# Remote-IT
## Remote and Hybrid work for Thriving Cities

# QUARTERLY REPORT #2

## APRIL - JUNE 2024

Prepared by

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This **Second Quarterly Network Report** captures the Remote-IT network's progress between April and June 2024, reflecting an important phase in which partner cities strengthened the development of their Integrated Action Plans and began shaping concrete actions. **The quarter's key milestone was the transnational meeting in Tartu, Estonia - a dynamic city known for its innovation culture, where cities explored both environmental and strategic aspects of remote work.** Highlights included an expert session by Dr. Eleni Feleki on the **sustainability implications of remote and hybrid models**, **alongside collaborative workshops on integration, persona development, and city positioning**. Through site visits and peer exchanges, cities reflected on how to create human-centred, inclusive, and locally rooted strategies that go beyond infrastructure to address the daily realities of remote workers.

# LEARNINGS FROM THE NETWORK

# TARTU HOSTS REMOTE-IT CITIES FOR AN INSIGHTFUL DIVE INTO THE FUTURE OF REMOTE WORK

**The city of Tartu, Estonia, hosted the fourth Transnational Meeting (TNM) of the URBACT Remote-IT network from June 18 to 21, 2024, bringing together project partners from across Europe to reflect on progress, share experiences, and co-create strategies around the evolving landscape of remote work and digital nomadism.**

The meeting opened with a warm welcome from Tartu's Deputy Mayor Raimond Tamm, who emphasized the city's ambitions under Tartu 2024 – European Capital of Culture, its commitment to digital innovation, and its potential as a remote work destination. This set the stage for a dynamic two-day agenda designed to accelerate local implementation efforts, enrich the Integrated Action Plans (IAPs), and foster transnational learning.

Partners provided updates on the development of their Urban Local Groups (ULGs), shared the tools and methods used in stakeholder engagement, and discussed key focus areas ranging from digital infrastructure and inclusive coworking spaces to community integration and small-scale action testing. The diversity of local contexts brought to light a rich palette of approaches and challenges, from Tirana's tax incentives and cultural events, to Dubrovnik's strategic marketing efforts, and Brindisi's community-building efforts in mixed-use housing.

## Environmental Reflections:
## Dr. Eleni Feleki's Session on Remote Work and Sustainability

A highlight of the meeting was the thought-provoking session led by URBACT ad-hoc expert Dr. Eleni Feleki, titled "To Remote or Not to Remote?". This two-hour session invited participants **to critically examine the environmental trade-offs of remote work and to consider whether current labour models truly contribute to a greener future.**

Through a mix of interactive polling, evidence-based insights, and city case studies, the session explored both the positive and rebound effects of remote work. Dr. Feleki emphasized that while reducing commuting has undeniable benefits for air quality and carbon emissions, the full picture is more nuanced. For instance, increased home energy use, digital waste, and urban sprawl may offset some environmental gains.

She highlighted compelling research, including data showing that **hybrid working models—especially those involving local flex spaces close to employees' homes—can reduce urban carbon emissions by up to 70% in the UK and 87% in the US.** Participants engaged in robust dialogue on how their cities could leverage hybrid work policies and local coworking infrastructure to both boost well-being and reduce environmental footprints. The session concluded with recommendations for municipalities to integrate remote work considerations into their broader green transition strategies, underlining the role of spatial planning, behavioural awareness, and flexible work infrastructure.

## Spotlight Moments: Podcast & Living Library

On the margins of the meeting, the first Remote-IT podcast was recorded. Hosted by Mark Thomas, editor of The Dubrovnik Times, the episode featured insights from Sirja Sulakatko (Tartu), Salvatore Modeo (Brindisi), and Alexandru Dincovici (Bucharest District 6), tackling the **challenges and opportunities of remote work, from productivity to cybersecurity, and the vital role of community spaces.**

A Living Library session showcased diverse strategies from partner cities on **how to attract and retain digital nomads and high-skilled professionals.** From co-working hubs and visa schemes to digital infrastructure and long-stay platforms, the session offered a preview of approaches that will be explored further in a dedicated article.

## Tartu's Local Ecosystem and Final Reflections

Participants also had the chance to experience Tartu's own remote work ecosystem through site visits to the **Tartu Centre for Creative Industries, SPARKUP co-working space, and the Tartu Welcome Centre** - each demonstrating how the city blends innovation, inclusivity, and cultural heritage to support newcomers and knowledge workers.

