Remote-IT
Remote and Hybrid work for Thriving Cities

QUARTERLY REPORT 4 & 5
OCTOBER 2024 - MARCH 2025

Prepared by

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This **fourth and fifth Quarterly Network report** are combined in one and they summarize the activities carried out at the transnational and local level within the Remote-IT network in a period between October 2024 and March 2025.

These quarters marked a significant step forward for the **Remote-IT network**, with cities advancing **from strategy toward implementation** in their Integrated Action Plans. A central highlights were our **transnationals meetings in Brindisi, Italy** in January **and in Tirana, Albania** in March and the collective exploration of **diaspora as an underutilized segment of the remote work ecosystem**—unpacking its relevance, challenges, and opportunities across diverse local contexts.

LEARNINGS FROM THE NETWORK

URBACT REMOTE-IT IN BRINDISI: CREATIVE HUBS, COMMUNITY MODELS, AND MID-TERM REFLECTIONS

As part of the ongoing journey of the URBACT Remote-IT network, the 6th transnational meeting took place in **Brindisi, Italy, from January 15–16, 2025,** welcoming city representatives from across Europe. Hosted by the Municipality of Brindisi—celebrated for its 2025 URBACT Good Practice Label—the meeting served as a valuable moment of learning, inspiration, and stocktaking.

A Deep Dive into Creative Hubs and Innovative Governance

The meeting kicked off with warm greetings from the Mayor of Brindisi, who emphasized the city's strategic pivot towards becoming a welcoming hub for digital nomads and remote workers. This was followed by a presentation of Brindisi's **"Case di Quartiere"** initiative, a network of ten repurposed public spaces across the city now functioning as community and innovation hubs. These were designed not only to host cultural and social activities but also to act as catalysts for economic and civic regeneration.

The Living Library sessions, held across both days, showcased innovative models for managing such creative hubs. Speakers from **Puglia Region, Palazzo Guerrieri, and Venti di Scambio** shared their practical insights, ranging from regional policies like *Luoghi Comuni* to co-managed urban laboratories and coworking spaces. International practices were also brought in through contributions from Murcia and Tirana, and from Brindisi's own *"Crossing Brindisi"* international community, a grassroots initiative born from the post-pandemic need for human connection.

Participants also explored **two standout community spaces** during site visits:

- **Casa della Musica,** a repurposed monastery now serving as a multidisciplinary music hub, and
- **History Digital Library,** an inclusive public library with immersive storytelling tools and digital accessibility features.

A dedicated section of the meeting was reserved for the **Mid-Term Reflection (MTR)** - an essential milestone to review network progress and adjust trajectories if needed. The session was facilitated by Lead Expert Alisa Aliti Vlasic, who presented the outcomes of a pre-meeting survey completed by all partner cities, which was followed by a facilitated discussion, *more information in the next section.*

