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POLICY
BRIEF

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Urban Interest Representation in the EU: Opportunities, Channels, and Constraints – Evidence from Hungary

• Balázs Brucker

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Local and regional authorities are key implementers of EU policies, yet their capacity to influence decision-making at the European level remains uneven and largely indirect. This policy brief analyses the main institutional and informal channels of urban interest representation within the European Union.

The analysis demonstrates that effective influence is primarily determined by early-stage engagement in the policy cycle, embeddedness in European multi-level governance networks, and sustained interaction with key institutional actors, rather than formal decision-making authority. Despite the existence of multiple access points, significant disparities persist between well-resourced cities and smaller municipalities in their capacity to effectively articulate and channel their interests at EU level.

The findings are grounded in empirical evidence from Hungarian cities of varying size and administrative capacity, highlighting both structural constraints and emerging strategies of engagement at the EU level.

METHODOLOGY

This policy brief is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with Members of the European Parliament, members of the Committee of the Regions, leaders and policy officers of European umbrella organisations, as well as heads and staff of Brussels-based regional and city representation offices.

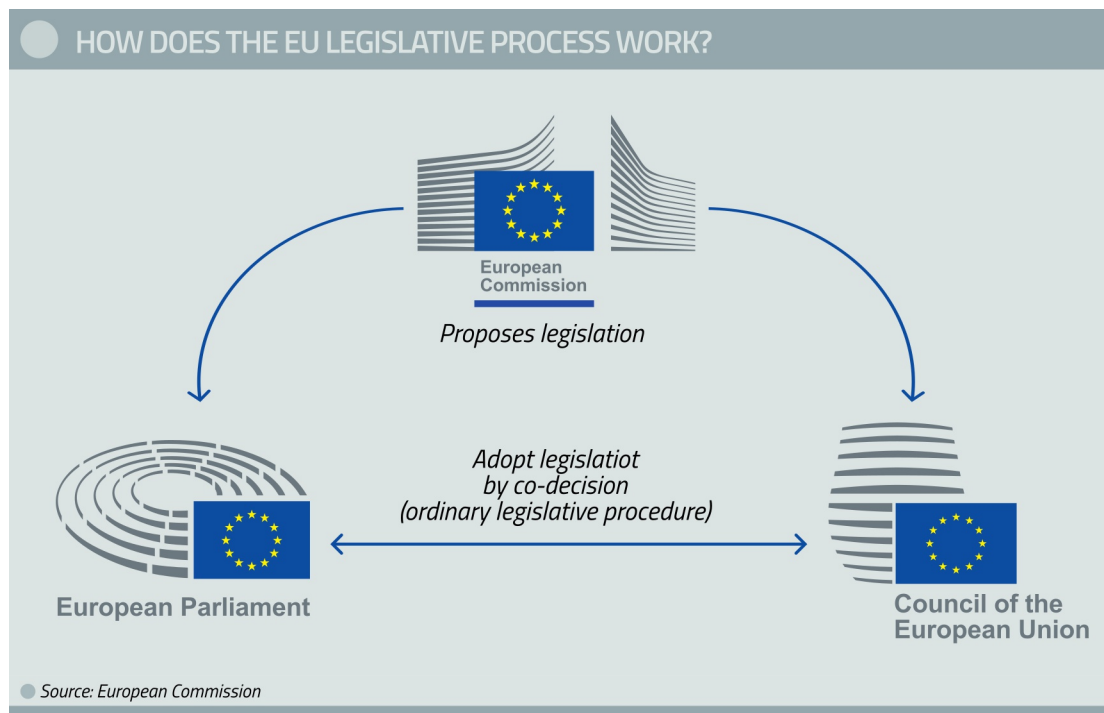
The empirical focus is on Hungarian cities, allowing for a comparative perspective across municipalities with different levels of resources, institutional embeddedness, and experience in EU-level advocacy. The qualitative research design enables an in-depth examination of the mechanisms, constraints, and informal practices shaping urban interest representation within the European Union.

BACKGROUND

EU policymaking is formally structured around the agenda-setting role of the European Commission and the co-legislative functions of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

Although local and regional authorities do not possess formal legislative powers, they are responsible for the implementation of a substantial share of EU policies. This creates a structural asymmetry: subnational actors are central to policy implementation but only indirectly involved in policy formulation.

Their capacity to influence EU decision-making is therefore largely contingent upon timing, access to institutions, and intermediary governance structures, rather than formal competences.



