

Urban@EU

CALL – XII Urban@it Report 2026

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Urban@it – National Centre for Urban Policy Studies – has announced a call for contributions for a report on European urban policies. The report aims to explore the relationship between the **evolution of urban policies** and the **trajectory of the European project within** a context characterised by discontinuities, new priorities, and increasing political tensions.

The goal of the report is to create a platform for critical reflection and interdisciplinary dialogue among Italian and European scholars and experts. It will examine and interpret the current uncertainty surrounding urban policies, including their language, focus, and targets. It will also address the renewed prominence of cities (will cities be at the heart of the new cohesion policy? Are they seeking ways to be included? And if so, how?), and more broadly, the disruptive or transformative contribution of the European Union in rethinking the role of cities for the future.

Stemming from these questions, the report tackles a fundamental macro-issue: the urban dimension, which has struggled to find a place in the European integration process, is now at risk of marginalisation due to new priorities arising from the global geopolitical reorganisation. Urban policies, which in the past addressed both urban innovation and territorial cohesion, contributing to the spread of area-based policies, are currently being supplanted by centralised and sectoral policies that appear to overlook the territorial dimension, particularly in the fields of climate change, reindustrialisation, and defence. This shift threatens to strip the ethical value from cities' involvement, exacerbating the latent technocratic and centralised approach, also due to the unequal participation of territories, which are themselves subject to de facto centralisation.

Positioned within a new phase of debate regarding the future of the European urban agenda, the report offers an opportunity to engage with this critical discussion. It seeks to gather diverse voices, viewpoints, expectations, and critiques related to the new framework for cohesion policies. The findings will be presented at the beginning of the new programming cycle and aim to provide critical and reflective support to the cities and territories involved.

Title proposals

**European Urban Policies at a Crossroads/ or *Urban policy at the threshold of the European project's uncertain future***

Subtitle proposal

*Emerging Perspectives*

This call encourages critical reflection on urban policies in Europe as they respond/address ongoing socio-spatial and politico-institutional crises and transitions. It specifically seeks contributions that examine the role of urban policy within the wider context of the European project. This framework includes the evolving ideas of territorial cohesion, subsidiarity, and integration (EU, 2016). Furthermore, it aims to analyse how urban policy has changed in response to increasing technocratisation, the fragmentation of knowledge sources, and competition among various overlapping agendas, such as the EU Urban Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals, the New European Bauhaus, UN-Habitat, and the Council of Europe (European Ministers, 2020; UN, 2015; Schellnhuber et al., 2022).

In the context of implementing the Next Generation EU and the intersection of traditional and emerging models of Cohesion Policy, this report highlights key policy issues. It examines new aspects of European urban policy, aiming to promote cities that are resilient, forward-looking, innovative, and inclusive. As a result, it suggests three interconnected axes of analysis, each contributing to the report's thematic structure.

1. **The “European Project”: What Contribution from Cities and Territories? A critical reading;**
2. **Urban and Territorial Policies within the European Project:** Key perspectives and themes;
3. **A Comparative Framework on the Evolution of Urban Policies in Europe:** Case narratives and empirical studies.

The report will conclude with an assessment of the recent cycle of Cohesion Policy and offer forward-looking considerations on the future trajectory of EU cohesion strategies.

## **1. The “European Project”: What Contribution from Cities and Territories? A Critical Reading**

In the context of European public policies, the concept of the European project for cohesion and territorial development represents a complex framework of foundational values, strategic goals, and institutional instruments. This idea was initially inspired by the notion of integration outlined in the federalist vision of the Ventotene Manifesto, which was signed in 1941 by Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi, with contributions from Eugenio Colorni and

Ursula Hirschmann. It was later revisited in the 1984 draft Treaty on European Union. In this vision, Europe is viewed not only as an economic space but also as a diverse political entity, grounded in cohesion, subsidiarity, and territorial solidarity.

Within this ideal framework, urban policies have historically served as tools to localise/territorialise the European project, engaging cities in the pursuit of shared objectives such as integration, sustainable development, and human rights. However, their position at the periphery of the EU's formal competencies—where intergovernmental dynamics prevail—creates a fundamental ambiguity: cities are celebrated as key actors in European governance, yet they remain subordinate to national and supranational levels in strategic decision-making.

