

Hydro~Heritage Cities

URBACT



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Hydro-Heritage Cities Journal 3



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With the support of all the Hydro-Heritage Cities' partners

From Raindrops to ripples

Shared lessons from the Hydro-Heritage Cities journey



How can cities transform hidden waterways and forgotten infrastructures into engines of sustainability, culture and community resilience? This is the driving question of the [Hydro-Heritage Cities Innovation Transfer Network](#), inspired by the award-winning Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T. UIA project in Chalandri. Alongside Chalandri, the network brings together Elche (ES), Serpa (PT), Sombor (RS), Roeselare (BE) and Rome (IT) - each reimagining their unique hydro-heritage as a catalyst for urban change.

This third journal covers the period from the Mid-Term Reflection in Sombor (October 2025) to the peer review of draft Investment Plans in Elche and Paris (early 2026)—a key transition from precipitation to run-off. It is a moment where cities move from testing and exploration towards consolidation, alignment and strategic clarity.

Through reflection, exchange and peer learning, partners are refining their approaches, strengthening their Investment Plans and building the foundations for long-term impact.

With photos and reflections, the journey continues—now with clearer direction and growing momentum... stay with us!

Straight paths and curves along the flow



When we first shaped the methodology of our network, the water cycle came naturally as a guiding metaphor—helping us reinterpret the URBACT transfer phases in a way that reflects our theme and our journey.

In this journal, we move further along that cycle. After the condensation phase, where ideas took shape and a shared understanding emerged, and the precipitation phase, where testing actions and local strategies began to form, we now enter a new stage. Here, those ideas are no longer just falling into place—they are starting to flow, connecting into more structured pathways.

What you'll find in this edition are highlights, reflections and insights from this moment of transition: from experimentation to consolidation, as Investment Plans are reviewed, refined and prepared to move forward.

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- 1. The third core Meeting in Sombor**
 - 2. The Hydro-Heritage webinars**
 - 3. The "Reuse" meeting in Paris**
 - 4. The fourth core Meeting in Elche**
 - 5. The Lead Expert corner**
 - 6. Coming soon on Journal 4**
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Sombor: reflecting, exploring and moving forward together



In late October 2025, the Hydro-Heritage Cities bunch arrived in Sombor, where the rhythm of the meeting naturally followed the flow of the Great Bačka Canal.

From the very beginning, the experience was not confined to meeting rooms. Walking along the canal, visiting the Bezdán Lock, and sharing a boat journey on the water, partners were invited to step into the local context—seeing firsthand both the scale of the infrastructure and the untapped potential of this hidden heritage.











The following day shifted the perspective towards the future.

Through expert inputs and discussion, partners explored how to measure impact, ensure economic sustainability, and position hydro-heritage as a driver for tourism and local development.

Contributions from experts such as ad hoc expert Ronald Lievens and Prof. Bálint Kádár helped ground these reflections in practical approaches.

Throughout the meeting, peer exchange and funding discussions supported cities in sharpening their Investment Plans—bringing them one step closer to implementation.

These moments on site set the tone for deeper exchanges. The first day created space for reflection, as partners collectively revisited their journey so far through the Mid-Term Reflection process, sharing progress, doubts and emerging directions. It was a moment to pause, take stock, and recognise how far each city had come.

Mid-Term Reflection: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead



At the core of the Sombor meeting, the **Mid-Term Reflection session** created a rare moment to pause. After months of activity, travel and experimentation, partners stepped back to look not only at what had been done, but at how the journey itself had unfolded.

Through the **Memory Clouds**, the network told its own story.

There were *spark moments*—first encounters, first ideas taking shape.

There were *flow moments*, when collaboration felt natural and things simply worked. There was also *turbulence*: governance hurdles, stakeholder fatigue, the complexity of aligning visions. And then, the *aha moments*—often emerging from testing actions—when concepts became tangible and meaningful.





