

STRONG WOMEN, STRONG EUROPE:

WOMEN'S LOCAL LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSIVE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

European Week of Regions and Cities 2026

Brussels |

Format: Political/Policy Debate

Context and Rationale

This session is proposed by the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (UMT), the national association representing municipalities in Türkiye, in its capacity as a partner organisation in the Women-Friendly Cities Programme - a flagship EU funded initiative, co-partnered and implemented by UNFPA Türkiye, currently in its third phase and active across 25 municipalities in seven regions of Türkiye. As an active member of international local government networks and a longstanding partner of European institutions, UMT brings a cross-regional, comparative governance experience and perspective that is directly relevant to the 2026 EURegionsWeek agenda.

The motto of EURegionsWeek 2026, "*Strong regions, strong Europe,*" highlights the central role of Cohesion Policy in reducing regional disparities and ensuring balanced development across the European Union. However, achieving these objectives requires not only financial instruments but also inclusive and responsive governance approaches at the local level. In this context, inclusive local leadership is essential to ensuring that cohesion objectives are translated into effective, place-based solutions that respond to the diverse realities of regions and cities.

Gender equality is not only a matter of fundamental rights, equal opportunities and democratic representation; it is also a key component of sustainable economic development. Despite progress, structural gaps remain across regions in women's representation in local decision-making, access to services, and participation in economic life. These challenges are often more visible in territories facing demographic change, migration pressures, or limited institutional capacity. This underlines the need for practical and inclusive governance models that can support more resilient and territorially balanced development. Strengthening women's participation in economic life accelerates development processes, particularly in less developed regions, and contributes to more balanced, inclusive and sustainable social and economic development in the long term. In this respect, empowering women is directly linked to Cohesion Policy, which aims to reduce disparities between regions. Women's participation in local decision-making contributes to more responsive public policies, stronger social cohesion, and better-targeted service delivery. Furthermore, under Article 9 of the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR 2021–2027), gender equality is established as a mandatory horizontal principle applicable across all European Structural and Investment Funds programming - meaning that gender-responsive local governance is not merely aspirational, but a legally binding condition of effective Cohesion Policy implementation.

In this context, local governments play a critical role as implementers of Cohesion Policy on the ground. The leadership of women mayors contributes significantly to shaping local development policies, increasing economic participation and ensuring a more accurate understanding of societal needs. Particularly in regions with diverse socio-economic and

demographic characteristics, the presence and perspectives of women leaders enrich the place-based policy approach, contributing to the development of solutions that are more sensitive to regional needs.

Translating these principles into practice, however, requires concrete governance tools and institutional mechanisms at the local level. In this regard, initiatives such as the Women-Friendly Cities Programme (implemented in cooperation with UMT and UNFPA)- EU co-financed and currently in its third phase across 25 municipalities and more than 200 Women Civil Society Organizations spanning seven regions of Türkiye - provide a relevant example of how gender equality can be systematically integrated into local governance via Local Equality Mechanism (LEM). The Programme's participating municipalities range from major metropolitan centres (Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir) to smaller cities in geographically and economically diverse contexts (Kars, Muş, Adıyaman, Giresun), covering more than 60% of the country population, making it one of the most regionally comprehensive local gender governance initiatives in the broader European neighbourhood. Through the establishment of LEM, the development of local equality action plans and strengthened cooperation with civil society, such programmes support municipalities in embedding equality into service delivery and decision-making processes, while contributing to more inclusive and balanced regional development. By operating in a non-EU country on the basis of EU principles, EU funding, and EU-aligned governance standards, the Women - Friendly Cities Programme represents a concrete model of transferable policy innovation - one with direct relevance for EU regions facing comparable demographic, economic and social challenges. By strengthening the leadership and participation of women, UMT ensures that local governments become the primary engines for achieving the broader objectives of the EU Cohesion Policy, proving that a 'Strong Europe' is only possible through inclusive and gender-responsive local governance.

The exchange of experiences among all mayors, particularly women mayors, will contribute to integrating inclusiveness and equality perspectives more strongly into local development policies, while supporting the comparison of different regional approaches and the dissemination of good practices. This comparative dimension is particularly aligned with the 2026 EURegionsWeek emphasis on place-based solutions: the session will draw on experiences from municipalities in lagging, transition and more developed regional contexts - demonstrating how the same governance principles can yield gender context-responsive outcomes across very different regional realities. This process is expected to both accelerate progress in less developed regions and promote a more sustainable and inclusive understanding of development across all regions. In this regard, women's local leadership is considered an important tool contributing to the economic, social and territorial objectives of Cohesion Policy.

In this framework, the session, to be organised in a Political/Policy Debate format, will first address the role and importance of women's leadership in the context of Cohesion Policy. It will then provide a comparative discussion of locally developed policies through the experiences and good practices of women mayors from different regions. The session will go beyond general exchange by highlighting how structured local governance tools can support inclusive regional development in practice, and how such approaches may offer useful lessons for other European contexts. The session is expected to be supported by active audience engagement and to contribute to the development of policy insights. UMT, as the applying

organisation, will bring its institutional authority as the national umbrella body for Turkish municipalities and its direct operational experience through the Women-Friendly Cities Programme to frame the debate from a practitioner perspective grounded in measurable local governance transformation.

The Central Debate Question

How can Cohesion Policy more fully harness the potential of women's local leadership and gender equality as a driver of inclusive regional development - and what governance tools, institutional mechanisms and multi-level partnerships must be in place for this potential to translate into measurable outcomes on the ground?

