

SUMMARY

Since 2014, the **Small Lithuanian Culture Capitals** (SLCC) initiative has been **decentralising culture** by shifting attention and resources from big cities to small towns and villages in all country regions. Through a national competition run by the Lithuanian Rural Communities' Union with partners, several settlements are selected each year to become culture capitals.

The SLCCs implement an ambitious, **year-long cultural programme** which includes festivals, concerts, exhibitions, residencies, workshops, and educational activities, combining local heritage with contemporary creativity. By 2025, 90 settlements held the title, creating new cultural traditions, boosting volunteering and strengthening cooperation between municipalities, NGOs, artists and businesses.



Source: *Rudaminos kultūros centras - RKC* (Culture center of Rudamina)

CONTEXT

Many Lithuanian rural areas face depopulation, ageing, out-migration of youth and limited cultural infrastructure. High-quality cultural activities are largely concentrated in major cities, leaving small settlements with few opportunities for residents to access professional culture or participate in creative life. At the same time, **rural communities have strong heritage, traditions and local identity**, but often lack platforms, resources or visibility to develop them.

The SLCC initiative responds by positioning **culture as a driver of inclusion, pride and territorial balance**. It brings professional arts and cultural experiences directly to rural residents while enabling communities to lead the design and delivery of their own cultural year.

OBJECTIVES

- > Strengthen cultural vitality and identity in rural areas through community-led, cultural programming;
- > Reduce territorial disparities in access to culture by bringing professional arts to remote areas;
- > Empower local communities, youth and volunteers to co-create cultural activities and traditions;
- > Enhance cooperation between municipalities, cultural institutions, NGOs and local actors;
- > Boost cultural tourism, highlight local identity, protect heritage and improve the visibility and attractiveness of small towns and villages.

Themes: LEADER/CLLD; sports, culture and leisure; rural-urban linkages; tourism and heritage

Country: Lithuania

Organisations:

- > Lithuanian Rural Communities' Union, NGO
- > Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, public authority
- > Lithuanian Council for Culture, national funding body
- > Association of Lithuanian Municipalities, NGO
- > Association of Lithuanian Municipal Elders, NGO
- > Local municipalities and cultural institutions in participating communities, local public authorities and cultural actors
- > Private sponsors (e.g. Agrokoncerno grupė), business partners providing annual co-funding to selected communities

Start & end date: 01/2014 - ongoing

Budget: EUR 3 000 to 20 000 per designated Culture Capital, plus municipal and local co-financing

Funding sources:

- > LEADER/CLLD
- > Lithuanian Council for Culture
- > Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Lithuania
- > Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania
- > Municipal budgets
- > Private sponsorship and voluntary local contributions

Website: <https://lkbs.net/mazoji-kultura/>

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ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

Since 2014, the Lithuanian Rural Communities' Union has been running an **annual national competition** with the Ministry of Culture, Association of Municipalities and Association of Elders. Communities apply and a **national committee selects several settlements** every year across all ethnographic regions. Each designated Culture Capital forms a **local working group** with the municipality, cultural centres, schools, NGOs and businesses.

The local working groups prepare a **year-long programme rooted in local identity**, combining professional performances with community-led heritage and youth activities, including festivals, theatre, exhibitions, craft fairs, residencies, workshops, intergenerational actions and cultural-tourism routes. Existing spaces (schools, halls, churches, squares) are used to ensure wide participation without new infrastructure.

Since 2018, Lithuanian Council for Culture **grants** (EUR 3 000 to 20 000 per designated Culture Capital) have provided a stable base for key events and artistic work. Municipalities add **venues, staff and co-financing**, while local sponsors provide **cash or in-kind support**. This **mix of national funding and strong community backing** allows even very small villages to deliver ambitious cultural yearly programmes.

The **process has evolved and matured**: 2014-2015 piloted the concept; 2016-2020 established a regular annual cycle across all regions; and from 2018 onward, dedicated funding strengthened quality and continuity.

The annual rhythm of application, selection, preparation and delivery now offers a **predictable framework that builds local capacity**. National organisations ensure coordination and funding; municipalities and cultural centres handle operations; schools, NGOs and volunteers support delivery; and local businesses **connect cultural activity with the rural economy and tourism**. Together, these actors sustain coherent cultural years with broad participation and visible regional impact.



RESULTS

- > **Ninety rural settlements designated as SLCC** in the 2014-2025 period, covering all ethnographic regions;
- > Significantly **enhanced access to professional culture** for residents of remote and small rural settlements who previously travelled long distances to cultural centres;
- > **Higher volunteer mobilisation** and stronger participation of youth, schools and community organisations in cultural planning and delivery;
- > New **opportunities for local artists and cultural workers**, including paid performances, exhibitions and collaborations with national cultural institutions;
- > Greater **visibility in national and regional media**, raising the profile of small towns and villages and promoting local cultural assets;
- > Positive **impact on local tourism**, with increased visitor numbers for festivals and thematic events, and development of new cultural-tourism routes and storytelling initiatives;
- > **Strengthened urban-rural cultural cooperation**, with growing involvement of city-based artists, theatres, museums and creative professionals in rural programming;
- > **Long-term legacy effects**: several settlements have kept new festivals, cultural routes, youth initiatives or annual events beyond their Culture Capital year;
- > **Enhanced local pride and community cohesion**, with residents reporting greater attachment to place and increased willingness to participate in cultural and civic life.



SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

- > **Community ownership**: local initiative in design and delivery ensures relevance and strong participation;
- > **Light but catalytic funding**: modest grants successfully mobilise additional municipal and community resources;
- > **Multi-level cooperation**: strong partnership between community organisations, municipalities, ministries, cultural institutions and private sponsors;
- > **Territorial balance**: designating capitals across all ethnographic regions reinforces rural-urban cohesion;
- > **Scalability**: programme can be expanded or replicated with limited resources, using existing infrastructure;
- > **Sustainability**: many communities maintain new traditions or partnerships after the designated year;
- > **Visibility effect**: the national title is as a powerful motivator, boosting cultural confidence and external recognition.



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