

**European Union, Asia and Australasia:  
Building partnerships between cities and regions**

A Seminar within the Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan  
EU Pavilion, Wednesday 28 May 2025  
15:00 – 17:00 JST (08:00 - 10:00 CEST)  
Osaka, Japan

**Short Description:**

As part of the international dimension of EU regional policy, this seminar at Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan highlights how European cities and regions collaborate globally to foster sustainable urban development and regional innovation. The International Urban and Regional Cooperation (IURC) project, an EU-funded initiative, plays a crucial role in strengthening international partnerships that drive sustainability, economic resilience, and innovation-led growth.

This focused session will showcase successful cooperation models between European and international cities, emphasizing best practices in climate resilience, smart mobility, and green infrastructure. Additionally, it will explore key regional innovation areas such as start-up ecosystems, biotech, digital transformation, and circular economy initiatives.

Regional and local authorities from the EU (Catalonia and Milan), New Zealand (Christchurch) and Japan (Prefectures of Osaka and Aichi) will share insights on how cities and regions can harness global collaboration to accelerate their green and digital transitions, foster entrepreneurship, and enhance economic competitiveness.

The hybrid event (onsite/online) will be held in English and Japanese languages with simultaneous interpretation. It will be livestreamed via Zoom ([link](#)) and registration will be opened on 20.05.2025.

**Agenda**

*Overall Onsite Moderation: Prof. Hidefumi Imura, IURC Japan Coordinator*

**15:00 - 15:10 Welcoming Address**

Thomas Gnocchi, Deputy Head, Delegation of the European Union to Japan

**15:10 - 15:20 Remarks by Honored Guest**

Nobuhiko Yamaguchi, Vice Governor of Osaka Prefecture

**15:20 - 15:30 Remarks by Honored Guest**

Jaume Duch Guillot, Regional Minister for the European Union and External Action, Government of Generalitat Catalonia

**15:30 - 15:45 The IURC Programme – Introduction, Achievements, Way Forward**

Video Message by Themis Christophidou, Director-General, European Commission, DG REGIO

**15:45 - 16:45 What's in for Regions and Cities? A Panel Discussion**

Aida Diaz (Catalonia), Marco Mazziotti (Milan), Julianne Hughey (Christchurch), Masaaki Shibayama (Aichi)

Moderation: Pablo Gándara, Team Leader IURC Asia and Australasia (presentation & discussion)