The meeting wrapped up with a bilateral exchange session where cities identified **shared interests and potential collaboration tracks**. In a final roundtable, participants aligned on upcoming deadlines, including the submission of finalized IAP Section 2 and the launch or finalization of Testing Actions by March 2025. The next transnational meeting was confirmed to be held in **Tirana, Albania, in early March 2025.**
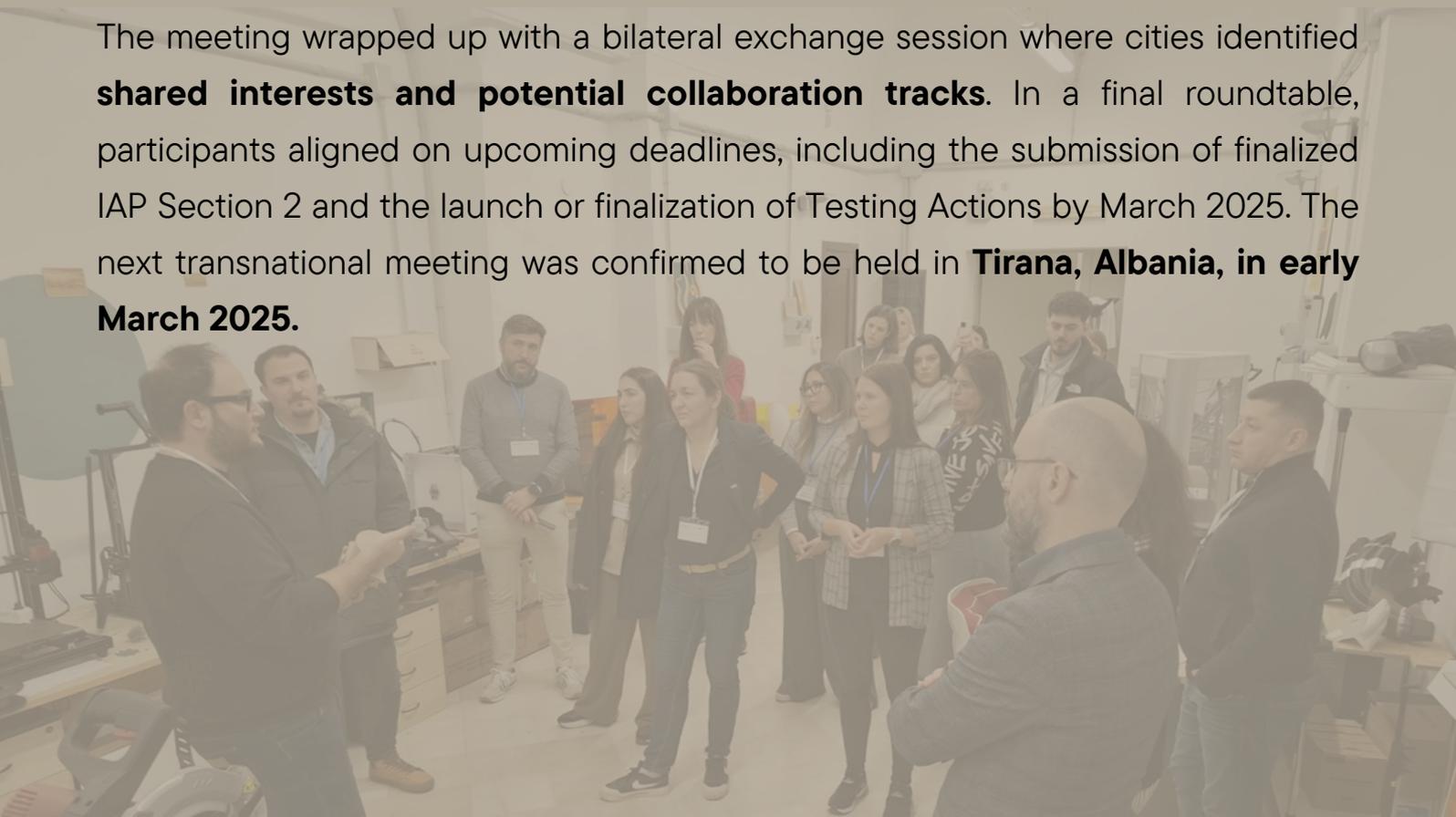
7TH TRANSNATIONAL MEETING IN TIRANA

Tirana, **the vibrant capital of Albania, hosted the 7th Transnational Meeting of the Remote-IT network on March 5–6, 2025.**

Representatives from partner cities gathered for two dynamic days of exchange, reflection, and forward planning. From finalizing Integrated Action Plans to exploring innovative approaches to remote work and diaspora engagement, Tirana offered both substance and inspiration.

Collaborative Momentum in Action

Day one kicked off with a welcome by Lek Hakani, Director of the Directory of strategic partnership diaspora and migration of the Municipality of Tirana, followed by updates on network milestones and local work within ULG's. Site visits to The Pyramid and Innovation Hub highlighted Tirana's transformation into a hub for innovation and digital talent.

City teams dived into finalizing their IAPs—sharing challenges, reflecting on structure and coherence, and providing peer feedback across network members. Different examples came from all partners who are shaping remote work futures through actions ranging from co-working hubs and nomad festivals to online learning platforms and hybrid-friendly infrastructures

The Pyramid of Innovation: A Site Visit into the Future

One of the highlights of the TNM was the site visit to the **Pyramid of Tirana**, a former communist-era structure recently transformed into a cutting-edge innovation hub. Now a symbol of Albania's digital and creative awakening, the Pyramid hosts startups, co-working spaces, educational labs, and tech-driven initiatives aimed at empowering youth and entrepreneurs.