As the meeting wrapped up, the Lead Partner reviewed network milestones and looked ahead to the next TNMs in Camara de Lobos (September) and Brindisi (November). With IAPs progressing and local strategies sharpening, Tartu's gathering reaffirmed the network's shared vision: enabling cities to thrive in a rapidly changing world of work, grounded in sustainability, inclusivity, and cooperation.

# STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTING DIGITAL NOMADS AND SKILLED PROFESSIONALS

As global mobility patterns shift and knowledge-based economies expand, cities across Europe are increasingly competing to attract a new class of temporary residents: **digital nomads and highly skilled remote professionals.** While this group remains diverse in age, origin, and sector, they share key expectations—reliable digital infrastructure, affordable yet quality housing, meaningful connections, and a lifestyle that supports well-being and flexibility.

## Why it matters

According to the 2023 Nomad List annual report, the number of self-identified digital nomads increased by 35% globally since 2021. Simultaneously, **over 50 countries** have introduced digital nomad or remote work visas, signalling a growing recognition of remote workers as an economic and social asset. These mobile professionals contribute to local economies through extended stays, use of local services, and participation in the cultural and social fabric of host communities.

However, attracting and retaining them requires more than Wi-Fi and coworking spaces. Cities must **craft comprehensive strategies** that integrate planning, hospitality, and economic development with a deep understanding of remote workers' needs.

## Key pillars of attraction strategies

Drawing from international research and practice, here are **five interconnected pillars** that cities are leveraging:



Five Pillars of Attracting Digital Nomads

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 🌐 | Legal and Visa Frameworks | Special visa programs Estonia, Portugal, Ron |
| 📶 | Infrastructure and Digital Readiness | High-speed internet Lisbon, Bali |
| 🏠 | Affordable and Flexible Housing | Flatio, NomadX platforms |
| 👥 | Community and Soft Landing Services | Welcome centers, integration events |
| 📍 | Lifestyle and Place Branding | Nature, safety, culture |

1. **Legal and Visa Frameworks**
   - Special visa programs such as those in Estonia, Portugal, and Romania offer tax advantages and legal clarity for remote professionals. These often include minimum income thresholds and health insurance requirements.

1. **Infrastructure and Digital Readiness**
   - High-speed internet, reliable power supply, and accessible coworking spaces are essential. Cities like Lisbon and Bali have invested heavily in broadband access and tech-friendly facilities.

2. **Affordable and Flexible Housing**
   - The lack of mid-term rental options and inflated short-term prices are major deterrents. Cities that provide platforms or partnerships to facilitate housing (e.g., Flatio) are ahead of the curve.

3. **Community and Soft Landing Services**
   - Remote workers often seek social belonging and peer networks. Initiatives like welcome centers, integration events, and local ambassadors help build a sense of place and reduce friction.

4. **Lifestyle and Place Branding**
   - Beyond work, nomads are attracted to a place's identity - nature, safety, culture, health services, and family-friendly options. A strong, authentic city brand rooted in values like sustainability, creativity, or inclusiveness often resonates more than flashy campaigns.
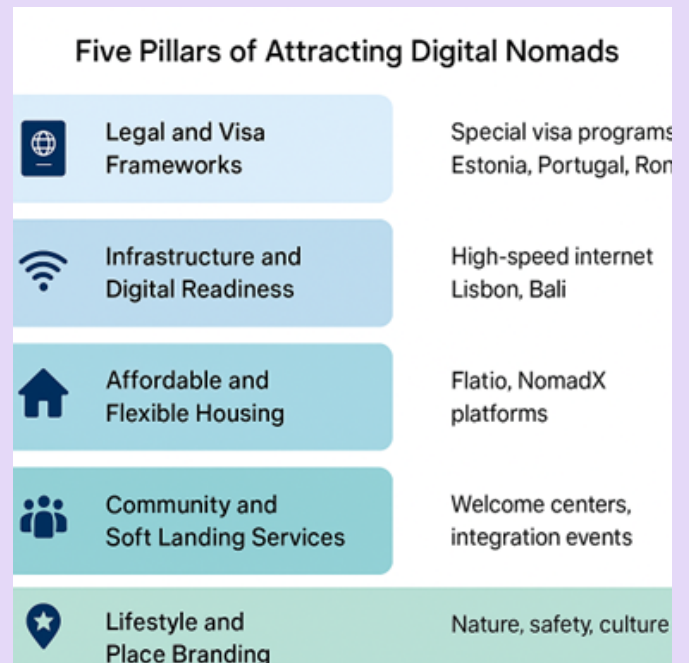
# Insights from the Remote-IT Living Library

