

From Dialogue to Action:

Replicating Open Climate Neutrality Forums across the Danube Region based on the M100 Convention Model

Policy brief

Accelerating the EU Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission (M4) in the Danube Region through Climate Neutrality Forums



Key Messages

- Counting as new model of urban governance based on co-creation and multi-level collaboration, Climate Neutrality Forums play a pivotal role in accelerating an effective transition to net-zero emissions.
- Building on the success of the Romanian M100 Climate Neutrality Forum (2024) and its evolution into the 2025 Convention, these recurring dialogues have proven to be vital governance instruments in supporting the climate-neutral transition within Romania's three Mission Cities: Cluj-Napoca, Suceava, and Bucharest (2nd District).
- Given the positive impact of such initiatives within the Romanian state, Danube Region countries should consider the integration of Open Climate Neutrality Forums into their national strategies.
- By facilitating multi-level governance and connecting cities with international financing, these forums accelerate the transition across the Danube Region. They drive progress through peer learning, transfer of best practices, and help recognizing important milestones in the cities' journeys towards their climate neutrality goals such as Mission Labels.

Policy Problem

Spanning 14 countries with markedly uneven institutional readiness, the Danube Region includes a relatively limited number of EU Mission cities, distributed across countries such as Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Montenegro.

While participation in the EU Mission “100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities” exists across much of the region, it remains highly uneven in scale, depth, and institutional support. In many countries, engagement is still fragmented, with cities often operating without centralised coordination platforms, dedicated financing mechanisms, or clear legal mandates to guide and sustain implementation.

This creates a structural disadvantage for a large share of cities in the Danube Region. Although they are expected to contribute to the same climate objectives, many lack the institutional framework required to translate commitments into Climate City Contracts, investment pipelines, and implemented projects.

Existing EU-level platforms, such as NetZeroCities and CapaCITIES, provide valuable support and peer-learning opportunities. However, their European-wide scope means they are not specifically tailored to the governance, financing, and institutional realities of the Danube Region. This limitation is particularly evident for cities in non-EU countries, which face additional barriers in accessing these mechanisms. As a result, a critical gap remains at regional level.

What is needed is a dedicated coordination layer — a structured space where cities, national authorities, and EU actors can align policies, exchange practical experience, and build the coalitions required to move from dialogue to implementation. Initiatives such as the Romanian M100 Forums demonstrate that such an approach is not only feasible but can generate tangible impact when anchored in a coherent governance framework.

Why Open Climate Neutrality Forums Are Needed

In this context, Open Climate Neutrality Forums play a critical role in bridging the gap between high-level EU objectives and the specific governance and capacity challenges of the Danube Region, including fragmented institutional support and varying levels of urban development. Building on the M100 model of multi-level governance, these forums provide a practical framework for aligning cities, national authorities, and European stakeholders. They enable access to financing opportunities, facilitate the exchange of applied knowledge, and support coordinated decision-making across levels of governance. By creating the conditions for sustained collaboration, such forums help move beyond fragmented efforts and address the persistent “dialogue-to-action” gap, supporting cities in translating Mission 4 commitments into concrete, investable and implementable actions.

Evidence from Romania: The M100 Convention Model

The Romanian experience demonstrates the concrete value of this model. Both the 2024 Forum and the 2025 Convention successfully brought together, in a single space, city administrations alongside representatives of the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, and the EBRD — directly connecting cities with the financing actors they need.

The introduction of the M100 Mission Label at the 2025 Convention further illustrates how Forums of this kind can generate tangible recognition mechanisms that reward progress and sustain political momentum. Built on co-creation between municipalities, academia, the private sector, and civil society, the Climate City Contract — the core instrument of the M100 model — has been internationally recognised as one of Europe’s most innovative national climate governance initiatives, with explicit calls for its replication.

Crucially, the 2025 Convention operated under the motto “No City Left Behind” — an equity principle that directly responds to the structural exclusion of smaller and less supported municipalities identified across the Danube Region, and that should guide the replication of this model at the regional scale.

Policy Recommendations for Danube Region Countries

Policy 1: Integrating recurring “Open Climate Neutrality Forums” into national strategies, using the M100 model to ensure continuous alignment between local and national authorities.

Policy 2: Bridging the financing gap by using these forums to directly connect cities with international financial institutions.

Policy 3: Establishing structured transnational exchanges to transfer best practices from advanced climate-neutral cities to developing municipalities across the region.

Policy 4: Implementing the “city label” mechanism to provide high-performing cities with political visibility and fast access to national and EU funding.

Policy 5: Fostering co-creation between academia, the private sector, and local governments to build inclusive innovation ecosystems capable of overcoming urban barriers.

Policy 6: Designing Forums around applied knowledge transfer — combining thematic panels with hands-on “learn and apply” sessions and city-led project showcases, so participants leave with actionable insights rather than declarations.

Policy 7: Using Forums as policy coherence spaces, bringing national platforms, EU institutions, and cities together to align multi-level governance and implementation priorities.

Policy 8: Structuring Forums to actively expand the coalition of committed actors, formally welcoming new partners and cities into the shared effort at each edition.

Expected Impacts

Appreciating the challenges highlighted above, through the replication of Open Climate Neutrality Forums across the Danube Region based on the M100 Convention Model, it is expected to:

- facilitate the implementation of the EU Mission 4 within the region;
- strengthen multi-level governance coordination and policy coherence;
- connect the region with European and international financing institutions;
- enhance peer learning and transfer of best practices for urban climate action;
- create visibility and recognition mechanisms (such as labels or selection processes);
- foster an ecosystem of cooperation around urban climate action within the region.



Conclusions

The replication of the Romanian M100 model across the Danube Region offers a strategic pathway to bridge the existing gap between high-level EU climate mandates and local implementation. By establishing a unified, transnational framework for dialogue, the region can move beyond fragmented national efforts toward a cohesive “innovation ecosystem.” This ensures that the transition to climate neutrality is not a solo journey for elite cities, but a synchronized movement where peripheral or less developed municipalities gain access to the same expertise, financial networks, and political visibility as their capital-city counterparts.

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The policy brief was prepared within the framework of the Harmonmissions project; full project title “Harmonisation of Missions in the Danube region”; Danube Region Programme; DRP0200475, www.harmonmissions.eu