

TRENDS IN SOLVING PROBLEMS NO ONE CAN SOLVE ALONE

GOVERNMENTS, BUSINESSES AND CIVIC ACTORS JOINING FORCES

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From climate resilience to digital transition: Europe’s local governments are building new alliances to tackle challenges no one can solve alone. This new “Trend Report” by the Innovation in Politics Institute – a Vienna-based organisation working with 2000+ political innovators across Europe – reveals how governments, businesses and civic actors are teaming up to deliver transformations better and faster.

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From climate breakdown to digital insecurity, from youth unemployment to aging infrastructure – Europe’s governments and cities face challenges that are too complex, too interconnected, and too fast-moving for any single actor to solve alone. But a new pattern is emerging. Across the continent, cities are not waiting for perfect conditions. They are teaming up with other sectors such as businesses, civil society, academia, and each other. Their shared interest and objective is simple: to tackle the missions that matter most. These emerging alliances are not policy add-ons. They are becoming the default approach to governing complexity. This report calls them **Mission Partnerships**.

THIS REPORT’S PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

This Trend Report by the Innovation in Politics Institute explores the rise of Mission Partnerships in different speeds, contexts and countries across Europe from the perspective of city governments. These partnerships are defined as cross-sector alliances anchored in trust, shared goals, and mutual accountability. In this report, we ask: Which challenges can only be solved together – and how are cities rising to meet them? We draw on field research in 20+ cities, desk research supported by AI tools, and seven years of experience scouting over 2,000 best practices evaluated by 15,000 citizen jurors.

OUR KEY FINDINGS

The nature of the problem has changed

Challenges today are structurally complex, interconnected, and evolve rapidly. Siloed governance models are struggling to keep up. Cities are responding by convening networks that include businesses, civil society, academia, and public institutions.

Collaboration begins informally – but grow more structured as they mature

We observed that alliances often begin informally – with a joint event, a shared challenge, or a crisis – and then evolve into more structured forms, backed by co-investment and measurable impact. This shift from crisis reaction to mission readiness is central to the stories in this report.

Trust is the enabling infrastructure

Partnerships that endure are not built on formal mandates alone. They grow from repeated cooperation, transparency, and the ability to learn together. Successful transitions are driven by co-design

between the trusted infrastructures of government, private firms, and NGOs.

Mission readiness requires a different skillset

Successful alliances are agile, inclusive, and able to share risk. The most effective cities invest in building internal capacity to coordinate across sectors and scale what works.

Community insight creates legitimacy

Cities that embed community voices early in the process consistently generate more legitimate, accepted, and resilient outcomes, showing that co-designed missions are more likely to succeed than top-down strategies alone. Antwerp’s youth employment alliance, for instance, shifted substantial amounts in public spending after 300 young people co-designed a new solution to the problem.

Compliance and complexity can be managed

Still, we found many governments that are eager to work with municipality-owned firms and local NGOs, but shy away from working with private firms due to compliance and complexity concerns. This is stressed despite the fact that in many cities such as Warsaw in Poland, over 90% of climate actions involve non-governmental actors. The city’s response: small, empowered, cross-sector units with clear mandates and often neutral brokers to coordinate and guide shared resources and interests.

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

To meet today’s challenges, governments must grow their capacity for mission delivery. That means:

- Defining missions that require shared responsibility.
- Convening anchor partners early.
- Starting small, learning fast, and scaling what works.
- Investing in people and structures that can coordinate across boundaries.
- Making trust, transparency, and accountability part of the infrastructure.

Mission Partnerships are not just a new collaboration model. They are a capability and a strategic response to the demands of complex governance. This report is a field guide for those who understand that in times of systemic change, leadership means convening.

1. OUR MOTIVATION TO CREATE THIS REPORT (AND A LITTLE BIT ABOUT US...)

In our work at the Innovation in Politics Institute, we have seen how local governments across Europe are stepping into a new leadership role with growing confidence. Increasingly, they act as conveners, creating spaces for mission-driven alliances that bridge government, business, academia, and civil society. These alliances align capacities and act where challenges demand not just institutional reforms, but shared ownership of problems and shared responsibility for action. Many European cities and regional governments have become laboratories of the future, pioneering practical solutions to transformational challenges.

For this report, we set out to explore one central question: **Which transformational tasks are so complex that no single actor can solve them alone – and how are cities and regional governments building the partnerships to meet them?** These are the kinds of missions that force governments, businesses, civic actors, and academia to work together – because otherwise, they would not succeed.

Over the past seven years, we have scouted more than 2,000 best practices and evaluated them with the help of over 15,000 citizen jurors. This has taught us: governments perform best when they work in genuine partnership with other sectors. If we understand the *emerging fields* where this collaboration is taking place, we can also better understand *why* some partnerships succeed more than others. Success is not a matter of issuing top-down



Edward Strasser CEO,
The Innovation in Politics Institute

decrees and hoping for compliance. In **Linz**, for example, the city invited construction firms, utilities, banks, and NGOs to co-design the shift to a circular economy in the building sector – turning a regulatory challenge into a collaborative mission. In **Cascais**, years of working closely with NGOs and the private sector meant that when refugee integration became urgent, partners responded immediately because trust had already been built. **Bologna's** climate neutrality mission and “Data Valley” transition, **Burgos' circular industrial estate**, and **Warsaw's** climate adaptation strategy all show the

2K+
BEST PRACTICES
IDENTIFIED

7
YEARS OF
SCOUTING AND
RESEARCH



Complex challenges can be solved by applying proven methods of collaboration. Leadership today means convening alliances, building trust, and creating mission partnerships that turn shared responsibility into lasting impact.

same pattern: solutions to complex problems emerge when diverse actors co-own the process from the start.

Research on intersectoral governance

confirms what these cities demonstrate in practice: effective cross-sector collaboration requires careful navigation of power dynamics, shared frameworks, clear accountability, and above all, the willingness to learn and adapt together. It is not only about aligning interests; it is also about creating new ways of working that value the strengths each sector brings. Along the way, partners often discover more common ground than they expected, and the trust built can be as valuable as the policy outcomes themselves.

The cities and regional governments in this report – about 20 across Europe – are not advancing through grand declarations, but through persistent, practical collaboration. We call these emerging forms of cooperation “*Mission Partnerships*”: alliances anchored in shared goals, trust-based processes, and

mutual accountability. Each looks different, shaped by its local context, but the lesson is clear: the more governments collaborate with businesses and civil society, the better they perform, the more resilient their solutions, and the more trust they earn from citizens.

This analysis does not offer a one-size-fits-all formula. It offers observations, principles, and stories from the frontlines of systematic change.

We hope this Report not only provides inspiring examples, but is also seen as an invitation to those who understand leadership as the ability to convene. It should give you know how and reassurance that complex challenges can be solved by applying proven methods of collaboration.

Yours sincerely,
Edward Strasser
 CEO, The Innovation in Politics Institute

15K+

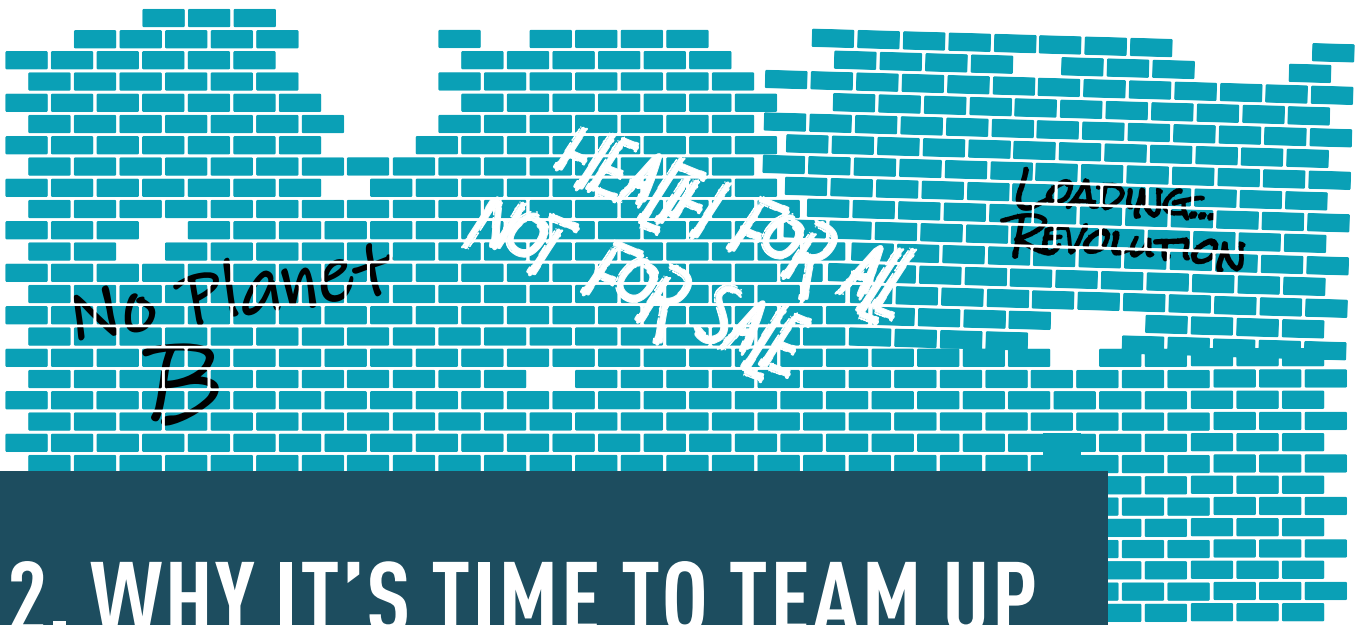
CITIZEN JURORS AS EVALUATORS

20+

CITIES & REGIONS FEATURED

MISSION PARTNERSHIPS: A NEW MODEL OF GOVERNANCE

Across Europe, governments show that no single institution can solve complex challenges alone. By forging alliances built on trust and shared goals, governments and partners turn regulation into collaboration and crises into innovation — creating resilient solutions and lasting public trust.