Objectives of the Session

- To discuss the role of women's leadership in advancing Cohesion Policy objectives at the local level
- To explore how gender equality contributes to reducing regional disparities and strengthening inclusive development
- To present concrete tools and governance mechanisms that support gender equality in municipalities
- To facilitate exchange of experiences among women mayors and local leaders from different regions
- To identify policy insights and recommendations for strengthening the place-based approach through inclusive leadership
- To present institutional tools, specifically the "Women Friendly Cities" framework, that empower gender-responsive governance in municipalities.
- To position UMT's Women-Friendly Cities model as a transferable governance framework with concrete replication potential for EU regions and local government networks
- To align session outcomes with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (and incoming 2025–2030 Strategy) and the mandatory gender mainstreaming provisions of the Common Provisions Regulation (Article 9 CPR)

Main Topics

- Women's leadership and its contribution to regional development and Cohesion Policy
- Place-based policy approaches and inclusive local governance
- Institutional mechanisms for gender equality at the local level (e.g. equality units, councils, action plans)
- Multi-stakeholder cooperation between municipalities and civil society
- The Women-Friendly Cities model (UMT/UNFPA) as a transferable governance framework: architecture, results and replication potential for EU regions

- Gender mainstreaming from horizontal principle (Article 9 CPR) to local governance practice
- Lessons learned and good practices from different regional contexts - across Türkiye and Europe

Target Audience

This session is designed to create a productive encounter between elected leaders and policy practitioners - ensuring that insights generated in the room translate directly into governance commitments and programme partnerships

- Mayors, municipal council members and elected local officials
- Representatives of EU institutions and international organisations
- Experts and practitioners working on regional development, gender equality and local governance
- Representatives of local government networks (UCLG, CEMR, EUROCITIES, etc.)
- Civil society organisations and academics

Speaker Profiles (Indicative)

- Moderator: Representative of an international/national organisation or academicians with dual expertise in local governance and gender equality policy; responsible for framing the debate question, managing the interactive discussion and synthesising policy takeaways
- Speaker A: Woman mayor from Türkiye, participant in the Women-Friendly Cities Programme (preferably); will present concrete outcomes of Local Equality Action Plan implementation at municipal level
- Speaker B (TBC): Woman mayor from Europe, - from a region with comparable socio-economic characteristics, offering a European counterpoint and enabling live comparison of governance approaches, barriers and enablers across different institutional contexts.
- Speaker C: Representative from UNFPA / Women-Friendly Cities Programme Manager - presenting the programme architecture: its phased evolution since 2006; the scope of Phase III (25 municipalities, 7 regions, local equality action plans, civil society partnerships); and the concrete steps through which EU co-financing has translated into institutional change at the municipal level. This speaker will directly address the replication potential for EU regions.
- Speaker D: Expert from a national/ an international organisation or academician - providing evidence-based analysis of the relationship between women's local leadership, Cohesion Policy effectiveness and regional development indicators. This speaker will anchor the debate in comparative data and propose a forward-looking

policy framework, including recommendations aligned with the Article 9 CPR horizontal principles and the EU Gender Equality Strategy.

Programme Flow (Summary)

- Opening and framing of the discussion
- Short interventions by speakers (political and technical perspectives)
- Moderated Discussion
- Interactive policy debate with audience participation, Q&A
- Concluding remarks and key takeaways

Total duration: 90 minutes. The format is a Political/Policy Debate - not a standard panel. The structure is designed to maximise genuine exchange, audience participation and political momentum.

Segment	Duration	Content
Opening and framing	10 min	Moderator introduces the central debate question and contextualises it within the 2026 EURegionsWeek motto and EU Cohesion Policy framework. UMT's role as organiser and the Women-Friendly Cities Programme are briefly presented.
Speaker interventions	28 min (4 × 7 min)	Each speaker addresses the central debate question from their specific vantage point: political (Speakers A & B), programmatic (Speaker C), and analytical (Speaker D). Strict timing enforced to maximise interaction time.
Rapid-fire policy challenge round	10 min	Moderator poses pre-prepared debate prompts directly to speakers generating dynamic exchange and sharply distinguishing this session from a standard panel.
Moderated debate with audience participation	30 min	Structured Q&A with active audience engagement. Includes at least one designated intervention slot for a local government network representative and one for a civil society actor - ensuring the debate bridges political, practitioner and citizen perspectives.
Concluding remarks and	12 min	Moderator synthesises 3–5 actionable policy recommendations, drafted in real time. These will be shared

policy takeaways		with all participants and submitted to EURegionsWeek organisers as a formal session output.
Post-session networking	15 min (informal)	Dedicated networking moment to facilitate partnerships between Turkish and EU municipalities interested in exploring the Women-Friendly Cities model. UMT staff present to facilitate introductions.

Expected Outcomes

The session is expected to contribute to a better understanding of how women’s leadership and gender equality can strengthen the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy and support regional development. It will facilitate the exchange of good practices, promote policy learning, and encourage partnerships among local and regional actors.

By linking political leadership with practical implementation tools, the session aims to generate actionable insights for integrating gender equality into local development strategies and for reinforcing inclusive, place-based approaches across regions.

The session is also expected to produce the following added value:

- practical policy messages and one-pager on how inclusive local governance can support Cohesion Policy implementation;
- greater visibility for tested local governance tools such as the Women-Friendly Cities model;
- stronger dialogue between municipalities, international organisations, and local government networks;
- new opportunities for cooperation and peer learning between Türkiye and European local authorities.

Overall, the session will present women’s local leadership not only as a question of representation, but as a practical contribution to stronger, more inclusive and more resilient regions.