During the Remote-IT Transnational Meeting in Tartu (June 2024), partners gathered for a "Living Library" session to exchange their own evolving practices. What emerged were honest accounts of trial-and-error, creative approaches, and the acknowledgment that strategy design must remain flexible and locally grounded.

## Murcia, Spain

Murcia took a proactive municipal approach by developing its own **remote work strategy for public employees,** preceding national guidance. The initiative includes the **TuMurcia app**, data-driven department reviews, and links with the **Audiovisual Hub** to attract sector-specific nomads. Their hybrid strategy combines improving public sector efficiency with sectoral economic development.

## Dubrovnik, Croatia



Dubrovnik's **Long Stay Dubrovnik** project provides a central online hub and in-person meetups for digital nomads. Run by the local tourist board, it facilitates accommodation, community integration, and cultural participation. The initiative emerged during the COVID years and continues to evolve with a focus on **non-seasonal tourism**.

## Tirana, Albania

Policy backing is Tirana's advantage. A 2023 national law exempts digital nomads from income tax for their first year. The city supports this with infrastructure, including **coworking spaces in libraries**, a **dedicated app**, and a growing ecosystem tied into its **Digital Nomads Festival** and upcoming **Capital of Culture 2025** status.

## Brindisi, Italy

Brindisi is focusing on **inclusion and community-based integration**. ULG members explored co-living models and turning underused spaces into community hubs. The city's strategy connects post-work life with cultural identity, sea sports, and local events.

### Heraklion, Greece

With a strong cultural scene and an existing nomad community, Heraklion emphasizes **lifestyle and work-life balance**. Challenges remain in digital infrastructure and housing affordability, but efforts are underway to improve connectivity and repurpose cultural centers into coworking spaces.

### Bucharest District 6, Romania

While lacking a dedicated local strategy, the district benefits from **Romania's digital nomad visa**. It leverages national frameworks and is investing in data gathering (including NomadList analytics) to better position itself. Their approach shows how **policy alignment and partnerships** can substitute for limited local resources.

### Camara de Lobos, Madeira (Portugal)

Their strategy blends **cultural innovation and local incentives**. With plans for a **Creative Industries Quarter**, a "Remote Work Friendly" business stamp, and support fo**r affordable housing through EU resilience funds**, Camara de Lobos is combining green transition, cultural policy, and workforce attraction in a single vision.

### Tartu, Estonia

While Tartu currently has no formal strategy or experience in attracting digital nomads and remote workers, the city is actively using Remote-IT to co-develop its approach through peer exchange and stakeholder engagement. The broader *Tartu*



Coworking spaces and other remote work spots in rural Estonia

Find a remote work spot in rural South- East Estonia. A coworking space, cozy work cafe or farm house - Kupland will help you find the perfect space to focus on what really matters to you.

Discover workspaces

*2035 Strategy* positions the city as an attractive and future-ready destination. Supported by Estonia's national *Digital Nomad Visa* (launched in 2020) and initiatives like *Work in Estonia* and *Kupland*, Tartu aims to build a remote work environment that enables flexibility, talent retention, and digital opportunity in a human-scaled urban context.

## A shared reflection

What binds these approaches is a **recognition that digital nomads are not tourists**, but rather temporary citizens. They engage differently—with expectations shaped by autonomy, flexibility, and values-based choices. Cities that succeed in attracting them are those that **invest in inclusive policies, integrated urban planning, and strong narratives** about what kind of life and work they enable.

The Living Library session showed that while strategies vary, they are most effective when they reflect a city's genuine character—and when remote professionals are seen not as consumers, but as potential contributors to the local social and economic ecosystem.

