

Strengthening the UAEU's Better Regulation pillar



**Discussion paper to inform the discussion of the Urban Agenda
for the EU post 2025**



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Executive Summary

The role of the UAEU and TA2030 in Better Regulation

The Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) and the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA2030) are key frameworks for improving EU regulation by systematically involving cities and regions in policymaking. Both initiatives seek to ensure that legislation reflects territorial diversity, thereby enhancing policy feasibility, effectiveness, and alignment with real-world implementation conditions.

Core ideas

- The UAEU operates through Thematic Partnerships, which propose actions under the pillars of Better Regulation, Better Funding, and Better Knowledge.
- The TA2030 promotes territorial cohesion and strongly advocates the systematic use of Territorial Impact Assessments (TIAs).
- Both frameworks encourage EU legislation that recognises diverse urban and regional realities and that embeds multilevel governance.

There is strong EU policy momentum to reinforce the Better Regulation pillar of the UAEU, driven by the establishment of an EU Agenda for Cities (EUAC) and the continued, undiminished importance of the broader simplification agenda, together creating an opportunity to strengthen both frameworks. This paper examines the key barriers and enablers with regard to the Better Regulation pillar of the UAEU.

Six main barriers to strengthening the Better Regulation pillar

1. Limited capacity at city, regional, and national level

- Many stakeholders lack the legal, administrative, or technical expertise needed for developing concrete initiatives related to Better Regulation or TIAs.
- Partnerships often rely on a (too) small, highly active core group.

2. Timing and thematic mismatches

- Partnership cycles (2–3 years) and themes do not sufficiently align with EU legislative cycles.
- Ex-ante assessments are lengthy and capture policy momentum only at a single point in time.
- Partnerships work in isolation from the TA2030.

3. Lack of Partnerships' consistent long-term support

- Temporary funding without long-term follow-up.
- No political advocacy beyond Partnership recommendation.

4. Weak institutional uptake in the European Commission

- The European Commission is not obliged to act on UAEU outputs, and the internal 'uptake process' lacks transparency and structure.
- Engagement beyond DG REGIO is limited.

5. Member States provide insufficient coordination

- Cities are heavily dependent on national representation in EU processes.
- Weak national coordination hampers both UAEU and TA2030 implementation.

6. TIAs are not structurally embedded

- The Better Regulation Guidelines consider TIAs only 'recommended when relevant', leading to inconsistent use and limited attention to urban and territorial implementation challenges

Five practical enablers to strengthen the Better Regulation pillar

1. Strategic timing

- High-impact Partnerships monitor the legislative agenda closely and align with political momentum. They engage the right DGs at the right moment.

2. Structural legal support

- Stakeholders consistently request early-stage legal reviews, continuous policy alignment and feasibility checks, and stable access to legal expertise via the European Urban Initiative (EUI).

3. Clear expectations and role definitions

- Successful Partnerships clarify upfront required expertise, roles, and time commitment. They attract partners with legislative and advocacy skills, while securing political backing going beyond the involvement of technical civil servants.

4. Early and active involvement of cities

- Early involvement of cities helps to identify implementation obstacles in a timely manner and to develop targeted, effective legislative proposals that take local perspectives into account. In this way, cities can contribute meaningfully to shaping EU urban policies during their development.

5. Stronger UAEU–TA2030 linkages

- Adjustment of the UAEU and the TA2030 would benefit from regular joint DGUM–DGTC sessions, systematic TIA use in UAEU recommendations, and wider dissemination of TA2030 activities within urban networks.

Two key opportunities to strengthen the UAEU's Better Regulation pillar

1. EU Simplification Agenda

Cities and regions can use new instruments (e.g., Reality Checks, Implementation Dialogues) to:

- highlight implementation bottlenecks,
- integrate TIAs in evaluation processes,
- feed structured input into impact assessments.

2. EU Agenda for Cities

Published in December 2025, the EUAC:

- embeds urban needs more structurally in EU legislation,
- strengthens the UAEU and TA2030 interface,
- supports multilevel governance and simplification.

Six key takeaways

1. Better Regulation delivers impact only when Partnerships have time, funding, legal support, and political commitment.
2. TIAs must be applied more consistently to reveal territorial differences.
3. Active, structured involvement of all relevant Commission DGs and Member States is essential.
4. Cities need early involvement in legislative processes to prevent implementation failures.
5. UAEU and TA2030 should be strategically integrated to build a unified territorial approach.
6. Current EU momentum (EUAC, simplification) provides a unique chance to institutionalise these improvements.