2. WHY IT'S TIME TO TEAM UP

CHALLENGES NO ACTOR CAN SOLVE ALONE

Europe's urban issues — from climate threats to digital security — are too complex, too fast-moving, and too interconnected for siloed governance. Addressing them requires shared structures, adaptive strategies, and mission-driven partnerships across sectors.

From the immediate health impact of Europe's increasingly common heatwaves, to the long-term threats to infrastructure due to climate change: Today's urban challenges are systemic, interconnected, and accelerating. The need to digitalise services and protect citizens online coincides with Europe's push for tech sovereignty. Housing crises intersect with the need to decarbonise the construction industry. Education systems face a shortage of qualified teachers while youth unemployment and skills gaps persist. At the same time, record levels of dissatisfaction with democratic governance are being fuelled by disinformation campaigns that undermine trust and polarise societies.

Triggers for collaborative efforts

Recent research shows that these transformational challenges are not just harder — they are structurally different. They are too complex, too cross-cutting, and too fast-moving for traditional, siloed governance to cope. Research on *intersectoral governance* and *cross-sector partnerships* suggests that without shared structures and adaptive strategies, even well-funded initiatives can fail to deliver sustained impact.

- **Complexity and interconnectedness of problems:** Today's challenges are too multifaceted to be resolved by any single

actor. Research from the WHO (McQueen et al, 2012) shows that rapid social and technological change has increased uncertainty and the pace of disruption. As a result, old siloed models are increasingly unfit for purpose.

- **Setbacks require adaptive responses:** Research like *Learning From Setbacks in Collaborations* (Pulido-Gomez et al., 2025) shows that, with transformational tasks, setbacks are inevitable. Adaptive partnerships can share risks, co-produce solutions, and learn quickly from failure. At the same time, they are building resilience.
- **Greater need for inclusive solutions:** Research from the *European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education* (De Vroey et al, 2025) stresses that challenges cut across sectors and affect multiple groups. Inclusive collaboration ensures broad buy-in and more sustainable outcomes.
- **Strategic urgency:** Governance trend analyses (Deloitte Center for Government Insights, 2025) warn that without new collaborative models, progress will stall, deadlocks will persist, and public value creation will lag behind what systemic change demands.

“Representative democracy once solely held the tools and authority to shape great transformations single handedly. In many areas, this approach is no longer adequate, prompting experimentation with alliances, network and collective-impact formats. The Institute puts these new ways of collaborative problem solving at the center of its method and thinking and applies them for governments”, explains Edward Strasser, CEO of the Innovation in Politics Institute.

Emergence of new forms of collaboration

Cities and regions hold an often underused resource: the diverse ecosystems of civic organisations, businesses, and institutions rooted in place. Civil society organisations know the priorities of their communities better than anyone, and businesses bring technical expertise and the capacity to deliver at scale.

Alongside long-standing models like **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)**, we see a rise in more *flexible, informal modes of collaboration* – alliances built on trust, mutual interest, and shared goals. Yet the question remains which factors help foster these new forms of collaboration.

Crisis fuels paradigm shifts

As Mair and Gegenhuber (2021) argue, social innovation has long been stuck in a fragmented paradigm, with rigid divisions of labor between the public sector, civil society, and business. It’s an approach that is increasingly ill-equipped for today’s systemic challenges. These divisions slow decision-making and hinder collective impact, particularly when crises demand speed and flexibility. Yet the authors also note that the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for rapid, digitally enabled collaborations, proving that other ways of working are possible.

“Wicked problems” demand integrated action

Political theorist H el ene Landemore argues that one of the reasons democracy thrives is because unlike other forms of government, it leverages collective intelligence (Landemore 2013).

Involving a range of people with different perspectives isn’t just fairer; it also leads to better results. In an age of growing complexity, this is more important than ever. As a result, many cities are developing new ways to leverage the insights of their citizens (Noveck 2018).

But there is also great scope for collaboration between governments and other organisations like NGOs, academia, and the private sector. Here too, the complexity faced by local administrations can be significantly reduced by bringing on board both technical expertise and alternative perspectives from an early stage. As the authors of *Collaborative Cities: Mapping Solutions to Wicked Problems* put it: “Wicked Problems [...] demand the kind of creative thinking, democratized engagement, and integrated action that best happens across boundaries when government, nonprofits, businesses and citizens work in concert” (Goldsmith et al., 2021).

Trust speeds up action

Trust is one of the most powerful drivers of effective collaboration. Experience shows that when partners bring different perspectives but share goals, trust built over time becomes a launchpad for new joint action – even between unlikely actors. In **Cascais**, Portugal, long-standing cooperation with local NGOs and businesses meant that when Ukrainian refugees arrived, rapid, coordinated support was possible. “Because the municipality has shown it delivers, partners usually say yes,” one official explained. In **Linz in Upper Austria**, for example, partnerships with industry in the context of reaching climate neutrality are built on the same principle and have led to further collaborations, like in “circular construction”.

From teaming up to building readiness

Recognising the need to work together is only the first step. The real test comes when cities and regions translate this intent into capability. As we will see in the fifth chapter, “From Challenges to Capabilities,” the governments leading the way are those that turn the mechanics of cooperation into a source of strength.

TRUST AS A CATALYST FOR ACTION

When diverse partners share goals, trust built over time accelerates joint action. Cases like Cascais and Linz demonstrate how long-standing collaboration enables rapid, coordinated responses to crises and drives systemic transformation.



3. RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY



The Innovation in Politics Awards recognise courageous and creative political projects in Europe

Notice

AI-supported tools were used at various stages: for transcribing interviews, exploring data, and mapping themes. But all findings were validated by human researchers before being included in the final report. In short: this report is written by humans, supported by AI – not the other way around.

To understand which challenges drive local governments like cities or municipalities to work across sectors and reach a common goal, we took a dual-track approach to our research: one part qualitative deep dive, one part horizon-scanning across the continent.

The Institute's unique knowledge base

Our starting point was a one-of-a-kind library of political innovation: Since launching the **Innovation in Politics Awards** in 2017, the Innovation in Politics Institute has collected more than 2,000 examples of real-world innovation across Europe. These cases cover everything from citizen participation to sustainable housing, from AI governance to health system transformation. They come from all levels of government and every corner of Europe.

Alongside this, we drew on the knowledge of our 100% non-profit subsidiary European Capital of Democracy (ECoD), which coordinates the **European City Network** (ECN) – a growing alliance of municipalities committed to democratic renewal and public sector innovation.

Where we looked

Most of the selected cities and regional governments were already active within our network or stood out in our Awards process –

places where collaborative efforts were either emerging or already bearing fruit. Our focus was on the *quality of insight*, not quantity: Hence, this is not a representative study, a full mapping of Europe, or any kind of ranking. The goal was to identify emerging patterns, not to evaluate or compare performance. We intentionally included a mix of geographic regions, political cultures, and institutional settings.

To map the trend of mission-driven, cross-sector collaboration, we chose eleven cities and regional governments for in-depth interviews: former Innovation in Politics Awards winners and finalists and ECN partners Warsaw (Poland), Bologna (Italy), Hamburg (Germany), Kiev (Ukraine), Burgos (Spain), Antwerp (Belgium) and Jõhvi (Estonia); the upcoming European Capital of Democracy of 2026 Cascais (Portugal), as well as Vienna Vienna (Capital of Democracy 2025) and Linz (Austria) both valued partners of the Institute. Finally, we took the opportunity to reach out to the city of Oulu (Finland) – who alongside Linz were runners up for the title of European Rising Innovative City in the European Capital of Innovation Awards (iCapital). We also undertook desk research on a further ten cities, from Budapest to Glasgow and Paris. With the exception of Oulu, all of



these cities are part of our broader network or have either won or been nominated for an Innovation in Politics Award.

What we looked for

For our interviews, we used a framework built on five key dimensions of collaboration: Mission Framing, Alliance Infrastructure, Financial Agility, Track Record, and Trust & Transparency. What mattered most to us was, first, what underlying challenge cities are responding to, and second, how they are doing it. We were particularly interested in informal, trust-based formats – collaborations that don't always follow a traditional public-private partnership model, but instead emerge from necessity and mutual interest.