**16:45 - 17:00 Closing Remarks**

Cesar Moreno, Delegation of the European Union to Japan

## Speakers

- 1) **Ms Themis Christophidou**, Director-General of the European Commission's Regional and Urban Policy department since September 2023. She has been serving the EU for over 23 years and has held various posts, from transport program manager in the Directorate-General for Regional Policy to Member of Cabinet of the first European Commissioner from Poland, Danuta Huebner. She has also served as deputy head of Cabinet of Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou, as Head of Cabinet of the Commissioner for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, Maria Damanaki and as Head of Cabinet of the Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Christos Stylianides. She is a civil engineer with a 38-year professional experience in the public and private sector.
- 2) **Mr Nobuhiko Yamaguchi**, Vice Governor of Osaka Prefecture. Over the course of his career, he has held several key positions in Department of General Affairs and Department of Policy and Planning in Osaka Prefecture, and played a central role in designing the Osaka Metropolis Plan as Executive Director of the Metropolis Policy Office. In 2013, he was appointed Director-General of the newly established Osaka Metropolis Bureau. He later transitioned to the Executive Director of Urban and Public Works Department, and subsequently served as Director-General of the Policy and Planning Department, where he contributed to the development of the Secondary Capital Concept. He is in the present position since 2019.
- 3) **Mr Jaume Duch Guillot**, Secretary for the European Union and External Action, Government of Catalonia, Spain. Before joining the Catalan government (2024), Mr Duch - a lawyer, university professor, and journalist - served as Director General of Communication and Spokesperson of the European Parliament since 2017. He has been a civil servant of the European Union since 1989. In the European Parliament, Duch has also served as head of the press office and as spokesperson for José María Gil-Robles when he served as President of the European Parliament.
- 4) **Mr Marco Mazziotti**, Director of EU Direct Funding at Municipality of Milan (sister city of Osaka), is a public sector professional with extensive experience in urban innovation and a strong focus on shaping sustainable urban strategies. His current capacity is Director for EU Direct Funding at the Municipality of Milan. Mr. Mazziotti plays a key role in securing and managing EU resources to support sustainable urban development and to develop local urban complex projects. His work emphasizes collaboration across municipalities, co-design with stakeholders and citizens, and leveraging EU programs to drive long-term urban transformation. Mr. Mazziotti maintains also active collaborations with a range of international organizations, with Columbia University and the Italian Association of Municipalities. Prior to his work in Milan, he gained valuable experience in development work across Southeast Asia.
- 5) **Ms Aida Diaz Saez**, Director of the Internationalization Program of the Department of Research and Universities (REU), Government of Catalonia. Since 2022, Ms Diaz is the contact point for the IURC cooperation with Japan and has hosted several Japanese IURC delegations. Results include MoUs between Kyoto Prefecture and the Government of Catalonia, or Kita Osaka Health and Medical Care City (KENTO) as well as joint projects such as one financed by the Japanese NEDO organisation and several missions to Catalonia and Japan.
- 6) **Ms Julianne Hughey**, Christchurch City Council (CCC). Ms Hughey works as a City Initiatives Lead for the Smart Christchurch unit and has coordinated the city's IURC smart city engagement since 2022. Some of the results achieved by CCC and Julianne particularly include the recent award as a demonstration city to a Horizon Europe innovation action, Smart City Podcast with other IURC cities launched 2023 involving Hamburg, Malaga, Rotterdam and others. She also coordinated the IURC (Malaga) participation at the Christchurch Innovation Expo 2023.
- 7) **Mr. Masaaki Shibayama**, Advisor to the Department of Economy and Industry, Aichi Prefectural Government (since 2024). Mr. Shibayama also serves as Visiting Professor at Nagoya University's Center for Deep-Tech Serial Innovation, where he contributes to academia-industry collaboration and entrepreneurial education. With nearly four decades of experience in regional economic development, innovation strategy, and public administration, Mr. Shibayama has played a key role in advancing Aichi's leadership in next-generation industries, including deep-tech, advanced manufacturing, and startup ecosystem development.

## **Background & rationale**

Cohesion Policy is the EU's main investment policy targeting all regions and cities in the European Union in order to support job creation, business competitiveness, economic growth, sustainable development and the improvements to citizens' quality of life. In order to reach these goals and address the diverse development needs in all EU regions, €392 billion – almost a third of the total EU budget – has been set aside for Cohesion Policy for the period 2021-2027. The international dimension of cohesion policy is reflected in the manifold formal agreements on regional and urban policy cooperation signed between the European Commission and non-EU partners.

Since 2017, the International Urban and Regional Cooperation (IURC) programme, implemented by the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG-REGIO) and the Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) service of the European Commission, brings together cities and regions from across the globe to contribute to the delivery of international commitments articulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the UN New Urban Agenda. It equally supports the delivery of the Global Gateway strategy and the implementation of the European Commission's priorities such as "A global Europe", a "New plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness", "Supporting people, strengthening European societies and the social model" and "Sustaining European quality of life". It is coordinated with EU Member States initiatives (Team Europe).

In this third edition of IURC projects starting in 2025, EU cities and regions collaborate with counterparts in Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America over the next 3 years.

## **Objectives**

The event will be an opportunity to deep dive into the international dimension of the European cohesion policy, focusing on the priorities for cities and regions in the current framework 2021-2027. By involving leaders and experts from four regions and municipalities participating in the IURC project, it will highlight practical examples and success stories of the cooperation. The event will showcase how cities and regions can leverage global partnerships to create added value, inspire innovation, and drive meaningful economic development.

Thematically it will cover areas of the *city-to-city* and *region-to-region* cooperation explored in the IURC project, including smart city, mobility, circular economy, energy transition, adaptation to climate change, industrial modernisation, innovation ecosystems, food-tech, biosciences, blue economy and digitalization.

The event will **stimulate EU cities and regions to apply for the IURC participation** through the [online EU survey form](#) available from **19 May** until **30 June 2025** (6 weeks).