Introduction

Background

Intergovernmental cooperation and multilevel governance on urban and territorial matters are essential components of shaping and improving EU legislation, its implementation, and assessment by embedding cities and regions in policymaking processes. The Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) will celebrate its ten-year anniversary under the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU, in the second half of 2026. Since 2016, the UAEU has been a crucial policy instrument for promoting and supporting cities' needs at the EU level and shaping multilevel governance structures among stakeholders from various policy sectors of local and regional authorities, national governments, the European Commission (EC), and other urban stakeholders. After nearly a decade of the UAEU and 20 completed or ongoing Thematic Partnerships on various urban challenges, there is heightened momentum to recalibrate the policy framework, taking stock of its contributions, its shortcomings, and its current and future role in the dynamic landscape of urban policies at the EU level. Similarly, the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA2030), adopted in 2020 under the German EU Presidency, plays a crucial role in embedding territorial principles and place-based approaches across all policy sectors, serving as a strategic framework for promoting the territorial dimension, including regions and cities of all sizes across Europe. Both frameworks have contributed to making EU policies more effective and targeted by ensuring that implementation experiences on the ground inform legislation, thereby reducing unintended or imbalanced effects on certain territories.

Ten years after the Pact of Amsterdam, this work coincides with a critical moment as the EU enters a new policy cycle marked by the publication of the *EU Agenda for Cities: Driving Growth and Prosperity* on 3 December 2025. The agenda is embedded within the EC's broader priorities on simplification and competitiveness, alongside new priorities to be agreed under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028+. Together, these developments create a strategic window of opportunity for enhanced collaboration between the EC and EU Member States, underscoring the need for existing and forthcoming policies to be grounded in a place-based and multilevel governance approach.

Against this background, the Dutch Ministries of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and of Housing and Spatial Planning (BZK and VRO) have invited the European Urban Knowledge Network EGTC (EUKN) to carry out a preliminary study aimed at strengthening the Better Regulation pillar of the UAEU. The study builds on previous UAEU assessments and provides an in-depth analysis of current challenges affecting its effectiveness in influencing EU legislation. It seeks to deliver evidence-based, concrete, and action-oriented recommendations on how to better leverage the UAEU's potential as an effective instrument for improving EU regulation related to urban issues. In addition, as the current UAEU Multiannual Work Programme (MaWP) is due for discussion and renewal by 2026, the study's findings will inform this process by proposing optimised organisational and procedural arrangements, as well as a more strategic and forward-looking orientation for the UAEU (2021b).

Given the critical role that both the UAEU and TA2030 play in embedding urban and territorial perspectives into more effective EU policymaking, their contribution to the EC's Better Regulation agenda is vital, for the EC and for all other governmental levels within the EU. As outlined in the EC's Better Regulation Guidelines (2021), Better Regulation seeks to ensure that legislation is targeted, effective, and easy to comply with, while achieving its intended objectives with minimal administrative and regulatory burden. The UAEU integrates Better Regulation as one of its three fundamental pillars, next to Better Knowledge and Better Funding. Through its Partnerships, participating stakeholders design actions and recommendations for promoting Better Regulation, while directly embedding cities' and Member States' needs and implementation experiences. However, the Better Regulation pillar – the most ambitious and potentially impactful pillar of the UAEU – has been comparatively weak in terms of

its concrete and sustained impact, compared to the other pillars. The 2019 Impact Assessment study of the EC (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019) observed that the Better Regulation pillar was weaker not due to a lack of relevance or analytical quality, but because it operated in a governance space without clear institutional anchoring, formal uptake mechanisms, or sufficient political ownership. The assessment strongly suggests that without tighter integration into EU policy cycles and clearer responsibilities for follow-up, Better Regulation could not perform on par with the other two pillars.

As political momentum builds around new priorities and evolving EU policies, it is crucial to examine and strengthen the Better Regulation dimension of the UAEU and TA2030. With the emerging EC's simplification agenda, embedding cities and territories' voices in policy processes becomes essential for achieving EU policy objectives. In line with that, the EUAC presents a critical opportunity to leverage cities' potential in shaping EU policies and to strategically strengthen linkages between the UAEU and TA2030. Understanding the barriers and facilitating factors in effectively addressing Better Regulation through these frameworks, and providing actionable recommendations for strengthening this pillar, is therefore both timely and essential for leveraging the current policy window of opportunity and for concretely informing the current discussions on the UAEU's new MaWP 2026.