From Linz's and Upper Austria's innovation clusters on circular economy, H2 and Bologna's digital transition, to Antwerp's youth employment alliances and Cascais' hyper-agile refugee response system – each city brought its own take on cross-sector mission delivery.



Finalists for the Innovation in Politics Awards 2024



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4. EMERGING TRENDS

EUROPE'S SHARED CHALLENGES NO ONE CAN SOLVE ALONE

Below are five key topic areas where we have identified a clear trend in governments teaming up with external partners to solve major challenges. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, it highlights areas – such as digitalisation or circular economy – which we have repeatedly encountered in our work, and which several of our interview partners identified as central.

For each topic, we highlight concrete examples from cities and regional governments throughout Europe. They are broken down into a series of brief “project snapshots”, as well as deep-dive “city spotlights”, which offer a more in-depth account of the inner workings of the collaborations. The level of formalisation of the collaborations collected here varies greatly. Nonetheless, they all illustrate how teaming up can equip cities to address some of the most pressing challenges of our times.

CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Why it matters now: The persistence of the “take, make, dispose” model creates mounting costs for cities and industries alike: through waste management, rising material prices, and escalating carbon emissions. Construction and material production are among the largest contributors to climate change, and only 6.9% of global consumption is based on recycled inputs (Circularity Gap Report 2025). To rectify this, circular economy (CE) is emerging as a system-wide approach that links carbon cycles, energy reuse, and material flows. Political frameworks, such as Germany’s 2024 National Circular Economy Strategy, now treat CE as cen-

tral to climate action and supply-chain resilience. Local governments are embedding circularity into procurement rules, while businesses adopt new models to cut emissions and waste. This systematic shift means that CE is one of the most critical levers for climate transformation, creating a new space for local governments to align with businesses, universities, and civic actors.

How cities are teaming up: Circular economy is by definition a collaborative undertaking. Cities and regional governments have several central roles to play:

- **As convenors and facilitators.** For example, Torino’s “Circular & Sharing Economy Lab” ran from 2019-2020. It harnessed entrepreneurial innovation to address local policy needs in a circular economy, including plastic, textile, and construction material re-use. Many of the social enterprises that emerged from it are still active today.
- **Leading by example.** For the Horizon-funded CIRCuIT project, Copenhagen, Hamburg, the region of Helsinki and Greater London teamed up with universities as well as architecture and construction firms to develop circular construction approaches that can be scaled and replicated across Europe.
- **Sharing best practices with government and industry around the world.** The European Circular Economy Hotspot initiative began in 2016 in the Netherlands. Each year, a different host city or region assembles a programme that showcases their CE best practices from industry and government. Recent hosts include Dublin in 2023 and Cardiff in 2024.



BURGOS KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location:

~177,000 residents;
capital of Burgos province in Castile and León, north-central Spain.

Governance:

Mayor-council system (Ayuntamiento), led by the centre-right Partido Popular; municipal decisions coordinated with the regional government of Castile and León; participatory district councils.

Economy: Strong manufacturing base (automotive, machinery, food processing), major logistics hub; growing focus on advanced manufacturing, green economy, and digital transformation.



City Spotlight Spain

Industrial Estates: Poligono Circular, Burgos

The Villalonquéjar industrial estate in Burgos in the North of Spain is one of the country's largest, home to more than 700 businesses with 16,000 employees. In 2021, the Business Association of the Villalonquéjar Industrial Estate, in collaboration with the Burgos City Council, launched the Poligono Circular, or "circular industrial estate" project.

The project was initiated by the Business Association and has a strong participative element, structured around meetings attended by both the City Council and representatives of local businesses. In its first year, it led to the recovery of 83,000 tonnes of non-hazardous waste, and has since seen the development of new energy sharing and waste-water reuse practices.



The involvement of the city has remained constant following the transition to a new administration in 2023. In February 2024, a permanent Circular Economy Office was established to manage the project. Local banking foundation "Fundación Caja de Burgos" provided the office with a full-time member of staff. In 2025, the estate hosts a best practice exchange event, bringing together circular economy practices from estates around the world.

The largest business on the estate is L'Óreal. But the estate is home to many small and medium sized businesses, which don't have dedicated climate teams. "Normally, big companies have their own sustainability projects", explained Jose Juan Martinez Caballero, Board Member of the Villalonquéjar Industrial Estate Business Association (AEPV). By contrast, smaller companies "don't have one expert in law, one expert in energy. It's one manager doing everything". The group assists these companies with training and assessments on potential improvements in the area of waste management. This has seen even direct competitors pool resources in order to create a systematic, community-led approach to industrial waste management. Larger companies have also supported smaller ones in addressing sustainability issues, including water treatment and energy efficiency.

City Spotlight Austria

Circular Construction: The re_use initiative in Linz

Linz in Upper Austria has set itself the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2040. A heavily industrial town home to 2% of Austria's population, it is responsible for around 13% of the country's carbon emissions. One key to its success will be a shift to circular economy construction practices. Construction is currently responsible for up to 14% of carbon emissions in Austria. At the same time, demand for housing is growing rapidly.

The re_use initiative by the City of Linz (in collaboration with the Innovation in Politics Institute) brings together city administrators with the private sector as well as NGOs and research groups to achieve this goal through a Mission Partnership.

It started with a congress in September 2024, at which the objectives were defined in joint meetings. This resulted in working groups, e.g. on data collection and measurement, financing and planning, as well as demolition

and reuse. All of the strategies and implementation of measures are defined and overseen by a steering committee, consisting of the city administration, the municipal services company, housing associations, construction companies, and local banks.

"The steady growth of this initiative demonstrates the power of collective action. Its expansion and the partners coming on board highlight a clear trend: collaboration and shared responsibility are emerging as the new drivers of sustainable transformation", says Ana Zuljevic, Head of Economic Development, Innovation, Climate Protection & EU at the City of Linz. In 2025, the province of Upper Austria joined the re_use initiative, thus widening its scope and importance.



CONVENING CLIMATE ACTION STAKEHOLDERS

Why it matters now

Tackling climate change requires more than legislation. While governments carry the mandate to lead, the path to climate neutrality depends on systematic change across sectors – particularly in high-emission industries like construction, manufacturing, and energy.

At the same time, the effects of climate change – such as extreme heat, flooding, and infrastructure disruption – transcend borders and sectors. Addressing them requires governments to act as convenors, bringing together the full ecosystem of stakeholders. While industrial decarbonisation promises the highest impact, it needs to go hand-in-hand with behavioural changes at the individual and community level.

How local governments are teaming up with other sectors:

- **Co-developing transition plans with key players from other sectors.** In 2018, the City of Linköping in Sweden introduced the local network initiative. The network currently consists of 18 private and public organisations, which have taken on challenges related to energy, material flows, transport and travel.
- **Ensuring social justice remains at the heart of the transition.** Launched under the NetZeroCities programme, Lisbon's LX Climate Lab is a platform designed to bring together governments with residents, businesses and academia to accelerate climate strategy innovations, while also addressing social issues such as energy poverty.

LINZ KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

~214.000 residents;
capital of Upper Austria,
located on the Danube
River between Vienna and
Salzburg.

Governance

municipal system with a
directly elected mayor and
city council; the govern-
ment of this industrial city
historically is center-left,
while the wider region of
Upper Austria traditionally
elects center-right govern-
ments.

Economy

Austria's leading industrial
city, home to voestalpine
AG (steel), LAT Nitrogen
(fertilisers), Borealis
(chemicals), and other
energy-intensive produc-
tion industries, major
machinery, logistics, and
engineering firms. Strong
in IT, creative services, and
research, with growing
innovation clusters and
tech parks.



Representatives from government, industry, academia, public administration and civil society exchange and learn from each other at the H2 Convention 2024 in Linz.



City Spotlight Austria

Green Industry: the H2 Convention in Upper Austria and the wider Metropolitan Area of Linz



Upper Austria is home to a quarter of Austria's industry, including steelworks and fertiliser production plants. In many heavy industry applications like these, hydrogen is playing a crucial role in reducing dependency on fossil fuels. Europe-wide projects are working to establish new supply chains – in the hope not only of moving to clean energy, but also of reducing Europe's geopolitical dependency on imported coal and natural gas.

also contribute financially to the initiative. The convention brings best practices from around the German speaking world and Europe to the area, as well as hosting workshops on key developments surrounding hydrogen energy. "We as a municipality may not produce green hydrogen ourselves, but we can create a framework, be a host and make sure that it all fits together," says Dominik Kreil, Climate Coordinator of the City of Linz. The Convention also hosts a Public Day, in which members of the public and school groups are invited to attend interactive workshops, exhibitions and talks organised by the various stakeholders.