# WHY AN INTEGRATED ACTION PLAN?

## Why an Integrated Action Plan?

As European cities struggle with complex, interrelated urban challenges - from housing shortages to talent attraction, digital transformation to climate resilience —-one thing becomes clear: solutions cannot be developed in silos. This is where the concept of an **Integrated Action Plan (IAP)** comes in - the cornerstone output for cities participating in URBACT Action Planning Networks like Remote-IT.

## What is an Integrated Action Plan?

In the URBACT context, an Integrated Action Plan is not simply a list of activities or a municipal wishlist. It is a **strategic, future-oriented document** that defines a coherent set of **locally rooted and stakeholder-driven actions** to address a specific urban challenge. Importantly, the IAP must reflect a deep understanding of the **local context**, integrate learnings from transnational exchange, and be designed with a strong focus on implementation.

The plan is co-produced with a wide range of stakeholders through the **URBACT Local Group (ULG)**, ensuring the final product is inclusive, credible, and aligned with local needs and capacities. This process transforms the way cities work - breaking silos, engaging new voices, and laying the groundwork for policies that are more resilient, responsive, and realistic.

## Why "Integrated"?

The term "integrated" carries specific meaning in the URBACT method. During the two recent capacity-building workshops held online on April 25th and May 10th, Remote-IT city teams explored what integration truly involves. As presented by the network's Lead Expert, Alisa Aliti Vlasic, integration means more than interdepartmental cooperation. It entails thinking across **multiple dimensions**, such as:

- **Stakeholder engagement:** ensuring both horizontal (across sectors) and vertical (across governance levels) involvement
- **Strategic coherence:** aligning new actions with existing local, regional, or national policies
- **Sustainability:** addressing economic, social, and environmental objectives
- **Spatial and territorial integration:** connecting neighborhood-level actions with city-wide or intermunicipal strategies
- **Temporal sequencing:** planning for short-, medium-, and long-term action
- **Cross-cutting themes:** integrating considerations like digitalisation, climate, gender, and procurement

As a result, IAPs aim to move beyond a "project-by-project" mindset. Instead, they become tools for **systemic change**, enabling cities to respond to evolving challenges with greater agility, coherence, and citizen trust.
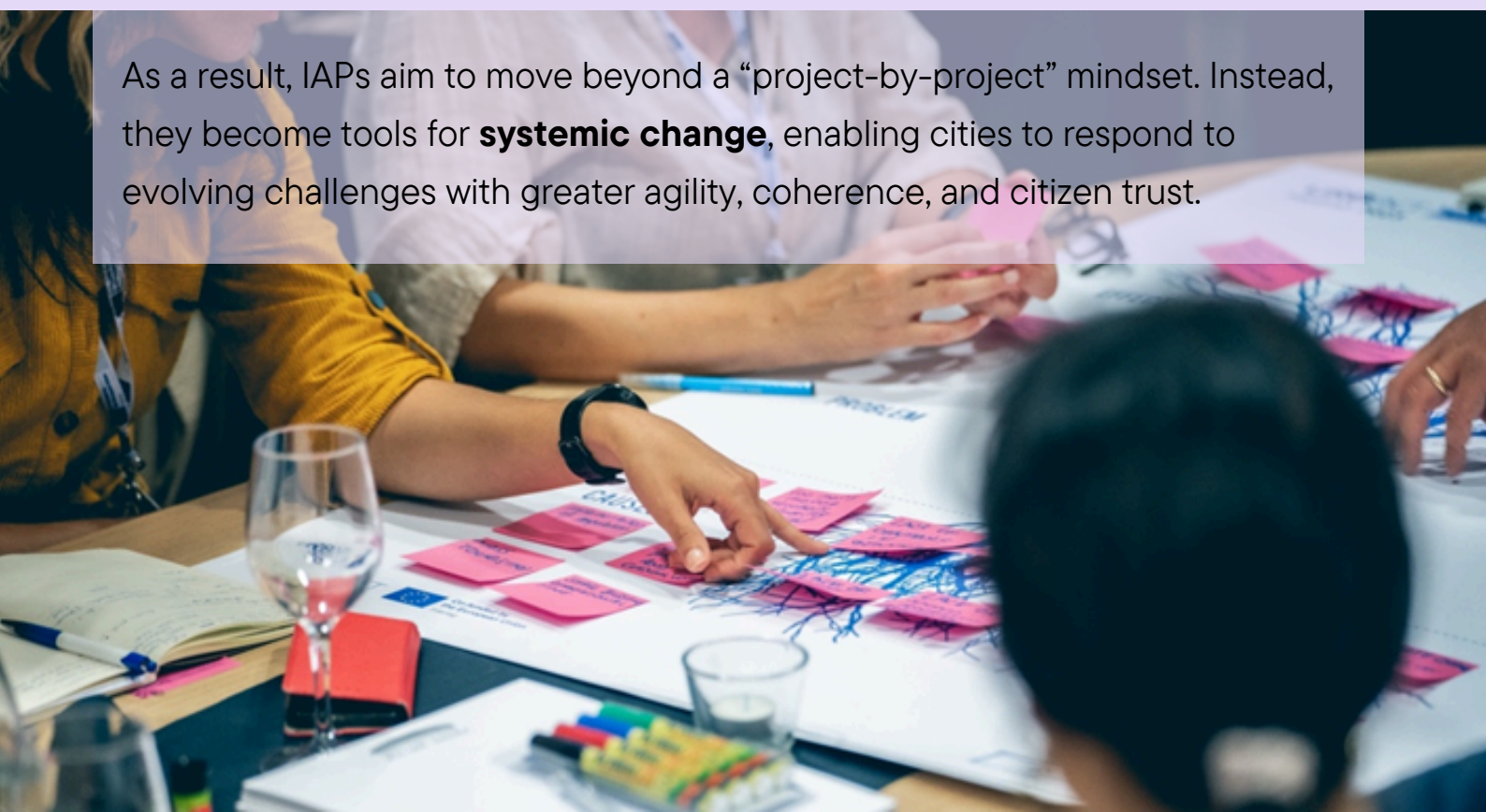
## What makes an IAP different?