Research question

This study addresses and seeks to answer the following research question:

How can the Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) and the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA2030) become more effective instruments for developing and promoting Better Regulation actions impacting urban and territorial matters?

This overarching research question is subdivided in three guiding sub-questions, along which this report is structured:

1. What has been the impact of previous efforts to strengthen the Better Regulation pillar?
2. What are the current key obstacles and enablers to the effective implementation of the UAEU and the TA2030 for shaping EU-level legislation with an integrated urban or territorial dimension?
3. How can the study findings inform measures for enhancing the effectiveness of the UAEU and the TA2030 in terms of optimising legislative changes in a complementary, integrated manner?

Contextualisation

The Urban Agenda for the European Union

First launched in 2016 with the Pact of Amsterdam and reinforced in the Ljubljana Agreement in 2021, the UAEU introduced a new multilevel governance working approach to urban policy and practice, fostering cooperation among Member States, cities, the EC, and urban and regional umbrella organisations in the design and implementation of policymaking (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019). The UAEU focuses on three pillars: (1) Better Funding, (2) Better Knowledge, and (3) Better Regulation. The three pillars aim respectively at (1) identifying, integrating, supporting and improving sources of funding for urban areas, (2) strengthening the knowledge base and exchange on urban issues and best practices, and (3) ensuring a more coherent and effective implementation of existing policies, legislation, and instruments (UAEU, n.d.).

Central to its implementation is the Thematic Partnership approach, which brings together actors across EU, national and local levels to co-develop Action Plans tailored to concrete urban challenges, by proposing – and ideally – implementing, directly or indirectly, actions based on the three pillars. This

approach stands out from other EU initiatives by enabling cities to formally engage with Member States and the EC to develop practical, solution-oriented actions based on clearly defined objectives (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019). The Partnerships are supported by umbrella organisations such as URBACT, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), Eurocities and the European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN), who contribute their urban issue expertise and play important roles as mediators, multipliers, consultants, and information disseminators, particularly in preparing Action Plans and supporting cooperation within the framework of the Urban Development Group (UDG) and the Directors-General on Urban Matters (DGUM) meetings (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019). Moreover, the European Urban Initiative (EUI) helps cities build capacity, share knowledge, and develop innovative, transferable solutions to EU-relevant urban challenges, offering strategic support for implementing their Partnership Action Plans (EUKN, 2023; EUI, n.d.). Under the renewed UAEU framework established by the Ljubljana Agreement of November 2021, the Ex-Ante Assessment (EAA) was introduced as an exploratory analysis to evaluate suitability, timing, focus and potential impact of new Thematic Partnership themes. The first Partnerships to receive this support were the Greening Cities Partnership and the Partnership for Sustainable Tourism in 2022 (UAEU, 2022). Following these first experiences, the format and template for future EAA was simplified and streamlined to provide more targeted support for future Partnerships.

In 2025, the possibility for an OFC (Other Form of Cooperation) was created. This targeted and flexible new instrument potentially allows for a more timely and faster delivery of urban issues in the EU policy cycle. The first OFC will probably start in 2026.

Following the UAEU's MaWP for 2022–2026 adopted under the Slovene Presidency, discussions on the next MaWP began under the Danish Presidency and will continue under the Cypriot Presidency, with endorsement expected during the Irish Presidency. The new MaWP will build on previous achievements and further strengthen the UAEU's role in integrating urban perspectives into EU policymaking. Enhancing the impact of the UAEU, particularly in relation to Better Regulation, remains a key priority on the agendas of both the UDG and DGUM meetings (2021b).

Synergies and differences between the UAEU and the Territorial Agenda 2030

Given the TA2030's objective to embed territorial principles and place-based approaches across all policy sectors, its efforts align closely with Better Regulation objectives and principles of the UAEU. Formally, the 2021 Ljubljana Agreement acknowledges these synergies and calls for a joint session on the UAEU and the TA2030 to be held at least once during each Trio Presidency (Slovene EU Council Presidency, 2021a.)

'The linkages between the UAEU and the Territorial Agenda 2030 will be further explored and strengthened to ensure a balanced development of the European territory and contribute to quality of life of all citizens.'