Governing Hydro-Heritage in the Digital Age: From Participation to Data-Informed Action - Webinar series



URBACT Co-funded by the European Union **Hydro-Heritage Cities**

GOVERNING HYDRO-HERITAGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE – FROM PARTICIPATION TO DATA-INFORMED ACTION

22 January 2026, 11:30-12:45 CET on Zoom
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83447614927>

How can cities govern hydro-heritage as a living common while navigating growing complexity in data, coordination, and participation?

This online session focuses on the governance dimension of hydro-heritage transformation. URBACT expert Alisa Aliti Vlašić explores how cities can strengthen decision-making, collaboration, and citizen relationships by combining participatory governance with meaningful, well-managed use of data and digital tools. The session places strong emphasis on **governance first**: face-to-face engagement, institutional coordination, and shared ownership, with digital tools presented as complementary enablers that help cities **scale learning, integrate information, and support implementation**.

Through a mix of conceptual framing, European city examples, and reflective discussion, participants will be invited to connect these insights to their own local implementation and investment planning.

AGENDA

11:30	Welcome, introduction and session framing within the HHC journey by the hosts
11:33	Welcome and session framing <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Welcome and objectives of the session• Technology as an enabler of governance, not a replacement for participation
11:40	From participation to (e)governance: a shared framework <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do we mean by governing in the digital age?• Key governance challenges in cities• Introducing the two complementary governance domains:<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Internal: how cities use data for coordination and decision-making◦ External: how cities use data and communication to build relationships with citizens
11:50	Domain 1 – Internal governance- using data inside city administrations How cities operationalize data internally to improve governance: <i>Internal challenges, what works in practice, city examples</i>
12:05	Domain 2 – External governance- data, communication, and citizens How can cities use data to strengthen relationship with citizens and stakeholders: <i>External challenges, from data to relationship, city examples</i>
12:30	From learning to action: embedding (e)governance in implementation plans <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Common pitfalls to avoid• Practical questions for cities
12:35	Discussion
12:45	Closure and next steps

On January 22, the Hydro-Heritage Cities network hosted a webinar with Alisa Aliti Vlašić, exploring how cities can move from participation to truly data-informed governance.

A key message emerged: cities are not lacking data—they are struggling to use it effectively.

Across the network, examples highlighted common challenges. In Chalandri, data on water systems proved difficult to locate due to fragmentation across departments, while in Sombor, governance complexity stems from overlapping ownership of water infrastructure.

Alisa distinguished between technology and e-governance: tools alone are not enough. Governance depends on how data is interpreted, shared, and translated into decisions.

Driving change for better cities

Governing Hydro-Heritage in the digital age *From participation to data-informed action*

Atlas AR Water, Ad-hoc Expert
Hydro-Heritage Cities, URBACT Transfer Network
2017-2024, online

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E-governance - how participation, data, and decisions connect

E-governance is not a tool – it is a way of organizing decision-making in a digital context



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Internal governance is not about data collection

- Aligning departments around shared questions
- Turning information into decision support
- Making responsibilities around data explicit
- Using data regularly, not exceptionally



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What usually goes wrong



- Data sits in separate departments
- Data is collected for reporting, not decision-making
- Different indicators for the same issue
- No clear owner of the "big picture"

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Why this is risky – when communication fails, trust erodes

- Participation fatigue
- Growing scepticism toward institutions
- Strong reaction to water and heritage decisions
- Conflict instead of collaboration



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Still – Hybrid is the winning combination

Digital works best when it complements face-to-face engagement

- Face-to-face builds trust and understanding
- Digital widens reach and continuity
- Together they reduce participation fatigue



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Digital systems should support participation—not replace it—and must be combined with face-to-face processes to build trust.

Several city examples illustrated these dynamics. Venice’s advanced “smart control room” collects vast amounts of data, yet only a small portion is effectively used for decision-making, highlighting the risk of over-collection without clear purpose. In contrast, Rotterdam demonstrates a more integrated approach, using shared dashboards across departments to support coordinated decisions, especially in complex contexts such as large public events.