The urban European project can thus be defined as a (still unfinished) multilevel process of constructing territorial (European) citizenship, in which cities simultaneously act as recipients, implementers, and experimental laboratories for the two policy axes that shape the European design: cohesion policy and the enlargement strategy.

In the current context of crises and transitions—including institutional ones—it becomes urgent to explore specific key dimensions of this process critically:

- What remains of the community approach in shaping both European and urban policies?
- How has the concept of cohesion been understood and applied in urban and territorial policies across various aspects—social, economic, and territorial?
- How has territorial cohesion become a fundamental element of the European project, particularly in relation to urban policy and intra-European disparities? –
- How have the languages of programming and cooperation been integrated into the territorialization of the European project?
- To what extent have European agendas adapted to global agendas?
- How has the European project been restructured concerning Cohesion Policy and EU Enlargement Policy?

To address these questions, the report suggests examining, by identifying key policy issues, effectiveness challenges, or possible alternatives, three foundational dimensions of the European project when viewed through an urban lens:

1. **The ethical-normative dimension:** Cities are increasingly recognised as carriers of European values such as inclusion, participation, and territorial justice (Sykes & Shaw, 2008; Atkinson, 2001). In this context, the European urban project is founded on a 'bottom-up' vision of Europe that emphasises cooperation among territories rather than merely between Member States.
2. **The programming dimension:** This dimension highlights how urban policies have gradually become integrated into European frameworks such as URBACT, ESPON, Interreg, and Horizon Europe, a process referred to as 'urban mainstreaming' (Purkarthofer, 2016). However, the predominance of evidence-based policy approaches and project-based funding has often reduced the political independence

of cities, which frequently engage in fragmented and competitive ways (Tasan-Kok & Oranje, 2017). The institutional design of Cohesion Policy, characterized by separate regulations and mechanisms for different funds, has often marginalized integrated policy design, especially when compared to the original integration logic that motivated early Community initiatives.

3. **The multilevel and selective dimension:** European urban action adopts a networked governance approach, with cities participating through networks (like Eurocities and Metrex), partnerships (such as the Urban Agenda), or selective mechanisms (e.g., Horizon or the New European Bauhaus calls). This approach creates a fragmented and uneven Europeanization, disproportionately favoring cities with higher administrative capacity and greater political influence (Zimmermann, 2020; Brenner, 2004).

Currently, some argue that the 'European project' in urban policy has served as both a political and technical tool aimed at building territorial European citizenship through mobilising cities as agents of cohesion and innovation, even though it operates within a multilevel governance system marked by asymmetries, technocracy, and capacity disparities.

This project can be seen as a progressive development (drawing inspiration from Jean Monnet's incremental approach), aimed at transforming national sovereignty into shared responsibility, with cities taking on an increasingly vital role. In this context, urban policies are not just tools for implementation but also means for citizenship and political co-creation of Europe's future, in line with the vision of a federated Europe.

Does this perspective still hold? Can it be implemented today, or is it necessary to reconsider the European urban project using new interpretative frameworks?

## 2. Urban and Territorial Policies in the European Project: Key Perspectives and Themes

To better understand urban policies, it is crucial to examine whether and how these policies have interpreted or reinforced the core values of the European project. Specifically, we should consider which aspects of the project—such as reducing inequality or enhancing integration—urban policies have aimed to promote or implement. To address this question, the report outlines four thematic entry points (dimensions), each of which will be analysed from various perspectives: those of policy experts, the cities themselves, intermediaries, technocratic actors within European institutions, and individuals who actively influence policy agendas.

### 1. The Europeanization of Urban Policies

As a lens for examining the internal contradictions of European urban governance, this theme raises the question: Are urban policies genuinely

becoming Europeanised, or are we witnessing a process of re-nationalisation? (Zimmermann, 2020; Zimmermann & Fedeli, 2021). Cities have served as testing grounds for an alternative model of governance—one capable of involving extended partnerships and experimenting with place-based logic.

