of Lake Saimaa surrounding the city. In winter Lake Saimaa is covered by a snowy layer of ice and silent darkness descends upon the city, casting a dramatic but peaceful presence. Despite the wintry scene, the culture venues of the city are teeming with life: orchestras are playing, and theatrical performances are staged, while libraries provide solitude and quiet respite. People revel in special activities enabled by the freezing cold; a particular tour skating route is established on the ice-covered lake; ice hockey is played, and people ski through the forest.

Saimaa is the landscape engraved in the minds of its people. A prehistoric human revelled in the summer sunset and darkening, moonlit autumn night - in a similar way as a modern-day Finn does now, sitting on the veranda of a summer cottage. Saimaa has offered rest and relaxation, refreshment, pleasure and unique experiences, to both random travellers of the past and today's city dwellers. The intangible values of the blue bioeconomy (business that is based on the sustainable use of renewable aquatic resources and water expertise) are a key to the new rising of Saimaa.

Portentously positioned amid the voluminous waters of the Kyrönsalmi strait rises the city landmark and symbol of Saimaa: Olavinlinna - the fortress built on the rocky island. Olavinlinna is the world's northernmost



Olavinlinna and s/s Paul Wahl (2010), Photo: Timo Seppäläinen / Savonlinna Opera Festival

castle; constructed in the 15th century. The first masters of Olavinlinna were the Swedes, then the Russians came, and now the Finns are in control. Approximately 150,000 foreign and Finnish tourists participate in guided tours, exhibitions and various events in Olavinlinna each year.

The best-known event in the city is the Savonlinna Opera Festival. Aino Ackté organised the first opera festival in 1912, and since 1967 Savonlinna has hosted the event every summer. Visiting productions staged by internationally acclaimed opera houses are always part of the phenomenal festival. In 2019, the Savonlinna Opera festival was visited by the La Scala Opera of Milan and Wiener Volksoper from Vienna. During the summer season 2020, the visiting productions will be performed by the Croatian National Theatre from Rijeka, one of the European Capitals of Culture in 2020. A number of different musical productions and cultural events organised by various groups have been established around the Savonlinna Music Academy and the Savonlinna Opera Festival. Among the most popular events are classical music concerts held in the world's largest wooden church, in Kerimäki.

The Savonlinna Senior Secondary School of Arts and Music is Finland's oldest special secondary school and the oldest school in the Nordic countries specialising in arts. The school is also one of the 11 Finnish secondary schools that has a special developer status.

Another truly fantastic landscape is Punkaharju, described by the famous Finnish poets J.L. Runeberg and Zachris Topelius as being the perfect Finnish landscape; a lake from the vantage point of a high hill, while watching the shimmering sunlight on the water's surface. Punkaharju has attracted tourists to the area since the late 1700s.

A unique annual event involving the old steamships built at the turn of the last century is the Saimaa Regatta, when the steamships come together in one of the cities of Lake Saimaa.

Music is the universal language, and nowhere is this more prevalent than in Saimaa, where it absolutely serves to bring the people together. People practise music as a hobby, professional productions are staged, and numerous festivals take place in the region during the course of the year. For example, the Ilosaarirock

Lappeenranta is known for its large Metku children's choir concerts.



Metkuillaan large choir concert, Lappeenranta concert hall (2015) with Sari Kaasinen as Choir Director. Photo: Anni-Stiina Hujala

The “Mikkelin poikateatteri” (all-male actors) has succeeded in encouraging young men to express themselves in a manner that is relevant to the younger generation.

festival in Joensuu, and the largest and earliest international dance festival, the annual Kuopio Dance Festival - both attract large audiences year after year. The phenomenal roots of music extend deep into the heritage of the Saimaa people. Kalevala runo-song and the national musical instrument of Finland, the kantele, are the driving force of folk music in eastern Finland. Among the many music groups in eastern Finland are the widely known Värttinä, with roots in Rääkkylä, inspired by the local folk music traditions; and the world-famous Nightwish, from the neighbouring town of Kitee, known for its symphonic metal music. Metal music has a strong presence along the eastern border of Finland, and Lemi has been declared the World’s Capital City of Metal with Joensuu as its runner-up.

Within the four provinces many museums fulfil national and local responsibilities. In addition to the professional museums, many historic exhibitions and artefacts on exhibit in old homes and other venues play a significant part in strengthening the local identity. Finnish libraries are the oldest and most extensive educational entities - authentic living rooms for the entire nation. Theatre is also versatile. In addition to the professional theatres in the central cities, numerous other independent actors, amateur and summer theatre groups are active in nearly every village.

Culturally speaking, the profile of eastern Finland is rich with both professionals and independent artists of all types. In addition to professionally produced cultural services, a significant number of small independent song and music groups thrive as well. These include different types of choir and music groups, bands, village theatres,



Mikkelin Poikateatteri (Mikkeli all-male theatre) Violence Road 2016, Paukkula/Artium, Photo: Sami Funke

literature circles, and visual arts groups. Many of these groups operate under the umbrella of the independent adult education system. Some act in various associations (typical in Finland) and some simply out of love for the arts, culture and handicrafts.

The cultural profile in eastern Finland is marked by the cultural coexistence of the Lutheran and Orthodox churches. The Orthodox culture is strong in the provinces of eastern Finland. It is maintained by the Valamo and Lintula convents in Heinävesi and the Orthodox cultural centre of Joensuu. The Orthodox culture with its cross processions, chants, and the blessing of water is ancient. Tsasounas, or prayer chapels, and sketes are found in many of the municipalities, and are open to all. The Finnish Orthodox museum RIISA carries out research, and records and displays the rich collections of icons and other cultural heritage of the Orthodox church.

A cottage is a precious place for a Finn. The population of many municipalities multiplies when spring comes, and the cottagers arrive in its wake. According to

statistics compiled in 2019, a total of 127,000 summer cottages are located within the four Saimaa provinces. The region has the most cottages in all of Finland. Russians constitute a significant part of the leisure-time dwellers, just like at the beginning of the 20th century. The future will bring an increase in multiple dwellers: people who reside in their city homes, but also spend considerable time working from their countryside home. Modern-day telecommunications enable remote work, which we are practising at the moment, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is needed to serve to: increase the cultural offering in eastern Finland all year round; enhance cultural entrepreneurship throughout the region; provide cultural accessibility, and promote more international offerings. The ECoC project will serve as an opportunity to broaden international cooperation between artists and event producers and will raise awareness and interest in the Saimaa region to the larger world audience. Saimaa is a source of well-being and creativity!





SAIMAA OF EVENTS AND CULTURE SITES: SAVONLINNAN OPERA FESTIVAL • ST. OLAF'S DAY • SAVONLINNAN INTERNATIONAL NATURE FILM FESTIVAL • BOXING NIGHT OLAVINLINNAN ST. THOMAS CHRISTMAS MARKET • KUOPIO DESIGN WEEK • ILLUMINATION LIGHT EVENT • FINLAND SUMMER SEASON OPENING SAVONLINNAN • SAVONLINNAN AUTUMN FIRE EVENT JOEN YÖ - NIGHT BY THE RIVER FESTIVAL • CHILDREN'S SINGING COMPETITION MESTARILAULAJAT, SAVONLINNAN • SAIMAA SUMMER THEATRES • SAVONLINNAN MUSIC ACADEMY METKU FOREST CULTURE DAYS • SULKAVA ROWING RACE • TIMO MUSTAKALLIO SINGING COMPETITION • KERIMÄKI CHURCH CONCERTS • STEAM SHIP REGATTA • ILOSAARIROCK LAPPEENRANTA SINGING COMPETITION • MIKKELI MUSIC FESTIVAL • MIKKELI ART & DESIGN WEEK • MIKKELI MUSEUMS' NIGHT • ILLUMIO LIGHT EVENT • LIEKSA BRASS WEEK KUOPIO COMEDY FESTIVAL • KUOPIO DANCE FESTIVAL • BLACK&WHITE THEATRE FESTIVAL • IMATRANAJON ROAD RACE • MIKKELI THEATRE FESTIVAL • ST. MICHEL TROTTERING RACE KOSMOS ELECTRONIC MUSIC FESTIVAL • LINNANNIEMI MEDIEVAL FESTIVAL • ANTI – CONTEMPORARY ART FESTIVAL • SATOA KUOPIO FOOD FESTIVAL • FINLAND ICE MARATHON JOENSUU MUSIC FESTIVAL • KUOPIO BAROQUE • KIRJAKANTTI LITERATURE EVENT • KUOPIO JUHLII CITY EVENT • SILVER STARS – PENSIONERS' FILM FESTIVAL • SAIMAA GEOPARK KIIHAUS FOLK • POP STREET • ROKUMENTTI ROCK FILM FESTIVAL • HISTORIC OLD TOWN DAY • HEAVY METAL KNITTING WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP • SAVONLINNAN CHURCH MUSIC WEEK



Q4 Explain the concept for the programme which would be launched if the city is designated as European Capital of Culture

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 forces still waters into motion – enhancing the premise of culture as an important and integral part of future strategic development of the provinces, cities and municipalities in eastern Finland. It is a unique mixture of water, forests, history, culture, and a sense of community, the essence of being Finnish, together with international interaction.

Saimaa Phenomenon is a concept, where a narrow understanding of culture broadens into an entirety that touches all spectrums of life. The name Saimaa Phenomenon derives from a rock festival tour named “Tuuliajolla” (“Adrift”), organised in 1981. The most renowned Finnish rock musicians at the time sailed Lake Saimaa on the S/S Heinävesi steamboat, stopping to hold gigs at different venues in the provincial cities. Singer-songwriter, musician, and poet Juice Leskinen came up with the idea. The Tuuliajolla tour proved that Finnish rock ‘n’ roll music emanates from all over Finland, not just from bars and clubs in

Helsinki. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 illuminates the fact that distinctive cultural heritage and interesting new phenomena live on in Finnish Lakeland. Aki and Mika Kaurismäki, who have later become world-famous film directors and producers, made their first full-length film of the tour, and named it “Saimaailmiö” (“Saimaa Phenomenon”).

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is the new mutual narrative for Finnish Lakeland - it will enhance the residents’ well-being and bring new vitality to the region. It is a totally new way of working; breaking down all the old obstacles that stood in the way of cooperation and progress in the past, and putting in their place a new foundation for building partnerships and networks for the future. Ambitious actions derive from a phenomenal culture. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 themes are: The Power of Water, Connecting Bridges and Eastern Joy. These will be introduced under question 11.

SWAMP VOLLEY WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP TOURNAMENT
LAPPEENRANTA BALLET GALA • GREEN REALITY CARNEVAL
BEAR FESTIVAL • WIFE CARRYING WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP
SIILIFOLK FOLK ART FESTIVAL • FINTANGO • LPRHC FEST
KITEE INTERNATIONAL MUSIC AND ART WEEK • ELOJUBILEE
TAITOKORTTELI HANDICRAFT AND CULTURE QUARTER
ST. OLAF JAZZ CONCERTS • RIUTTALA FARMHOUSE MUSEUM
LAPPEENRANTA FORTRESS • WORLD CAPITAL OF METAL LEMI
ART CENTRE SALMELA • KUOPIO ROCK • KENKÄVERO VICARAGE





Q5 Describe the cultural strategy that is in place in your city at the time of the application, including the plans to sustain the cultural actions beyond the year of the title?

At its meeting on March 30, 2020, the Savonlinna City Council approved the Cultural Strategy compiled by the regional councils and stakeholders of the provincial capital cities, to remain in effect until 2030. The name of the strategy is: The Phenomenal Culture City, the Cultural Strategy of Savonlinna and the Cultural Strategy of Cooperation in Eastern Finland. Therefore, it is not only the cultural strategy of Savonlinna, but the change-making cooperative strategy by which the direction of development will be turned within the entire Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region. The Cultural Strategy brings forth a new way for Savonlinna and all of Finnish Lakeland to solve problems and find solutions to the challenges which have in the past hindered the development of the Saimaa region.

The essence of the strategy is the phenomenal culture, which instils confidence in our ability to create a bright future for the entire region. The phenomenal culture demonstrates the border-breaking ambitious cooperation in the Mycelium of partnerships and networks. Doors are open for everybody. It is our goal to lead by example, and by working in this manner we aim to make Savonlinna and the entire Saimaa region a role model for city development throughout Europe. Our success story will pave the way to demonstrate how something small can grow into much larger proportions,

and how rethinking and removing obstacles can set into motion revolutionary power.

The cultural strategy is grouped into three dimensions. In the first dimension the city forms a platform enabling cultural networking, the second is the multi-faceted identification and acknowledgement of cultural projects, and the third dimension entails building a new, unique Saimaa networking model.

The first pillar of the cultural strategy recognizes that Savonlinna lacks the financial resources to be an independent cultural producer on its own, but it can become instrumental in offering a platform of support to help other cultural players to succeed. These players are cultural and art professionals, whom the city of Savonlinna can bring together and provide motivation, giving new meaning and impetus to the cultural life around Saimaa. Developing and strengthening Savonlinna's image as a culturally vital city will enhance its attractiveness locally and abroad, and will leave its mark on residents as well, helping them to lead a happy and well-fulfilled life. In a strategy where Savonlinna acts as an enabling platform, the city can provide support for networks, spearhead various cultural projects, create and maintain connections, and offer free public spaces as needed.

The second pillar of the cultural strategy compels the city of Savonlinna to identify and bring to the forefront, independent art producers and marginal culture providers, so that their significant contributions to the rich overall cultural landscape of the region can also be acknowledged. Spotlighting the achievements of these less renowned cultural providers offers residents and visitors alike an opportunity to expand their perspective of the city's multi-faceted cultural life. The city of Savonlinna is tasked with creating the prerequisites to increase

cultural offerings all year round, leading to the strengthening of the cultural attractiveness of the city and establishing the preconditions required for the well-being of residents. Savonlinna will actively communicate about all cultural activities, and the inspiring power of culture will pass throughout the city organisation.

The third pillar of the cultural strategy will be to foster networks for cooperation between cultural players, providing them with opportunities to develop their activities, expand their audiences, and broaden their advancement into new international arenas. These networks will be utilised to the fullest extent possible. At its most fundamental level, this will include fund-raising efforts, organising exhibitions, and promoting travel-related products and services. Networking opportunities and cultural contacts with our Russian neighbours across the border will also be strengthened.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will herald the new normal in the way things get done: with respect to cultural endeavours, well-being, vitality and maintenance, and boosting the power and direction of working together in a completely natural way, with open borders. This requires a new kind of attitude: working together is always of utmost importance and nothing can be achieved alone. Working in this manner will set the stage for a new era and a new attitude, by illustrating the many advantages of working with others to achieve a common goal, and by demonstrating the point that success is rarely a singular event. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will instil a new sense of confidence in the work people do, in cooperation, and in the future. The net effect of this will transform the scepticism of the people residing in the four provinces into a new level of pride for their own city, municipality and village. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 way of doing things will be utilised in focusing the

development procedures of regional and city development.

New networks will be taken into use in different and exciting new ways. Ideas, products and services generated by these new networks will act as a catalyst to move things forward - allowing them to be introduced and take hold in new national and international arenas. As members of such a phenomenal culture we feel it is necessary for us not to shy away from combining commercial and artistic components, but instead to bring together the business world and artists. The highest priority of our Cultural Strategy is to earn the designation of European Capital of Culture 2026, by creating a sustainable operational model which will continue to function and develop long after the end of the year.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has as its mandate strengthening the appeal and well-being of the entire region. From a broad perspective, culture helps break down conventional silo mentality and assists in developing totally new ways of getting things done. It also strengthens the development of economically productive creative industries.

Using its culturally sustainable concept as a basis to work from, Savonlinna will make a positive contribution to global change. Sustainable development can be achieved through cultural change. Savonlinna and the entire Saimaa region is building a more sustainable future, when we change our ways of thinking and doing. Eastern Finland currently requires actions for strengthening its vitality. Actions in which culture is broadly perceived - as values shared by people and entities, as implications, perceptions, operational manners and practices - provide excellent tools for achievement. The Cultural Strategy is the roadmap to change.



1. INPUT INTO LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Q6 Describe your 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.

Phenomenal culture is the core of identity and way of life for the people residing within the four Saimaa provinces. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 identifies and acknowledges that the creative sector of eastern Finland needs support and fortification. Jobs within the cultural sector are few and far between in eastern Finland and the majority of the people working in the industry are solo entrepreneurs. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will create an environment that brings their competencies forward and increases their work opportunities. The Savonlinna Cultural Strategy and the Cultural Cooperation Strategy for eastern Finland offer tools to develop opportunities for creative people to work together across provincial and national borders. Fortifying cultural activities is an investment in vitality and an investment into the future.

Key figures of cultural industries in eastern Finland

	2010	2017
Number employed in the workforce in cultural industries within the four provinces.	7,986	6,416
Number of cultural and mass communication businesses in the four provinces	1,303	1,174
Total turnover of aforementioned businesses in the four provinces, million euros	623	451

Source: Statistics Finland and Arts Promotion Centre Finland



SounDome, iglu and ice instruments in Varpasaari, Imatra 2017
Photo: Noomi Levo



The Savonlinna Cultural Strategy will be extended into a cultural future review which covers the entire Saimaa region. It will stress the role of the cities and the public sector in acting as operational enablers. The publicly funded cultural services such as libraries and museums form the foundation for building new activities. In order to raise the efficacy of publicly financed cultural services, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will encourage residents to participate in the use of the services to a stronger degree. The objective is to encourage an increasing number of people to enjoy the available cultural services regardless of where they live or what their earlier opinions of culture might be.

Culture is at the centre of sustainable and socially responsible, all-year-round tourism. The arts and culture are an underutilised resource for the travel industry in the Saimaa region. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will address the issue and work towards forming tighter connections between culture and business in general, and especially the tourism industry. Also, the business endeavours within the creative industries will be promoted and support given to artists in utilising their versatile expertise. This synergy will create high-quality and sustainable tourism products, experiences and services. The bid for European Capital of Culture itself will attract investments in tourism and strengthen the partnership between the business and culture sectors.

Resulting from Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, a new digital platform will be created which will establish a new way of working and improve the accessibility and acquirability of services. Improvement of digital accessibility is an investment into culture, well-being and all-year-round tourism. Interest towards Saimaa will increase, when services are easily presented and accessible and can be experienced digitally using increasingly popular VR and AR contents during exceptional situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The new digital platform will serve to bring together the fragmented cultural field in the region, also providing assistance to the players in the area during crises.