The first H2 Convention took place in 2023. It has since established itself as the largest in Austria, with the third edition planned for November 2025. The initiative was launched by the Province of Upper Austria, the City of Linz, publicly owned energy company Linz AG, as well as the state-majority owned companies Verbund and Energie AG Oberösterreich, in cooperation with the Innovation in Politics Institute. It brings together key industry players in the private sector, of whom many

The City of Linz and Linz AG are both key members of the re_use Linz initiative (see section 4.1). The City is also currently preparing a new collaborative format dedicated to Carbon Capture, expanding its cooperative approach to climate action.



Students engage with energy companies and public institutions during the H2 Convention - Public Day 2024



© Sebastian Philipp, Andreas Brugger

City Spotlight Poland

A Collaborative Climate Blueprint: Warsaw

Warsaw is one of five cities in Poland to have signed the Net Zero Cities Climate City Contract, with the aim of moving towards climate neutrality by 2030. The city of 1.8 million inhabitants has faced short-term challenges with heat waves, droughts, flooding and poor air quality. It has also been identified as a European pollution hotspot (IEEP 2024) – making its climate neutrality goals all the more ambitious.

The groundwork for its current strategy was laid by the AdaptCity project, which ran from 2014-2019. The city took a collaborative approach to drawing up the document detailing its adaptation plan. In fact, the project had its roots outside of City Hall, in the work of the Institute for Sustainable Development, a civil society organisation with a focus on the environment. The Institute also prepared the project's EU LIFE Programme funding application.

The city continues to cooperate with other actors in various processes related to climate policy. After all, less than 10% of urban greenhouse gas emissions fall directly under municipal authorities. The vast majority rely on coordination with housing associations, businesses, academic institutions, and civil society for their implementation. "Many of the ideas behind our adaptation strategy came from outside institutions," explained Leszek Drogosz, Director of the city's Infrastructure Department. "We respect and use the expertise of people who have worked in this field since the 1980s as well as point of view of the



representatives of much younger generation." This meant consultations with the public, but also with civil society and activist groups. The city also used roundtable discussions with businesses, including the publicly owned Warsaw waterworks MPWiK Warszawa, alongside local companies in the areas of insurance, construction and transport. Academic partners were brought in to help with the analysis of the contributions. Throughout, Warsaw was also in constant dialogue with 11 other large Polish cities, exchanging insights and ideas.

The Green Vision for Warsaw, which followed AdaptCity, built upon many of the principles from the earlier project. Developed with input from over 100 partners, it too was based on the idea that climate resilience can only emerge through cooperation.

WARSAW KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

~1.8 million residents; Poland's largest urban area. Located in central-eastern Poland on both banks of the Vistula River

Governance

Mayor-council system with directly elected mayor (centre-right) and 60-member city council. Divided into 18 districts with their own councils.

Economy

Poland's financial and business hub, generating ~15% of national GDP. Key sectors: finance, IT, business services, logistics, construction, and creative industries. Hosts HQs of major Polish companies (PKO BP, Orlen, PZU) and regional offices of multinationals (Google, Citi, Accenture).

CASCAIS KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

~214,000 residents;
coastal municipality in
Lisbon District, part of the
Lisbon metropolitan area.

Governance

Mayor–council municipal
system led in 2025 by a
centre-right coalition of
the liberal-conservative
Social Democratic Party
and the People’s Party.

Economy

Driven by tourism, real
estate, services, and
retail, with some light
manufacturing. Hosts
high-value residential
areas and benefits from
commuter links to Lisbon.
Growing support for inno-
vation, tech startups, and
green economy initiatives.

City Spotlight Portugal

Engaging Citizens in Sustainability in Cascais

Stakeholder engagement can mean giving everyone a say – or it can put matters squarely in their hands, giving them an active role in sustainability in their community. In Cascais, the local government worked with NGOs, educational institutions, and the private sector to recruit residents as local “tutors”, responsible for the monitoring and stewardship of Cascais’ public spaces. The project began as a community vegetable garden project, launched with European funding. Due to its enormous success, the project rapidly evolved into a citywide model of citizen co-management. Today, residents feel empowered by it to take the lead on issues of urban management and environmental care.

“You don’t protect what you don’t know or feel identified with,” told us Filipa Pereira, a Neighbourhood Tutor. “When you build a sense of community, you feel that you belong to the city – you protect it. This is one of the greatest advantages.”

Each tutor is assigned a specific area in the city. They monitor the area, and report back to the city on issues related to waste man-

agement, public safety, urban maintenance, and environmental stewardship. Alongside the “Fix it” citizen portal-app, tutors meet municipal leaders roughly every three months across the four parishes, putting them into direct contact with the council.

“These citizens are the ears and eyes of the municipality,” explains Jenny Romero, a Project Manager in the Department of Management Support at the Municipality of Cascais. “We have a very quick response rate, in fact, 98% of issues are solved this way.”

By 2024, a total of 257 tutors were monitoring 90% of public spaces throughout the city.

The programme is coordinated by Cascais Ambiente, the city’s municipal environment company; it is primarily publicly funded, with in-kind support from firms such as Vodafone (devices for tutors who need them). As Romero stresses, it’s “not just a volunteer programme” but a structured system “where citizens, NGOs, and private partners all work together with the municipality to address urban sustainability challenges.”

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

Why it matters now

Young people in Europe today face a vast range of challenges: rising cost of living and housing combined with stagnant incomes; a mental health crisis; and the long-term effects of climate change. Many also experienced disruptions at crucial stages of their education due to effects of the global pandemic. Not only did they have to adapt to new methods of remote learning, they also missed out on work experience and the development of soft skills. Across the EU, youth unemployment stands at 14.7%. At the same time, there are persistent issues with skills shortages, particularly in STEM subjects (Science,

Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), at a time when European digital sovereignty is more important than ever.

How cities are teaming up with other sectors:

- **By working with schools, education departments and experts.** In 2018, the municipality of Alytus in Lithuania had one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the country. The city worked with the Labour Exchange, Youth Affairs Department, local schools, and experts in psychology to provide career support and provide placements with local employers.



- **By leveraging civil society to reach marginalised communities.** The city of Paris works with the *Mission Locale*, an NGO which promotes autonomy and professional integration of young people by offering free support and advice, with a special focus on low-income neighbourhoods.
- **By encouraging employers to give young people a chance.** “Glasgow Guarantee” is a long-running project which subsidises wages and apprenticeships in order to find work placements for young people. The city council works together with local colleges as well as hundreds of employers to implement the programme.

City Spotlight Belgium

Tackling Youth Unemployment in Antwerp

In 2023, the City of Antwerp had an unemployment rate of 13.6% among 17-25 year olds. The city’s Employment Service and Youth Service worked together to identify the causes, and to set policy priorities for addressing them. “There was already data available, the percentages and everything. But we wanted to know the motivation behind the data because there lies the added value. You don’t find real solutions in numbers and percentages if there is no explanation behind the data. How do youngsters experience the issue? Are they getting support from home?” told us Roel Camps, Youth Participation Expert at the City of Antwerp.

Antwerp started with a survey based on open questions completed by over 300 young people, designed in cooperation with local youth organisations. To ensure they were reaching a broad cross-section of young people, the Flemish Department of Education helped them set up interviews at schools and further education institutes. They also worked with several job centres who receive city funds, speaking to around 100 young job seekers.

This was followed by a “youth takeover” event, which put 20 young people directly in dialogue with the Alderman of Antwerp and the CEO of the Flemish Department of Employment.

Based on the findings, the City Employment office developed three new policy priorities, backed with a budget of 350,000€: 1) Improved support during the job application process; 2) the adoption of more youth-friendly recruitment practices by employers; and 3) addressing mobility issues that prevent young people from getting to potential places of work.

To help achieve the second of these priorities, an external youth organisation launched a project to help improve the recruitment process, working directly with local businesses to achieve their goal. A total of 15 business leaders were brought together with young job-seekers for a series of workshops. Together, they developed a toolkit that outlined simpler interview formats, guidance on giving useful feedback, and clearer job advertisements. It has since been integrated into Antwerp’s employment policy framework.

ANTWERP KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

~565,000 residents; Located in the Flemish Region, 45 km north of Brussels.

Governance

Two-tier municipal system with a central City Council and 10 District Councils, including recently added Borsbeek (2025). The current coalition is led by the Flemish-nationalist, centre-right New Flemish Alliance.

Economy

Hosts one of the world’s largest ports, driving logistics, petrochemicals, manufacturing, and international trade. Global diamond trade hub. Strong in chemicals, maritime industries, and an expanding service sector.

IRELAND MIDLANDS KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

~318,000 residents across Laois, Offaly, Westmeath, and Longford; centrally located in Ireland.

Governance

No stand-alone regional authority since 2014; now a strategic planning area within the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA). Each county has its own council managing local governance.

Economy

Diversified base in agriculture, manufacturing, engineering, and services. It has been identified by the Financial Times as a “European Region of the Future”, and ranked 2nd in Europe for FDI strategy in the Small European Regions category in 2025. Strong transport links make it a logistics hub.

City Spotlight Ireland, Estonia

Closing the Skills Gap: STEM in Ireland’s Midlands & Coding in Jõhvi and Tallinn

The Midlands in Ireland is a designated EU Just Transition Fund territory, an initiative founded to support communities negatively affected by the transition to climate neutrality. Previously heavily dependent on peat mining and industry, the region is now focusing on economic diversification – driven by collaborations between local government, industry, educators, and civil society organisations.