2. **The Urban and Territorial Dimensions of Policy**

This dimension requires a critical review of both direct and indirect urban programmes, aiming to create an evaluative overview of their nature, impact, and level of mainstream integration. The goal is to determine whether and how urban and territorial considerations are incorporated across policy instruments and delivery mechanisms.

3. **Urban Policy within the Cohesion Policy Framework**

This theme examines how urban policy fits into the broader structure of EU Cohesion Policy and how it reflects the European project. It highlights emerging trends that point towards a partial return to a rights-based, sector-specific approach—contrast to earlier place-based models. A notable example is the EU's recent focus on housing, initiated in 2017 and culminating in the appointment of a dedicated European Commissioner for Housing. This role involves developing the EU's first comprehensive plan for affordable housing and creating an investment platform intended to attract public-private capital for sustainable housing. What are the consequences of this shift for cities, especially regarding funding and policy visibility?

4. **Knowledge Production and the Technocratic Shift**

This line of inquiry examines how knowledge is generated and utilised in urban policymaking, focusing on the role of data, the growing technocratic approach, the fragmentation of evidence bases, and the functions of supporting structures and platforms such as the Joint Research Centre (JRC), Urban Audit, ESPON, INTERREG, Horizon Europe, the New European Bauhaus, URBACT, and others.

A key feature of European urban and territorial policy design has been the adoption of **collaborative and participatory methods**—aligned with the integrated, place-based, and community-led approaches that underpin the EU's urban agenda.

### 3. Comparative Framework on the Evolution of Urban Policies in Europe: Case Narratives and Empirical Insights

This section of the report provides a comparative analysis of the evolution of urban policies in selected European countries, including France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Poland, the United Kingdom, Romania, Hungary, Norway, Finland, Germany, Serbia, and Turkey, among others.

The objective is to develop a dynamic overview of the models, trajectories, and discontinuities that have influenced the formulation and institutionalisation of urban agendas in various national contexts. Particular emphasis will be placed on how cities

have interpreted—or, in some cases, diverged from—the guiding principles of the European project concerning cohesion and territorial development.

The comparative analysis will be structured along the following interpretative axes:

1. **The Institutionalisation of Urban Policies**

The extent to which urban policy has been formalised within national administrative and governance systems.

2. **Engagement with European Instruments**

The nature and depth of national engagement with EU frameworks and tools—such as the Urban Agenda, Cohesion Policy, Enlargement Policy, and operational programs including URBACT, ESPON, and Interreg—and the capacity of national contexts to internalise and adapt the principles and mechanisms they embody.

3. **The Rise of New Policy Priorities and Crisis Impacts**

The emergence of pressing thematic priorities—such as ecological transition, housing inclusion, and digital transformation—and how recent crises (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, energy instability, and inflation) have reconfigured urban policy landscapes.

The goal is to identify divergence patterns across centralised, decentralised, hybrid, and fragmented governance models, as well as differences in urban policy Europeanization, which often depend on the strength of local administrations and the presence of strong national or transnational networks.

Moreover, the section will critically analyse the varying levels of **urban protagonism** across countries: while in some contexts cities have played a strategic role in shaping political agendas, in others they have remained confined to technocratic and administrative implementation processes, thereby revealing the **asymmetric and selective nature** of the so-called "European urban project."

Ultimately, this comparative reflection aims to develop a nuanced and diverse policy agenda, highlighting both similarities and differences among member states. It will evaluate whether the European project has succeeded in creating a varied yet united community of practice, or whether it still grapples with the ongoing marginalisation of urban policy within the wider public policy framework.

#### 4. Conclusions

The concluding section—representing the position and interpretive synthesis of *Urban@it*—will be derived from the analysis of submitted contributions and outcomes from the international seminars.

One part of the conclusion may provide a retrospective evaluation of the “European project” with specific reference to the development of Cohesion and Enlargement Policy as it relates to cities and territories. Another section will focus on future considerations for the next phase of Cohesion Policy. Finally, the section may suggest innovative perspectives—potentially contrasting with more mainstream approaches—designed to encourage further debate on the strategic repositioning of urban policy within the European institutional and political framework.