Participants toured the space, witnessing how architectural heritage can be reimagined for the digital age. The site exemplified Tirana's commitment to cultivating **a remote work-friendly urban ecosystem**, blending history, innovation, and civic engagement under one iconic roof.
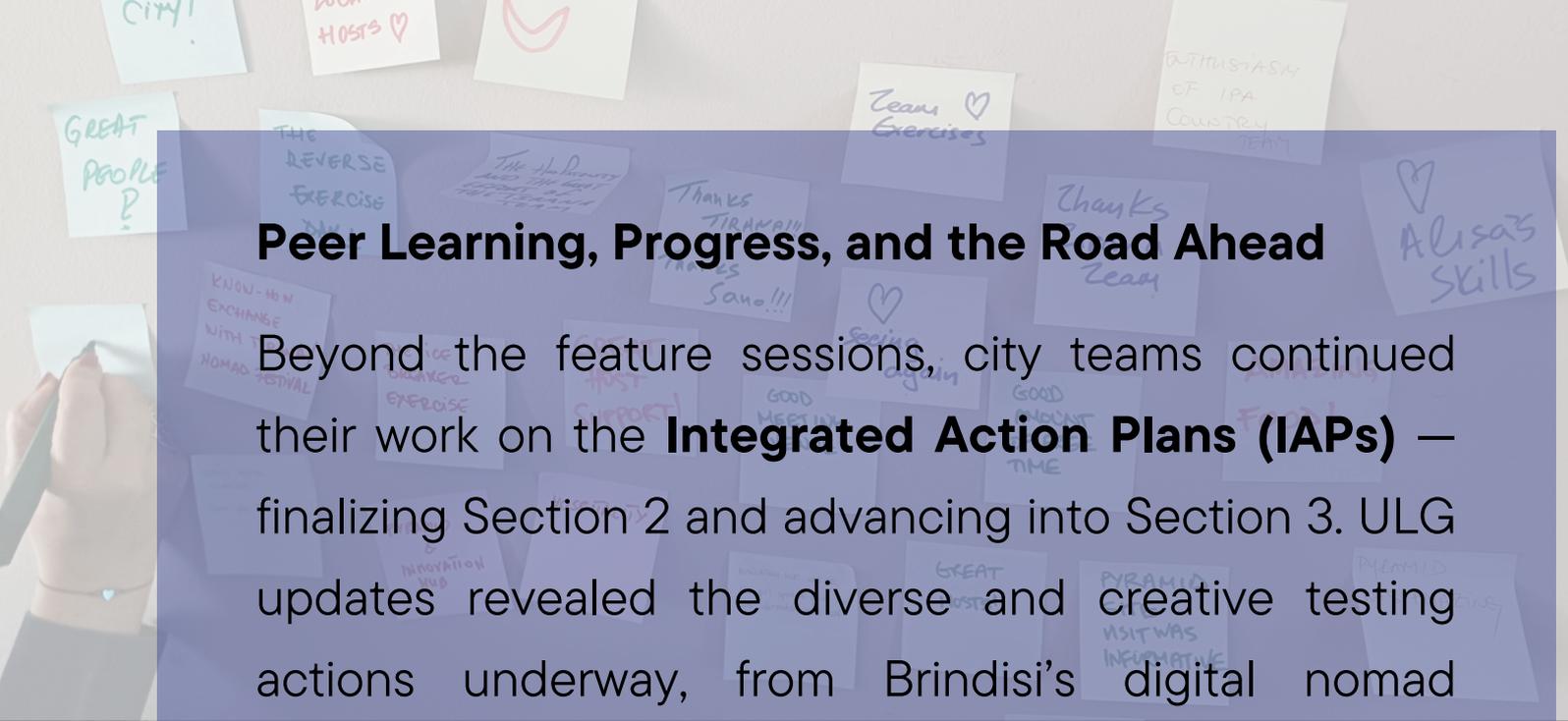
Peer Learning, Progress, and the Road Ahead

Beyond the feature sessions, city teams continued their work on the **Integrated Action Plans (IAPs)** — finalizing Section 2 and advancing into Section 3. ULG updates revealed the diverse and creative testing actions underway, from Brindisi's digital nomad integration campaign to Heraklion's remote work-friendly spaces and Tartu's online training platform.