As part of the Driving STEM in the Midlands initiative, students engage in the VEX Robotics competition, with over 200 students participating in regional finals and some progressing to world championships. The programme is supported by local employers and STEM clusters. Alongside this, Microsoft Dream Space provides STEM training for both students and teachers. Since launching, it has reached nearly 300,000 students, and has been expanded to Portugal and the Netherlands.

kood is an example of an innovation beginning in the private sector before being adopted by governments. Troubled by a lack of qualified software developers in the country, eight Estonian startup entrepreneurs – including Taavet Hinrikus (Wise), Martin Villig (Bolt), and Marek Kiisa (Superangel) – launched a new kind of coding school in Jõhvi in the north east of the country.

The non-profit school is open to anyone 18 or over who has completed a basic education. Initially cost-free, it has since switched to a “no upfront fee” tuition model based on post-study

earnings. The school employs a peer-to-peer learning model, with no teachers or lectures. At the end of the two year programme, students qualify as junior-level full-stack developers. The school also works closely with employers to find students their first work placement. “You need to have the companies behind the school who believe in what you’re teaching, and who are willing to hire the people who graduate,” the school’s then co-director Karin Künnapas told us in 2022.

Development costs at kood are funded by donations from the private sector, including major Estonian banks, as well as scaled-up startups. Since launching in Jõhvi, kood has been approached by the administrations of two other Estonian towns – Võru and Paide – to launch their own schools. In these cases, the towns themselves acted to secure initial funding, and in Paide, a local manufacturing firm also made a substantial financial contribution.

kood’s peer-learning coding model has also been introduced to around 30 high schools around Estonia, including ten schools in Tallinn, beginning in the 2025-2026 academic year. The model has also been adopted abroad, beginning with the launch of kood/Sisu launching in Kuopio, Finland in mid 2024. And as part of a foreign aid project, a remote academy has also been launched in Zhytomyr in Ukraine, and a remote boot camp was made available to students in Nairobi, Kenya, with a view to expanding operations into Eastern Africa.

TALLINN KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

~456,000 residents; capital and largest city of Estonia. Located on the northern coast.

Governance

Representative municipal system. The current coalition is led by the Social Democratic Party. The coalition ended over 20 years of Center Party dominance.

Economy

Strong in logistics, maritime trade, ICT, finance, and tourism. Known as a leading digital government pioneer with a thriving start-up and innovation ecosystem.



DIGITAL SECURITY AND TECH SOVEREIGNTY

Why it matters now

The AI boom has coincided with the emergence of a new geopolitical reality for Europe. It has become clear that the bloc is too dependent on digital technology built and hosted elsewhere, above all in the USA and China. The drive for European tech sovereignty is not only about securing its economic future. It is founded in a commitment to the idea that digital technology should serve democracy, rather than being allowed to undermine it. Pro-democracy technology is a huge opportunity for cities to improve their services and their relationships with their residents – while keeping their data safe. And it is key to ensuring that cities fulfill their responsibilities in line with national and European legislation on freedom of information, AI safety, and data protection.

How cities are teaming up with other sectors

- **By encouraging the private sector to share their data and their know-how.** In the project “Governing Urban Data for the Public Interest”, the City of Hamburg and the New Institute teamed up with private sector firms Bolt and IoT to develop an experimental public-private data sharing framework, in which the businesses voluntarily made some of their data available to the city.
- **By providing “sandboxes” for the rapid development of new technologies – tested by residents.** Tallin is one of the most advanced smart cities in the world. Through the “Test in Tallin” project, the city partners with private companies to pilot new smart city solutions – while also allowing residents to test them and provide their feedback. Recent projects focus on digital solutions for energy efficiency and social inclusion.
- **By ensuring that tech benefits everyone.** The CitiVerse European Digital Infrastructure Consortium (EDIC) was founded in Valencia in 2024. It brings together 14 European cities committed to cooperative smart city development, with a focus on AI-based solutions – working with public entities, citizens and the industry.



BOLOGNA KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

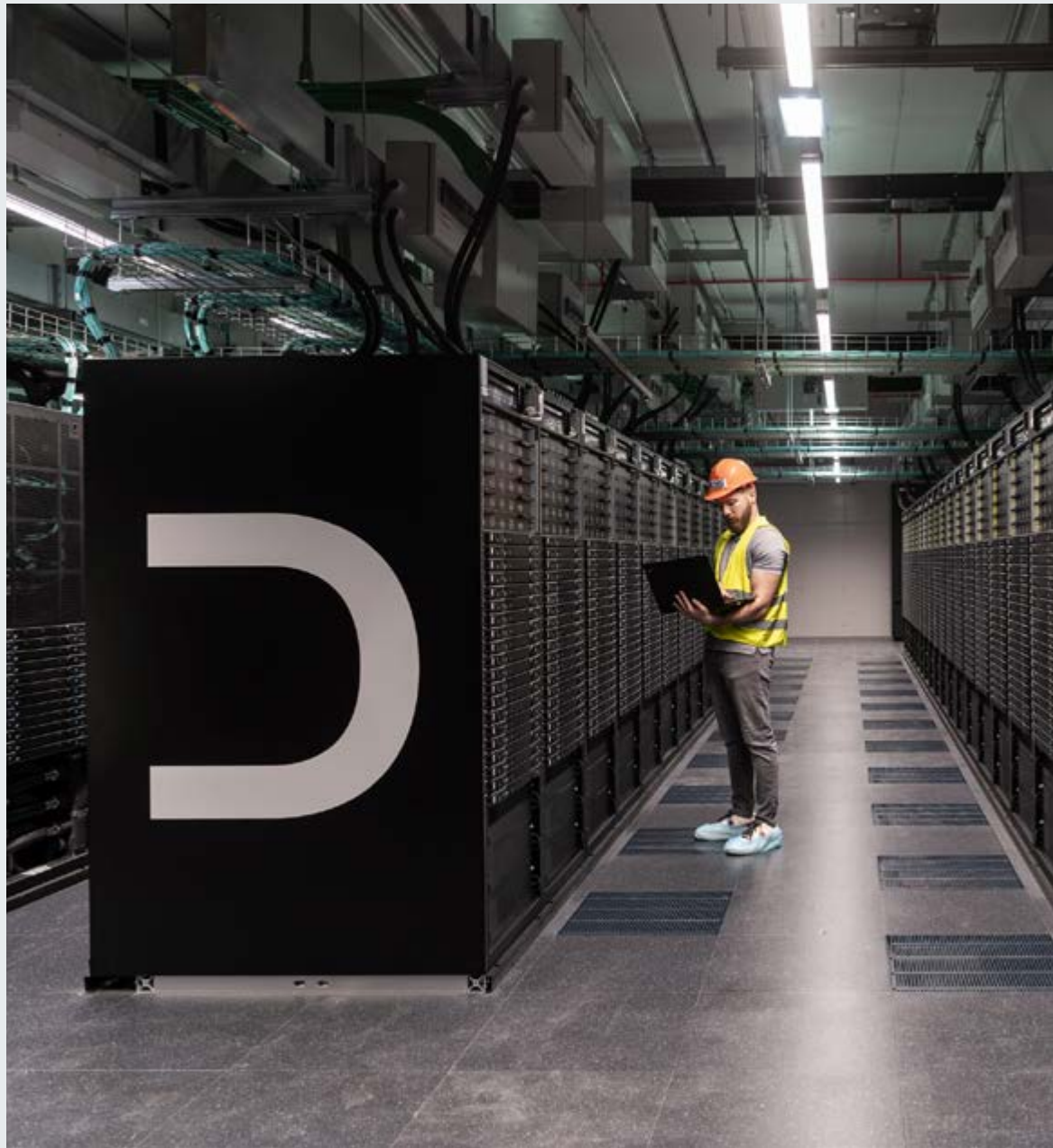
~390,700 residents; capital of Emilia-Romagna in northern Italy. Located at a key crossroads between northern and central Italy, with a UNESCO-listed historic center.

Governance

Mayor-council system with the Democratic Party (PD) – center-left – leading city politics, often in coalition with other progressive parties. Divided into local districts with delegated services.

Economy

Diversified industrial base in automotive (Ducati, Lamborghini nearby), food processing, logistics, and mechanical engineering. Growing high-tech, biotech, and ICT sectors supported by research institutions. Strategic transport hub for Italy and Europe.



City Spotlight Austria, Italy

Vienna's proposed AI Gigafactory and Bologna's supercomputer

Launched in April 2025, the EU Continent Action Plan seeks to turn the EU into a global leader on AI, requiring the rapid establishment of a vast network of AI and data infrastructure.

In 2025, Vienna announced a bid to host one of five planned **"AI Gigafactories"** outlined in the Action Plan. For the city, this decision is about far more than hosting a processing facility. The city sees this as an opportunity to enhance its status as a "leading European technology hub". Vienna's pitch positions the city as a core digital and economic hub for

Europe, capable of linking AI supercomputing power to sectors such as life sciences, precision medicine, and advanced materials research.