To strengthen national and international cultural interaction Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will also promote Artist-In-Residence programmes. The goal is to assemble an Artist-In-Residence

programme within all four provinces and to integrate the programme onto the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform from where it can easily be promoted. The Artist-in-Residence project will transform Saimaa into an inspirational hotspot for artists, which will in 2026, become globally famous: from the Rocky Mountains to Cape Town and from Vladivostok to Honolulu.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will effectuate a turnaround in the vacancy rate of local commercial buildings in the region by re-engaging their use as phenomenal spaces for creative artists. The currently empty display windows of the commercial buildings in the cities are an example of the underachievement of the region, which does not fit into the picture of eastern Finland increasing its vitality. We must carefully scrutinise what kind of an image Savonlinna and the other cities in eastern Finland wish to convey to visitors from both Finland and abroad. From this vantage point, it is certainly worthwhile to restore empty buildings and attend to their new use. In this endeavour Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 wants to be a promoter. Cities in eastern Finland and other players in the region are initiating infrastructural projects for the support of cultural actions. These initiatives are introduced in more detail under Q 38.

As a result of cooperation between the cultural and social sectors, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will strengthen the sense of participation and communion. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will take all groups into consideration; for example, by offering foreign students and migrants various cultural activities and products. The number of various low-threshold workshops and communal art projects will be increased, and good practices of the cultural well-being networks will be exchanged among the cities. Visits by artists to day care centres, schools, and retirement homes will be everyday practices in the future.

Our ways of interacting as residents are also an integral part of culture. This demands a more integrated deeper relationship between cultural players, the business world, and the social and health sector. As a result of these actions, abstract values, intellectual services and material commodities will strengthen the vitality of eastern Finland.



1. INPUT INTO LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Q7 How is the European Capital of Culture action included in this strategy?

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is the ambitious priority project of the Savonlinna Cultural Strategy. The Cultural Strategy draws attention to the cultural status of the four provinces, activates communal action, supports networking and identifies new national and international partnerships. The processes and ways of cooperation formed during the preparation work of the ECoC will continue their progress after the title year.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 and the Savonlinna Cultural Strategy have the same working concept: phenomenal culture. Culture, which encompasses all of its players, modes, and corollary activities, is our mutual phenomenon. Cooperation in the Saimaa Way will become an exemplary operational model which will give direction to all aspects of our actions and practices well into the 2030s.

The strategy work began in autumn 2019 by organising four workshops with participants representing arts and culture producers, city residents, associations, city developers and cooperation groups in the region. Interviews were conducted, aiming to acquire better insight into the current status of the cultural environment and future goals. The strategy work was monitored by a steering committee made up of Bridge Builders and civil servants from the city of Savonlinna.

The Savonlinna Cultural Strategy, the Cultural Cooperation Strategy of eastern Finland and the goals of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 are bound into one. Implementing the strategy will strengthen the confidence of the residents in the future and will attract young people to move into the area.



Q8 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)?

In 2030, Savonlinna will be a thriving city in the centre of the Lake Saimaa region and will be renowned as a centre for a multifaceted culture cluster. In ten years' time, Savonlinna will have been transformed into a growing city. New residents will have moved to the city, the birth-rate will have increased, the rate of unemployment will have decreased, and economical metrics will all indicate an upward trend. Multi-dwelling and remote work will be everyday practices, and the easily accessible cultural life surrounding Olavinlinna will attract people to live nearby. People will be healthier and have a more positive outlook on life - the joy of life will be evident, especially among children and young adults. The same trend will be apparent in all of the cities and municipalities touched by Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Safety and security, clean nature, forests, water and culture are all tourist attractions of the Saimaa region. They will attract future urban-rural dwellers, who live in multiple locations, extending their stay in the rural areas for longer periods of time.

The ECoC project will increase all-year-round culture travel, promote interaction between the cities, enhance the prerequisites for creative industries, and create both national and international networks and partnerships. The driver of change will have been Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. By 2026, Savonlinna and the four capital cities of the provinces will have developed into

a multi-faceted centre of cultural life, and international contacts will bring many different players and activities representing a wide variety of cultural sectors, into the area.

Contacts with European cultural players and artists will enhance the international image of the Saimaa cities and increase their visibility. All year round, phenomenal cultural events will be organised by the cities, thus bringing about an increase in events that will indicate growth in the knowledge capital of the cultural cluster. The cities of Saimaa will have strengthened networks with their Russian partners, which will be apparent in the cooperation between the arts and cultural institutions, student exchange programmes, and open visits in both directions. The number of travellers will grow, and many will come to enjoy the clean lake nature of Saimaa, the forests and cultural offerings, and extending their stays for longer periods.

By 2030, the educational opportunities offered by Saimaa universities, including those in the field of applied science, will have increased. Student places will have increased in the music and arts sectors and students will arrive in the area from elsewhere in Finland, and Europe as well. The museums in the Saimaa region will have built an operational concept based on cooperation, which will attract visitors from Finland and other countries in the world, and the museums will have become a significant platform for the transition that aims for cultural sustainability. The Saimaa region will be home to many Cultural Routes certified by the Council of Europe.

The ECoC project will create new business in the culture and travel sectors, and both of these sectors will be strongly present in mutual brand marketing. In 2017, the provinces and cities of South Karelia and South Savonia signed their first agreement on mutual marketing of the Saimaa region. Three years later the city of Varkaus was annexed to the agreement and in 2030 the provinces

of North Karelia and North Savonia will also be part of the same group of doers.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will be active in working with other tourism developers and marketers. We aim for growth in the culture and travel sectors, increasing all-year-round tourism and enhancing awareness of the Saimaa region. According to the tourism strategies of South Savonia and South Karelia, Saimaa will soon be among the three most significant destinations, along with Helsinki and Lapland.

The economical multiplier effects of the ECoC year will be significant. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 project has implemented a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis to determine the monetary effects of the ECoC project on the social, health and environmental issues in the region. It will be completed in autumn 2020 for use by the ECoC project.

The power radiating from the ECoC initiative will strengthen the identity and self-confidence of the residents in Savonlinna and the entire Saimaa region. It will bolster the residents' confidence in the future, strengthen the feelings of belonging of people, fend off the polarisation of society and increase the interest of people in societal issues. It directs the attention and interest of people towards European values and democratic decision making. The ECoC project supports society, helps people avoid becoming more passive, and opens the path to an active and interactive European identity.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 challenges us to think about the future of Europe and the entire world. The key to change is cultural sustainability, without which sustainable development cannot be achieved. Culture helps us to change our mindset and way of life, reflecting on everyday living, the economy and politics. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will have phenomenal impact on changing people's attitudes in many ways, before the ECoC year, during 2026 and thereafter.



1. INPUT INTO LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Q9 Outline briefly the plans for monitoring and evaluation.

The ECoC year will be monitored and evaluated based on measuring the goals set in the presented table.



Photo: Mikko Nikkinen / gosämaa.com

	Main goals	Sub-goals/effects	Indicators	Data
Local, National and International Ecosystem of the Creative Economy	Strengthening of the Creative Economy Ecosystem	Improving employment in the cultural and creative industries /retaining jobs; Improvement of the status of creative industries and increasing of entrepreneurship/business; Diversification and strengthening of cultural offerings; Increase in ticket sales revenue; Increased participation in cultural activity; Growth in grants and investments of creative industries; Strengthening of the European dimension in cultural activity	Number of educated in art industries; Employed in culture and media enterprises; Person-years in publicly funded institutions; Number of art institutions; Taike (Arts Promotion Centre) grants; Number of cultural buildings; Number of artists; Future prospects and current status of cultural actors; Number of artists in international cooperation and productions; ECoC culture programme budget; Number of events; Resident's views on cultural activity; Resident's awareness of cultural offering; Number of cultural projects	TEAvisari (Cultural Health promotion capacity building framework); Statistics from Statistics Finland; Taike statistics; Qualitative and quantitative research; Barometer of cultural actors
	Rise of culture and vitality factors in Finnish Lakeland			
	Improved prerequisites of the creative industries and increased activity within creative industries			
	Increased appreciation of culture			
Participation, identity and communality	Internationalisation of cultural activity in eastern Finland	Growth in participation of residents and the strengthening of sense of belonging; Strengthening regional identity of residents; Creation of a new kind of self-confidence and pride towards own region; Feelings of well-being among residents increases; Participation and involvement in cultural activities increase	Number of participants in events; Number of participants in producing programmes; Number and profile of volunteers; Profile of participants in events; Residents' awareness of ECoC; Residents' participation in cultural events; Amount of programmes implemented in sheltered housing, schools and day-care centres; Experienced easiness of participation; Number and share of residents participating in and producing events; Number of young people participating and producing events; Change in regional identity; Amount of positive writings; Residents' experienced well-being; Rate of low-incomers; Share of those considering quality of life as good	TEAvisari; Statistics from Statistics Finland; Welfare compass; Sotkanet (Statistical information on welfare and health in Finland); Various qualitative and quantitative research (panel data, resident questionnaires); Media monitoring; Saimaa Phenomenon data and material
	Strengthening of the regional identity			
	Improvement of residents' well-being			
	Increased pride in own region			

	Main goals	Sub-goals/effects	Indicators	Data
Entrepreneurship, business and vitality	Development of service structure and growth of regional vitality	Improved images of eastern Finland; Enhanced national and international profile of eastern Finland; Sustainable growth in number of travellers; Growth of tourism income; Saimaa and Lakeland concepts are clarified; Improved accessibility of the region; Creation of new products and services; Year-round tourism develops	Number of overnight stays in accommodation enterprises; Number of participants in events; Average room price; Number of arrived travellers; Spending of tourists at events and in the region; Number/share of Finnish / international travellers; Number of different nationalities; Amount of accommodation capacity; Total population change; Number of out-migrated; Population; Age structure; Real estate costs development; GDP amount; Amount and share of employed and unemployed in workforce; Amount of jobs, Number of enterprises; Amount of investments; Number of events; Number of real estate deals; Number and share of higher-level educated; Rank in the national image research; Perceptions of travellers on the region and city; Number of positive articles in media; Views of enterprises on efficacy of ECoC on business; Views of enterprises on availability of workforce; Travellers' perceptions of the region	TEAvisari; Statistics from Statistics Finland; Rudolf statistic data; Visiittori.fi, Taloustutkimus Oy image research; Various qualitative and quantitative research (panel data, resident questionnaires); Media monitoring
	Creation of new permanent jobs			
	Deceleration of out-migration and the increase of the region's retaining and attracting power			
	Growth of number of travellers and tourism income			
	Improvement of the region's and cities' national and international profiles			
Know-how and expertise, networks and cooperation	Increase in cross-industry cooperation	Intensifying of contacts between education, research, environment, sustainable development, city development and culture tourism; Strengthening of intellectual capital from implementation of large regional and international projects; Enhanced know-how in event production and expertise; Project activity enabled creation of operational cooperative platforms for creative industries; Creation of new contacts and cooperation models with top experts in the European culture and creative industry	Number of cross-industry projects; Views of stakeholders on development of cooperation; Participation in skill share labs (capacity building); Number of participants in competitions; Number of innovations created in competitions; Number of research culture/culture tourism-related projects; Number of co-productions and number of participants and producers in them; Visibility of cooperation in media; Residents' participation in other cities' events; Sustainability projects, Regional development projects and amount of funding; Number of new international partnerships; Number of international productions.	TEAvisari; Statistics from Statistics Finland; Project registers; Qualitative and quantitative research (e.g. stakeholder questionnaire), Media monitoring
	Increase of cooperation between residents of cities in eastern Finland			
	Strengthening of intellectual capital			
	Creation of new ideas and operational and economic innovations			
	Creation of new international partnerships and networks within the cultural industry and creative economy			





The flowkantele innovated by Koistinen Kantele in Rääkkylä pulls one into a communal musical adventure.

Q10 What is the artistic vision and strategy for the cultural programme of the year?

According to the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 vision, the arts and culture play a significant role in the development of Savonlinna and the four provinces in the Saimaa region. In our vision, culture belongs to everyone and it has been proven that the sense of well-being of people is improved when they engage in cultural activities. Arts and culture will have played a significant role in the branding of the Saimaa region and will have expanded the awareness of our presence on the international scene. The financial resources, knowledge

and experience invested into the ECoC project will have remained within the area of the four provinces. The entirety of the artistic programme has proved to be phenomenal and Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has based all of its actions on sustainability and accountability.

The strategy of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 must succeed on the following issues in order to achieve the set goals. The Cultural Strategy for the Cooperation of eastern Finland must expand to include all four of the Saimaa Phenomenon provinces. Residents in the area must take ownership of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, having confidence in its epoch-making power and see its impact on improving their standard of living. In the preparatory stage of the project actions and decisions must be made so as to ensure economic and

other resources, such as knowledge, remain as much as possible within the four provinces. Art and culture are easily accessible, and their visibility is substantial. Both Finnish and international audiences have found the phenomenal programme to be superior and interesting. Everyday Saimaa life has raised considerable interest among visitors and local residents have been eager to display their everyday life to guests.

Cultural sustainability and accountability have become a cornerstone to a new mindset and way of getting things done. We respect the vulnerable lake nature of Saimaa and seek ways to develop small-scale, but rich cultural offerings. We demand that ecological, social and economic sustainability be adhered to in the marketing of cultural and travel services.

We will prepare for achieving our vision by appointing, in turn, each of the central cities of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 as the Saimaa Capital of Culture. The ECoC project is linked to anniversaries of each city:

<p>In 2022 Mikkelin will celebrate its 184th anniversary.</p>	<p>In 2023 Joensuu will celebrate its 175th anniversary.</p>	<p>In 2024 Lappeenranta will celebrate its 375th anniversary.</p>	<p>In 2025 Kuopio will celebrate its 250th anniversary.</p>	<p>In 2026 Savonlinna will celebrate its 387th anniversary.</p>
<p>MIKKELI Saimaa Capital of Culture 2022</p>	<p>JOENSUU Saimaa Capital of Culture 2023</p>	<p>LAPPEENRANTA Saimaa Capital of Culture 2024</p>	<p>KUOPIO Saimaa Capital of Culture 2025</p>	<p>SAVONLINNA European Capital of Culture 2026</p>

2. CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC CONTENT

Q11 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.

The cultural programme of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is based on three main themes. The cultural programme of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is based on three main programme themes: Power of Water - Connecting Bridges - Eastern Joy. By unveiling these three themes the secrets of the phenomenal culture will be revealed.” In addition to the three main themes, a programme named “Everyday Saimaa” is illustrated by small-scale art experiences, tiny adventures, and significant encounters, all of which go to demonstrate the uniqueness of living on the shores of Saimaa and experiencing first-hand Saimaa culture. We are a hospitable lot who loves unexpected encounters.

We have visualised our cultural programme as a kalakukko “filled” with all these cultural ingredients - slowly baked to perfection - and bursting with all the flavours of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

Kalakukko, (fish and pork pie) is a traditional Savonian dish protected by the TSG (Traditional speciality guaranteed) scheme in July 2002. Kalakukko consists of fish and pork slices baked inside a thick and impervious rye casing. The filling of the Kalakukko can stew in its rye casing in a mildly hot masonry oven for 5 to 7 hours. Kalakukko is at its best when it’s warm, with a generous dollop of butter on top!

Power of Water

- Under this theme, art and culture float on the waters, creating exciting routes for audiences.
- Small, unique experiences and encounters, where one can sense and be a part of the unique lake nature.
- Relationship with nature.
- Art, culture and traditions building adventurous routes.

Connecting Bridges

- Art and culture sweep up people into activities, granting equal opportunities for all to experience and create art and culture.
- New networks and inspirational cooperation that ignites new ideas.
- Cooperation between cultural institutions is the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 backbone.
- Calls for thinking on an international scale.

Eastern Joy

- Exuberant Karelians and jovial Savonians live in perfect harmony.
- Our culture is unique and original.
- Tradition, communality, hospitality and culinary culture.
- Highlights a rich history and life well-lived, laying foundations for future generations.
- Daring to be original.
- New ways to work together.
- Bold plunges.

Everyday Saimaa cultural kalakukko



In winter 2026, the opening event of the ECoC year will be hosted by Kari Kola, a pioneer and internationally recognised Light Artist from Joensuu, who is well known for his extensive outdoor installations. Kola's latest work "Savage Beauty", was exhibited in Ireland in March 2020, as part of the Galway ECoC year 2020 programme. At the beginning of 2026, Kari Kola's light art installation encompassing five different locations will light up the entire Saimaa region. The light art installation will involve illuminating five different bridges, located in five Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities.

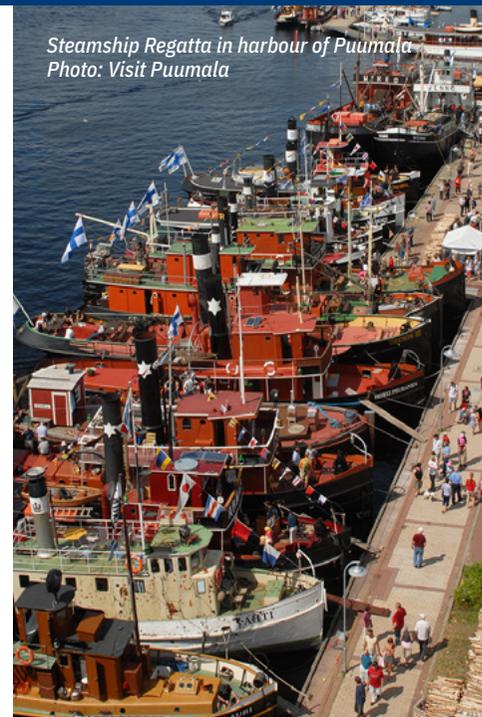


Luminous Finland 100 Olavinlinna light installation by Light Artist Kari Kola, Photo: Cristopher Lund

Summer 2026 event will be publicly announced at a later date.

In 2026, each of the four seasons will be celebrated with one big event

In spring 2026, the traditional Lake Saimaa event "Laivanpassuu" will take place, when during one day, all the ships and boats on the waters will assemble at whichever harbour happens to be the nearest at the time. In Savonlinna, the magnificent event will consist of the historical steamships, which still sail the waters of Saimaa. The appearance of the ships with their steam whistles sounding meant the end of the era of isolation and the reopening of channels after the long winter. While waiting for the boats to arrive one could sense a whiff from the outer world. This same whiff starts up the boating season of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.



Steamship Regatta in harbour of Puumala Photo: Visit Puumala

In autumn 2026 the "Saimaan kekri" event will gather people to cook and eat together. During the whole autumn season, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will publish various recipes for preparing food using local ingredients. Master classes by the Skill Share Lab will focus on food culture and the Master Chefs will share their knowledge with apprentices. The Saimaa Region of Gastronomy organisation will arrange a series of events at the markets of the central cities, the Gastro Food Ambassadors will visit day care centres, schools and houses for senior citizens and the whole of eastern Finland will sit down to eat together.



SATOA Kuopio Food Festival 2017 Photo: ProAgria Itä-Suomi



With the Power of Water

ART AND CULTURE ON THE WATERS

Arts and culture will travel along the waters during the ECoC year. Our artists will take over the region's lakesides, islands, villages and cities and stage their unprecedented and unique performances for people to experience. You might stumble on an unexpected cultural experience on your familiar walk to the lakeside.