As the network moves toward the next transnational meetings in Heraklion and Bucharest, the Tirana meeting leaves a strong message: cities that successfully weave together **policy, place-making, and people** will lead the way in the remote and hybrid future.
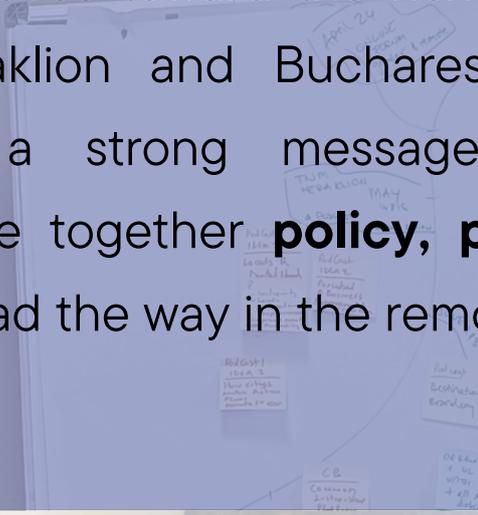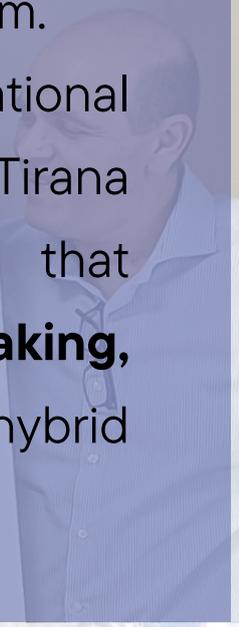
LIVING LIBRARY – INCENTIVES FOR REMOTE WORKERS / DIASPORA: WHAT WORKS AND LESSONS LEARNED

In one of the meeting's most engaging sessions, the **Living Library** invited city partners to share real-world examples of how local governments can activate diaspora potential and attract remote workers—not just as residents, but as changemakers.

WHY FOCUS ON DIASPORA?

Cities often look outward to attract international digital nomads, yet diaspora communities—those with emotional and cultural ties to their home country—represent a powerful, underused resource. As participants noted, financial incentives alone aren't enough. Connection, purpose, and meaningful engagement are key motivators.

CITY HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Tirana** presented a model that goes beyond return migration—it connects economic opportunity, cultural identity, and urban innovation. Central to this strategy is TEDA Tirana, the city's free economic zone, positioned as a key incentive mechanism for attracting diaspora investment, remote professionals, and international businesses. But TEDA Tirana is just one component of a broader municipal framework that includes:
    - RE-IN-VEST grants for returning migrants starting businesses.
    - The Tirana Digital Nomad Festival, which combines community building, skill sharing, and cultural immersion.
    - Programs for migrant women entrepreneurs, language integration, mental health support, and career placement.
    - Cross-sector partnerships with GIZ, IOM, national ministries, and the private sector.
- **Dubrovnik** presented national-level incentives under Croatia's diaspora strategy—ranging from subsidized housing and self-employment grants to language and cultural integration programs. These are aimed at easing return migration and anchoring remote professionals back into the homeland.
- **Heraklion** shared insights from the Greek Diaspora Fellowship Program, connecting Greek scholars abroad with universities back home. The model illustrated how short-term academic fellowships can serve as bridges for longer-term engagement and cross-border collaboration.