The session also explored external governance, with Barcelona’s open data and participatory platforms showing how cities can link citizen input directly to decisions, increasing transparency and trust.

Across these examples, a recurring gap persists: participation processes are expanding, but governance systems often fail to translate inputs into clear outcomes, leading to frustration and disengagement.

The takeaway for Hydro-Heritage Cities is clear: start from concrete governance challenges, define the data that truly matters, and embed its use into everyday practice. Effective e-governance is not about doing more, but about doing a few things consistently—and making them count.

Beyond the ULG: Building Lasting Governance for Hydro-Heritage - Webinar series



The poster features a decorative vertical border on the left with blue wavy lines. At the top, it includes the URBACT logo, the European Union flag with the text 'Co-funded by the European Union (Interreg)', and the 'Hydro-Heritage Cities' logo. The main title is 'BEYOND THE ULGS: BUILDING AGILE, SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURES OF GOVERNANCE FOR SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION'. Below the title, it states the date and time: '4 March 2026, 12:00-13:30 CET on Zoom' and provides a Zoom link: 'https://us02web.zoom.us/j/61964700553'. The text describes the webinar's focus on building sustainable structures for systemic transformations, mentioning a case study from Romania. An agenda section follows, listing times and topics from 10:00 to 11:25.

URBACT Co-funded by the European Union (Interreg) Hydro-Heritage Cities

BEYOND THE ULGS: BUILDING AGILE, SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURES OF GOVERNANCE FOR SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION

4 March 2026, 12:00-13:30 CET on Zoom
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/61964700553>

How can cities build sustainable structures for systemic transformations in cross-cutting themes such as hydro-heritage?

This online session focuses on several mechanisms that can enable city stakeholders to work together long-term for solving complex urban issues. Together with Anamaria Vrabie, URBACT expert, we'll explore the emergence of public sector innovation labs and strategic local partnerships as different pathways for collaborative work. We'll also look at the core elements on how to build at city level the capacity to innovate, not only to implement.

Taking as main case study the emergence of the first public sector innovation lab in Romania, the session allows a deep dive into the nuts and bolts of imagining and resourcing such structures. Participants will be invited to connect these insights to their own local implementation and investment planning.

AGENDA

10:00	Welcome, introduction and session framing within the HHC journey by the hosts
10:10	Welcome and session framing <ul style="list-style-type: none">Welcome and objectives of the sessionTackling a topic as complex and under explored as hydro-heritage might need a completely different approach in long-term governance and resourcing.Structure of the session: a case study approach for building the first public sector innovation lab in Romania and reflection on how to build a city's capacity to innovate.
10:20	Introducing the analytical framework of assessing innovation capacity in cities and the case study
10:30	Tips and lessons learned on how to build the innovation capacity of a city using as case study the first public sector innovation lab in Romania
11:00	Key resources you can use in planning your next steps and other city examples
11:10	Discussion and other city examples
11:25	Closure and next steps

On March 4, ad hoc expert Anamaria Vrabie invited the Hydro-Heritage Cities network to look beyond the URBACT Local Group (ULG) and reflect on what comes next: how to sustain collaboration, innovation, and impact after the project ends.

Drawing from her experience in setting up an urban innovation unit in Cluj-Napoca, the webinar explored how cities can move from temporary project structures to more permanent governance models.

A key insight was that ULGs are not an endpoint, but a starting point—one possible format among many for enabling cross-sector collaboration and experimentation.

Participants were encouraged to think in terms of **structures, not just projects**: defining clear goals, building the right organisational setup (inside or outside the municipality), strengthening data use, and fostering long-term partnerships. The Cluj example showed how small-scale testing—through pilot actions, co-design processes, and user-centred approaches—can gradually build trust and legitimacy across departments and stakeholders.

A central message resonated strongly: **change happens at the speed of trust**. In complex governance environments, progress depends less on tools or methodologies and more on relationships, shared values, and the ability to translate ideas into accessible language.