Through an open application for our programme collection, we want to discover additional unique and new creative content.

Trail network is a year-long art event, which covers all the four provinces and the artwork is placed outdoors among nature, and along the various water hiking and trekking routes. Some of the works are easy to find, whereas accessing others requires some perseverance. The two events along the Trail network, "Taidepilkkki" ("Art Ice fishing") and "Elosoutelu" ("August rowing"), take place simultaneously at different locations within the four provinces. This event is a joint project organised by visual art professionals and regional art organisations, aiming to develop international cooperation. The Trail route is produced by Ars Nova, the Joensuu Art company, Kaakon taide and Kuopion kuvataiteilijat.

"Järven tarina" ("Tale of the Lake") in the Saimaa Theatre style

Saimaa Theatre is a touring theatre that sails on the Saimaa waters. Composed of professional performing artists, it has operated since 2014. In 2026 the theatre

will broaden its route to encompass the entire region of eastern Finland and will go ashore into the harbours of small villages and take its modern theatre performance, in the theme of Power of Water onto historically valuable stages of local village halls. The performance will not only happen on stage but will begin upon the arrival of the theatre to the village and ends when the ship sails away. The Saimaa Theatre will blow life into the villages and invigorate their social communities.

During summer, 2026, Kulttuurikiska, Kolkkokollektiivi and Parkumäen Masinistit will raise their event tent

in Kuopio, Savonlinna and Joensuu, preparing a sound art installation under bridges, on piers and in various nature destinations. Kolkkokollektiivi will write the texts and Masinistit will take care of the technical production together with the professional actors of Kulttuurikiska. An interdisciplinary and multi-art project entails building a container string generator, scrap metal robot, weather poem machine, a reading out loud machine with a motion sensor, and a mystery machine equipped with unartificial intelligence.

The Great Saimaa Water Tour is a project organised by the Association for Rural Culture and Education (MSL) which exhibits the enchantment of the countryside through various workshops, work exhibitions, walking routes and environmental art. The tour highlights the unique ITE (Finnish contemporary folk art) artists and ITE environments. MSL will gather together the Saimaa region action groups and in 2024-2026 will compile an exhibition which will climax in the Great Saimaa Water Tour in 2026. Focal to these events are the cultural and ecological balance and the sustainability and continuity of the waters and the local culture. Artists in the region, cultural institutions, associations, tourism entrepreneurs, educational institution and the municipalities will be invited to

partake in the production of these events. Also, national and international artists will be invited to participate.

LAKE CULTURE

Lake Culture will bring together programmes where history and modern-day Saimaa meet, and will present all the different types of Saimaa residents. It goes without saying that Saimaa is the most precious place in the world to the people living there. The theme will enhance the communal spirit, share information and have impact on our phenomenal Saimaa and the future of its residents.

Future Riihisaari

The Lake Saimaa Nature and Museum Centre located in the proximity of Olavinlinna exhibits Saimaa culture, nature, and the sailing history of the region. The most significant types of ships that have sailed Lake Saimaa are on exhibit at the museum ship pier. By 2026 the Riihisaari area will have developed into a lakeside gathering place for residents, tourists and opera festival guests to enjoy. The city of Savonlinna is preparing to apply for status as a national city park. The city park would include the area around Riihisaari as well. The city has also initiated a process for getting Saimaa onto the UNESCO world heritage list. Metsähallitus (the Finnish Forest Administration) and the Ministry of the Environment are preparing a preliminary study relating to the UNESCO world heritage list application. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programme will support these efforts with its seminars and festivals, and aims to promote discussion about the significance of preserving the city's nature and landscapes as a source of well-being to its residents.

Partners of the Lake Saimaa Nature and Museum Centre in Riihisaari include other national city parks in Finland and in Sweden, UNESCO world heritage sites, and the network of European Water Transport Museums and cultural centres.



Say norppa!

The importance of preserving a close relationship with nature culminates in the “Norppa” (Saimaa Ringed Seal) - the appealing, but still endangered resident of Lake Saimaa. The project launches a special educational programme for children, which in 2026 will be fused with art projects produced by various children’s cultural players in different parts of eastern Finland. The Saimaa Ringed Seal is the subject for many products crafted by artists and handicraftsmen in eastern Finland. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 challenges everyone to innovate and create new products, stories and artwork with the Saimaa ringed seal as the subject. A virtual Norppa art exhibition will tell the story of this indigenous resident of Saimaa to all around Europe and the world, promoting its preservation in Lake Saimaa. Discussions concerning cooperation with the eastern districts of the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation are ongoing.

Cottagers

The shores of eastern Finland are full of summer cottages and leisure-time residences. Cottagers illuminate the shores of Lake Saimaa throughout the year, because multi-dwelling is leading to people owning homes in more than one location. The cottage culture has a special significance in our cultural heritage. Cottages are actual treasure chests with their layers of magazines, dishes, textiles and handicrafts and their milieus have filled up with unique woodpiles, post boxes and outhouses. In 2026 we will organise a special Cottager week, when we inspire our cottage people to open their door to paradise and welcome guests from near and far to visit. Discussions on cooperation in the cottagers project are ongoing with the Mikkeli region leisure-time residents’ delegation and the Hannover 2025 ECoC project.

CULTURE OF THE FOREST

The current situation in the world challenges us to rethink how we live and encourages us to make radical changes to ingrained habits. The Culture of the Forest programme includes three projects that will be produced with international partners. The projects will address forest mythology and query: “What can we learn from the past?” - that is, with respect to living more modestly, on nature’s terms?

**City(e)scape**

Architect Sami Rintala, currently living in Bodö, Norway, will return to his roots in eastern Finland to exhibit his City(e)scape installation for which a multidisciplinary work group will be assembled, consisting of local organisations of handicraftsmen and international architectural schools. The installation will gain force from the heritage of eastern Finland and the encounters between east and west, as it searches for inspiration from the mystics of the forest, old building customs and traditional values of the people in eastern Finland. From this, different types of temporary structures will be erected among nature and in village centres, to serve as places for self-reflection - as well as places for people to meet. The project aims to better understand the basic needs in life; to preserve a connection with nature and rather than constantly inventing something new, to rediscover something valuable from our past. Sami Rintala’s work group is currently involved in producing content for the Bodö European Capital of Culture 2024: building a sauna-salt water pool in the harbour, a seashore spa and an Arctic design school.

Lovet2026

“Lovi” is found in Finnish mythology and relates to supernatural places and a mystical state of being. Lovet2026 is a two-phase project that the Finnish Forest Museum Lusto

is planning as a joint project with the Slovakian city of Žilina, European Capital of Culture 2026 candidate in Slovakia. Phase one of the project involves a study of the traditions and various ways wood is used for building in both countries. The knowledge and identified ways of working will be put into use in the design of new types of structures and artwork in the future. The second phase of the joint project approaches the theme from a perspective of country cottage living and trekking excursions into nature. In Slovakia, art will take over in the cottages alongside the mountain trekking routes, and in the Saimaa region, cultural content will be available to viewers in wilderness huts and resting places along the walking routes.

Spirit of the forest is a versatile programme which utilises the forest as a stage and production platform for different types of cultural events. New, modern artistic interpretations create multi-storied content and in 2026 will bring art into nature - on the lakesides, fields and forests.

Under this theme, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will initiate an open international programme application, which challenges people to reflect on their own relationship with nature and their way of life through art.

EVERYDAY SAIMAA WITH THE POWER OF WATER:

- Sitting on waterside stones
- Moving on the water
- Beach fish soup events
- Winter swimming
- Fishing events: rod fishing and ice-fishing competitions
- Forest walk
- Berry-picking, mushroom-picking and hunting





Connecting Bridges

TECHNOLOGY BRIDGES GAPS

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 utilises modern-day technology and digitalisation to build invisible bridges, new, immersive spaces and promote change. A touch of art and culture has the ability to convert a hard, physical product of technology into an adventure - giving it a soul. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 harnesses art, design, and technological know-how into new cultural experiences through cooperation between the universities of eastern Finland, technology enterprises and art festivals, such as the Kuopio Dance Festival.



Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 as a platform

FLAGSHIP

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 platform breaks down fences and silos! The new digital platform encourages ground-breaking, cross-industrial cooperation. The new platform is based on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 database, which improves the administration of services, discoverability, marketing and accessibility, and the creation of open innovations between cities and business sectors. Applications, services, and products connected to virtual and augmented reality, the gaming industry, and area marketing and administration will be connected to the platform. The platform will help various players search for partners and reach a wider audience. Transparency and accountability, knowledge-based leadership, and physical and virtual accessibility are key elements and themes in designing the platform. In the future, with assistance from our partners, such as tourism operators, a commercial application of the platform will be developed.

New digital Exhibition Spaces

By the ECoC year 2026 two very different digital exhibition spaces will have been created in eastern Finland. These will enable the creation of internationally significant digital art programmes and creating immersive experiences, bringing them into the ECoC programme. The extensive art treasures hidden in our museums can be made visible in modern environments. The VB Photographic Centre in Kuopio will create an exhibition space in the city environment, where just by pressing a button a summer forest is transformed into a winter forest scene or into a background for a dance performance. At the same time, it can operate as an innovative platform for different art forms. The Tuunaansaari cave (former Retretti Art Centre) in Punkaharju, in the eastern part of Savonlinna, will make use of VR, AR and MR technologies and will support the local cultural and business operations. Training, development workshops and Art-in-Residence operations will also be starting up in the centre.

Schoolchild science

In spring 2026 a science and technology competition organised by the Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT Junior University and the J. Hyneman Centre targeted to the upper level students, which supports the curriculum of the schools and promotes utilising schoolchild science within the Saimaa region. New technological inventions are innovated and produced, especially innovations related to the purity of Saimaa, increasing enjoyment and sustainable travel on the waters, based on the themes with the Power of Water and Connecting Bridges.

History comes alive!

A working group of lecturers from the universities of Jyväskylä, Helsinki and Eastern Finland will form a digital learning environment for history. An experiential pedagogic event with the European cooperative partners will

be organised during which new material on the newly mastered phenomena will be produced. The game platform based on this material will be made available to tourists. Discussion on cooperation have been ongoing with the Hildesheim 20225 EoC project.

ART AND CULTURE AS A BRIDGE

In Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 art and culture are both visible and invisible Bridges. The theme brings the cultural institutions of our provinces together, achieving more as one big group than what one individual institution could do on its own. We will make space for modern dance and promote the achievement of cultural equality. We will illuminate our bridges and switch on lights all over Saimaa.

The largest museum in Finland

tells about Saimaa Phenomenon 2026

FLAGSHIP



Through the networking of the museums and as a result of cooperation, a museum network will be created, which encompasses the entire region of eastern Finland and spreads out on the web through the Finna service (data bank) used by the museums. The museums within the network will record, research and present the Saimaa Phenomenon and open up the largest museum in Finland in 2026, which will bring forth the culture, history and the most significant art contents of Saimaa. Before 2026, the cooperation will intensify to produce a floating exhibition that will tour all around eastern Finland. Saimaa museums will produce contents using augmented reality in locations such as harbours, sightseeing venues and in historical destinations, utilising the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform. The largest museum in Finland will be completed in 2026 and will be opened up to the public in all of the museums in the Saimaa region as well as more broadly through the available digital platform. Discussions on cooperation have been opened up with



the culture committees in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad area.

A part of the museum network will be the Muisti Centre of War and Peace, which will open up in Mikkeli, in spring 2021. The centre has discussed prospects of cooperation in 2026 with the Hildesheim 2025 European Weeks of Peace project. The Centre of War and Peace exhibitions are covered in the plans described under Q 14 .

M_itä? in 2026, administered by the art museums of Mikkeli, Kuopio and Joensuu. The review of modern art will expand to Lappeenranta (and possibly to other cities in the Saimaa region) and cooperation will be sought on an international level. Curated superior modern art reviews will bring forth the professional artists in the area in an extent unforeseen on the shores of Lake Saimaa. M_itä? will bring publicity to the modern art in the area. Pending the available opportunities, modern art will also spread on a communal level through participatory events.

Saimaa Lights FLAGSHIP

Light Artist Kari Kola will produce a three-part installation as a part of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programme. The ECoC year will be opened with an exhibition where five bridges in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities will be simultaneously illuminated, and the theme of side events will be light and ice.

The second part of the programme will be made up of “Nature’s secrets” workshops. International visual and media art professionals will facilitate workshops for artists in the area, where less known nature sites with historical significance will be illuminated. The workshop process will be recorded, and its progress can be followed through the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform. In the closing event of the ECoC year, the light art spectacle will be designed and implemented by the

local artists who have participated in the workshops. At the same time the entire Saimaa region will be illuminated, and residents will be invited to organise their own guerrilla lighting spectacles.

Saimaa theatre trilogy

Throughout the past, close connections have been maintained between the people from eastern Finland, Karelia and Vyborg to St. Petersburg. A story rising from the regions’ mutual history will be staged as a great Saimaa trilogy. Two parts of the trilogy will be shown in theatres throughout the Saimaa region and one part will be staged by a theatre from Russia. The goal is to narrate the close mutual history of the Saimaa region and St. Petersburg using the tools of drama to intensify the mutual understanding and dialogue between Finns and Russians. The programme will be produced by actors and playwrights from both Finland and Russia. Professional theatres in eastern Finland will cooperate in implementing the programme. Discussions on cooperation have been opened up with the Cultural Committee of the Leningrad area.

New steps of Eastern dance

Dancing is one of the most popular leisure-time activities among the young people in eastern Finland. However, dancing as a profession is quite challenging due to the scarcity of working opportunities in the area. ITAK (Regional Dance Centre of Eastern Finland) will form the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Bridge between modern dance and the people of eastern Finland, taking new steps by expanding its operations and tour network to cover the entire area of eastern Finland. In autumn 2024 ITAK will open the opportunity for dancers to apply for producing new modern dance performances, which especially focus on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 themes. Performances will be placed in the ECoC year

programme tour in a way that modern dance will reach also the villages and border areas during 2026, taking new phenomenal steps and becoming an equal part of the art field of eastern Finland.

The Savonia University of Applied Sciences is planning neurodance training for dance professionals, physiotherapists and students in the profession. The goal of the training is to establish dancing as part of neurological group physiotherapy in the physiotherapy training programmes within Finnish Lakeland. The training will reach its peak in 2026, when an international neurodance event will be organised in Kuopio, the Capital City of Dance in eastern Finland. In the event, a joint production between the neuro-rehabilitates, dancers and physiotherapists will entail public dance performances with the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 themes.

Story of Equality Written in Saimaa

Equality is a basic right to the Finns. Equality to a resident of Saimaa means the heritage of Finnish author and equal rights activist Minna Canth, as well as many everyday issues that make life in eastern Finland easy. Cultural equality entails being able to choose one’s place to live and still have access to cultural services, participate and be part of different types of communities.

The library institution and free adult education are cornerstones of our cultural equality. A mobile library (a bus filled with books) ensures library services for all in sparsely inhabited eastern Finland, where distances are long, with roads winding around the lakes. The joint project of the libraries in the Saimaa region is the Library Car Rally, which cares for and develops the unique tradition of the mobile library. Together with their customers, the libraries in the region will also put together a literary culture route, in which the local literature and authors are brought forth in a new and involving manner. During the 2026 Mobile Library Days, the Savonlinna and IFLA



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(International Federation of Library Associations) member libraries will be invited to familiarise themselves with our phenomenal library institution.

Minna Canth, who fought for equal rights, freedom of speech, democracy and the right for women to vote, lived in a 200-year-old house named Kanttila, in the centre of Kuopio. The Association of the Minna Canth House wants to preserve Kanttila and restore it for the use of cultural activities. In 2026 the association will organise seminars and events pertaining to literary art and journalism in the house. The house will offer an Art-in-Residence programme for writers, researchers and artists. Kanttila doors will be open to all citizens of the world, who wish to promote equal rights. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has discussed about cooperation opportunities with the Hannover2025 ECoC project.

BUILDING CULTURE SPACE BRIDGES

The ECoC year will bring the city and municipal centres alive, it will return medieval times to Savonia, build bridges to create a new city culture in eastern Finland and create opportunities for organising spontaneous events and escapades in public spaces. We encourage cities and municipalities to point out spaces for the use of arts and events and smooth out processes for acquiring permits and other documents for the various players. Instead of building new premises, we encourage players in the public and private sectors to facilitate the use of empty spaces for multi-faceted cultural activity.

We will grant special “Myö taataan” (“We guarantee”) scholarships to new, unique city and neighbourhood events and players to ensure that planned events are realised. Suitable artists can be commissioned through the artist database, which is a part of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform.

Eastern city culture

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will create two new city festivals in Savonlinna by Craft & Design Savonlinna and Ars Nova. During the events the city will be full of visual art, exhibitions, temporary space artwork exhibitions, performances, talks, lectures and workshops. The 2026 ANTI-Contemporary Art Festival connects the cities of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 with a project in which artists from all over the world and their artwork take over different premises such as public spaces, homes, shops, market places, businesses, and forests and lakes. The festival will also grant the world’s only Live Art ANTI Festival International Prize, and the winning artwork will be exhibited around eastern Finland during the ECoC year. During the 2025-2026 Residency Programme a new artwork will be produced, and the artist/group of artists will work in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities. The artwork will have its premiere in Kuopio at the ANTI-festival in September 2026. The ANTI-festival has discussed cooperation opportunities with the Magdeburg2025 ECoC project.

Eastern winds – three independent culture spaces together

Many long-established cultural spaces in eastern Finland have closed their doors. Independent cultural venues including Kulttuuritila Nuijamies (Mallet Man) in Lappeenranta, Savonlinnan Kulttuurikellari (Savonlinna Culture Cellar), and Näyttämö (Stage) in Joensuu, have combined forces to create a new way of working together. This cooperation facilitates staging superior productions and sales of new cultural services and increases international awareness of independent cultural venues. Cooperation also offers more resources to everybody in the culture and art scenes, enhances cultural entrepreneurship and increases work opportunities in the industry. Eastern wind cultural cooperation

in 2026 will enable the sharing of information to other players through the Saimaa Skill Share Lab, and the production of a ECoC programme designed especially for the independent cultural spaces.

Creative Spaces and Doers

Creative spaces in the Saimaa region are worth a visit, entailing adventures and action. The spaces open up unique insights into an authentic cultural field in eastern Finland and in them one can be led, hand-in-hand guided and end up as part of a new story. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 gathers the creative spaces, residences, cultural homes and hubs of eastern Finland all together. Our digital platform will facilitate joining a communal network of players and facilitates accessibility for guests also.

Creative players will be assembled in the artist data bank of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform. Through the platform it will be easy to study the expertise of the professional artists in our area and find suitable art players for local, national, and international productions.