KEY INSIGHTS ON DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT & REMOTE WORK ATTRACTION

- Diaspora engagement thrives on **purpose, emotional connection, and impact**—not just subsidies
- Returnees and professionals want to **contribute**, not just relocate
- **Innovation hubs** often offer real entry points through infrastructure and incentives
- **Hybrid models** (temporary returns, remote collaboration) are often more viable than permanent relocation
- Emphasizing **cultural identity** and community-driven programs makes engagement more meaningful
- Reducing **bureaucratic barriers** is essential to facilitate smoother reintegration

BEYOND LIFESTYLE – DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION, NOMADS, AND REMOTE WORKERS

On October 30, 2024, we held our second Online Forum, bringing together over 50 participants to **explore how digital transformation is reshaping the landscape for remote workers and digital nomads**. Titled "Beyond Lifestyle – Digital Transformation, Nomads, and Remote Workers," the forum shifted the focus **from individual mobility trends to the broader systemic changes that digitalization entails, for people, places, and public institutions.**

Alison Partridge, Remote-IT's Ad Hoc Expert, moderated the event, drawing on her extensive experience in leading European digital innovation networks.
The forum framed digital transformation as more than just a trend, it's r**edefining work, governance, and urban living.**

Digitalization and society: Human-centered concerns

The first keynote was delivered by **Dr. Haydee Sheombar,** researcher at the Rotterdam School of Management, who explored **the multi-layered impact of digital technologies on society.** Her presentation tackled difficult questions: How do online environments affect behavior and mental health? How can governments reclaim trust in a digital world dominated by private platforms?

PROGRAM

Event Details:
Date: Wednesday, Oct 30, 2024
Time: 10:00 AM – 11:30 PM
Location: Online (Zoom)

10:00 – 10:10 **Welcome and Introduction**
Natasa Miric
Alisa Aliti Vlasic

10:10 – 10:15 **Scene setting & icebreaker**
Alison Partridge

10:15 – 10:30 **The importance of trust and ethics to public authorities embracing digital transformation and human-centred approaches to urban development**
Haydee Sheombar

10:00 – 10:40 **Q&A Session**

10:40 – 10:55 **The extent to which digital infrastructure and open data can be used to attract digital nomads**
Alison Partridge and Mark-Emil Talivere

10:55 – 11:05 **Q&A Session**

11:05 – 11:25 **Panel discussion: What does all of this mean for Remote-IT cities?**
Alison Partridge, Haydee Sheombar and Mark-Emil Talivere

11:25 – 11:30 **Reflections, conclusion, next steps**

11:30 **Final words and closing**
Alison Partridge, Alisa Aliti Vlasic and Natasa Miric

HOSTS SPEAKERS

Alison Partridge
Remote-IT Ad Hoc Expert

Haydee Sheombar
Researcher, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University

Mark-Emil Talivere
Innovation Expert, City of Tallinn

Alisa Aliti Vlasic
Remote-IT Lead Expert

Natasa Miric
Remote-IT Lead Partner

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Drawing from global research and her own experience, Sheombar emphasized the importance of **trust, ethical design, and citizen empowerment.** She warned of growing gaps: educational, social, and technological, that risk deepening inequality. Her call to action was clear: **cities must adopt a human-centered approach to digitalization, where inclusion and transparency are foundational, not optional.**

Sheombar also underscored that **digital isolation is not strictly age-related, but largely education-dependent.** Her recommendation for Remote-IT cities: **invest in ongoing digital literacy programs, and co-create services with citizens through tools like urban data platforms.**

Tallinn's experience: From infrastructure to open innovation

The forum then shifted to a fireside chat with **Mark-Emil Talivere,** Innovation Expert from the City of Tallinn, who shared how Estonia's capital has become a leading digital city. Through programs like **"Test in Tallinn"**, the city invites companies to **pilot tech solutions in a real urban environment.** Digital nomads, too, play a role in this feedback loop by testing services, offering insights, and shaping better user experiences.

One standout innovation discussed was **Estonia's National Open Data Platform,** which not only improves service efficiency but also opens new avenues for citizen engagement. Talivere stressed the importance of basics -starting with reliable public Wi-Fi—and the need for an agile mindset among local authorities.

His advice to smaller cities: **don't wait for perfect conditions, start with simple, visible improvements and build from there.**

The panel emphasized that while technology is evolving rapidly, **meaningful digital transformation requires parallel work on mindset, capacity, and trust-building**. Digitalization should be approached as a tool for **empowering communities, improving governance, and attracting talent,** not as an end in itself.

