

Eurocities 2026 Utrecht – Leaders Circle (Political track)

9 June, 15.30-17.00

Concept

The Eurocities Annual Conference offers a dedicated political track designed to provide city politicians with a private forum for open and strategic reflection where city politicians can explore the internal challenges of their political mission: shaping a desirable future for their territory while embracing the diversity of citizens' needs and expectations.

Over time, the traditional boundaries between responsibilities attributed to national and local governments have increasingly blurred. Cities are more directly affected by the actions—or inaction—of higher levels of government, while simultaneously being on the frontline of citizens' concerns. Technological progress and demographic shifts have brought both new opportunities and new pressures, enabling local administrations to become more efficient and responsive, but also revealing new political, social and ethical challenges for local leaders.

As a result, pressure has mounted significantly on local politicians. They are expected to foster change in increasingly complex environments, address a growing number of policy challenges simultaneously, and deliver solutions at speed — often with limited resources and within short electoral cycles. In some cases, this sustained pressure contributes to political fatigue, leading politicians to step away from public office at the end of their mandate. In other cases, it has pushed local leaders to seek stronger cooperation and collective political action at European level to address shared challenges.

This evolving role also creates new tensions: how to remain representative of diverse local realities, how to reconcile immediate citizens' demands with long-term transformation, and how to sustain oneself politically and personally in the face of constant scrutiny and expectation.

Despite these realities, there are few spaces where politicians can openly share and reflect on the lived experience of governing — beyond policy solutions, outside formal negotiations, and among peers only. This session is intended to fill that gap and to identify actions Eurocities could take to further strengthen its Leaders Circle.

Key perspectives and guiding themes

The session will be structured around three interconnected topics:

a) Governing under constant pressure


- Being the first point of contact for citizens' frustrations, expectations, and growing demands for immediate action
- Managing recurrent and overlapping crises while preserving credibility, trust, and institutional stability
- Navigating intense public accountability, media scrutiny, and political polarisation in real time

- Balancing short electoral cycles with the need for long-term urban, social, and economic transformation
- Making difficult or unpopular decisions where the benefits may only materialise after the end of a political mandate
- Governing within the constraints of past political choices and managing the disruption caused by changes in political majorities or government transitions
- Effectively communicating long-term strategies to citizens with pressing short-term concerns

Guiding questions: How does constant political pressure affect your ability to reconcile short-term urgency with long-term vision? What helps (or could help) you sustain trust and strategic direction when results extend beyond your mandate?

b) The accumulation of challenges

- Climate, housing, social inequalities, economic transition, and digitalisation increasingly converge and must be addressed simultaneously at the local level.
- Political agendas are widening faster than local governments' financial, administrative, and institutional capacity.
- Evolving expectations from citizens regarding the role of local leaders: mayors are not just expected to lead but also act as crisis managers, guarantors of fairness, sustainability and local identity

Guiding questions: Which (new) skills do Mayors need to develop to face the accumulation of challenges? How to develop these skills?:  do you see the role of Mayors evolving, in view of these new challenges?

c) Supporting political leadership

- Political leadership often requires making complex decisions in uncertain conditions. Having spaces to exchange doubts, test ideas, and reflect critically—away from public positioning—can improve decision-making quality and strategic clarity.
- Sustaining effective leadership over time requires balance: avoiding overload, maintaining perspective, and ensuring continuity in action. This is less about personal comfort than about preserving judgment, consistency, and the capacity to act in the public interest.
- Peer exchange between mayors, trusted advisors, professional administrations, and institutional networks such as Eurocities plays a key role in strengthening governance. These support structures enable learning from experience, sharing solutions, coordinating action, and avoiding isolation in decision-making.

Guiding question: Who supports the politician — and how can peer networks like Eurocities play a stronger role?

Format

Opening by the President and break-out groups with curated discussion by politicians or Eurocities senior staff members – each group would be expected to cover all the key topics mentioned above.