Tavinsalmi medieval centre

The history of the city of Kuopio and the province of North Savonia dates back to the 1500s, when a state-owned estate was established in the village of Tavinsalmi. The plan is to build a medieval adventure centre at the location of the original estate, bringing the spirit of the past back to the location. During the ECoC year 2026, medieval times will return to Tavinsalmi. If implemented, theme days and events will be organised at the centre, where visitors can experience a day in the medieval times: getting immersed in the habits, food, and handicraft culture, and acquiring first-hand experience in brewing medieval beer, fencing and bow hunting. Events for children and young adults will bring medieval times into modern-day popular culture, such as LARP (live action role-playing) and Cosplay (Costume playing).

ON CONNECTING BRIDGES OF WELL-BEING

Arts and culture have been proven to increase feelings of well-being. In this programme we will create an active and participatory way of life, we will enhance the visibility and equality of special arts by including activities in the ECoC year programme, and we will immerse culture as part of phenomenal exercising activities.

We will be offering opportunities to submit applications for the creation of new cultural well-being projects.

Mutual Cultural well-being network in eastern Finland

South Savonia's "Taikuhyve" and North Savonia's Well-being Power Plant of Eastern Finland are examples of regional networks that aim to develop activities that combine cultural activities with well-being and arts and cultural activities that promote well-being. They also act as regional interaction and communications channels. Our goal is to ensure that in 2026 each province has its own cultural well-being network and we work purposefully towards increasing the impact of culture and arts on the well-being of people. Many projects such as Kulttuurikamut (Culture chums), Pirstäjät (Stimulators) and the Kaikukortti are available so that everybody has the opportunity to enjoy cultural activities. The network is active in participating in ECoC events.

Phenomenal special arts

Culture belongs to everyone! Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will bring forth the talent of artists requiring special support and will create participation and equal opportunity for all. We will include special arts in our programmes and encourage all of our cooperation networks to pay careful attention to humane values and equal opportunities in their own projects. High-priority projects of phenomenal special arts will be Hyppy!

(Jump), a theatre event in Mikkeli and the multi-art festival Parafest in Joensuu, which will be developed and expanded to include all of eastern Finland. We are working on finding international partners for organising various events.

Liikutaan! - Let's move!

Regional exercise organisations will take an active role in the ECoC year through their own Liikutaan! (Let's move!) programme. They will bring together various regional sports clubs, municipal sports services, educational institutions, schools, and day care centres with whom different kinds of all-year-round, easily accessible, and low-threshold exercise activities will be organised. The Liikutaan! project will approach and encourage those that exercise the least to participate in their exercise groups. The main events will be grouped according to the seasons of the year. In spring, a bicycle relay which will tour through all of the four provinces, will be organised. In the summer the main event will be a Nightless Night orienteering event, in the autumn walking, berry-picking and mushroom-picking will be the focal point, and the ECoC year will end in a "pipolätkä" tournament, i.e., "beanie hockey" - an informal ice hockey tournament. Events involving exercise will be an integral element of other main events of the ECoC year. Regional exercise organisations will work together with cultural organisations to integrate art experiences in their projects. Regional organisations have discussed cooperation with the St. Petersburg sports committee and with the Magdeburg2025 ECoC project.



National costumes, Photo: Susanna Mattheiszen

EVERYDAY SAIMAA ON CONNECTING BRIDGES

- Well-being from nature
- Saimaa culture tours
- Try out culture, test art visits
- Communal events
- Phenomenal actions and doers
- Joint campaigns



Eastern Joy

THE PRIMAL FORCE OF MUSIC

In our area, especially in North Karelia, an ancient folk music tradition thrives, based on the Finnish national epic Kalevala, and the national instrument, the kantele. Singing is still the strongest form of human expression, and playing music is an extension of words. However, our own phenomenal Karelian cultural heritage, right here in its own environment, is in danger of becoming extinct, being lost and gone forever. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will bring the region's own musical heritage into modern-day times to make it visible, and will bring players across musical genres together, generating a platform for new musical innovations. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is working together with the Slovakian ECoC candidate Žilina in preserving national instruments that are under threat of becoming extinct, and is planning a festival, in which the UNESCO-protected Slovakian fujara flute and the Finnish string instruments kantele and jouhikko will be the focal point.

Folk Music Institute of Eastern Finland

An institute of Folk music will be established in the Savonlinna region. The institute will research the Finno-Ugric folk music and song, dance and other traditions related to it, offering training and events, and will also record the traditions of eastern Finland. The goal is to raise awareness of folk music traditions, enhancing their value, and to serve as a broad platform for renewal work.

Operation Kantele

Our national instrument, the kantele, will be updated through the Operation Kantele project undertaken by the



North Karelian regional council and the municipality of Rääkkylä. We will inspire people to fall in love with the sound of the Karelian kantele and take the instrument into their own hands. In many communal ways we will ensure that the art of playing the kantele will remain alive in the future, and new kantele innovations will be developed. The future of the kantele will be fortified through the instrument development centre, which will be established in Rääkkylä. The kantele serves as an important connection to our cultural roots; we believe the instrument can live on and become even more phenomenal in the future. In 2026 the sound of the kantele will be heard in all of the four provinces and the social music will entice and bring together different generations and nationalities.

“Nyt mie ruppeen laulamaan” (Now I’m gonna start singing)

Many of the players of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will join in the song project which will increase involvement and well-being. Everyone can join in to sing together with children, young people, migrants, seniors and special groups.

At a certain time of day, in each of the provinces, people will come together to sing both old and new songs. We will return to the ancient social tradition of singing and rediscover the joy of its unique expression brings to everyday life in eastern Finland. We will rediscover the joy of song!

Saimaan orkesterisilta - Eastern Joy Orchestrated

The primal force of music, and the relationship of folk music to the development of classical music and the impact it has had on modern and contemporary music, will inspire the city orchestras in eastern Finland.

The orchestras will adopt the primal power of eastern folk music as one of their themes during the

ECoC year and will emphasize the cooperation that exists between folk musicians and singers. Score writers will be commissioned to create, and orchestras will premiere, exciting new works to commemorate the theme. The significance of song will be highlighted throughout the year in; bringing the public together to sing, for example. During the ECoC year, various European orchestras will come together to create one giant symphony orchestra, which will play at the main events of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026.

TOGETHER

Communal spirit is an integral part of everyday Saimaa. Under this theme we will explore new ways of creating communal work. We will include people of all ages, from the very youngest to the oldest. We value competence, skill and tacit knowledge, which we wish to pass along to future generations.

We will open up an application theme where we will search for programmes that are communal and bold, examining life in eastern Finland from an outsider's point of view.

LAKU - The World's largest children's culture festival

In 2026 the provincial children's culture centres and players will join together to produce the world's largest children's culture festival: LAKU. We want to encourage each child in the area to participate, one way or another, in the six-week programme that will take place in each of the four provinces. At the same time, we will write a story together, telling about the children of eastern Finland, and leaving a cultural legacy in the hearts of the new phenomenal generation that is on the rise. The main events of the festival will be huge choir concerts, art clinic spectacles and the Maja challenge. Preparations for the event will be accomplished in 2021-2025,

experimenting with new ways to address children's culture. A participatory budgeting option will be tested in the project. In addition, the children's culture centre VERSO is involved in producing the Rattaat—Wheels project comprising a multi-sensory performance based on the power of water, and stories based on interviews done with old-timers concerning their recollections of industrial development in the Saimaa region. The way of working which results from the project will remain as part of a regional cultural education plan. We have entertained the possibility of a mutual programme discussed where professionals in children's culture from eastern Finland will jointly produce puppet theatre acts with Slovakian artists from Žilina.

Meeting of Masters and Apprentices

Eastern Finland benefits strongly from the many phenomenal professionals we have in the region who possess special skills and expertise. Traditional handicrafts, such as sewing national costumes and tuning them up, building wooden instruments, and crafting birch bark, represent skills which have an important cultural heritage and need to be passed on to a new generation of workers - now! Much tacit knowledge can also be found in the many associations and in the cultural and art fields. We will challenge the Masters to share their knowledge and Apprentices to continue the work of the Masters by creating their own interpretations of the abundant tacit knowledge being passed on from one generation to another. We will enrich our programme by bringing together the many nationalities in our area. The meeting of cultures and traditions can lead to innovations, and by working together, understanding of other cultures will be improved. We will organise workshops and events within this programme in 2026.

Saimaa Skill Share Lab

Saimaa Skill Share Lab is a meeting place for acquiring new skills, sharing information and enhancing communal spirit. The project will create Master Classes led by national and international experts. The Master Class concept is a new learning environment, where thinking and doing is accomplished by using an innovative, mentoring approach. One of our partners in the project is Mikkeli Memory Campus - the service centre for information management. Digital archives offer the Skill Share Lab access to an extensive inventory of basic material and a network through which new innovations can be created. One of the Skill Share Lab events is a communal meeting for entrepreneurs: "Kesän onnellisin päivä" (Happiest day of the summer) where both experienced entrepreneurs and young growth entrepreneurs are offered an excellent opportunity for networking, sharing experiences and learning new ways to work together. The event will be organised by the Young Entrepreneurs of South Savonia, Savonia and North Karelia.

Suomen Pisin Wappu ("The Longest May Day in Finland")

is a traditional May Day celebration organised by the students at Skinnarila, the campus of the Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology (LUT) and the LAB University of Applied Sciences in Lappeenranta. The Suomen Pisin Wappu spectacle lasts for several weeks and features a different event every day. In 2026 students from the other universities in the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region will be invited to participate in the event. The Wapunaika (May Day time) will begin with the declaration of the "Wappuräyhä" (May Day revelry) including the eternal Wappunuotio (May Day bonfire), parties, sports events, excursions to other regions, outdoor festivals, and academic dinner parties.



LET'S EAT!

Food has always been a matter of honour for a hostess or host in eastern Finland. Our cuisine is based on seasonal harvests, revealing a story about our way of life, cultural heritage and hospitality. We bake, roast and prepare food of many varieties - from game to fish, to berries and mushroom. Traditional foods are highly valued, and recipes are customarily passed on from one generation to the next.

Saimaa Region of Gastronomy is one of our high priority projects. We are applying for European Region of Gastronomy status in 2026 on behalf of the entire Saimaa region. We will bring our pure food into focus, passing along to all of Europe our special techniques for foraging wild herbs and mushrooms and preparing food in the midst of nature. Emphasis will be placed on the importance of improving accessibility to local ingredients, extending service networks across provincial borders, and achieving beneficial results by enhancing cooperation under the D.O. Saimaa brand. Cooperation between food players in eastern Finland will intensify and new concepts for events will be expanded to include other regions. Our goal is that in 2026 each municipality will have its own food event and several Saimaa Gastro Ambassadors will populate the area of eastern Finland. The region's culinary tourism products will be productised with the cooperation of regional companies, associations and creative industry participants and bridges built to international markets.

Table Over Borders – Стол через границу In this event we will actually build dinner tables that extend over the border between Finland and Russia. We will invite residents on both sides of the border, food connoisseurs and international gastro-tourists to partake in this gastronomic feast, featuring the very best dishes from



2. CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC CONTENT

eastern Finland and Russia. Preliminary plans for the event have already started with the cultural committee of the Leningrad area.

Say MUIKKU! When Brits have fish & chips, we Finns have “paistetut muikut”. Vendace is an integral part of the cuisine in eastern Finland and it has been consumed here for as long as the area has been populated. The traditional Savonian food, kalakukko, is usually made with vendace. Vendace is mainly caught using gill nets, fyke nets and seines. It is the most important type of fish that professional fishers catch and the most significant to the fishing economy. Eating vendace and other wild freshwater fish from Finnish waters is truly ecological. We will challenge people to share their experiences of preparing food from fish, especially so-called “trash fish,” by providing photographs of their fishing and cooking activities, as well as providing recipes of their favourite and most delicious freshwater fish dishes. When taking your photo, capture your feeling of pure Eastern Joy by saying MUIKKU! (instead of CHEESE!)

EVERYDAY SAIMAA WITH EASTERN JOY

- **Jovial Savonians and hospitable Karelians**
- **Storytelling and the power of words**
- **Visiting culture**
- **Village festivities**
- **“Rotina” tradition (taking a gift of sweet and savoury pastries to a new-born)**
- **Baking traditions**

Q12 Explain succinctly how the cultural programme will combine local cultural heritage and traditional art forms with new, innovative and experimental cultural expressions?

The Eastern Joy theme highlights a rich history and a life well-lived, laying a strong foundation for future generations. It brings our strongest heritage-related content together and moulds it into our cultural programme. The Primal Force of Music programme brings the Finnish national instrument, the kantele, and the traditions of Karelian and Savonian folk music and our national epic Kalevala, into modern day times. The kantele is a phenomenal ancient musical instrument from eastern Finland, played to illustrate strong feelings of both joy and sorrow. The Kalevala rhythm and singing in the Kalevala metre have been the strongest mode of word; singing together is an integral part of our cultural heritage.

The Masters and Apprentices Meet project will bring together regional experts in a variety of fields and records their valuable work for future generations. We wish to pass along and teach handicraft skills to both our own people and our guests. We challenge Masters to share their knowledge and Apprentices to make use of this rich heritage of knowledge left for us by preceding generations, by inventing their own interpretations.

The Syömään! (Let’s eat!) programme will strengthen the communal spirit of the area through the rich culinary heritage of eastern Finland. Preparing traditional locally sourced food and eating together

will be an important part of the cultural events in the ECoC offerings. Saimaa Gastro-ambassadors will help to build bridges between the culinary cultures and the various gastronomy professionals.

Under the theme of The Power of Water, the Forest culture programme will seek inspiration from old sculpting and building traditions, and the way of life in eastern Finland. Mythology and communal spirit are the source of revolutionary thinking in the City(e)scape and Lovet2026 projects. The international cultural content and artworks will be erected in the forest and lake landscape.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has been inspired by the “Ring tours” (train trips offered by Finland’s state railway company VR) in the 1950s and 1970s, and we have brought these ideas into the present with the help of platform-thinking. Under the theme of The Power of Water, the Art and Culture on Water programme in which different art genres, from arts to theatre, float cultural adventures along the water. The wooded lake landscape with its numerous natural harbours will be harnessed once again as a stage for the Ring tours. Applying virtual and augmented reality to bring history back to life will bring additional excitement to the experiences enjoyed along the routes. We will invite guests to walk to authentic venues and immerse themselves into accounts of past happenings, leaving their own tracks in the continuing virtual story. Through drama and experiential pedagogy, we want to raise interest especially among children and young people in the history and traditions of the area. That is the only way to ensure that our cultural heritage will be preserved for generations to come.

Traditions and the past discourse with the future. All three need each other so that Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will carry well past the ECoC year. Reflection on the future will be connected to the National Futures



Day in March. It will be started up in 2021 by organising the first Saimaa Future Day, after which the event will recur annually. The theme of the Saimaa Future Day will change yearly, based on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programme, and the event will be organised in all of the four provinces. The Saimaa Future Day will be organised in conjunction with entities involved in anticipating the future. This will grant the opportunity of connecting bridges to The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra and the Finland Futures Research Centre, the main organisers of the National Futures Day.

Q13 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?

The cultural programme of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has been specifically designed to include as many individuals and organisations as possible; at its core is a network which actively encourages participation and seeks ways to expand. In addition to the two coordinators, basic work on the project has been accomplished by members of the Bridge Builders Team, representing all four provinces. Utilising the networks and know-how of the Bridge Builders Team has allowed us to connect with various artists and other cultural players in all of the provinces and their respective capital cities.

In meetings organised in the summer 2019 many challenges were identified. It is those challenges we aim to solve with the ECoC programme. Among the problems outlined was the fact that eastern Finland is viewed as

an area inhabited predominantly by people who are no longer employed; tourism is seasonal by nature; residents are shy of telling others about their own abilities; regional cooperation on many levels is lacking; ecological safeguards need to remain in place; and it would be advantageous to develop stronger ties with our Russian neighbours.

In September 2019 brainstorming sessions took place throughout eastern Finland to discuss main themes for the ECoC year. These conversations centred on hospitality and resilience but revealed a unique story where the focal point of the culture was based on water and forests. Based on these meetings, the themes were outlined and sent on for further comment. We received feedback and improvement suggestions from approximately 60 people.

During the next workshop round we immersed ourselves even deeper into developing content. In different areas around eastern Finland we organised almost 30 workshops, involving artists, cultural and tourism organisations, entrepreneurs and people active in many different regional associations. Participants represented both young people and pensioners.

State-supported institutions in the area, such as orchestras, museums, children's cultural players, theatres, libraries and various sports organisations were called together to plan programmes extending over provincial borders. These meetings created a new kind of way of working together among the provincial cultural institutions when they committed to working together and planning mutual programme contents. New networks have already been created and the inspiration to develop mutual content has increased, transforming words into action.

We also identified new partners, with whom we can produce content that supports each other, especially in the field of nature tourism, culinary culture, and

the cultural environment and local history projects. We will strengthen cultural travel and create new opportunities for cooperation between artists, cultural players and tourism.

Multi-level, broad preparation ensures a stable operational environment for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 where individual professional artists and cultural players can give their own contents. The platform must be ready so that multi-faceted cultural content can bloom and reach a wide audience.

We are still open to new programme content and the ECoC programme structure will be supplemented by opening up opportunities for new open applications. For example, we will build new workshops for international art and science and create prerequisites for strengthening cultural entrepreneurship.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have an effect on the future actions and contents of Saimaa phenomenon 2026. At the time of writing this bid book, the cultural sector is experiencing difficulties and needs special support - now, and in the future. Changes in our operational functions are in the works, and will be considered when planning further content for the ECoC year, once the situation with the pandemic calms down.



Q14 Give a general outline of the activities foreseen in view of:

a. Promoting the cultural diversity of Europe, intercultural dialogue and greater mutual understanding between European citizens

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

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

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will bring forth and strengthen multi-faceted European culture and cultural heritage, dialogue between various cultures and mutual understanding and fellowship between people and nations in today's Europe from seven different perspectives. These are the shared experiences: interaction at the eastern border area, connecting waters and the European great lake areas, the significance of forests and relationships with the woods, gender equality, the richness and diversity of the European small languages, the significance of culture in fending off social polarisation and cultural sustainability.

THE BORDER REGION - MEMORY OF WAR AND PEACE

Saimaa Phenomenon will highlight the fact that eastern Finland is part of an extensive border area between the east and west. We are part of the northernmost part of the long and broken cultural border of eastern Europe, which extends from Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, through Poland and the Baltic states to Finland. This zone has been the thousand-year-old area of cultural

collisions and interaction, where citizens have shared experiences of war and changed borders as a result of the wars. Along with the encumbrance of history, the enriching interaction between the cultures and the transmission of information and influences needs to be stressed. Along the border zone special cultural expertise has been created which is strongly evident in the relationship between eastern Finland and Russia. We consider it important to share our mutual experience with the rest of Europe.