For Hydro-Heritage Cities, the webinar offered a timely reflection: as Investment Plans take shape, the real challenge is ensuring that the collaborative spirit of the ULG evolves into durable governance arrangements capable of carrying hydro-heritage forward.

From Plans to Play: Hydro-Heritage Cities in Paris



HHC partners gathered in Paris for the URBACT ITN meeting (3-5 February 2026), hosted in a rather fitting setting—a **houseboat on the Seine**. A place between land and water, it offered the perfect backdrop to reflect on the next steps of the journey.

The meeting brought together the 10 ITN networks from across Europe to **test ideas, review progress and shape final outputs**. For Hydro-Heritage Cities, a key moment was the **peer review of draft Investment Plans**, where cities presented their strategies and received feedback from peers outside the network. This exchange helped clarify priorities, identify gaps and strengthen the plans through fresh perspectives.

Equally important was the focus on **final products and storytelling**. Inspired by creative formats—from toolkits to gamification—HHC partners began shaping their final output, “*Hydro Heritage Cities in Play*”, combining storytelling and interactive elements.

The sessions on **storytelling and final event design** also helped define the concept for the closing event in Rome (June 2026), envisioned as an engaging and participatory experience.

A meeting on water, about water—and gliding farther towards more focused results.

Elche: from review to final alignment



Ready to reuse?

The Hydro-Heritage Cities network met in **Elche on February 11-13, 2026** for a focused transnational meeting marking the transition into the final phase of the project.

Set within the rich water landscape of Elche—from the historic reservoir to the palm grove system—the meeting combined **site visits, institutional exchanges, and intensive working sessions**. The core of the programme was dedicated to the **peer review of Investment Plans**, supported by collaborative exercises and “speed-date” exchanges between cities.

Alongside this, partners worked on **funding strategies**, explored through the Radar exercise, and began shaping the **final outputs and the Rome event**.

Overall, the meeting acted as a moment of **alignment and acceleration**, helping cities move from draft plans to more structured, shared and actionable strategies.

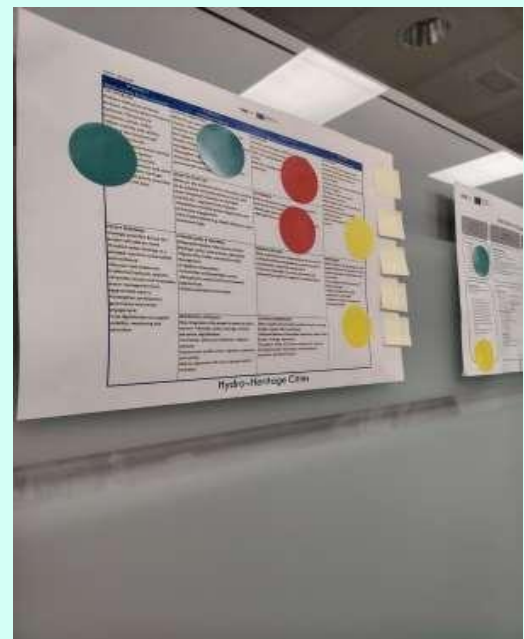


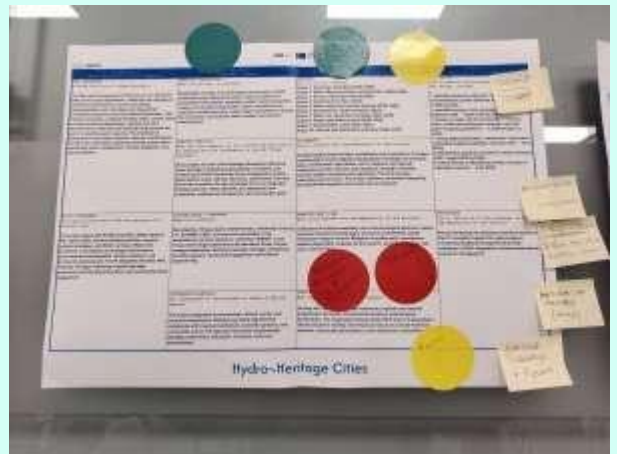
A practical stress test

The peer review, facilitated by Chiara Lucchini, was designed as a **hands-on and collaborative process**. Cities started with short pitches and a simple self-assessment (green/yellow/red) to identify what works and what still needs attention.