Ljubljana Agreement, 2021

It is therefore useful to examine how the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA2030) is operationalised and where it overlaps with the objectives of the UAEU. The TA2030 is an intergovernmental policy framework aimed at reducing inequalities between people and places and ensuring a sustainable future across Europe (Territorial Agenda, 2020). While it has no direct legal, financial, or institutional implementation mechanisms, it relies on existing funding instruments, multilevel coordination across sectors, and monitoring arrangements to enhance transparency and effectiveness (Palmieri, 2024). Key actors include Member States, subnational authorities, the European Commission, and other EU institutions,

cooperating through the National Territorial Cohesion Contact Points (NTCCP) and the Directors-General on Territorial Cohesion (DGTC). Member States are expected to integrate TA2030 objectives into national policies, while the Commission contributes by strengthening the territorial dimension of EU policies, informed by pilot actions.

As the geographically and thematically broadest framework, the TA2030 serves as an overarching reference for dialogue and coordination with both the UAEU and the EU Rural Vision (Böhme et al., 2024). Urban challenges increasingly require wider territorial cooperation within functional areas, while economic development and innovation in cities can generate positive spillover effects for surrounding regions (Ferry et al., 2020). This urban-territorial perspective is particularly relevant given intensifying pressures such as demographic change, migration, urban sprawl, and competition for land. From an operational perspective, the two frameworks are complementary: the UAEU benefits from a more formalised Partnership structure and stronger access to funding, while TA2030 pilot actions offer greater flexibility to test territorial approaches (Böhme et al., 2024).

These overlapping territorial and urban challenges intensify tensions between competing land uses – such as housing, nature protection, infrastructure, and clean energy – highlighting the need for stronger integration of urban and territorial considerations in EU policies, including the European Green Deal and the Nature Restoration Regulation (Ivanov et al., 2023). Recent economic and demographic trends further underline this need, as territorial and intra-territorial inequalities continue to widen, particularly in and around large urban areas. In this context, the 2025 Polish Presidency’s Joint Declaration reaffirmed the importance of addressing urban and rural challenges through a Functional Areas perspective, and called for place-based strategies, multilevel governance, and regular Territorial Impact Assessments of EU policies (Polish EU Council Presidency, 2025).

Identifying and leveraging synergies between these frameworks is therefore particularly important in the current EU policy context, where priorities increasingly emphasise competitiveness and simplification. Together, these developments underscore the need to demonstrate that cohesion and competitiveness are mutually reinforcing objectives of EU policy.

Better Regulation

The Better Regulation Agenda aims to ensure that EU policies and legislation are evidence-based, effective, coherent, proportionate, and easy to implement, while minimising administrative burden (EC, 2021). According to the EC’s Better Regulation Guidelines (2021), it is about ‘creating legislation that achieves its objectives while being targeted, effective, easy to comply with and with the least burden possible’ (European Commission, 2021, p. 3).

Both the UAEU and the TA2030 contribute to the EC’s Better Regulation Agenda, albeit through different mechanisms and policy pathways. The UAEU supports Better Regulation primarily through its Partnership actions, which take a variety of forms. These range from formal policy inputs – such as influencing legislation that leads to amendments to existing acts or the development of new regulatory frameworks – to more informal contributions, including implementation support through guidelines, handbooks, and recommendations.

As outlined in the Pact of Amsterdam (2016), the UAEU aims to ensure that EU policies, legislation and instruments are implemented more effectively and coherently, with particular attention to reducing administrative burdens for urban authorities (Dutch EU Council Presidency, 2016). The Ljubljana Agreement (2021) further reinforced the significance of the UAEU’s Better Regulation pillar, calling for its strengthening to promote ‘better alignment of UAEU priorities with the EU regulatory landscape and policy cycles to ensure effective and timely actions’ (Slovene EU Council Presidency, 2021a). Importantly,

the UAEU does not initiate new regulation independently; rather, it serves as a platform for integrating urban needs, practices, and responsibilities into the design of future policies and the revision of existing ones at EU level.

UAEU: Effective Better Regulation action example

The Air Quality Partnership's Better Regulation action focused on identifying regulatory and implementation gaps related to air pollutant emission sources, thereby helping policy makers to better understand and meet the requirements of the European Air Quality Directive. Its principal deliverable was the 2018 joint position paper on the EU Ambient Air Quality directive, submitted during the EC Fitness Check on Air Quality, which reviewed the interaction between different regulations and implementations of air quality legislation and set out recommendations on closing regulatory gaps and implementation (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019; KED, 2021).