The story of eastern Finland is worth telling in a European context. Since it was established in 1703, the radiating impact and attraction of the metropolis of St. Petersburg has extended to the northernmost parts of Saimaa. People went to St. Petersburg for seasonal work and on their trade travels many wanted to see the empirical glory and the swarm of people with their own eyes. The Russian Revolution in 1917 cut off the connection and access to the city which was renamed as Leningrad, and once again in 1924 Leningrad was isolated from the people of eastern Finland for decades. World War II moved the border between Finland and the Soviet Union to its current position.

The cities of Saimaa have cooperated and wish to continue the cross-border cooperation between the EU and Russia. We in eastern Finland have the knowledge, experience and skill to do this. As a demonstration of this competence, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 wants to build a multi-faceted series of cultural events with both Russian and European partners. We will share multilingual information on the history of the Saimaa border and interaction on the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform also.

We wish to tell Europe the story of Saimaa, St. Petersburg and Russia; how this blooming relationship was created and destroyed; how its recreation has had such a significant influence on the Saimaa region and how now the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 can bring

Europe and Russia into a closer relationship through art and culture.

THE EUROPEAN GREAT LAKES – WITH THE POWER OF CONNECTING WATER

Finland is a land of thousands of lakes. The seas, lakes and rivers have always connected Europeans. Trade, people and influences have moved long distances from one place to another with the Power of Water. In spite of its location, Saimaa has been integral in the broad interaction for centuries with eastern Europe. A feasible waterway has not been available from Saimaa to the Gulf of Finland nor has the Vuoksi, which flows to Lake Ladoga been sailable due to numerous waterfalls on the river. To solve this problem, in 1844 it was decided that a canal be built between Saimaa and the Gulf of Finland. When the Saimaa Canal was opened in 1856, Finnish Lakeland had a direct cultural contact with the rest of Europe. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 tells about what the fourth largest lake in Europe has meant to the people living on its shores from the stone age to modern-days and what its significance is in the future.

Clean water is a basic requisite of life. The water of Saimaa is clean at the moment, but it has not always been that way. We have learned from prior accidents and learned to take care after our waters. In many European countries whole bodies of water or parts of them have been conserved by establishing national or nature parks around them. This has also been done on Lake Saimaa where the unique national parks of Kolovesi and Linnansaari are located. In 2018 approximately 50,000 people visited these national parks.

Saimaa is home to one of the world's rarest seals, and approximately 400 Saimaa Ringed Seals live in the region. The seal is a relic, which was locked in the lake as a result of the earth rising in the area after the last ice-age, approximately 8,000 years ago. Fortunately, the seal population has grown lately due to rigid preservation

measures and it is possible for a visitor to see one of these rarities on a boat trip.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 wants to invite the players in the European lake districts such as Ladoga, Onega, Peipus, Vänern and Vättern, to come together to plan a project consisting of a series of events and seminars. We will also invite representatives of other great lake districts from around the world to join us.

Expertise on the Saimaa Ringed Seal and water purifying technologies can be found in the area of Saimaa Phenomenon. Based on this seminars will be organised during the ECoC year for both experts and the general public.

We want to tell all of Europe how important clean water is and why it needs to be preserved. We also want to share the story of The Power of Water as an inspiration for art.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FORESTS AND THE FOREST RELATIONSHIP - NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL WEALTH

Finland has the most forestland in Europe and eastern Finland is in the very centre of the densest forest region. Growing forests as carbon sinks and the wise use of forests are focal questions in the Finnish society and in fending off climate change. Finland and Finns are known for their multivalued forest relationships which is also indicated by the fact that the forest relationship in Finland was selected as a national intellectual culture heritage on the UNESCO culture heritage list.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 wants to tell the rest of Europe about the phenomenally special relationship we share with the Finnish forest; a relationship which has provided inspiration and empowerment to artists and composers throughout the centuries, as well as so-called “normal”, everyday Finns. The Karelia inspiration, Imatra Falls and the landscape of Koli were compelling forces behind the works of composer Jean Sibelius, and

painters Akseli Gallén-Kallela and Eero Järnefelt. Without the forests, Finnish food culture would be lacking, and people would be unable to attain their fine state of well-being.

During the ECoC year Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will promote a versatile programme inspired by forests and trees. The programme will include folk music, chain saw sculpturing, Finnish contemporary folk art (ITE), dance and children’s culture.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 wants to tell Europe the story of how Finland has lived, in the past and continues to live, a life centred around the forest; and how the forest and man have interacted for thousands of years. We want to provide Europe with a clear understanding of the Saimaa region; a place where the people believe forests and water constitute the essence of life.

A STORY OF EQUALITY WRITTEN IN SAIMAA DESERVES TO BE HEARD

The history of equal rights in Finland begins in the city of Kuopio and is an important part of European cultural heritage. Finnish women were the first in Europe to be granted the right to vote and their eligibility to run for political office was enacted in 1906. The change of law required a decade of work for and on behalf of women’s rights. The first and most influential person behind the women’s rights movement in Finland was author Minna Canth, who lived in Kuopio. She stated that she would fight to the last breath on behalf of the downtrodden and mistreated. Minna Canth’s spiritual heritage is still going strong in the Finnish society and in Kuopio. Equal rights, freedom of expression, and tolerance are among issues which deserve more attention and can be improved in Finland, Europe, and throughout the entire world.

Equal literacy is equality. Finland is a leading country with one of the highest literacy rates in the world, but in recent years the trend has gradually reversed and currently moving in the wrong direction. Modern-day

Minna Canths are needed - to work on promoting literacy and encouraging young people to develop a love of reading. Reading engages minds and helps prevent children and young people from feeling they are excluded from society.

Discussion concerning Finland joining the European Heritage Label project began after Finland celebrated its centennial year of independence in 2017. Finland joined the European Heritage Label project the following year and the first opportunity to apply for a Finnish cultural heritage site will be in 2021. The city of Kuopio has already stated its intent to apply for a Cultural Heritage Label for Minna Canth’s lifetime work on behalf of equal rights.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has broached the topic of cooperation regarding equal rights issues with the German city of Hannover, which is in the second stage of its bid for ECoC 2025. As a result of these discussions, we will participate as a partner in the events and seminars concerning gender equality organised by Hannover in 2025. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 supports the concepts of human dignity and equality and requires the same values from the organisers of events in the ECoC project.

RICHNESS AND DIVERSITY OF EUROPEAN SMALL LANGUAGES

Finnish is a small, vibrant, but thriving language - as are many other small languages in Europe. The language serves to awaken Finnish national feeling. Finland is a nation of readers even today, and plenty of Finnish literature is available. Joel Lehtonen, a well-known author from Savonlinna, has been elevated to the same status as our national author Aleksis Kivi, and is considered to be one of Finland’s finest and most significant writers. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 region serves as the location of many novels, as well as the birthplace of many authors. Conversely, many authors, such as Lehtonen, were considered cosmopolitans. Lehtonen travelled



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extensively in Europe and translated many books from several different languages into Finnish. The location of Lehtonen's novels, Putkinotko, tells its own story about this literary heritage. The complete works of the writer are maintained by the Joel Lehtonen Society. Putkinotko is located in Tolvanniemi, in the area of Sääminki, nowadays Savonlinna.

The best-known Finnish work is the national epic, Kalevala, which has been translated into 61 languages. Kalevala continues to be at the forefront of contemporary literature for the Finns, and it has been rewritten in different dialects and children and young adults have their own versions of the book. Especially the dialects spoken in eastern Finland are vibrant. We are proud of our own dialects, and catechisms, comic strips, and dictionaries are published in the different dialects. Nowadays the global language of English is changing our mother tongue as well. As unfortunate as this may be, it does help keep our own language alive because we do need to keep up with the times.

During the EcoC year, we want to spotlight the richness of small languages and dialects and showcase the significance of local literature by organising literary events. We will invite everyone who is interested in Joel Lehtonen and literature published in small languages (such as literary researchers and other literature aficionados) to these events.

CULTURE IN DECREASING POLARISATION - A COMMON CHALLENGE FOR EUROPEAN SMALL CITIES AND PERIPHERAL REGIONS

Savonlinna and many other municipalities in eastern Finland are, by many measures, areas that are losing their vitality, even though the region enables a good life. European cities that are similar to Savonlinna in size and other attributes suffer from the identical problem. How can the retaining power of small cities and the countryside which are outside the influence of big cities maintain

their retaining power and increase their attractiveness to new residents and returnees? Capital cities of the provinces are suffering from the same problems.

Culture in the broadest sense of the word, has a significant role to play in the development of the cities and provinces. Culture conveys communal spirit - in ways we work together, among individuals and organisations, in practices, impressions, and values. We cannot yet say what the social impact of the COVID-19-pandemic will be, but it is possible that it will have ripple effects on urbanisation trends.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) art and culture have significant impact on well-being. Culture is the key to a good life. Could an increase in cultural offerings effectively reduce social polarisation - one of the negative global mega trends of the 2020s? The European Union has a common interest in curbing the spread and inhibiting the expansion of social polarisation.

We stress that the residents in the small cities and remote villages need to be drawn to and kept in the vicinity of multi-faceted cultural services. From the perspective of residents living in remote villages, mobile libraries that come by weekly, children's hobby and music clubs or pensioners' reading or memory circles, are just as important as the prominent cultural events such as the Savonlinna Opera festival. Preventing exclusion and social polarisation starts with providing all EU citizens with the opportunity to enjoy cultural services. We believe that from a broad perspective, cultural services and debates brought about by discussions of art and cultures, can provide an effective means of combating social polarisation.

We want to alleviate social polarisation by increasing communal spirit, encouraging interaction between people, respecting diversity, supporting cultural services in the outermost regions and promoting self-motivated cultural activities among residents.

CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY AS AN ENABLER OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Challenges of the future also affect the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 area to a great extent. The United Nations Agenda2030 includes 17 ambitious goals for achieving sustainable development by 2030. Ecological sustainability must be maintained, climate change must be halted, the circular and data economy must be reinforced, the cleanliness of waters and seas must be ensured, especially the purity of groundwater, and the diversity of nature safeguarded. Both economic and social sustainability must be addressed in order to assure that natural resources are not wasted, and so that states can achieve world peace and secure the well-being and safety of their citizens.

However, sustainable development cannot be realised without cultural sustainability. It is goal-oriented change of culture towards a more sustainable world. Change only happens through cultural change. When a person consciously changes their way of thinking, their world view, and their ways of acting, that change impacts the daily lives of other individuals, as well as the economy, politics and administration. People who "think different" are needed everywhere.

The young people of today are key players in achieving sustainable development. We need to listen carefully and take into account their concerns about the future of the planet. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 supports and strengthens this thinking.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 wants to take up the challenge, and plans to invite the European Ministers of Culture and other key cultural players to Savonlinna in 2026, to consider how cultural transformation, (meaning the social and cultural turning point towards a more sustainable way of life), could be globally achieved and implemented. The outcome of the conference will be the signing of a Declaration of European Cultural Sustainability, which will be known all over the world as the Savonlinna Agreement.



Q15 Can you explain your overall strategy to attract the interest of a broad European and international public?

The superior level of artistic content of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will act like a magnet in attracting people from around the world to come to phenomenal eastern Finland. The cultural programme of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will offer international audiences authentic encounters and genuine hospitality. In the cross-cutting Everyday Saimaa programme we will bring together content from diverse local participants. The ECoC programme has been created from a perspective of transformative travel. We believe an increasing number of travellers choose destinations where they can acquire first-hand experiences, learn about the local culture and customs, get to know the people, and learn something new and relevant.

Our cultural programme encourages movement. We suggest people explore the city environment and nature as well, such as the Arts and Culture on Waters programme. The Spirit of the Forest project's open programme application offers opportunities for international players to create art in a unique environment, bringing about new concepts for experimental events.

The first main artist of the Savonlinna ECoC year 2026 is Light Artist Kari Kola, whose visual exhibition will open the Savonlinna Culture Capital year. His work concentrates on outdoor installations that consist of several different forms of art. Kola, who grew up in Joensuu, has created large light installations in many different countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovenia, France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. In 2015 his artwork Light Is Here opened up the UN international Year of Light at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

Kola's latest work "Savage Beauty", was exhibited

in Ireland in March 2020, as part of the Galway ECoC 2020 programme. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic, the installation was exhibited virtually. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will engage a three-part programme from Kari Kola which is described in detail under Q 11.

Architect Sami Rintala, who resides in Bodö, Norway, is internationally acclaimed for his wood architecture, and is the second main artist of the Savonlinna ECoC year 2026. Rintala, who is originally from Kaavi, in eastern Finland has publicly voiced his opinion on how more attention could be paid to the negative cycle of the rural net out-migration areas with architecture and buildings. In 1999 Rintala raised waves with his production where old barns were elevated on ten-metre wooden sticks, portraying animals moving from the countryside into the city.

Now, Rintala is interested in forest culture and the idea of people returning to paradise to live a good life. In Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Rintala and his team will produce a programme named City(e)scape which will entail cooperation with various international schools of architecture (see Q 11).

M_itä? in 2026, managed by the art museums of Mikkeli, Kuopio and Joensuu. The review of modern art will expand to Lappeenranta (and possibly to other cities in the Saimaa region) and it is hoped that cooperation will extend to an international level. Outstanding curated reviews of the modern art works produced by professional artists residing on the shores of Lake Saimaa, will give them the substantial attention they so richly deserve. M_itä? will bring publicity to the region's vibrant modern art scene. Given the appropriate opportunities, modern art will also spread in popularity to the communal level through participatory events.

In 2026 we will arrange international exhibitions in the Saimaa Phenomenon digital exhibition spaces in Kuopio and Savonlinna. Even before 2026 comes around, we plan to capture our unique nature and icon art as

immersive experiences and export them to the world. Through the visits we will raise international awareness of the Saimaa lake nature and the upcoming programme of the ECoC year.



*LAND(E)SCAPE Architectonic Landscape Installation in Savonlinna 1999. Exhibited in La Biennale Di Venezia 7. Mostra Internazionale Di architettura. Artists: Sami Rintala and Marco Casagrande
Photo: Jussi Tiainen (daytime) and Heikki Leikola (burning barns)*



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Q16 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?

In order to implement its ECoC programme, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has connected with several former and future ECoC cities. Contacts will also be made with those applicants who have not succeeded with their ECoC bids, if their applications have included parts that would complement our programme.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 representatives have visited Bodö, Klaipeda, Matera, Narva and Tartu. In April 2020, a large delegation of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 committee cancelled its planned visit to Galway, Ireland because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The same reason caused cancellation of scheduled excursions to Hannover, Hildesheim, Magdeburg and Veszprem. Delegates from the Slovakian city Žilina were able to visit Savonlinna just before the pandemic broke out.

Through the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) ECoC SME project, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has received information on the involvement of young people and entrepreneurs participating in the ECoC process and has created contacts with Rijeka, Timisoara, Kaunas, Leeuwarden and Matera. Ideas are being discussed on about doing further research about local identity with the Veszprem University of Pannon and partnering with Hannover with respect to development of ECoC evaluation processes. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has also studied Turku's evaluation and monitoring processes for its ECoC year.

The border zone theme has been discussed with

the Narva2024 ECoC project. Narva emphasized the border issue, which is also a problem in eastern Estonia, in its own bid book. Also, in Hungary's 2023 ECoC bid, the city of Szombathely stressed the border region theme; the era of the cold war after World War II, and the eastern regions of the European Union being left behind the iron curtain. Riga, a ECoC in 2014, stressed its position on the eastern and western border, as well. Contact will be made with these ECoC cities during the second round of the application process.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 delegates have also discussed cooperation with the cultural committees of the cities of St. Petersburg and the Leningrad area. The goal is to establish prerequisites which will lay the foundation for interesting cultural opportunities.

Finland joined the European Council cultural activities group in 2018, and there are currently two cultural routes in eastern Finland which have gained status. The two routes which have gained status are the Astuvansalmi rock paintings in Ristiina, listed in the Prehistoric Rock Art Trails, and the St. Olaf Cultural route which begins in Trondheim, Norway and ends in Olavinlinna. The main Finnish sites on the latter route are located in Turku, which served as a ECoC in 2011. We plan to engage assistance from Turku to gain more recognition for the St. Olaf route. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is presently pursuing development of a cultural route with the Baltic states, using the theme of runo-song. This will form a part of the "Runon ja rajan tie" (Road of Poem and Border) adhering to the heritage of the Kalevala. The cultural and natural sites at the southern parts of the lake basin have been collected into Saimaa Geopark, and the application of the UNESCO Geopark status is currently pending.

The European Great Lakes programme presented in Q14 expands The Power of Water theme by networking with other sister cities of the Saimaa

Phenomenon 2026 cities and other ECoC cities. We will discuss possible cooperative opportunities with the ECoC 2023 Veszprem in the vicinity of Lake Balaton and the 2024 ECoC Tartu by the Peipus lake. On the Russian side we have opened up discussions of cooperation with the city of Priozersk by the largest lake in Europe, Lake Ladoga. The city of Petrozavodsk, on the shore of the second largest lake in Europe, Onega, is the sister city of Joensuu and Jönköping, on the shore of the Swedish lake Vättern is the sister city of Kuopio. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has also joined forces with the Network for European lakes (nEULakes). Of the Saimaa cities, Imatra is a member of this network.

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Forest Culture Programme combines many of the future ECoC cities. The central theme of this project is the history and future use of wood as the primary building material as related to innovations, know-how, arts and industries. The goal is to revitalise the gradually diminishing wood building competence and support new innovations. The project also puts emphasis on the connection between building from wood with carbon cycling and carbon storage.

A partner of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, the Finnish Forest Museum Lusto will commence a joint project with the museum of Kižhi, located on an island on Lake Onega and known for its wooden churches, and designated as a UNESCO world heritage site. Another potential partner in historic wood building is also a UNESCO World Heritage site, located in the Carpathians of Slovakia. This partner in question is a museum which is responsible for the administration of eight wooden churches built during the period 1500-1700. The church of Petäjävesi, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the world's largest wooden church in Kerimäki will be included in the cooperative venture. Also, Veszprem2023 and Bodö2024 have announced their interest in the issue of wood building and architecture.



The German ECoC 2025 candidate, Hannover, has plans for social and gender equality which fit in well with Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 themes. The city of Kuopio is applying for the first Cultural Heritage Label in Finland for equal rights activist Minna Canth. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has initiated discussions about participating in Hannover's equal rights projects.

The ideal of peace is a central pillar of sustainable development. German Hildesheim has stressed in its ECoC project the significance of working towards peace to increase international security. The Muisti Centre of War and Peace in Mikkeli is interested in cooperating with Hildesheim and preliminary discussions have begun concerning the Hildesheim Peace programme.