The second step used a **“speed-date” format**, with rotating exchanges between cities to tackle key issues—governance, funding, priorities and long-term sustainability.

A few common messages emerged: **be clearer on value propositions, strengthen links to policies and funding, and connect testing actions more directly to strategy**. Overall, the exercise worked as a real stress test—helping cities sharpen and solidify their plans.





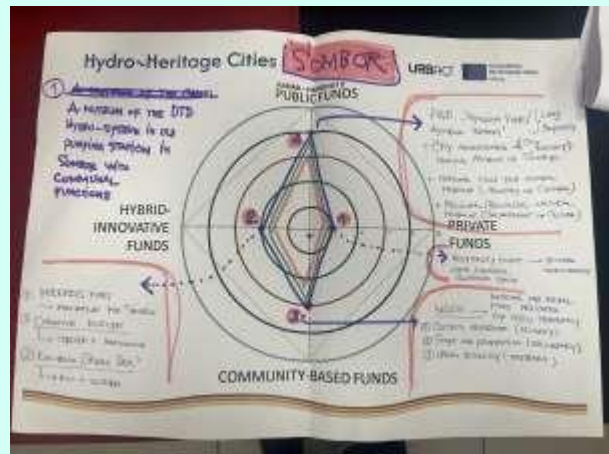


Looking beyond the usual funding suspects

The Funding Radar exercise helped cities map where their actions could be financed—across **public, private, community-based and innovative sources**.

The picture was quite clear: most plans rely heavily on **public and EU funding**—solid, familiar, but often limited. Few cities are yet exploring **private partnerships, community funding or hybrid models**.

This highlighted a shared gap. Moving forward, the challenge is to shift from simply “finding funding” to building a **funding architecture**—combining different sources to increase flexibility, ownership and long-term sustainability.



5. Watching the flow- personal reflections of the Lead Expert



Looking back at these past months, I have the feeling that something has shifted. Not dramatically, not all at once, but steadily, almost quietly, like water finding its path.

In Elche, this became very tangible. Plans that once felt abstract are now taking shape. Conversations are more focused, sometimes more challenging, but also more honest. There is less "What could we do?" and more "How are we actually going to do it?". And that, to me, is a sign of maturity.

What I find particularly encouraging is not only the progress itself, but the way it is happening. Each city is moving at its own pace, with its own constraints and opportunities, yet there is a shared direction. The exchange is becoming more natural, more horizontal. Cities are not just learning from the original practice but from each other.

Of course, not everything is smooth. Governance questions remain complex, funding is still a puzzle, and keeping stakeholders engaged over time is never easy. But these are no longer hidden challenges, they are part of the conversation.

*As Lead Expert, my role has often been about **keeping the flow going**: connecting ideas, translating between contexts, sometimes slowing things down, sometimes pushing forward.*

But more and more, I feel that the network is carrying itself. I can watch their progress like the flow on the Great Bačka Canal in Sombor.

We are now entering the final stretch. The work ahead is about making things real, turning plans into commitments, actions into structures, and learning into something that lasts beyond the project.

And like any good water story, it's not about reaching the end. It's about what continues to flow after.

6. Coming up next...



In the final journal, we follow the last steps of the Hydro-Heritage Cities journey. From the final meeting in Rome on June 17-18, 2026 to the expert review of the Investment Plans, cities will consolidate their work and prepare for implementation.

The journey will then open to a wider audience at the URBACT City Festival in Nicosia, celebrating results and sharing lessons with cities across Europe.

From local actions to European exchange, the story comes full circle—ready to flow beyond the project.