This second Remote-IT Online Forum was a timely reminder that digital transformation is not just about infrastructure, it's about people. As cities continue shaping their Integrated Action Plans, the forum offered both cautionary takes and inspirational models.

The recording of the forum is available **here.**

A STRATEGIC PAUSE: MID-TERM REFLECTION FOR THE REMOTE-IT NETWORK

During the tranational meeting in Brindisi, Italy, a dedicated section of the meeting was reserved for the **Mid-Term Reflection (MTR)**, an essential milestone to review network progress and adjust trajectories if needed. Facilitated by Lead Expert Alisa Aliti Vlasic, the session invited partners to reflect on their progress midway through the network journey.

Grounded in survey results submitted by all partner cities, the MTR offered a structured space to review:

- **Progress on Integrated Action Plans (IAPs)**
- **Advancement of Testing Actions**
- **Functioning and engagement of Urban Local Groups (ULGs)**
- **Thematic learning and knowledge sharing**
- **Support needs at both network and programme levels, and**
- **Forward-looking risks and learning opportunities.**

The goal was not only to assess achievements but to identify roadblocks and recalibrate the network's direction to ensure meaningful outcomes in the second half of the project.

The discussion surfaced several shared insights. On IAP progress, most cities reported that they had completed or nearly completed Section 1 and were advancing well through Section 2. However, challenges remained - particularly around **integrating stakeholder input effectively and ensuring cross-sectoral coordination.**

In terms of **testing actions,** some cities noted that timelines were tight and that additional soft measures - such as communication support, user feedback loops, or complementary outreach, were necessary to make the pilots truly informative.
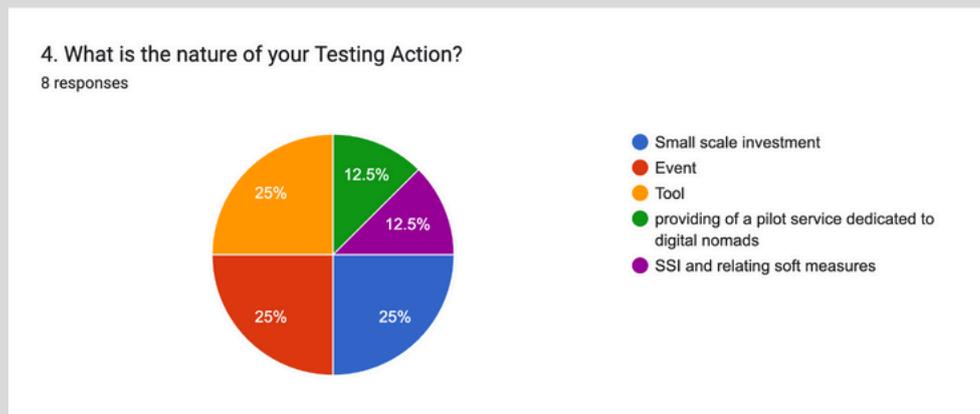
ULG dynamics also varied widely: while some partners had strong, politically supported groups that were actively contributing, others reported fluctuating attendance, difficulty in maintaining interest, or lack of clarity among stakeholders about their role in shaping the action plans.

What emerged from this reflection was an important understanding that **successful implementation would require more than just finalizing the IAP documents**. Cities shared how partial ULG meetings, tailored to specific themes or stakeholder groups, helped manage expectations and foster more focused engagement. Others highlighted the value of creating direct links between project outcomes and the day-to-day interests of ULG members, helping to sustain momentum and anchor their participation.