The facility would be a magnet for top scientists, high-tech companies, and startups, boosting Vienna's competitiveness and creating hundreds of highly skilled jobs, while strengthening its position as a university city. Approximately 60-70% of the initial 500 million euro investment would come from public sources, with the rest being



provided by technology companies. The city government is engaged in discussions with potential private sector partners, and has developed plans to re-use heat generated by the factory to reduce the city's dependence on imported gas – potentially heating up to 120,000 households and reducing the city's gas consumption by about 15%. The city has a strong commitment to "digital humanism", and places great emphasis on the ethical considerations surrounding AI and data. In the interview, the city stresses, the Gigafactory will only succeed if it is managed as a "complex digital ecosystem" rather than a stand-alone industrial site – an infrastructure investment as much about Europe's future independence in technology as



about Vienna's own economic transformation. European tech sovereignty may be a work in progress, but the continent is already home to some key infrastructure. Alongside **"Lumi" in Finland, "Alps" in Switzerland and MareNostrum in Spain, "Leonardo" in Bologna, Italy** is one of Europe's most powerful supercomputers. It is used for data processing, High Performance Data Analytics (HPDA), Artificial Intelligence and machine learning, with applications from climate modelling to medical research or engineering simulations. Bologna sees Leonardo as a key economic driver, attracting talent to the region and reshaping its economy away from manufacture towards digital services.

Leonardo is operated by Cineca – a consortium of Italian universities, research centres, the Italian Ministry for Universities and Research, and the Italian Ministry of Education. While not part of this core group, the City of Bologna belongs to a broader consortium led by Cineca, including regional, city and municipal government representatives.

"What we bring to the table is the focus on ethical data use," explains Miles Gualdi, Coordinator, European and International Projects Unit at the City of Bologna. "We may not be involved in processing the data, but we reflect on why and how our data is used. The key motto of this administration is to leave no one behind in all of the various transitions going on. In the context of digital technology, this means ensuring the fair and responsible use of data."

VIENNA KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

~2,028,000 residents;
Austria's largest city and a top EU urban centre. Located in eastern Austria on the Danube River. Around 36% foreign nationals.

Governance

Unique Austrian city-state combining municipal and provincial powers. The City Council (100 members) also serves as the state parliament. The current coalition is led by the Social Democratic Party of Austria and the liberal party NEOS. Vienna has 23 districts, each with its own district council and head.

Economy

Austria's economic hub with strengths in finance, IT, manufacturing, creative industries, and tourism. Hosts major national firms, global organisations (including UN offices), and a strong start-up and research ecosystem.



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Experts and decision-makers from Austrian cities and municipalities exchange knowledge and experiences at the first Safe Democracy Convention (2025).

City Spotlight Austria

Safe Democracy: Improving digital interaction between citizens and government

Depending on where you live, everyday contact with your local authorities – from making payments to signing up for services, retrieving information or making your opinion heard – can be a frustrating experience. Digital solutions have a proven track record of improving standards in communication between local administrations and their residents. At the same time, local administrations need to uphold the highest standards to ensure the security of citizens' data, and to boost their own transparency.

The Austrian initiative "Safe Democracy" was founded in the belief that high quality digital solutions are the foundation for trust in local government. It was co-founded by the City of Vienna, the Austrian Association of Cities and Towns, the Austrian Association of Municipalities, and technology companies, such as Samsung Austria and Cisco Austria, together with the Innovation in Politics Institute.

The first Safe Democracy Convention was attended by representatives of 60 cities and municipalities, 25 national and local ministries, 50 associations and NGOs, and 20 private businesses. The core of the initiative is best practice exchange with 24 tried and tested digital government solutions from around Europe so far.

The sheer volume of e-government solutions available makes keeping an overview ex-

tremely difficult, especially for smaller towns or municipalities who don't have dedicated teams. "There is so much intelligence out there, there are so many examples you can use who already did it better than you can do it from scratch" explains Josef Zehetner, Programme Manager for Safe Democracy at the Innovation in Politics Institute.

The steering group of the initiative is currently developing a set of guidelines for use by local authorities when identifying potential digital solutions. The aim is to support them in identifying the right products, while also maintaining high standards of security and transparency.

The business partners of the initiative make financial contributions in support of the activities, but also provide essential expertise on digital solutions. Both Samsung and Cisco have a track record of working with local and national governments on digital solutions, making them natural partners for the initiative. For the first event, the founding partners were joined by seven further companies and organisations, which provided both financial support and additional expertise.

Alongside a second Convention in Vienna, scheduled for Spring 2026, an additional event is due to take place in Innsbruck, to ensure that administrations throughout Austria benefit from the initiative.

City Spotlight Germany

Data for the Public Good in Hamburg

What would happen if the sea level rose half a meter? What if rainfall becomes heavier, or if the temperature rises? What if the population goes up or down? How would mobility be affected if there were no more parking spaces in the city centre?

Nora Reinecke is the Overall Project Lead of “Connected Urban Twins”, a collaboration between the German cities of Hamburg, Leipzig and Munich. The idea is to answer questions like those listed above using “digital twins” of each city – a virtual model of an urban area that combines data collected from sensors around the city with other public data to create a kind of mirror of the city. This can then be used by researchers to simulate various scenarios, or by citizens to find out more about how their urban environment is managed.

The collaboration is funded by Germany’s “Model Smart Cities” programme. Members of the city administrations come together in working groups dedicated to specific topics. This means that progress made in one city can be directly shared and tested in the others, resulting in a shared process, rather than three parallel projects. The project will run for four years – after which, the formal arrangement will end, even if the individual projects continue.

Besides the three cities, multiple additional partners are involved in the project. Various municipal departments provide data and guidance on research priorities. The group also works closely with academic partners, including the City Science Lab at Hafen City University in Hamburg, who provide methodological guidance. Tech companies assist in developing simulation tools and user interfaces.



HAMBURG KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

– Key Facts (2025)
Population & Location:
~1,860,000 residents;
Germany’s second-largest city.

Governance

Parliamentary city-state system, currently governed by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), in coalition with the Greens. Divided into 7 boroughs, each with local assemblies for district matters.

Economy

Home to one of Europe’s largest ports, a global logistics hub. Key industries include aerospace (Airbus), shipping, logistics, media, finance, IT, renewable energy, and manufacturing. Hosts major employers like Lufthansa Technik and global shipping firms, plus an active startup ecosystem in green tech and digital services.

PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Why it matters now:

Europe's public healthcare systems face an array of challenges: aging populations, increasing demand for mental health services, and rising costs present national governments with vast tasks. Cities and local municipalities do vital work in closing the gaps, assisting vulnerable groups in getting access to healthcare, organising mental health support programmes, and piloting new digital health services.

Recent research shows that cross-sectoral governance has a key role to play. A 2025 study on purpose-aligned systems shows how health, social care, and public services must align resources and goals to address inequalities and build trust across institutions (Badr: 2025). New approaches in data linkage merging health, housing, employment, and justice records are also reshaping inclusion efforts, making hidden populations like migrants or homeless individuals visible for targeted support (Pearce et al. 2023). This underscores a shift: local governments, businesses, academia, and civil society increasingly need to work together to design resilient, inclusive social and health ecosystems.

How cities are teaming up with other sectors:

- **By ensuring transparency and building trust in digital health solutions.** Stockholm City Council worked with local healthcare providers to give patients access to their own digital healthcare records, with the aim of improving trust between patients and healthcare providers.
- **By letting those most affected lead on accessibility.** To develop its Local Inclusion Agenda, the City of Amsterdam developed a participatory process involving people with disabilities, advocacy group Cliëntenbelang Amsterdam, and city officials. Implementation began in 2020, addressing issues like accessibility of public spaces and public transport, as well as social inclusion and inclusive education.
- **By closing gaps in national-level healthcare.** Life expectancy in Hungary is 4.6 years lower than the EU average. The City of Budapest has committed to closing this gap. They teamed up with several partners including healthcare provider V&H Medical and Budapest Transport to launch a screening bus programme. Around 7,000 people underwent screenings in 2024, with plans to continue the project.





City Spotlight Finland

Digital Healthcare Solutions in Oulu

For the period 2021-2027, the city of Oulu has set itself the goal of developing “the best European ecosystem to create global added value with digitalisation, solving ecological, economic, and social sustainability challenges.” Part of this mission involves transforming the city and the surrounding area into a region of excellence in digital healthcare and wellbeing solutions.

One of the projects it launched in pursuit of this goal was the Oulu Health Labs – a collection of innovation, testing and development environments that cover specialised medical care, medical imaging, primary care, social care and education. A new hospital in Oulu has the first private 5G standalone (SA) network in a functioning hospital in Europe. This network is available for businesses and researchers to test and develop new products and services. “Typically, it can take about 7 years to get from the original idea to the market in the health sector,” explains Maria Vuorensola, Programme Manager of the Oulu Innovation Alliance. The goal of the labs is to speed this process along. Technology developed in the labs includes the “Oura” smart ring, which monitors heart-rate and other health indicators, and the “Nucu” baby sleep monitor.