To envisage its own strategy concerning the prevention of social polarisation by political means, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 wishes to cooperate with Kaunas2022, Veszprem2023, Bad Ischl2024 and Tartto2024 ECoC. We want to see what kind of an impact the ECoC year has on strengthening the self-assurance of residents and eliminating lackadaisical attitudes. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 wants to hear feedback on how the other ECoC cities have succeeded in achieving their goals and what type of additional programmes are planned in the cities for maintaining positive development.

To promote cultural sustainability, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will make a suggestion to the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry for Foreign suggesting that a conference on cultural sustainability be organised in Savonlinna, in summer 2026. In the event that the suggestion gains support on a national and international level, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will initiate discussions with the European Union and European Commission, and the staff of Commissioner Marija Gabriel, who is responsible for cultural issues, to pursue the matter further.

Sister cities

MIKKELI

- 1. **Békéscsaba**, Hungary
- 2. **Luga**, Russia
- 3. **Mõisaküla**, Estonia
- 4. **Vejle**, Denmark
- 5. **Molde**, Norway
- 6. **Borås**, Sweden

SAVONLINNA

- 1. **Detmold**, Germany
- 2. **Kalmar**, Sweden
- 3. **Torzhok**, Russia
- 4. **Árborg**, Iceland
- 5. **Arendal**, Norway
- 6. **Silkeborg**, Denmark
- 7. **Budavár**, Budapest city zone 1, Hungary

KUOPIO

- 1. **Győr**, Hungary
- 2. **Minneapolis**, USA
- 3. **Winnipeg**, Canada
- 4. **Jönköping**, Sweden
- 5. **Alūksne**, Latvia
- 6. **Svendborg**, Denmark
- 7. **Pitkyaranta**, Russia
- 8. **Pskov**, Russia
- 9. **Castrop-Rauxel**, Germany
- 10. **Bodø**, Norway
- 11. **Gera**, Germany
- 12. **Besançon**, France
- 13. **Opole**, Poland
- 14. **Craiova**, Romania
- 15. **Shanghai Pudong**, China

JOENSUU

- 1. **Linköping**, Sweden
- 2. **Isafjordur**, Iceland
- 3. **Tönsberg**, Norway
- 4. **Hof**, Germany
- 5. **Vilnius**, Lithuania
- 6. **Petrozavodsk**, Russia

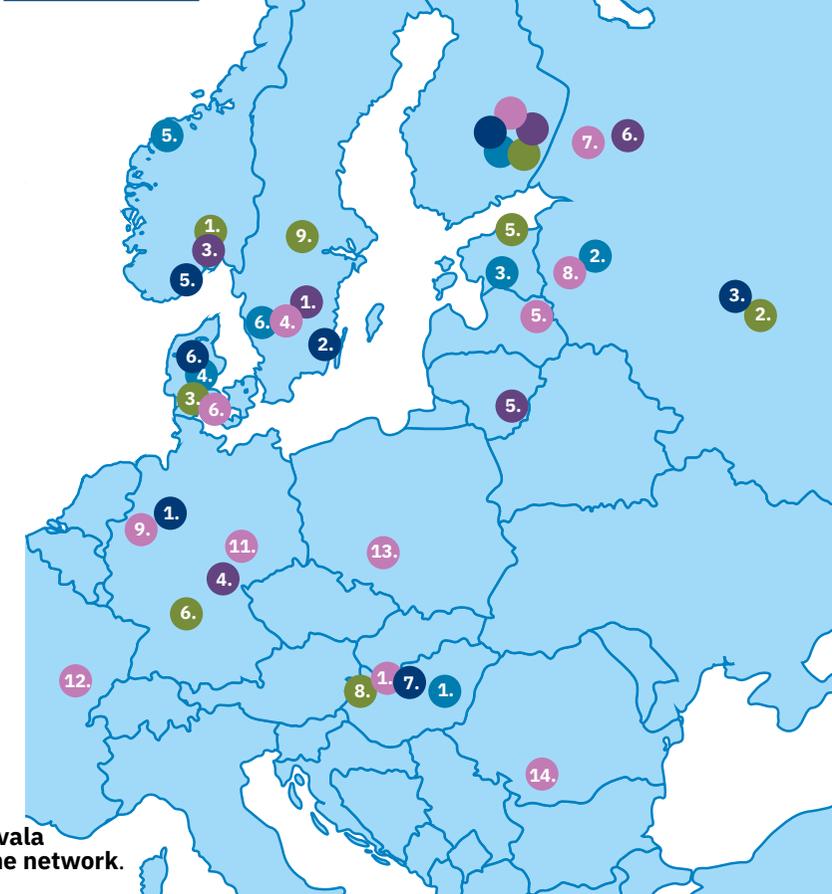
Also cooperation agreement between **Sortavala** and **Suojärvi**, and as a member of the **Mecine network**.

LAPPEENRANTA

- 1. **Drammen**, Norway
- 2. **Klin**, Russia
- 3. **Kolding**, Denmark
- 4. **Lake Worth**, USA
- 5. **Rakvere**, Estonia
- 6. **Schwäbisch Hall**, Germany
- 7. **Stykkisholmur**, Iceland
- 8. **Szombathely**, Hungary
- 9. **Örebro**, Sweden



ICELAND



NORTH AMERICA



CHINA



Q17 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.

A considerable number of Karelians and Savonians joined together and have created a phenomenal programme for the ECoC year. From the onset, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has employed a bottom-up strategy, aiming for transparency and encouraging open dialogue. We have made contact with residents directly and have asked them what kind of cultural offerings they would like to see, what interests them, and have inquired into how committed they are with respect to consuming new cultural offerings. Our goal has been to boldly compile a forward-looking bid book that looks like us, residents of eastern Finland. The success of our cooperation has required that we play with open cards, despite the fact that this is a competition for a much-desired title.

Up until April 2020, our story has developed through 30 workshops, public events and discussion forums which have been organised in Savonlinna, Mikkeli, Kuopio, Joensuu, Lappeenranta and Imatra. Participants in the workshops have included artists, cultural producers, entrepreneurs, and active individuals from various associations. The age span of the participants has been broad, from young people to senior citizens. Content accumulated from the events has been incorporated into the bid book. The phenomenal ideas received in response - the scope of their diversity and inventiveness, and the concrete proposals offered - have taken the organisers completely by surprise. The huge response received speaks to the cultural potential of the people

living in the region, and points to the fact that many ideas have not been realized due to lack of suitable channels and follow-up.

The media have provided comprehensive coverage of the many events involved in the project. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is an interesting topic from a social point of view which has generated active discussion in the media. Of special significance have been the newspaper articles and social media posts which convey the understanding that the communal power emanating from Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is the best thing that has happened in the provinces in a long time.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 communicates via its website and has an active presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter by which we communicate news about the project. The provinces and cities involved in the project have gained recognition due to publicity generated by communication professionals who have created newsletters and other materials, together with the use of other channels to get the word out. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has also been the theme of programmes in many events.

At public events, we have acknowledged local cultural projects and the people who have implemented them, with Saimaa Phenomenon 2026's own "phenomenal" recognition award. The tour of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 Trailblazers has raised spirits and inspired people to get involved in developing their own cultural events. Results have been encouraging and the residents in the region are proud of their own cities.

Individual ideas have been gathered through the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 website by employing a special questionnaire, symbolically named an "Idea Seine", where people have been able to enter their own suggestions. On the same platform a questionnaire was launched concerning the local identity and the ECoC year, and 624 responses were submitted from

different parts of eastern Finland. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has invited residents of the area to connect into a mutual "Saimaa Mycelium", a rapidly expanding network where individuals or organisations can share their own networks and connect with other groups to share ideas and find doers. The goal of the Mycelium is to connect issues that may appear to be far apart with the help of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. The Mycelium is open to all and everybody can join just as they are, with their own know-how and inspiration, to become part of a larger group of people.

In winter 2019-2020 Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 organised a writing competition for the upper school children in the four provinces; the task was to write about the future of the region under the heading of "The Saimaa of Dreams". We received 95 writings and many of them voiced concerns of climate change, the cleanliness of the lakes, ensuring diversity, employment and the prerequisites of a good life.

In their texts the young people expressed their wishes for a good life and being happy living by Lake Saimaa. The young people think that the Savonlinna ECoC project offers people in eastern Finland the opportunity for renewal and becoming happier, more open-minded and more communal-spirited. Diversity is accepted and everybody respects each other and the surrounding nature. And it is still important that we can easily and safely drink the water directly from Lake Saimaa.

In order to get people involved in producing Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 events a new way will be adopted by which the different players can work in an open and border-breaking way. The Saimaa Phenomenon as a platform concept leads with knowledge, highlights sustainability and accountability, providing ECoC year digital services to everyone.



When we saw the presentation about the project I thought “Wow, it would be cool if Savonlinna actually wins”.

Girl, aged 14, Savonlinna

The ECoC bid has awakened a sense of pride in me, because it’s actually our city/area that has been nominated as a candidate. Nobody could have ever believed that such a small city could achieve such a fantastic opportunity.

Girl, aged 14, Savonlinna



*Mikkelin Tyttöteatteri (Mikkeli Girl Theatre, Some sort of bodies),
Paukkula/Artium (2014). Photo: Sami Funke.*



Q18 Explain how you intend to create opportunities for participation of marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

Culture belongs to everybody and the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 ECoC year belongs to each and every resident in the four provinces. The initiation process of our programme has from the beginning been participatory and open to all. It has been done together and communally with the region's artists, cultural institutions, independent players, various associations, also considering many special groups. In the open workshops and the idea seines and through the Mycelium we have heard small wishes and big dreams, we have received suggestions which have been recorded, pending concrete procedures for the ECoC programme.

We understand that our geographical area is broad, distances are long, and the population is sparse. The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 programme will mean that remoteness does not mean exclusion. In 2022-2025 when the region's cities are in turns the Saimaa Capital of Culture, we will create the Saimaa Way - working together to ensure cultural equality for all of our residents, regardless of where they live, or what their socio-economic position. We will make our programme accessible and take the cultural programmes to places where it is not usually seen; under bridges, by the roadside resting places and harbours. We want our residents to "stumble" on culture, encountering it in unexpected locations and to experience phenomenal moments.

An actual challenge for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is the steadily growing group of older people who live alone and whom the cultural offerings do not reach due to the lack of information, immobility, poor

transport services or because of a difficult financial situation. Reaching them requires cooperation between the social and health sector, family members and voluntary workers. Cultural events must be free of charge and without obstacles so that it is easy to pick up people from their home and take them along.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will be involved in creating new opportunities for participation. For example, Savonlinna and Lappeenranta have implemented the Kaikukortti: a card with which somebody in need of financial support gets free admission to cultural events. Our goal is that in 2026 the same type of card will be available in all of our provinces. Culture friendship action is meant to help out people for whom the threshold to attend cultural events is high, and the concept has just gone to the testing stage. In 2026 volunteer culture friends will be familiar to all and they will accompany individuals, get the tickets and if necessary, guide the individuals to the event venue. Try out culture, test art, is a form of action which takes our residents into the neighbouring provinces among new cultural experiences.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will make visible the skill of artists who require special support in eastern Finland and will encourage them to get involved and become a part of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Our programme strengthens their involvement and supports them as equals among all artists. The Parafest festival for disabled artists and the regional Hyppy! Theatre festivals are part of the ECoC year programme. Also, in other programmes, and especially in the Everyday Saimaa programme, special groups are perceived as both producers of art as well as members of the audience. Additionally, we will inspire and involve artists who need special support to bring their own projects as part of our ECoC programme through open programme applications.

All four of our provinces have migrants and asylum seekers. In order to ensure their integration and that they remain as active citizens in our community, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will be building involvement and community. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will involve migrants and asylum seekers in projects, also giving global cultures a presence in 2022-2025, during each Saimaa Capital of Culture year. Our Eastern Joy programme encourages everybody to participate and meet up with others. We can introduce our ways, culture, culinary traditions to each other, and finally do all of these together. In the open programme applications migrants will be encouraged to participate.

We aim to involve everyone in eastern Finland in building the well-being of their own habitat. This is also the strategic focal point where additional resources will be allocated during the ECoC project. Participation of residents will be strengthened through various cooperation networks, where local players are central. In cooperation with various volunteer networks, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will be involved in activating groups of residents who are in a weaker social, financial or participatory position. We will increase community effort through various regional cultural well-being networks and players.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will be involved in planning and implementing various resident-oriented events, spectacles and campaigns. We will encourage everyone to be more active and create channels and methods to enhance the attributes of their own habitat for a comfortable lifestyle. Residents' initiatives will be taken further to the cities' decision-making processes through so-called partnership tables and participatory budgeting. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will enable organising even the smallest events in the cities and villages and organised by independent players and residents with the "Myötaataan"(We guarantee) scholarship.



Q19 Explain your overall strategy for audience development, and in particular the link with education and the participation of schools.

At the beginning of 2020 Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 implemented a questionnaire targeted at the residents of the four provinces in eastern Finland to determine how the residents consume cultural past times and how they feel about the bid for the ECoC title. 624 responses were recorded. Based on the replies the following table shows how the respondents participate in cultural activities. Only 1.8 percent of the respondents had not used any cultural services during the past year, few services were used by approximately one fourth of the respondents and

Use of cultural services in the four provinces, percent:

	At least once a month	At least six times a year	At least three times a year	At least once a year	Not once
Cinema	9	17	26	33	16
Theatre	2	7	25	35	30
Concerts	6	14	32	32	16
Art exhibitions and museums	5	10	21	38	27
Other museums	3	8	20	44	25
Opera	1	1	4	24	70
Events with entry fees	7	23	30	29	12
Free events / concerts, etc.	5	17	28	36	13

approximately seven percent of the respondents said they have used many cultural services. Reasons for using or not using cultural services were not queried.

The most challenging group is middle-aged and older men, whose interest in cultural events is very low according to research also. Their common interest is sports and other athletic events, and Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will offer such content together with various sports clubs. Good experiences have been accumulated through the cooperation between theatres and sports clubs and this will continue. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 encourages sports clubs, exercise organisations, and cultural actors to initiate a similar type of cooperation under the ECoC year.

In the case of older people living alone and in institutions the situations are slightly different. For several years, different kinds of cultural programmes have been organised in sheltered housing facilities for older people:

small theatre productions, musical performances, and reading out loud. Saimaa Phenomenon will develop suitable virtual contents for retirement homes. Participatory actions for older people living on their own are described under Q 18.

Young adults aged 20-25 can be best reached through their educational institution. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has already contacted them. LUT University (Lappeenranta and Mikkeli), University of Eastern Finland (UEF, Joensuu and Kuopio) and the Universities of Applied Science in eastern Finland: South Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences XAMK, LAB University of Applied Sciences, Karelia University of Applied Sciences, Savonia University of Applied Sciences, HUMAK University of Applied Sciences, and Diaconia University of Applied Sciences will be targeted in communication, telling about Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, and encouraging students to get involved in phenomenal actions and experiences.

The young people in the four provinces are involved in the ECoC project as Saimaa Ambassadors. Provincial youth councils and youth councils from municipalities work in the area and the ECoC year will be communicated through them. The youth councils will select their own Saimaa Phenomenon Ambassadors, who will spread the joyful message about the ECoC year.

A special challenge for the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is the children and young people of the families who live in the outskirts of the city and in the remote villages. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 aims to attract the children and young people to consume cultural events extensively to encourage them to be more active users of the services as adults, which according to research brings a better quality of life and well-being. Superior and versatile children's and young people's culture is stressed in the strategy, and this will leave life-long positive experiences on consuming and producing culture.



Arto Keinänen playing the accordion on his electric-powered cruise boat "Lady of the Lake" - (2018), Photo: Travelers Buddy / Visit Saimaa

The involvement of day care centres and schools in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has already started. Cultural activities organised by the municipalities for children have been legislated by law and the municipalities have compiled plans and programmes for cultural education which are the basis for what Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will do for involving school children in consuming culture and as independent producers of culture. The central cities of Saimaa have launched their own cultural and art education programmes which aim for each pre-schooler and student to familiarise themselves with the cultural offering of their own city and the possibilities for free-time activities. The Culture trail offers an experimental learning adventure and Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will implement this readily available channel to communicate events. The aim is to encourage school children to be inspired and fascinated by cultural and to experience how art impacts their well-being and makes culture more significant to them. In our programme content this is furthered by the enlivening of history and enhancing story telling through drama and experiential pedagogy and Rattaat-Wheels projects.

In 2026 children and young people will be considered in the broad LAKU programme, which includes children's art guidance activity, a science competition, and sing-along and dancing events. The world's largest children's culture festival LAKU has promised to touch all of the children in eastern Finland during the six-week-long festival.



5. ADMINISTRATION

a. Finance

City culture budget

Q20 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)? (Please fill in the table below).

The ECoC project is an important turning point for the development of eastern Finland, so we want to take on the endeavour regardless of future challenges. It will change the direction of development of the entire region of eastern Finland and strengthen the vitality of the area.

The culture budget includes theatres, museums, grants by the cultural affairs and the grants to the orchestra and event production, teaching of basic art, general cultural affairs and adult education centre. Savonlinna city cultural expenses in 2016-2020:

	Savonlinna city annual cultural budget, euros	Savonlinna city annual cultural budget, percentage of total budget
2016	4,557,051	1.8
2017	4,470,457	1.7
2018	4,277,203	1.6
2019	4,295,224	1.6
2020	4,310,631	1.6

In Finland municipalities take care of social and health services, which make up approximately 60-65 percent of the municipalities' costs. Due to this the costs of cultural activities are a relatively small portion of the total budget. Because the city of Savonlinna is not applying for the ECoC title alone, it is important to understand the total share of the involved cities in the cultural activities. Total culture budgets of all the cities Savonlinna, Mikkeli, Kuopio, Joensuu and Lappeenranta:

	Annual culture budget of Saimaa Phenomenon cities, euros	Annual culture budget of Saimaa Phenomenon cities, percentage of total budget
2016	75,018,106	3.1
2017	74,267,460	3.2
2018	73,550,808	3.2
2019	76,019,850	3.0
2020	78,044,029	3.1

Q21 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.

Funding for the ECoC project will come from the budgets for business activity, area development and strategic development. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities will not fund the ECoC project from the cultural activity budget. The staff working with cultural and event productions will use their working time for preparation work and implementation of the ECoC year. By implementing and supporting Saimaa Phenomenon as part of the normal activities in the cities and regional councils, the Saimaa Phenomenon is hoped to connect into all everyday routines in the future.

Q22 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 aim is to maintain cultural activity budgets at least at the current level regardless of the future financial challenges. Success in the ECoC year may even raise them. The Cultural Strategy approved by Savonlinna maintains that provincial cultural coordinators will be employed, meaning additional resources are required.



Operating budget for the title year
Income to cover operating expenditure

Q23 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. Please also fill in the table below.