Unlike traditional urban plans, IAPs are:

- **Participatory:** developed through iterative engagement with local stakeholders
- **Tested:** often include small-scale experiments that inform full-scale action
- **Flexible:** adaptable as new data, funding, or community input becomes available
- **Action-oriented:** each step includes clear objectives, responsible actors, timelines, cost estimates, and indicators

An IAP can become the **bridge between vision and delivery**, often strengthening a city's ability to mobilize funding and political support.

## What did cities learn in the Remote-IT workshops?
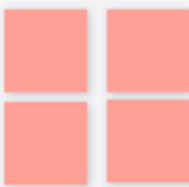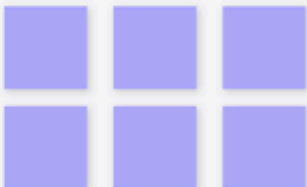
The two workshops highlighted the importance of investing time and energy into the **co-production process**, not just the final document. Cities were guided through practical exercises such as:

- Mapping their **existing policy landscape**
- Analyzing root problems using **problem-solution tables**
- Identifying **integration gaps** using a self-assessment tool
- Clarifying their **strategic objectives and action areas**

They also reflected on the role of testing - how **small-scale actions** can provide valuable insight into what works, what doesn't, and why.

Cities left the sessions with a clearer roadmap and an appreciation of why this process isn't "just another plan" - but a real opportunity to reshape governance and public service delivery.

# ADDITIONAL TOOLS USED

| Goals & Motivations for becoming a remote worker | Challenges he/she is currently facing | How did he/she hear about our city? |
|---|---|---|
| Work-life balance segments of importance | What does he/she need from our city? | What influences his/her decision? |

Age -
Occupation -
Education -
Current location -
Current status -
other -

# Who Are We Designing For?
# Why cities need personas to build better remote work strategies

As cities across Europe work to become more attractive to remote workers and digital nomads, one key question often goes unasked: **Who exactly are we designing for?**

It's easy to refer to broad target groups — "digital nomads," "remote workers," or "knowledge professionals" — but unless we clearly understand the people behind these labels, our strategies risk being too generic to be effective. This is where the **persona method** becomes invaluable.

## What is a persona?

A **persona** is a semi-fictional character that represents a key type of user a city wants to engage or support. Developed through research, observation, or consultation, personas help city teams step into the shoes of real people - revealing their goals, frustrations, expectations, and the barriers they face.