KEY FINDINGS

- 1.** Urban interest representation in the EU is characterised by a complex multi-level governance system in which formal institutional channels and informal networks operate in parallel. While multiple access points exist across EU institutions, effective influence is most frequently exercised during the early stages of policy formulation, particularly within the preparatory phase of the European Commission, when policy options remain open and negotiable.
- 2.** A second key feature is the pronounced asymmetry of access across institutional channels. The national route – linking municipalities to decision-making in the Council of the European Union – is strongly conditioned by political alignment between local and central governments, which limits its effectiveness in politically fragmented contexts. Consequently, many municipalities increasingly rely on direct engagement with Brussels-based institutions.
- 3.** Within the European Parliament, rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs play a pivotal role in shaping legislative outcomes. In most policy areas, the Parliament is a co-legislator with the Council of the European Union, making sustained informal engagement and relationship-building essential for subnational actors seeking to influence EU legislation.
- 4.** The Committee of the Regions provides structured representation for local and regional actors; however, its purely consultative and non-binding role, together with its consensus-oriented mode of operation, limits the strong articulation of specific territorial interests. Since 2025, its presidency has been held by Kata Tüttő, a member of the Budapest General Assembly, highlighting the growing influence of Hungarian urban actors in EU-level governance processes.
- 5.** EU agencies primarily contribute through technical expertise, data provision, and policy support functions, rather than political advocacy, thereby reinforcing the technocratic dimension of EU–local relations.
- 6.** At the same time, European networks such as Eurocities and Eurotowns serve as key intermediaries for interest aggregation, knowledge exchange, and coordinated advocacy. However, internal heterogeneity often constrains their ability to formulate unified and politically strong positions.

7. Finally, resource asymmetries constitute a structural constraint. Larger cities with dedicated Brussels representation and stronger administrative capacity are better positioned to maintain continuous engagement with EU institutions, whereas smaller municipalities rely more heavily on umbrella organisations and indirect channels of representation. In the Hungarian context, this pattern is illustrated by Budapest, which is the only city maintaining a dedicated liaison office in Brussels.

EU channels for urban advocacy

CHANNEL TYPE	INSTITUTIONAL SETTING	MAIN ACCESS POINTS	FUNCTION IN INTEREST REPRESENTATION
NATIONAL CHANNEL	Member State governance system	National ministries Permanent Representations Coreper	Aggregation of local and regional interests into national positions within the Council of the European Union Indirect influence on EU decision-making through Member States
EU INSTITUTIONAL CHANNEL	EU multi-level governance system	European Commission European Parliament Committee of the Regions EU agencies	Agenda-setting (Commission) Legislative influence (Parliament) Consultative representation (CoR) Technical input and implementation support (agencies)
NETWORK-BASED / INDEPENDENT CHANNEL	Transnational governance structures	European city networks (e.g. Eurocities, Eurotowns) Brussels-based regional representation offices	Interest aggregation Knowledge exchange Capacity-building Coordinated advocacy Facilitation of access to EU institutions

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Dedicated officers

- Cities should establish dedicated officers or focal points for international and EU affairs, including staff with proficiency in English and preferably French and strong knowledge of EU institutional structures and decision-making processes.
- These positions should be responsible for continuously monitoring EU legislative developments, funding opportunities, and policy initiatives, thereby strengthening institutional preparedness and strategic positioning.

2. Good timing

- Municipal interests should be channelled into EU policymaking at the earliest possible stage, particularly during the European Commission's preparatory phase, when policy outcomes remain flexible.
- Where direct access is limited, municipalities should rely on national or European umbrella organisations to represent their interests effectively.

3. Channels, presence

- Access to national government channels is often more readily available to municipalities where coordination between central and local levels is less constrained.
- Where such coordination is more limited, municipalities should place greater emphasis on direct engagement with Brussels-based institutions, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, and relevant EU agencies, as well as on alternative advocacy channels such as European city networks and liaison offices.

4. Cooperation with MEPs

- When engaging with Members of the European Parliament, municipalities should prioritise those linked to the relevant city or territory, while recognising that political affiliation often shapes the effectiveness of cooperation, particularly in terms of access and outcomes.

5. Committee of the Regions – Regular reporting

- Where municipalities are represented in the Committee of the Regions, members should ensure regular reporting to their home municipal administrations in order to strengthen vertical information flows and improve local-level awareness of EU policy developments.

6. Cooperation with city networks

- Cooperation with municipal associations and European city networks should be strengthened, particularly Eurocities for large cities and Eurotowns for medium-sized cities, alongside participation in thematic European umbrella organisations.
- These networks enhance both policy learning and collective advocacy capacity.

7. Shared representation offices in Brussels

- Given the high costs of establishing individual Brussels representation offices, most municipalities are unlikely to maintain standalone structures.
- From a cost-efficiency perspective, the development of shared regional liaison offices is recommended, building on existing models of regional representation in Brussels, in order to improve access to EU policy information and facilitate coordinated advocacy.

CONCLUSION



Urban interest representation in the EU is shaped by the interaction of formal institutional structures and informal governance practices. While multiple access points exist across EU institutions, effective influence is primarily determined by timing, relational embeddedness, and administrative capacity.

Strengthening coordination mechanisms and participation in European networks is essential for improving the ability of cities to effectively articulate and advance their interests within EU policymaking processes.

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The ELTE Centre for Economic and Regional Studies consists of three institutes, the Institute of Economics, the Institute for Regional Studies and the Institute of World Economics.

- Address: 1097 Budapest Tóth Kálmán u. 4.
- Postal address: 1097 Budapest Tóth Kálmán u. 4.
- Phone: (+36-1) 224 6700
- E-mail: titkarsag@krtk.elte.hu
- Web: www.krtk.elte.hu/en