Basic budget for Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 for 2022-2027 is 20 million euros. The funds will be used to produce a versatile and effective ECoC year, which will start up a new era of cooperation in eastern Finland. The budget has been proportioned according to the financial carrying capacity of the participating cities.

Our aim is to increase funding by inviting all cities and municipalities in eastern Finland to participate before submitting the bid book for the second application round. The regional councils have agreed to direct when possible to regional development funds to support Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 projects for a sum of approximately six million euros. Other EU programme funding will also be utilised. As presented in the table, the aspired additional funding is a total of seven million euros, when the entire available budget would be 27 million euros.



Winter swimming in Saimaa. Photo: Harri Tarvainen / Visit Karelia

	Income to cover operating expenditure, total euros	Public sector, euros	Public sector, percentage	Private sector, euros	Private sector, percentage
Basic budget	20,000,000	18,000,000	90	2,000,000	10
Aspired additional funding	7,000,000	6,500,000	93	500,000	7
Final budget	27,000,000	24,500,000	91	2,500,000	9

Income from the public sector

Q24. What is the breakdown of the income to be received from the public sector to cover operating expenditure? Please fill in the table below.

According to the estimate given by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the input from the state of Finland will be 12 million euros. The city of Savonlinna has committed to fund the preparation and implementation of the ECoC year with the total sum of two million euros. It is a substantial input proportioned to the population of the city, which at the end of 2019 was 32,998. The cities of Mikkeli, Kuopio, Joensuu and Lappeenranta will support building the basic budget with their own proportions. In the second application stage we will discuss with the other cities and municipalities of eastern Finland about their participation in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026, to which many are already committed.

The regional councils involved in the project will fund the project moderately through their own budgets. The financing of these regional councils derives basically from the largest members: the cities Savonlinna, Mikkeli, Kuopio, Joensuu and Lappeenranta, who will already finance the ECoC year through their own budgets.

An EU project, administered by the ECoC organisation is planned for 2022, and a total one million euros will be applied from the European regional development funds. The project application will be submitted at the beginning of 2021, and the funds in question are presented in the basic budget as EU funding.

The regional councils channel part of the European regional development funds. They are committed to allocating and searching for other possible EU programme funds for about six million euros in order to ensure that the ECoC year will be realised. Because this funding is scheduled for a longer period and to fund several projects, and the realisation cannot be guaranteed, it is presented as aspired supplementary funding, excluding the aforementioned project.

Income to cover operating expenditure from the public sector	Basic budget, euros	Basic budget, percent	Aspired additional funding, euros	Final funding, euros	Final funding, percent
State	12,000,000	67	0	12,000,000	49
City of Savonlinna	2,000,000	11		2,000,000	8
Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities	2,000,000	11	1,500,000	3,500,000	14
Regional councils	1,000,000	6	0	1,000,000	4
EU (excluding Melina Mercuri prize)	1,000,000	6	5,000,000	6,000,000	24
Other	0	0		0	0
Total	18,000,000	100	6,500,000	24,500,000	100

Q25 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?

At its meeting on March 30, 2020, **the Savonlinna city council** approved the Cultural Strategy and the city's self-financing.

The Mikkeli city board has approved the proportion of funding and participation in the project at its meeting 20.4.2020. The city council will decide on the matter 18.5.2020.

The Kuopio city board has approved the proportion of funding and participation in the project at its meeting 27.4.2020. The city council will decide on the matter 11.5.2020.

The Joensuu city board has approved the proportion of funding and participation in the project at its meeting 20.4.2020. The city council will decide on the matter 27.4.2020.

The Lappeenranta city board has approved the proportion of funding and participation in the project at its meeting 14.4.2020. The city council will decide on the matter 27.4.2020.

The board of the South Savonia Regional Council has at its meeting 20.4.2020 decided to participate in the Savonlinna ECoC application and is bound to its proportion of the funding.

The board of the North Savonia Regional Council at its meeting 27.4.2020 decided to participate in the Savonlinna ECoC application and is bound to its proportion of the funding.

The board of the North Karelia Regional Council at its meeting 27.4.2020 decided to participate in the

Savonlinna ECoC application and is bound to its proportion of the funding.

The board of the South Karelia Regional Council has at its meeting 6.4.2020 decided to participate in the Savonlinna ECoC application and is bound to its proportion of the funding.

The state of Finland has not yet decided about funding to be allocated to the nominated ECoC in Finland. According to preliminary information the state funding will be 12 million euros.

Income from the private sector

Q26 What is the fund-raising strategy to seek support from private sponsors? What is the plan for involving sponsors in the event?

In addition to public funding, Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 funding strategy will rely on funding from the business environment and from various foundations. Businesses and foundations within eastern Finland are significant funders of cultural activity. Art, culture and sports are funded with grants, donations and sponsorship agreements annually with several million euros. Additional funding will be applied from individuals and crowdfunding campaigns.

Nationally and regionally operating businesses in eastern Finland will be involved in funding Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Negotiations have been initiated in a good spirit and more will be initiated during the second round of the bid. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 lacks the presence of large corporations with headquarters in eastern Finland and few businesses listed on the

Helsinki stock exchange with headquarters in the region regardless of the many large industrial operation sites in the region. This is a challenge to the cooperation, but strengthening and safeguarding the power to maintain, and increase vitality and attraction power are critical to the success of operational locations. The goals of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 support the future success features of the businesses in the region.

We will bind the private funders to the implementation of the ECoC year by negotiating on cooperation that will result in concrete mutual benefits for all parties. A prerequisite of all funding is that the artistic independence of the ECoC unit will always remain intact.

Possible financiers from foundations may allocate their funding through channels other than through the ECoC organisation. As a whole we want to challenge private funders to ponder on the long-term implications and effectiveness of projects relating to the ECoC projects.

Responsibility for acquiring the funds is spread throughout the ECoC organisation and the entities involved in the preparation work, so the touch points with various business and foundations are numerous. The ECoC organisation will employ people or individuals whose tasks will include gathering funding for the ECoC year and implementing the heritage projects continuing after the nomination year.



Operating expenditure

Q27 Please provide a breakdown of the operating expenditure, by filling in the table below.

Operating expenses	Euros	Percent
Programme expenses	12,600,000	62
Advertising and marketing	3,500,000	18
Salaries, general expenditure and administration	3,900,000	20
Total	20,000,000	100

The planned basic budget for 2022-2027 is 20 million euros. It includes the preparation of the ECoC year, year of nomination and the year following the designation, which mainly entails the preparation of heritage projects. Approximately 62 percent of the budget will be used for producing Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 content. Marketing plans will be presented in more detail under Q34.

According to the current plan the ECoC organisation will entail 65 person-years in 2022-2027. The number of personnel is at its largest in 2025 and 2026, with 15 employees. Administration expenses are high due to the high level of salaries and salary side costs.



Budget for capital expenditure

Q28 What is the breakdown of the income to be received from the public sector to cover operating expenditure? Please fill in the table below.

Q29 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?

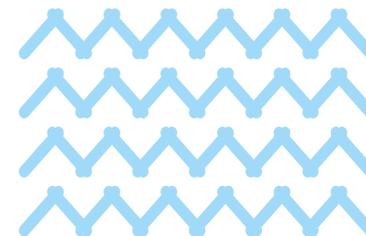
Q30 What is your fund-raising strategy to seek financial support from Union programmes/funds to cover capital expenditure?

Q31 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 have combined questions 28-31 because they are closely linked to each other.

In 2020–2025 many infrastructure projects will be implemented in our region and expenses incurred will be mainly covered by the municipalities' own funding. The Ministry of Education and Culture will fund some of the projects. The attached table includes the most significant new investments of the capital cities of ECoC 2026 provinces relating to the implementation of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. The listed projects are separate from the ECoC 2026 application.

Municipalities will use EU Structural and Investment Funds to finance their cultural and infrastructural projects when possible. These funds include the European Regional Development Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. It is also possible to acquire loans through the European Investment Bank for funding cultural infrastructure projects.



	Project	Estimated expenditure	Schedule	Decided
Savonlinna	New library vehicle	350,000 €	2021	Under planning
Joensuu	New conservatory	The conservatory will be constructed by an outside operator and the city of Joensuu is bound to a 20-year lease agreement. Annual rent is one million euros	2022	Decided
Lappeenranta	Construction of new multi-purpose arena and indoor sports hall	30,000,000 €	2023	Under planning
Kuopio	Savilahti sports and event centre for sports, club and events activities	35,500,000 €	2020–2022	Decided
Kuopio	LUMIT, new building for the Senior High School of Arts	23,200,000 €	2020–2021	Decided
Total		89,050,000 €		

b. Organisational structure

Q32 Please give an outline of the intended governance and delivery structure for the implementation of the European Capital of Culture year

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities have decided that a limited company will be established for purposes of the preparation and implementation of the ECoC year programme. Owners will initially be the cities of Savonlinna, Mikkeli, Kuopio, Joensuu and Lappeenranta. The limited company model is easy to administer and guarantees the operational and artistic independence of the ECoC entity.

Representatives from all of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cities will be selected on the board of the company. The board of directors will appoint a managing director and artistic director for the company. The managing director will be responsible for finance and organising operations.

An artistic committee with extensive representation of the various arts sectors will be established to support the artistic director. Also, a junior committee will be appointed to ensure close interaction with the young people in planning and implementation of the ECoC 2026 programme. Successful planning and implementation will be ensured by employing a programme coordinator for each of the provinces from the beginning of 2022.

The board of directors will determine the final administration model.



C. Contingency planning

Q33 What are the main strengths and weaknesses of your project? How are you planning to overcome weaknesses identified?

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 project preparatory group, the Bridge Builder team, has compiled a SWOT analysis, in which the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats relating to the ECoC2026 application project have been analysed. As a final result of the analysis two reply categories were formed in which the strengths and opportunities were combined and in the other the weaknesses, challenges and threats were listed.

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The strengths of the Savonlinna ECoC project are the unique lake and forest nature of Saimaa, the rich history of Finnish Lakeland, the cultural interaction between east and west, and the eastern joy and hospitality. The pure waters of Saimaa, the beautiful archipelago, unique fauna and flora are all worth sharing with all of Europe. Our historical and cultural interaction with east and west increases the understanding that others have of us and they will connect Finnish Lakeland to be a part of broader historical and cultural entities.

Being from eastern Finland includes authenticity and honesty, a way of life among large waters and a distinctive way of being curious and open-minded to all things novel. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 strengthens the ego of people in eastern Finland and the identity of leisure-time residents. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 shares the story of the people living on the shores of

Saimaa to all of Europe and the entire world.

Among the strengths of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is the independent and superior cultural production and the professionals with strong expertise: the artists, culture producers and other doers. Numerous large cultural events are organised annually within the region which indicate a substantial intellectual capital. Digitalisation offers new opportunities to increase accessibility and to improve services. Saimaa Phenomenon has ignited people to act on behalf of their home and brought the residents, civil servants and political decision-makers of the four provinces closer to each other.

Diversifying and increasing the number of events along with raising the quality of services will promote the travel sector in such a way that it will become all year round. This in turn will attract new businesses and employment opportunities in the Savonlinna and Saimaa region.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 has built new partnerships and networks extending over provincial borders. The phenomenal cultural cooperation strategy instils confidence in our ability to create a bright future for the entire region. Accountability and sustainability challenge everybody to work for a better world. The cultural transformation to a change in lifestyle as a change-making power is a giant opportunity offered by Saimaa Phenomenon. Savonlinna can rise to a model example for small cities in European peripheral regions to overcome their difficulties and start up a new change for increasing well-being.

WEAKNESSES, CHALLENGES AND THREATS

Worldwide threats such as COVID-19 and societal, economic and social consequences are difficult to anticipate. It is impossible to evaluate the impact of the pandemic or other similar global crises on the cultural, tourism industries and overall, on the mobility of people. This will offer new challenges because operations will

increasingly be on the web and digital services and their accessibility and business logic will be more pronounced. In Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 we have identified this, and we will strengthen our digital platform-thinking.

A challenge for Saimaa Phenomenon is the geographical breadth of the region. Accessibility within the four provinces is not easy in all aspects. The same goes for the digitalisation of services and a worry is that the platform-thinking of the project stops mid-way. Another worry is how the project succeeds in involving the full-time and leisure-time residents to the planned extent.

We are also worried whether we will succeed in convincing people of the change-making power of the ECoC year. The message we communicate does not reach the people and they will abandon the project, when the lively flurry dies down and the efficacy of the project and its programmes come to a standstill. The spirit of doing will not happen and the provinces will continue on with their attitude of doing it alone continues.

Fending off the weaknesses challenges and threats requires that they are acknowledged. The preparatory Bridge Builder team is well aware of the challenges and problems involved in Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. In order to be prepared to face problems and to solve them, the Bridge Builders suggest the further strengthening of the network like action strategy, strengthening the confidence between the politicians and civil servants of the cities and provinces and increasing inspirational and open communication. An effective and operational administrative ECoC 2026 organisation is in a key position in involving decision-makers and the residents in the region to achieve the mutual goal.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 must be capable of communicating each day in a clear and intelligible way that the ECoC project is an investment in the future and the goal is to strengthen the vitality of the entire region and increase the quality of life of people.



d. Marketing and communication

Q34 Please provide with an outline of the city's intended marketing and communication strategy for the European Capital of Culture year.

Our marketing and communication strategy is based on the themes of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026: Connecting Bridges, Eastern Joy and Power of Water. They are creative starting points for our communication with aims to involve people, bring feelings of joy and tell about our development procedures in a very concrete way.

Bridges connect us to local people in Saimaa, to our sister cities, and to the rest of Europe and the entire world. The social media works in the same way. In our communications we want to not only offer knowledge, but we want to involve people in the discussion and the development of our region. Right-time communication and interaction facilitate that we can have impact on the development of eastern Finland locally, just as well as other parts of the world.

All communication from traditional channels to social media postings - from photographs to podcasts, emanate our eastern joy. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 emanates pride of our own cultural heritage and our joyful life among our waters and nature. Culture, art, nature and Saimaa are an unbeatable combination.

Our communication aims not only to share the beauty of Saimaa, but to share our concrete actions and opportunities. The ECoC will make its goals and actions visible and will tell people about its power and impact on the lives of people in eastern Finland.

THREE CIRCLES OF THE COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING STRATEGY

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 communication and marketing strategy is built on three circles.

1. Cities and provinces as communicators of change

The inner circle comprises the first level of partners: the city of Savonlinna, provinces of eastern Finland and the central cities. The aim of this circle is “acts in the front” and tells about the concrete procedures and the efficacy of the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026. Actors identify and acknowledge the diversity of culture and bring it forth in all contacts. They create inspirational pictures of the future among the residents, encourage actors into new initiatives and increase the confidence in developing well-being with the aid of culture. When people understand the importance of the ECoC year, they will be inspired by its opportunities and support its implementation.

Actors will have in their use Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 communication material, such as photographs and logos, and they will produce content in the social media, in blogs, podcasts and other channels. Communicators will also use their own local and national channels and their own contacts with representatives of the media.

2. Residents and doers in the area as communicators

The second circle comprises both full-time and leisure-time residents in the region, and local cultural and tourism doers. In this circle the aim is to increase local pride, cultural experiences and phenomenal acts and the cooperation between travel players. The channels are phenomenal ambassadors, events, storytelling, meeting places, circulating pop-up infos, sharing and supporting phenomena, and strategic social media.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 phenomenal ambassadors, travellers, and the young people in the region are



5. ADMINISTRATION

invited to share their own experiences and information on ECoC events in their own way and their own communication channels. Also, decision makers and social media influencers are asked to communicate Saimaa Phenomenon in person so that we get visibility among people in eastern Finland. Local people are informed of cultural offerings and they are involved and inspired by using questions, competitions, influencers and hashtags. For example, a positivity challenge will be launched among the residents in the area where they can share their own tips on the best travel destinations or leisure-time experiences. Artists and other cultural actors and small and bigger travel players are identified and acknowledged, they are encouraged and brought to the front. Communicating with the travellers is also important. With these tactics love and positive emotions toward the region are strengthened and shared in creative ways.

3. Marketing outside the region

The outer circle comprises the public outside the region. The goal is to raise awareness about Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 and the entire Saimaa region, enhancing its image and attraction in Finland, Europe and other parts of the world.

We will communicate Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cultural events and actors, interesting travel destinations and, in general, how phenomenal the region is. Tactics of this circle will be active marketing outside the region, event communication, bold spectacles of regional marketing, dynamic campaigns, strategic social media and the development of digital cultural experiences.

Savonlinna and the entire region of eastern Finland will be marketed with its unique nature and nature adventures and delicious local food, eastern Finnish joviality, culture, events and hospitality - in short, the way of life in eastern Finland, to which we invite everybody to join us. To the cultural and travel professionals we will spread word about our versatile cultural clusters, training

in the industries and work, gallery and atelier spaces. To new residents, returnees and leisure-time residents the Saimaa region will be visible as an attractive place, where one can establish a balanced life to be lived according to one's own rhythm.

A new level for Saimaa branding work

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will work together with travel players and projects when communicating a mutual Saimaa brand. Multiple region marketing organisations and travel destination brands operate in a geographically broad region. Saimaa regional marketing and branding cooperation has already begun in the southern provinces and based on this a Saimaa agreement has been made and an association has been established.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 aims to deepen and broaden this cooperation and create a structure for a mutual travel brand for the entire area. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will promote cooperation between the travel organisations in the area by unifying the marketing strategy of the four provinces. The goal for the cooperation is that all four provinces join the Saimaa cooperation according to the agreement or otherwise work in close cooperation. The region will be marketed as one destination and the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 digital platform will be utilised.

Vision Transformed to Reality – Strategic Communication Projects

In the vision of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 marketing and communication the themes and events will reach the local residents and the European audience. Achieving this vision requires that the new digital platform will be implemented as a workable tool, which serves residents, travellers, artists and entrepreneurs. In addition, we will continue to nominate known people in eastern Finland, who promote the arts, culture, vitality and communal spirit in the area as Phenomenal. By appointing the



*Saimaa Ringed Seal (2017),
Photo: Pia Behm / Visit Saimaa*

people as Phenomenal we will win them over to actively share the message of Saimaa Phenomenon.

The Saimaa Ringed Seal is one of our most important Phenomenals. The Saimaa Ringed Seal is one of the Saimaa residents, whose well-being the ECoC endeavour aims to improve. Through its own project, the Saimaa Ringed Seal will gain visibility with product ideas and photographs.

Eating freshwater fish is truly ecological. “Sano muikku” (Say Muikku!) is a project which addresses utilising freshwater fish. The project will transform into local involvement and communication by inviting everybody to share their photographs of fishing, cooking, and their most delicious fish dishes.



Q35 How does the city plan to highlight that the European Capital of Culture is an action of the European Union?

Our mutual European cultural heritage is under the special protection of the European Union. The EU supports arts and creative industries and wants to bring them within reach to all. We will raise a few examples of how we will emphasise the actions of the EU.