Thematic learning also received strong attention: partners expressed a desire to delve deeper into topics such as the **gender dimensions of remote work, digital divides, and data-informed policymaking**, as well as calls for more **structured peer exchange across other URBACT networks working on similar themes.**

The MTR session outlined next steps with clear timelines. Cities committed to finalizing Section 2 of their IAPs by February 2025 and continuing the rollout of their testing actions into early spring. Additionally, participants showed interest in further capacity-building activities on **governance for IAP delivery, funding strategy design, and post-project sustainability models.**

In this sense, the Mid-Term Reflection was more than a checkpoint, it was a turning point.
It reaffirmed shared goals, clarified local and network-level risks, and equipped partners with the insights needed to ensure that the final phase of Remote-IT delivers both strategic and tangible impact.
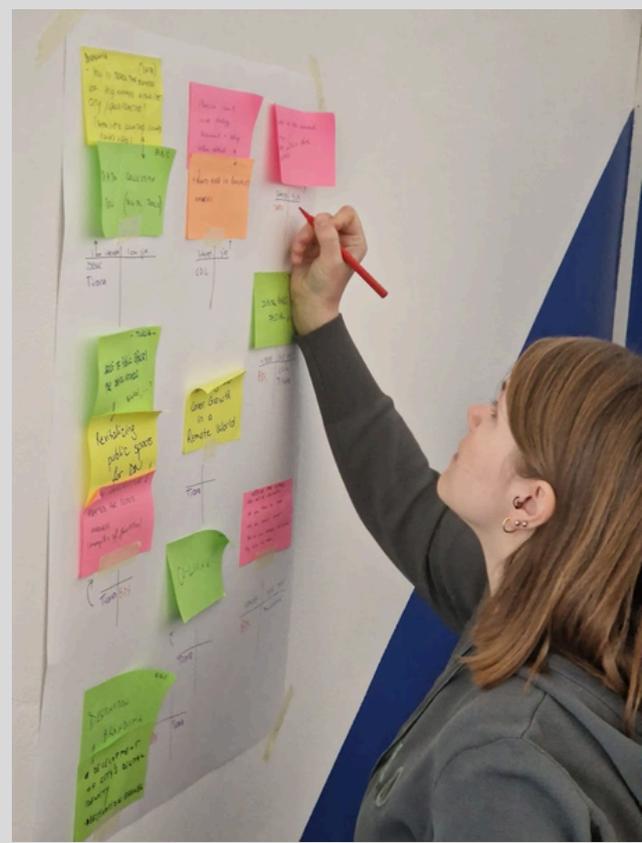
ADDITIONAL TOOLS USED

ICE BREAKER

EXPLORING PERSPECTIVES - THE REVERSE HUMAN SPECTRUM

WHY WE USED IT

In the evolving landscape of public administration, especially when designing policies for remote workers and engaging diaspora communities, **empathy, critical thinking, and the ability to understand opposing viewpoints are essential skills. The Reverse Human Spectrum icebreaker** was intentionally chosen to nurture one such underdeveloped, yet critical, competency: the ability to argue *"the other side."*

For city officials, policymakers, and other local actors, this skill is vital. Whether engaging skeptical stakeholders, navigating political complexities, or leading inclusive dialogue, **the capacity to articulate and understand opposing views without defensiveness is a sign of democratic maturity and effective leadership.** By practicing this skill in a safe, playful environment, participants are better equipped to respond to diverse arguments with clarity, respect, and strategic insight, not confrontation.

HOW WE USED IT

The Reverse Human Spectrum was used as an opening interactive ice-breaker on Day 1 of the TNM in Tirana. Here is how we did it:

1. **Provocative statements introduced** - Participants were presented with a series of polarizing or thought-provoking statements related to remote work, migration, and public policy (e.g., "Remote work will reduce brain drain," or "Diaspora professionals should be given incentives to work in their home country.")

2. **Physical spectrum formed** - A physical line was created across the room, with one end representing *strong agreement* and the other *strong disagreement.*
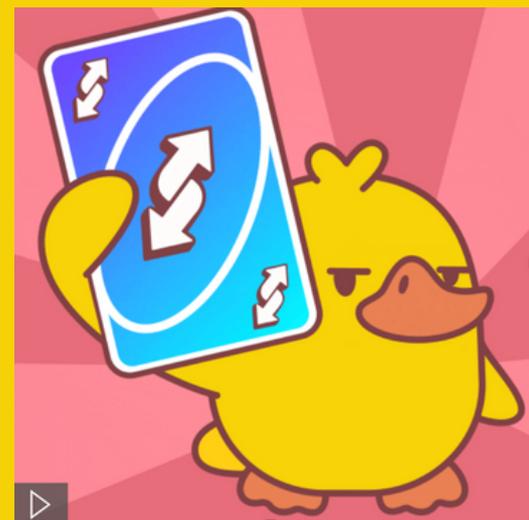
2. **Participants take a position** - Participants positioned themselves along the spectrum according to their personal beliefs in response to a statement.