Rather than designing a strategy for an abstract audience, personas bring **focus and empathy to policy planning.** They help ensure actions are not only technically sound, but **meaningful and user-centred.**

# Why did Remote-IT cities work on personas?

During a recent capacity-building workshop, all cities in the URBACT Remote-IT network worked with their URBACT Local Groups to co-create one or more personas based on their local context and goals.

Some cities developed personas of **international digital nomads**, others focused on **remote workers embedded in the local economy,** and several explored personas of **remote employees within public administration.** These diverse angles reflect the wide spectrum of challenges and opportunities that cities are navigating when it comes to remote work.

More importantly, each city grounded its persona in a real understanding of its community - drawing on local insights, ULG discussions, and current strategies. The process wasn't about crafting perfect marketing profiles, but about **uncovering the real-life needs** of the people behind remote work trends.

## How we used it

In the Remote-IT capacity-building workshop, cities were guided through a step-by-step process to co-create personas in collaboration with their URBACT Local Groups. Each city selected a specific type of remote worker relevant to their local context and then built out their persona **using a structured canvas**.

**This included identifying the persona's background, motivations, goals, pain points, preferred working conditions, and expectations from the city.**

Cities also explored what a "typical day" might look like for this persona, helping them think beyond infrastructure and services toward daily experience, emotional needs, and social integration.

The method combined strategic reflection with empathy, enabling city teams to design policies not just for a demographic group, but for a person with specific challenges and aspirations. Importantly, the exercise was collaborative - encouraging open dialogue among local stakeholders and revealing **different perspectives on what makes a city remote-work friendly.**

# WHAT DID THE WORKSHOP REVEAL?

The workshop focused not only on the creation of personas, but also on how to use them effectively:

- **To clarify priorities:** Personas help city teams identify which issues matter most from a user perspective – access to services, integration with the community, or availability of flexible workspaces.
- **To guide action planning:** Each action in the Integrated Action Plan should respond to a specific user need. Personas help keep that connection strong and visible.
- **To inspire inclusive thinking:** By exploring different user types, including those less likely to be engaged, cities can design more equitable and impactful interventions.
- **To test assumptions:** Personas can be used to reflect on whether proposed actions would realistically meet the needs of the people they're meant to support.

The exercise also encouraged cities to use their personas as living tools – revisiting them as more data becomes available, or as local priorities shift.

# What comes next?

With personas now developed across all cities, the next step is to **embed them in the ongoing development of the IAPs** - using them to shape actions, evaluate ideas, and communicate plans clearly to both stakeholders and funders.

Some cities may also choose to test their personas further through **small-scale actions,** gaining valuable feedback before scaling solutions more broadly.

Above all, this exercise has strengthened a crucial mindset: **planning for people, not just policies.** Whether a city is aiming to attract new talent, support flexible public employment, or create a vibrant environment for hybrid working, it begins with understanding who those people are -and designing with them, not just for them.

# WHATS NEXT?

**Online forum #1 - "Green Transition and Remote Work"**
*July 2024*

**Capacity building workshop on defining SMART goals**
*September 2024*

**Transitional meeting in Camara de Lobos, Portugal**
*September, 2024*

**Podcast recording: "Who is a remote worker/digital nomad these days?"**
*September, 2024*

**Remote-IT is an URBACT Action Planning Network**, financed through the URBACT IV (2021-2027) programme of the European Commission. Remote-IT network tackles the new challenges cities are experiencing connected to the future of work. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the transformation around how work is organised, with hybrid and remote work models significantly impacting the lives of citizens, as well as the organisational culture of major employers (public/private). Remote-IT partnerships of cities is collaboratively exploring this emerging topic in order to implement proactive policy making.
Website https://urbact.eu/networks/remote-it;

**URBACT** is the European Territorial Cooperation programme aiming to foster sustainable integrated urban development in cities across Europe. It is an instrument of the Cohesion Policy, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the 27 Member States, Norway & Switzerland. It enables cities to work together to develop solutions to major urban challenges, reaffirming the key role they play in facing increasingly complex societal changes.
More info: https://urbact.eu/

**The Remote-IT Network** is led by the Dubrovnik's Development Agency (DURA), Croatia. Partner cities include: Brindisi (Italy), Bucharest District6 (Romania), Camarade Lobos (Portugal), Heraklion (Greece), Murcia (Spain), Tartu (Estonia), Tirana Albania).