Europe Day

May 9, Europe Day is a celebration of all citizens of the European Union and a day that brings all citizens together to celebrate. South Savonia has traditionally celebrated the province as a part of Europe on its Provincial Day, May 9. The ECoC project has been an important part of Europe Day celebrations since 2019.

Pop-up info spot

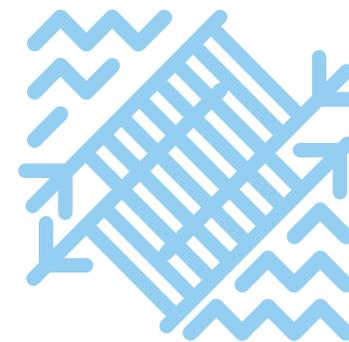
Next year we will combine campaigning for the ECoC year together with the Europe Direct information point. We will launch a pop-up info point focusing on the EU and ECoC year, and it will circulate at various events, and from one city/municipality to another. The info point is meant to inform residents about the Savonlinna ECoC year and respond to questions relating to the EU.

Diverse cooperation and partnerships

Many EU-funded arts and cultural projects, building projects, and joint projects between educational institutions are implemented in our region. Among EU-funded projects related to the Culture Capital programme are Saimaa Geopark, Vespaikka – Water in its natural element in South Savonia, D.O. Saimaa and numerous smaller projects funded by Leader groups. In addition to these, the EU Cross-Border Programme is utilised to fund projects where a Russian partner is also involved.

EU Campaign Annual Clock

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will participate in celebrating theme weeks and days of other ECoC cities and those preparing for their ECoC year. European Capitals of Culture will be regularly invited to visit, to participate in workshops and to bring a taste of their ECoC programme contents to Savonlinna and other provincial capital cities. Cooperation is intensified in these meetings between the ECoC network.



Q36 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.

At its meeting on March 30, 2020, the Savonlinna City Council unanimously decided to apply for the European Capital of Culture 2026. The city council also decided to allocate funds totalling 2 million euros for the basic capital of the project.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is a joint project between four provinces and five cities, so in addition to Savonlinna, also the other parties will discuss and make a decision on participating in the project. The schedule of the decision making has been addressed in Q 25.

According to preliminary information, the Ministry of Education and Culture has plans on allocating 12 million euros to the designated ECoC from Finland. At the time of printing this bid book a decision on this issue has not yet been made.



Q37 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:

A) EXPLAIN BRIEFLY HOW THE EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE WILL MAKE USE OF AND DEVELOP THE CITY'S CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE.

Contents pertaining to Q37 A) are also addressed under questions 3, 6, 31 and 38, where the Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 cultural profile, and the strengthening of the preparedness of the cultural and creative industries, and the future city and travel infrastructure have been addressed.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 will utilise all of the readily available cultural infrastructure and supplementary infrastructure under development extensively and in a versatile way. Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 also aims that empty and only partially utilised public spaces be allocated for the use of various artists.

Central cities of Saimaa have made several decisions pertaining to cultural infrastructure investments for 2020-2025. Also, other cultural investments are in process, pending decisions.

B) WHAT ARE THE CITY'S ASSETS IN TERMS OF ACCESSIBILITY (REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT)?

The special benefit of the accessibility of Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 is that the Saimaa region, and especially Savonlinna, Punkaharju and Imatra are Finland's oldest and best-known travel destinations. Among the first guests was the Czarina of Russia, Catarina II, who came to see the Imatra Falls in summer 1772. The tourism of the area increased after the opening of the Saimaa Canal in 1856, and its accessibility improved significantly after the rail transport network was expanded in 1870-1906. Travellers spent time at the Saimaa spas and at the Punkaharju and Imatra State hotels. Today's travellers can arrive to Saimaa via water, rail transport, air, or by road.

Rail traffic

The four capital cities of the four provinces and Savonlinna are served with good train connections, especially from the Helsinki direction. It is also possible to travel within the region by train from one city to another. Lappeenranta and Vainikkala are served by daily return trips to Moscow and four to St. Petersburg, where the duration of the train trip is one and-half hours. Vainikkala – Lappeenranta is served by a pre-order taxi.



RAIL TRAFFIC

Air traffic

Airports in the Saimaa region are located in Savonlinna, Kuopio, Joensuu and in Lappeenranta. The competitively bid Helsinki - Savonlinna route is operated by an airline which is subsidised by the city of Savonlinna and the Finnish government. The international accessibility of Savonlinna has been improved; for example, regular charter flights between Savonlinna and Frankfurt will commence in 2021.

The Lappeenranta airport is a gate to Saimaa. Berlin, Budapest, and Bergamo are served by two flights a week, all year round. From April to October two flights per week fly from Vienna and once a week to Athens.

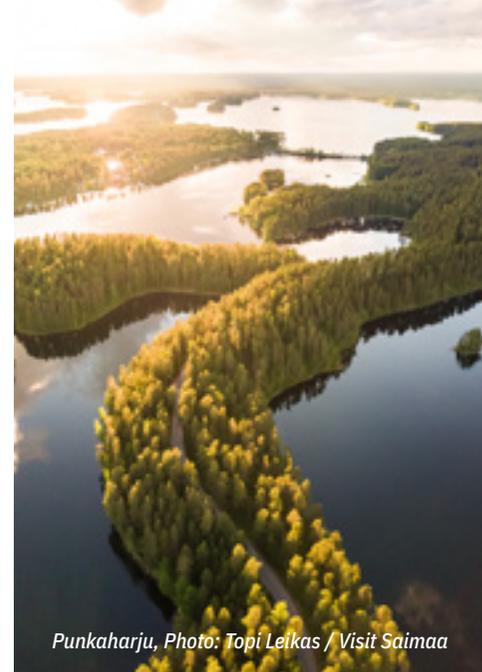
Road traffic

Buses supplement train traffic. The dense traffic network between Joensuu and Kuopio is maintained by the two campuses of the University of Eastern Finland. Also, traffic between Savonlinna and Mikkeli is lively due to commuting to work. Because they stop in smaller places on the way, it is easy to travel by bus. About a dozen bus companies regularly serve the region.



Water traffic

Water traffic on Lake Saimaa is busy during the summer. The steamship m/s Puijo, built in 1914, sails the scenic Heinävesi route from Savonlinna to Kuopio. The ship also cruises from Savonlinna via Puumala to Lappeenranta. The m/s Puijo also cruises via Heinävesi, so it is possible to make an excursion to the Orthodox Valamo monastery by ship. Various themed cruises are organised, for example, to view the Astuvansalmi rock paintings and to see the Saimaa Ringed Seal. Scenic cruises are available in Savonlinna, Kuopio and Lappeenranta, and in the summer season, it is possible to take a daily visa-free cruise on the Saimaa Canal to Vyborg, in Russia. Water taxis sail around in the vicinity of the national parks.



Punkaharju, Photo: Topi Leikas / Visit Saimaa



Photo: Travelers Buddy / Visit Saimaa

- Savonlinna – Helsinki**
4 trips in Helsinki direction
5 to Savonlinna, travel time 5 hours
- Savonlinna – Joensuu**
2 return trips
travel time 3-3.5 hours
- Savonlinna – Kuopio**
4-5 daily return trips
travel time 2.75-5 hours
- Savonlinna – Lappeenranta**
2-3 daily return trips
travel time 3.5-4 hours (by car 2h)
- Savonlinna – Mikkeli**
8-9 daily return trips
travel time 1.5-3 hours
- Joensuu – Helsinki**
3-4 daily return trips
travel time 6.5 - 10 hours
- Kuopio – Helsinki**
9-11 daily return trips
travel time 5.25 - 7 hours
- Joensuu – Mikkeli**
1 daily return trip
travel time 3.5 hours
- Kuopio – Mikkeli**
8 daily return trips
travel time 2.25 - 2.75 hours
- Joensuu – Lappeenranta**
1 daily return trip
travel time 3.25 hours
- Kuopio – Lappeenranta**
no bus connections
- Joensuu – Kuopio**
10 daily return trips
travel time 2 - 2.75 hours
- Lappeenranta – Mikkeli**
5 daily return trips
travel time 1.75-2 hours
- Lappeenranta – Helsinki**
7 daily return trips
travel time 3-4 hours
- Mikkeli – Helsinki**
12-13 daily return trips
travel time 3-3.5 hours

BUS TRAFFIC



6. CAPACITY TO DELIVER

The future

Transport connections from Helsinki to Saimaa are good, but within the region accessibility is challenging. Accessibility will be improved by creating a Mobility as a Service System (MaaS), where all the public transport information will be saved including timetables and stops, taxis, and rental cars and bicycles. This will offer alternatives and enable buying tickets from one digital system. Most of the cities offer city bikes and scooters for easy mobility in the city centres. New tour products will be made available in the Saimaa region and will be accessible either by public transport or a car.

Three major projects are ongoing for the improvement of the international accessibility of Eastern Finland. The Parikkala border crossing is expected to open in 2024, enabling a new route between the EU and Russia. A train connection between St. Petersburg and Imatra is also in plans. The accessibility of eastern Finland will also be improved by the East track project, which will shorten the travel time from cities in eastern Finland to Helsinki. The redevelopment of the Saimaa Canal to make it passable year round is planned.

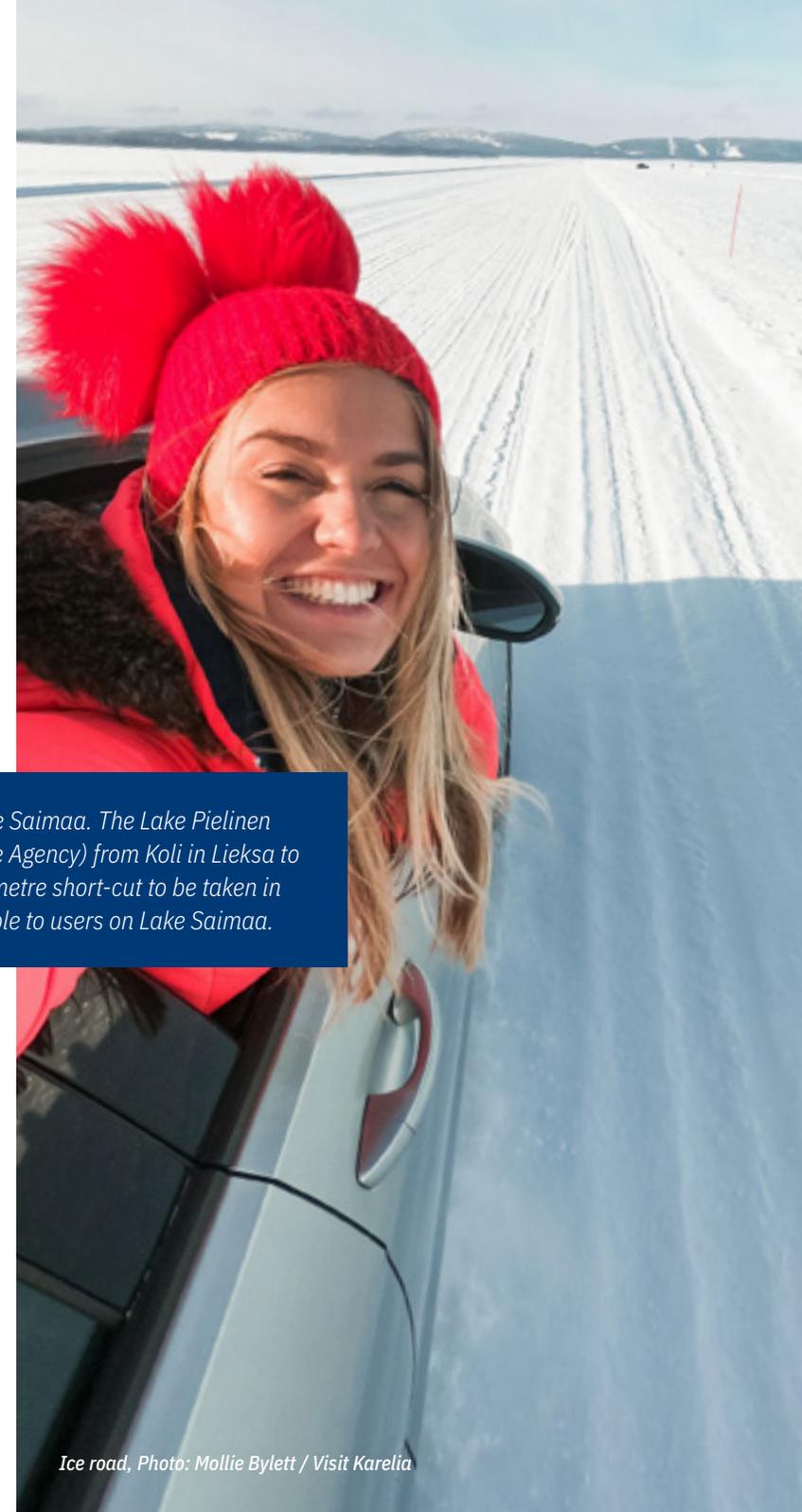
C) WHAT IS THE CITY'S ABSORPTION CAPACITY IN TERMS OF TOURISTS' ACCOMMODATION?

The accommodation capacity of the Saimaa region will be sufficient for the visitors during the ECoC year. Savonlinna's capacity to accommodate guests is demonstrated by the number of visitors in the city during the Savonlinna Opera Festival, with over 2,000 daily guests. The tourism sector in the region and residents are accustomed to accommodating all of the visitors coming to the area to participate in the events organised in the area during the summer season. The accommodation capacity of the four Saimaa provinces is presented in the enclosed table.

Substantial accommodation and adventure tourism investments have been implemented and new projects are in plans. These privately funded investments will significantly increase the accommodation capacity in the Saimaa region.

During the winter, ice roads make it possible to drive on Lake Saimaa. The Lake Pielinen ice road (maintained by the Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency) from Koli in Lieksa to Vuonislahti, is seven kilometres long, allowing for a 51-kilometre short-cut to be taken in wintertime. Many privately maintained ice roads are available to users on Lake Saimaa.

	Rooms in hotels, hostels and equivalent, number	Beds in hotels, hostels and equivalent, number	Rental cottages, number	Beds in rental cottages, number	Rooms total, number	Rooms total, number
South Savonia	2,343	6,397	703	3,735	3,046	10,132
North Savonia	2,556	6,381	1,092	5,439	3,648	11,820
South Karelia	1,960	5,556	160	952	2,120	6,508
North Karelia	1,483	3,918	336	1,653	1,819	5,571
Total	8,342	22,252	2,291	11,779	10,633	34,031



Ice road, Photo: Mollie Bylett / Visit Karelia

Q38 In terms of cultural, urban and tourism infrastructure what are the projects (including renovation projects) that your city plan to carry out in connection with the European Capital of Culture action between now and the year of the title?

In the following table are all the cultural and tourism infrastructure projects which are planned for implementation 2020-2025 (see also questions 6 and 37a).

	Project	Value of investment, euros	Schedule	Decided / Under planning
Savonlinna	Renovation of the Savonlinna Provincial Museum	3,000,000	2020	Decided
Mikkeli	Renovation of Mikaeli, the concert and conference house of Mikkeli	23,000,000	2020-2023	Under planning
	Renovation of the Mikkeli main library	3,100,000	2020-2023	Decided
	Restoration of Muisti Centre of War and Peace in Mikkeli	3,000,000	2019-2020	Decided
Kuopio	Renovation and expansion of the Museum of Kuopio	17,800,000	2020	Decided
Lappeenranta	Restoration of the Lappeenranta main library	7,700,000	2023	Decided
	Acquiring spaces for Lappeenranta museum collections	6,000,000	2025	Under planning
Total		63,600,000 €		

In addition to the aforementioned projects several independently funded cultural and tourism infrastructure projects are under discussion.

Infrastructure investments are under review in a broader perspective and it must be discussed whether Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 can meet, with its example the challenges of European regressive small towns. The problem is the built environment and infrastructure is increasingly underused when the population and services decrease. Management of this change requires understanding broad enteries, historical acumen and the perception of alternative futures. Change management, sustainable dimensioning and maintenance, demolition and renewal of buildings and the desire to increase the vitality of the cities is an equation that the small European cities need to solve in the near future. Maintaining underused infrastructure is not sustainable or possible, even without any pressures on building based on increasing population being in the horizon. Deserted streets and empty business premises do not enhance the appeal of a small, idyllic European city struggling to attract new residents, returnees, and tourists.

Acknowledging and caring for cultural heritage, increasing comfortable living and positive images in the future are the cornerstones of vitality of small cities in the future. It is not a question of preserving or demolishing individual buildings. Instead, a comprehensive grip is needed where the city history and the stories of the residents are considered and the cultural environment in its entirety is valued as part of the future city development change management and increasing vitality. Now we have to embrace a visionary thinking that springs from a new starting point and historical data.

The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 networking model will also be used extensively after the ECoC year in city development projects by the four provinces for designing future infrastructure and planning investments required by development measures. The starting point of the thinking is that Saimaa Phenomenon is the platform, and the city as a platform is one of the dimensions of this phenomenon. The cities, urban centres and villages, built up environment, infrastructure and nature act as “the platform of platforms” in which humane action, culture, services, and other platform-thinking dimensions are connected.

With the driving forces of culture, nature, and wellness being at the forefront, the cooperative development strategy utilised by Savonlinna and eastern Finland will bring a new dynamic with the emphasis being tourism, well-being, and entrepreneurship. The initiative to develop the strategic Savonlinna city centre master plan (valid to 2040) and the ECoC project are examples of how land use is aligned with city and regional development at the European level.

Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 presents Savonlinna and the four Saimaa provinces an opportunity to rise and become a phenomenal role model for European city development!



SAIMAA PHENOMENON 2026 – SAVONLINNA APPLICATION FOR EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE

Bid book compiled by:

Bridge Builders

Sari Kaasinen, City of Joensuu, chairwoman

Susanna Latvala, City of Mikkeli

Heli Gynther, Regional Council of South Savonia

Jonna Forsman, City of Kuopio

Jari Sihvonen, Regional Council of Pohjois-Savo

Riitta Huurinainen, City of Joensuu

Heli Räsänen, Regional Council of North Karelia

Tuija Willberg, City of Lappeenranta

Anu Talka, Regional Council of South Karelia

Outi Rantasuo, City of Savonlinna

Katja Pasanen, University of Eastern Finland

Jarkko Kääriäinen, University of Eastern Finland

Coordinators

Anu-Anette Varho, Regional Council of South Savonia

Reko Tammi, Regional Council of South Savonia

Editor

Jyrki Paaskoski, Punkaharju

Translation

Ruth Lähdeaho-Kero, Moninaiset Lähdeaho, Punkaharju

Laura Matveinen, Eksakt Oy, Savonlinna

Layout

Vesa Kärkkäinen & Veera Miettinen, Kixit Oy, Mikkeli

Printing

Grano Mikkeli

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