Other key projects include “Oulu Medical Data Infrastructure”, a collaboration between the

University of Oulu and the Wellbeing Services of the County of North Ostrobothnia. Together, they are working to develop a data infrastructure that will allow for the processing of sensitive and confidential data, maintaining European data security standards while also driving medical innovation. The aim is to allow for the secondary use of patient data for preventative healthcare purposes.

Both of these projects are part of the Oulu Innovation Alliance. The alliance is not a legal entity. Instead, it is a strategic consortium of actors within the Oulu area. There are 7 core signatories – including the city, the University, several public services, and one private business from the IT sector (Techtronica). The programme manager Maria Vuorensola works in the Business Department of the City administration. It was established in 2009 – and has overseen countless projects in both healthcare and other areas.

The broader strategy of the Alliance is established by the mayor’s office in collaboration with partners from both the public and private sectors. The individual projects, however, are not managed centrally by the city or by the core group. Instead, the partners on the various projects are left to take decisions and conduct their work within the framework set out.

OULU KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

~216,000 residents;
largest city in Northern Finland.

Governance

A centrist coalition government led by the Centre Party and the National Coalition Party.

Economy

High-tech hub specialising in ICT, telecommunications, and digital health. Strong innovation ecosystem in clean tech, circular economy, and sustainable urban solutions, anchored by the Oulu Innovation Alliance (OIA) with universities, research institutes, and industry.

City Spotlight Portugal

Cascais' Community Approach to Healthcare and Wellbeing



Carlos Carreiras, Mayor of Cascais, winner of the title "European Capital of Democracy 2026"

The COVID-19 pandemic put an enormous strain on national health services around Europe. Not only were hospitals overwhelmed with patients suffering with the virus. It also became difficult for patients to access regular healthcare, including simple visits to the doctor.

The City of Cascais in Portugal responded by working to establish its Local Health and Social Solidarity Services (SL3S). Its goal: to ensure that every citizen, regardless of legal status or income, has access to core services such as online doctors' appointments, psychological support, and social assistance. While the pandemic may be over, the project has lived on, with the goal of easing pressure on the overburdened national health service. The online platform "Vida Cascais" was launched in April 2021. It began by offering teleconsultations and home deliveries of medicines. In recognition of the fact that many of its citizens are not online, physical centres were also established, to ensure universal access. Unlike many similar projects launched during the pandemic, the project has lived on and continued to grow.

The scheme makes use of the local "Viver Cascais" card. Originally introduced to give residents free access to public transport, within the local healthcare system it acts as

a substitute for a medical insurance card – thereby granting thousands of refugees and undocumented residents access to healthcare and other vital services. When the Ukrainian refugee crisis began in 2022, Cascais gave the Viver Cascais card to all new arrivals, to ensure their seamless access to services. They also offered language support during medical consultations.

In September 2024, the city also relaunched "Espaço S – Saúde e Bem-Estar Jovem" ("Space S – youth health and wellbeing"), a programme which provides support to young people aged 12-30. Housed in a youth centre run by the city, among other things, it provides up to 12 months of clinical psychological support, a key provision at a time when many young people suffer with mental health issues.

The Vida Cascais platform is the product of ongoing cross-sector collaboration. The city government worked together with the national health service, the Red Cross, Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Cascais, and local NGOs. This inter-institutional approach not only helped the city to collect the resources and establish the network required to offer such a complex and multifaceted solution. It also helped them to understand the community's needs, including those of vulnerable groups.

City Spotlight Ukraine

Improving Accessibility in Kyiv

The City of Kyiv has a long history of democratic innovation. Its innovative network of municipal civic spaces, “VCentri Hub”, was launched in 2020 to strengthen community engagement. Immediately following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it quickly adapted to help its residents confront the new reality the war brought with it.

One of the biggest topics the city currently faces is accessibility. With a large number of war-wounded, many of them amputees, ensuring that the city accommodates their needs is crucial. “Most of them are at a very active age, and we need to provide them with possibilities to live normal lives and to be a part of society,” says Dmytro Ruban, the First Deputy Director of the Department of Public Communications of the City of Kyiv. He emphasised that this does not only mean physical accessibility, but also access to information, and to an active social life.

Part of Kyiv’s approach involves ensuring that the voices of people with disabilities are heard during the planning of all policy initiatives within the city. To this end, the city has built up a network of consulting bodies, consisting largely of NGOs who represent the needs of the disabled community. The VCentri Hub currently has ten locations around the city, and acts as a centre for civic engagement – a place where NGOs, city officials, students, and businesses can meet and discuss issues like these.

Civic engagement has always been strong in the city, but it took on a new dimension when Russia launched its invasion. “The NGOs, businesses, and the City Council – we all united when the invasion began,” said Ruban. “Everybody was very organised, supporting each other. There were no borders or clear frames – who is the authority, who is a business – everybody just did their best to help for the safety of the city, for the safety of our communities.”



KYIV (KIEV) KEY FACTS (2025)

Population & Location

~3 million residents;
capital and largest city of
Ukraine.

Governance

Mayor–city council system with dual municipal–regional powers. Mayor Vitali Klitschko (Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform) also heads the Kyiv City State Administration. In wartime, the Kyiv City Military Administration shares governance responsibilities.

Economy

Ukraine’s economic centre with strong finance, IT, manufacturing, transport, and service sectors. Hub for international business and government. Despite the war, continues digital innovation, recovery efforts, and infrastructure repair.



5. FROM CHALLENGES TO CAPABILITIES HOW CITIES BUILD MISSION READINESS

Before, we have seen that city administrations are being asked to deliver transformative change faster and across more domains than ever before. But ambition alone isn't enough. The cities and regional governments in this report show that building mission readiness – the capacity to act across sectors – means overcoming structural barriers by turning them into sources of strength. While the challenges are consistent across contexts, the ways cities build capabilities in response are evolving.

Challenge: The Cost of Transformation

Missions stretch resources. But cities are increasingly distributing the cost across sectors. Co-investment from businesses, academia, and other government levels is becoming standard practice. For instance, in Burgos' circular industrial estate, private and public actors jointly fund not only infrastructure, but the staff of the now-permanent project office. Linz's innovation department acts as a structured hub for

30 to 40 such collaborations, bringing clarity and continuity to shared budgeting models, with around 65% funding coming from public sources in the year 2025. Or Vienna's proposed Gigafactory project: around 60 to 70% of the projected investment is expected to come from public sources, while the rest will be raised through private sector partnerships. This model distributes financial risk while maximising innovation potential.

Challenge: Navigating Compliance

Rules and regulations can slow down collaboration – unless they are managed creatively. Several cities are working with third parties such as local development or business agencies, or neutral brokers such as Project Together in Germany, Impact Hubs, or the Innovation in Politics Institute, to align goals in accordance with compliance frameworks. These intermediaries help translate informal partnerships into compliant structures, and maintain formal coordination platforms that meet both legal and operational needs.

Challenge: Building Trust Across Sectors

Trust remains one of the most critical foundations for effective collaboration between the public and the private sector. Cities like Cascais and Antwerp show how repeated, informal partnerships – often sparked by necessity – can grow into long-term, trusted alliances. In both cases, dedicated teams for participation or innovation already existed, enabling fast response and continuity. This points to the importance of having infrastructure in place before a crisis hits.

Challenge: Power Dynamics and Structural Gaps

Sectors differ in culture, timelines, and incentives. To bridge these, governments use short-term working groups and shared goal-setting exercises. These allow actors to meet in manageable formats, build momentum, and negotiate their roles on equal

terms. Burgos' industry collaboration began as such an informal group – eventually growing into an institutionalised circular economy office, once momentum and mutual benefit were clear.

Challenge: Regulatory Constraints

Instead of waiting for national frameworks, many local and regional governments are co-developing their own. In Linz and Upper Austria, working groups develop operational models for circular construction that anticipate or shape future regulation. In Warsaw, the city's climate contract is informing broader planning norms. Cities are showing that co-writing new rules can be a form of capability in itself.

From First Steps to System Change

Across our interviews, a clear pattern emerged: successful collaborations between public and private players are often repeated, expanded, and eventually formalised. An initial project, even one initiated outside of government – as with *kood/Jõhvi* in Estonia – can become institutionalised and scaled when the conditions are right. Success leads to more success, as bonds between actors deepen.

What begins as a mission often evolves into a method

When governments invest in coordination structures – whether formal departments like in Linz, or recurring informal formats as in Antwerp – they create the conditions for mission partnerships to multiply. Over time, this turns collaboration from an exception into part of the system.

Mission readiness is not a static goal, it's a habit. It starts with small, often informal actions and grows through repetition, trust, and shared experience. As these cases show, cities that invest in the infrastructure of collaboration – whether formal or informal – are those best placed to meet complexity with capability.

6. THE INNOVATION IN POLITICS INSTITUTE'S METHOD: 5 KEY PILLARS

Over the years, the Innovation in Politics Institute has worked side-by-side with city administrations, businesses, and civic actors across Europe. We have seen what makes ambitious cross-sector missions succeed – and what makes them stall.