The TA2030 operates with a less explicit mandate to influence legislative change, as it lacks formal enforcement mechanisms. Nevertheless, by promoting territorially sensitive and spatially integrated policies across all sectors, mainly through more regular and effective Territorial Impact Assessments (TIAs), it indirectly advances the objectives of the EC's Better Regulation Agenda.

The 2024 TA2030 Stocktaking Review highlights that the TA2030's potential to promote better (territorial) regulation and TIAs remains significantly constrained by its non-binding nature, imprecise concepts and objectives, and weak links to sector policies, all of which are compounded by no institutionalised support or funding structure (Böhme et al., 2024). Nonetheless, recent developments suggest a gradual increase in awareness of Better Regulation within the TA2030 framework, as seen in emerging pilot actions and the strengthening of linkages between UAEU Partnerships, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and ESPON, although these efforts are at an early stage (Interview 3).

When drafting new policies and legislation, the EC is required to carry out an Impact Assessment to examine the need for EU action, identify available policy options, and assess their potential impacts. These assessments are mandatory for initiatives likely to have significant economic, environmental, or social impacts, or that involve substantial EU expenditure. However, according to the EC's Better Regulation Guidelines (2021), TIAs – assessments of unintended, spatially specific effects on urban and rural areas, cross-border regions, and outermost regions – are only encouraged 'when relevant' (p. 30). TIAs are included in the Better Regulation Toolbox, but its use remains non-mandatory.

TA2030 Pilot action example

The TA2030 pilot action 'Regulatory TIA: exploring the varied impacts of regulations across different territories', launched in 2024 by the Netherlands, examines how EU regulations create tensions between sectoral policy areas and spatial development. The pilot action will establish guidance to improve TIA implementation and address capacity limitations. Preliminary results indicate that EU policies lack territorial focus and TIA adoption remains uneven across Member States, underscoring the need for continued advocacy and capacity-building to ensure a territorially sensitive and place-based approach throughout national and EU policymaking processes (Territorial Agenda, n.d.).

Despite this, TIAs have gained increasing traction through initiatives such as ESPON TIA Quick Checks, conducted by the CoR since 2015 and now comprising around 30 assessments (Committee of the Regions, n.d.). These Quick Checks have demonstrated the importance of linking TIAs with sectoral policy cycles and have been highly appreciated by cities for their relevance to UAEU themes and Better Regulation principles (Törökné Rózsa, 2016). Nevertheless, challenges remain, including limited capacity at

different levels of government to conduct TIAs and the absence of a more structural approach to their systematic application.

Assessing the contribution to Better Regulation

Better Regulation pillar of the UAEU

Since the inception of the UAEU, the Better Regulation pillar has remained comparatively weak in delivering concrete and sustained legislative impact compared to the UAEU's other two pillars: Better Funding and Better Knowledge. The latter are arguably easier to realise, as they require less political backing for implementation. A limited number of Partnership actions are focused on Better Regulation, and even fewer demonstrate concrete effectiveness in impacting legislation through formal amendments (Interview 3). The analysis of stakeholder interviews and the review of previous policy documents reveal several persistent challenges regarding the UAEU's effectiveness in addressing Better Regulation. These reflect both structural and procedural challenges, including the voluntary nature of Partnerships, limited technical capacity, and lack of formal policy uptake mechanisms.

This analysis builds on other initiatives that have examined in detail the effectiveness of the UAEU, while identifying recommendations targeted to current challenges and policy developments of urban and territorial matters in the EU. The 2019 Impact Assessment study provides a holistic assessment of the implementation and performance of the UAEU, deeming it a qualified success while raising key challenges to its operationalisation and implementation across the, back then, 14 Partnerships. The Better Regulation Initiative (BRI), developed by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands, builds on the findings of the Assessment Study. The BRI presents a compact analysis and categorisation of already undertaken Better Regulation actions, identifying input opportunities that are impactful in influencing existing or changing legislation at EU level, and offering supportive advice on the continuation and operationalisation of Better Regulation actions (KED, 2021).

