

Local leadership for European democracy: a learning programme for Catalan municipalities

Brussels visit – 29-30 September & 1 October

Delegació del Govern davant la Unió Europea - Rue de la Loi, 227

25 persones

About the programme

Across Europe, democratic institutions and values are under increasing pressure. The rise of populist and far-right movements, often fuelled by social polarisation and the unchecked influence of digital technologies, is reshaping political debate and eroding public trust. These trends are not external to the European Union; they are increasingly visible within EU member states and institutions, raising questions about the EU's own ability to uphold and renew its democratic foundations.

One of the most visible threats to both local and European democracy is the continued spread of disinformation. While not a new phenomenon, its scale, speed, and sophistication have grown dramatically through digital technologies and generative AI. Disinformation campaigns increasingly exploit local concerns—from urban planning to climate and migration—blurring fact and fiction, fuelling distrust, and eroding the foundations of informed democratic debate. Yet disinformation is only one symptom of a broader democratic malaise: a weakening of civic trust, institutional confidence, and political culture.

In this context, municipal leaders must develop the capacity not only to respond to specific challenges like disinformation, but to act strategically in defence of democratic values—locally and within the broader European sphere. That requires a deeper understanding of the EU's democratic dynamics, stronger political leadership on European affairs, and access to structured peer exchange on how cities across Europe are navigating similar challenges.

Objectives

This three-day immersive visit to Brussels brings together the eight Catalan municipalities participating in the programme. The visit is designed to help participants understand how the EU works, build institutional contacts, and begin developing their Municipal Strategy Briefs. The programme combines external visits to EU institutions and networks with facilitated working sessions hosted at the Generalitat's Delegation office.

Agenda

Day 1 - Eurocities

Time	Session	Description	Objectives
Morning / Early Afternoon — Arrivals			
12:00	Participants arrive in Brussels		
Afternoon — Welcome & Setting the scene - Square de Meeûs 1, 1000 Brussels			
14:00 – 14:30	Registration & welcome coffee	Eurocities	
14:30 – 14:50	Official welcome — Eurocities • André Sobczak, Secretary General, Eurocities • Carlota Roses, Subdirector-General for Support for the Internationalisation of Local Governments, Generalitat de Catalunya	Welcome address and programme introduction.	Anchor programme politically and institutionally
14:50 – 15:00	Presentation of the programme for the visit • Guillem Ramirez, Head of learning and capacity-building	Programme presentation; Q&A	

Time	Session	Description	Objectives
	Andrés Ferrer, Eurocities Academy Officer		
15:00- 15:30	Transfer to DG REGIO		
15:30 – 16:30	DG REGIO Caroline Callens, Head of Unit, DG Regional and Urban Policy Spain and Portugal, European Commission	Meeting with officials from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy. Presentation of cohesion policy tools, urban funding mechanisms, and the European Urban Agenda, with a specific focus on how municipalities can access resources and influence policy design at the EU level.	Open participants to the funding and policy levers of cohesion policy; identify concrete opportunities for their municipalities within EU regional programmes.
16:30	Wrap-up & logistics briefing for Day 2	Practical information for Day 2 (timing, walking directions to external venues).	
Evening			
19:00 – 22:00	Official dinner: reception, networking with Eurobubble	Venue TBC	

Day 2

Time	Session	Description	Objectives
08:30 – 09:00	Meeting	Gather at Eurocities office - Square de Meeûs 1, 1000 Brussels	
9:00 – 9:30	Transfer to DG JUST		
09:30 – 10:30	Visit DG JUST • Daniel Fleischer-Ambrus, Team Lead, Democracy, DG JUST, European Commission	Meeting at the European Commission's DG JUST. EU officials present the current state of play on EU democracy policy — including the Democracy Shield, the Rule of Law framework, and EU initiatives on media freedom and disinformation. Followed by a discussion on how these tools connect to local governance and what cities can do to engage with and amplify these agendas.	Equip participants with a concrete understanding of the EU's institutional levers on democracy; identify practical entry points for municipal engagement with Commission processes.
10:30 – 11:00	Transfer to Committee of the Regions		
11:00 – 12:00	Visit – Committee of the Regions • Gianluca Spinaci, Green Deal Advisor, Committee of the Regions	Session at the Committee of the Regions (CoR), the EU's assembly of local and regional representatives. Presentation of the CoR's role in EU policymaking and how local governments can formally feed into the legislative process (e.g Green Deal). Discussion of current CoR workstreams relevant to	Help participants understand the formal institutional channel through which cities and regions influence EU law and policy; inspire concrete engagement with the CoR by their own municipalities.

Time	Session	Description	Objectives
		democracy, cohesion, and local governance.	
12:00 – 12:30	Transfer		
12:30 – 13:30	Lunch break	Lunch provided at the Delegation	
Afternoon - Delegació del Govern davant la Unió Europea: Rue de la Loi, 227			
13:30 – 13:50	Official welcome: Generalitat de Catalunya • Ester Borràs Andreu, Delegada del Govern davant la Unió Europea, Generalitat de Catalunya		
14:00 – 15:20	Dialogue between city offices in Brussels • Laia Segura Cueto, Head of the Barcelona Representation Office in the EU Ajuntament de Barcelona • Bart Molenkamp, EU Public Affairs officer, City of Enschede • Wim de Jaeger, Lille Metropole • Benedek Jávor, City of Budapest (TBD)	Panel discussion with representatives from city offices in Brussels — Barcelona, Lille, Budapest, Enschede — sharing how they structure their EU presence, what advocacy strategies work, and how they connect local priorities to European processes.	Learn from cities with established EU engagement; test and strengthen participants' own strategic thinking; build cross-city connections that extend beyond the Catalan network.
15:20 – 15:35	Coffee break		

Time	Session	Description	Objectives
15:35 – 16:50	MEP Meeting • Dario Nardella, MEP, S&D, European Parliament	A first encounter with European parliamentary politics, meeting with one or more MEPs. An open conversation on the state of EU democracy, the role of cities in the European project, and the political challenges that connect local and European governance and democracy, from disinformation to polarisation movements.	Give participants a high-level political anchoring to the EU context; surface the connections between municipal experience and European political dynamics; open doors for future advocacy relationships.
16:50 – 17:00	Group reflection & synthesis / Wrap-up	Facilitated closing session of Day 2, held at the Delegation. Participants share in pairs or plenary: one insight gained, one question that remains, and one potential action for their municipality. First concrete inputs toward Section 4 of the Municipal Strategy Brief are noted.	Consolidate learning; begin strategy brief process
Evening			

Day 3 -

Time	Session	Description	Objectives
Morning			
09:00 – 09:30	Morning coffee check-in		

Time	Session	Description	Objectives
09:30 – 11:00	Workshop: From learning to action	Structured working session facilitated by Eurocities, in city pairs or small groups. Participants reflect on the two days of visits, identifying their city's key EU entry points, the most relevant institutions and networks, and the implications for their Municipal Strategy Brief (Section 4: EU engagement strategy). Groups share emerging ideas in a brief plenary exchange.	Generate concrete, usable inputs for the MSB; shift participants from absorption to action; ensure the visit produces a tangible output that carries the learning forward.
11:00 – 11:15	Coffee break		
11:15 – 12:15	Plenary sharing: city priorities & next steps	Each city (2 minutes) shares one priority and lesson learned they take home and one concrete next step.	
12:15 – 12:45	Programme wrap-up & closing remarks	Eurocities and Generalitat summarise key themes, recall programme structure ahead (online sessions, mentoring, final workshop in November). Space for open feedback.	