3. **Reverse argument challenge** - Once positioned, participants were challenged <u>to defend the opposite of their belief, explaining and justifying the view of someone on the other side of the spectrum.</u>

4. **Group reflection -** After several rounds, a short debrief helped reflect on the experience: how it felt to argue the opposing side, what was learned, and how this might apply to real-life public engagement or policy-making situations.

The session was energizing, disarming, and surprisingly revealing.

It reminded participants that understanding disagreement is not the same as agreeing to it, but is a **prerequisite for meaningful dialogue, smarter policy, and stronger consensus-building.**

CRITICAL FRIENDS CIRCLE: PEER LEARNING TO STRENGTHEN IAP

WHY WE USED IT

As cities worked on shaping their Integrated Action Plans, we introduced the **Critical Friends circle**—a peer review exercise with an idea that constructive feedback from trusted colleagues can lead to deeper insights and stronger outcomes.

The purpose of this activity was to create a structured yet informal setting where participants could **receive honest, supportive feedback** on their work while also learning from the approaches of others. While developing local strategies it is easy to overlook blind spots or fall into default thinking. By exchanging plans across cities, participants had the opportunity to see **their IAPs through fresh eyes**, challenge assumptions, and strengthen the coherence and clarity of their planning.

This exercise also fostered a key leadership skill for local policymakers and urban stakeholders: the ability to **give and receive feedback without defensiveness**. Engaging in critical, yet respectful, dialogue builds trust within the network and encourages a culture of shared improvement. It aligns with the core values of the Remote-IT network: **collaborative learning, open reflection, and collective growth**. This exercise supported the shift in our mindset **from "presenting a finished product" to embracing the process of co-creation, where every draft is an opportunity for learning and iteration.**

HOW WE USED IT

The **Critical Friends circle** was used as a facilitated, small-group activity focused specifically on **Section 2 of the Integrated Action Plans**. The method encouraged openness, clarity, and structured peer feedback through a simple, time-bound process. Here's how it was implemented:

1. **Forming diverse peer groups** - Participants were divided into small groups of three, with each person coming from a different city. This cross-city composition ensured that feedback came from varied urban contexts and perspectives.

2. **Sharing the IAP** - Each participant had up to 5 minutes to present their IAP Section 2. Rather than formal presentations, the focus was on informally flipping through the document—regardless of language—allowing others to observe layout, structure, and the logic of the plan.

3. **Silent feedback via post-its -** While one person was presenting, the other two listened actively and wrote their reflections on post-it notes, using four guiding questions:
   - **Clarity**: Is the plan's structure and content easy to follow?
   - **Coherence**: Do the objectives, actions, and indicators align logically?
   - **Understandability**: Even without language fluency, does the document look well-organized and actionable?
   - **Key challenges**: Are there visible gaps, inconsistencies, or open questions?

4. **Group discussion** - After the feedback was written, the group took 10 minutes to openly discuss the comments together. This conversation provided space to explore:
   - What are the strengths of the IAP?
   - Which aspects could be improved?
   - Are there common struggles among participants?
   - What examples, tools, or approaches could help each other?

5. **Rotate and repeat** - Once discussion on the first IAP concluded, the group rotated focus to the next member and repeated the same steps until all three participants had received and given feedback.

WHATS NEXT?

Online forum #3 - "Gender equality, digital nomads and remote workers"
April 2025

Podcast recording: "How cities create Integrated action plans - Remote-IT example"
May, 2024

Transitional meeting in Heraklion, Greece
May, 2024

Transitional meeting in Bucharest D6, Romania
June, 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 District 6 (Romania), Camarade Lobos (Portugal), Heraklion (Greece), Murcia (Spain), Tartu (Estonia), Tirana Albania).