The result is the Institute's five-pillar "Mission Partnership" method: a practical toolset that helps cities and their partners move from vision to measurable impact.

1. Convening Power

The first step is getting the right people from various sectors to join and shape the mission together. Cities often have the trust and networks to do this better than anyone, because they are seen as neutral arenas where competing interests can meet.

In Linz's circular construction mission, the city and the province of Upper Austria didn't just invite partners to a few workshops and call it a day. They created a steering group that met regularly and included construction firms, property developers, municipal utilities, banks, NGOs, and academic experts. This group became the place where priorities are negotiated, trade-offs discussed, and the mission's direction agreed. Decisions made here shaped both policy and industry practice, ensuring that every partner had a real voice in the outcome.

2. Focusing on Shared Interests

Ambitious missions don't start with persuading everyone to compromise – they start by identifying what's already a common interest. That means zeroing in on goals that matter to all sides, especially those tied to future relevance, economic survival, and long-term competitiveness.

In Burgos, when nine competing plastics companies joined the "Poligono Circular" sustainability push, they didn't waste months debating differences. Instead, discussions were built around shared priorities: cutting waste, reducing energy costs, and meeting the EU's tightening environmental standards – issues that were business-critical for every company in the room. Once partners saw that the mission addressed their own bottom line as much as the city's climate goals, cooperation became a matter of self-interest rather than concession.

3. Best Practice Exchange

No public entity – whether it's a city, a region or a country – starts from zero. Somewhere, someone has already cracked part of your problem. The trick is to find them and learn fast. Best practice exchanges ensure that this work isn't doubled. They help move discussions beyond the theoretical level, and deal with concrete applications. They can also lead to ongoing collaborations with new partners.

Bologna's climate-neutrality mission drew inspiration from European peers tackling similar heatwave and flooding challenges. Officials brought in examples of successful adaptation projects from other Mission 100 cities, saving months of trial and error.

This isn't just efficiency – it's risk reduction. When Cascais built its own local health system during COVID-19, it leaned on lessons from earlier community-based health models, adapting them to local needs.

4. Reducing Complexity

Many of the projects outlined in this report engage a large array of stakeholders. This is one of the keys to their success. At the same time, there is a need for smaller groups to take ultimate responsibility for decisions and drive action. In some cases, cities take on this role alone; but there are also examples of multi-stakeholder steering groups who combine the perspectives of multiple sectors to map systemic barriers and identify quick wins year per year.

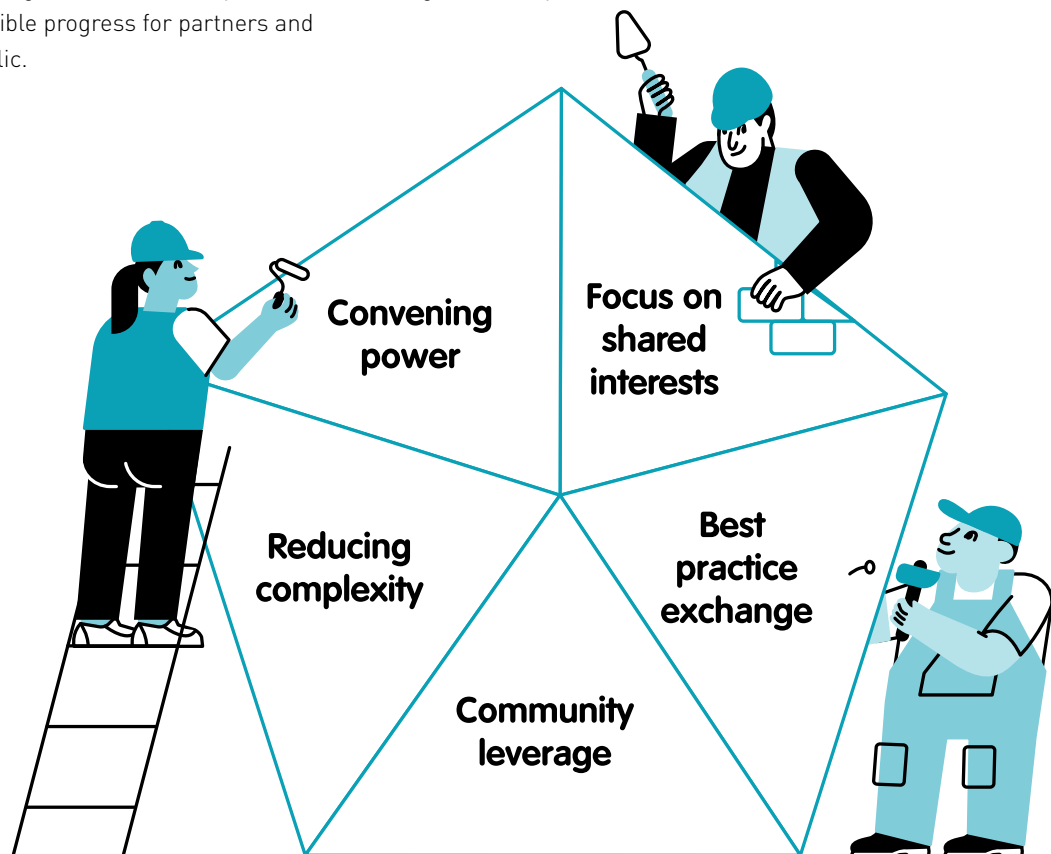
Moreover, we see that projects advance better when they translate big ambitions into a sequence of practical steps and near-term milestones. Breaking complex challenges into yearly, concrete goals creates clarity, accountability, and visible progress for partners and the wider public.

In Warsaw's climate city contract, over 90% of the work depends on actors outside city hall – housing associations, universities, private firms. To keep coordination manageable, the city created smaller, multi-sector working groups with clear decision-making authority. This step-by-step approach, breaking down the enormous challenges into smaller pieces, avoided endless all-hands meetings and kept progress visible.

5. Community Leverage

The people who live and work in a city often hold the insights and the legitimacy that can make or break a mission.

In Antwerp's youth employment mission, the city didn't just design programmes for young people: it asked them what wasn't working. Over 300 young residents responded, leading directly to new employer engagement programmes and a €350,000 budget shift. Because the ideas came from those affected, uptake was immediate. Directly involving the community in projects hence ensures that the solutions work for the people they affect the most. It also leads to higher rates of acceptance, and closer ties between administrations and their community – a key to strengthening democracy.



7. WHAT'S NEXT A PLAYBOOK FOR MISSION MAKERS



Bringing the right partners to the table, and securing early wins that build momentum

This report was written to be more than an analysis, but to provide a hands-on guide for turning big, complex challenges into successful mission partnerships. We like to also think of it as a practical handbook – a mission-maker’s manual – for spotting the right opportunities, bringing the right partners to the table, and securing early wins that build momentum:



Get in touch with us!

Step 1 Test if Your Challenge Fits a Mission Partnership

A mission partnership works best when:

- **The task is transformational** – It demands systemic change, not a minor policy tweak. The goal is to establish new ways of working, and this means structural change.
- **No single actor can solve it alone** – The solution needs resources, authority, or expertise from multiple sectors. Our cities are home to a vast number of organisations with vital expertise – we need to activate them.
- **All key stakeholders have a real stake in the outcome** – Their core mission, economic survival or growth depends on it. If the only benefit for some actors is “good publicity” or “being informed,” that would not be enough intrinsic motivation
- **The problem is solvable** through concrete action.
 - *Example for a Mission Partnership:* Building a zero-waste supply chain with local industry to reduce landfill waste by 60%.
 - *Not a mission partnership:* A city wanting only to improve citizens’ perception of its recycling program.
- There is a path to measurable progress – You can set interim goals and track them publicly.

Step 2 Map Stakeholder Interests Before You Start

- Identify “must-have” partners: Which actors are essential for technical, financial or operational delivery? Define what’s at stake for each: For businesses, it might be market access, cost savings or shaping future market condi-

tions; for NGOs, influence and impact; for academia, research opportunities; for government, policy success, and public trust.

- Find overlapping interests: That’s your shared interest zone, the heart of the mission’s framing.

Step 3 Secure Early Commitment Through Convening

- Create a “Governing body” like a Steering Group early to formalise decision-making and maintain trust. Avoid open-ended roundtables that fizzle; define roles, responsibilities, and the decision-making process from day one.

Step 4 Identify and Deliver Quick Wins

Early results build credibility and deepen engagement. Look for actions that:

- **Can be launched within a few months** with available resources.
- **Are visible to stakeholders and the public** – momentum needs to be seen.
- **Showcase the value of working together** – results that no actor could have achieved alone, like in Bologna which installed microclimate cooling stations in heat-vulnerable districts as a visible start to a broader climate adaptation plan.

Step 5 Plan for Scaling Before You Start

- Agree on how successful pilots will be scaled: governance, funding, and partner roles.
- Decide which public entity will “own” the mission beyond the initial project phase.
- Build in a best-practice exchange loop – what you learn here should feed back into other governments or sectors.

8. Appendix

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