The programme identified three types of Partnership actions under the Better Regulation pillar, showing the wide variation in how formally Better Regulation actions are designed to influence EU legislation:

1. Actions formulating recommendations for improvement to EU legislation that lack clear regulatory recommendations or clearly formulated aims to target existing EU legislation.
2. Better Governance actions, which aim at improving the application of EU legislation and policy but might lack clear recommendations on improving EU legislation itself.
3. Insufficiently developed Better Regulation actions, which can be regarded as more effective for Better Knowledge and Better Funding actions rather than regulatory change.

Despite its contributions being appreciated and viewed as successful by participating stakeholders, the BRI, originally funded by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, failed to receive additional funding from the EU and other Member States, and stopped in 2022.

Key barriers and enablers for Better Regulation

The following analysis and recommendations are structured to identify key barriers and enablers in promoting a strong and effective Better Regulation pillar along three categories:

1. **Institutional and procedural effectiveness** examines concrete internal procedures, institutional arrangements and technical implementation challenges, with recommendations addressing

institutional bottlenecks, targeted support of Partnerships and implementation gaps of Action Plans.

2. **Stakeholder engagement and legacy building** analyses the distribution of roles and responsibilities across governance levels and sectors, identifying gaps in engagement and accountability. Recommendations will clarify stakeholder mandates and strengthen coordination mechanisms to ensure more effective translation of legislative and policy recommendations into action.
3. **Strategic alignment and policy coherence** addresses the reality that many actions fail to achieve impact because they are not aligned with existing opportunity windows, policy cycles, or legislative processes. Identifying and aligning actions with these opportunities increases the likelihood that recommendations will be considered and implemented.

Table 1 summarises the main systemic barriers and enablers identified across the UAEU, showing that the three thematic categories of analysis encompass aspects that go beyond policymaking and legislative design to include governance and implementation. The three categories are fundamental elements for effectively delivering Better Regulation.

Key Barriers	Key Enablers
Institutional and procedural effectiveness	
• Short-term strategic focus of Partnerships • Lack of adequate resources and funding • Lack of technical, legal and administrative capacities and support • Limited effectiveness of EAA • Voluntary nature and high degree of flexibility (e.g. lack of clear Action Plan requirements) • Lack of formal implementation mechanisms	• Long-term perspective, commitment and support (funding) of Partnerships • Intentional Partnership composition with skills, networks and shared (political) agendas • Comprehensive legal support • EU tools and targeted support to promote Better Regulation (such as BRI)
Stakeholder engagement and legacy building	
• Imbalanced and inconsistent stakeholder involvement • Lack of clarity in relation to partners' responsibilities • Lack of structural approach in recommendation uptake process at EC, weakening consistent commitment to driving Partnership recommendations forward in the EC • Limited sense of ownership among stakeholders • Limited inclusion of cities' voices in EU legislative consultations	• Clear expectation management with regards to needed skills, time and commitment of Partnership partners • Thematic alignment of Partnership themes with various sectoral DGs' priorities) • Strong support and commitment from various DGs • Stronger strategic coordination of national-level policies for easier implementation in cities
Strategic alignment and policy coherence	
• Lack of political backing and limited channels for advocacy • Thematic misalignment between policy recommendations and EC's thematic priorities • Temporal mismatch between UAEU actions and EU policy cycles • Low internal coherence between Partnerships	• Strategic cooperation with external policy actors to collectively 'lobby' • Securing political backing and uptake by all relevant governmental levels, from local to European) • Regular support tools to identify windows of opportunity, political

- Weak interlinkages between UAEU and TA2030, and with other sectoral EU frameworks
- Low awareness of TA2030 among UAEU Partnership members and difficulty in aligning them operationally
- momentum and alignment with legislative processes
- Strategic leveraging of synergies between UAEU and TA2030, and other EU policy frameworks
- Disseminating and advocating more effectively for uptake of recommendations
- Leveraging current policy momentum (EUAC, simplification agenda)
- Harmonising Partnership outputs with Presidency timelines
- Valorising OFC as cooperation format

The following sections unpack these findings across the three categories.

Institutional and procedural effectiveness

As outlined above, effective implementation is key to successful Better Regulation actions. The alignment of policy objectives with adequate administrative capacity, financial resources, and consistent political oversight is essential to ensure that commitments translate into measurable outcomes. This section analyses internal procedures and technical implementation challenges, focusing on mechanisms to enhance targeted support for Partnerships and to address persistent implementation gaps in Action Plans.

Several interviewees noted inefficiencies in the Partnerships' ability to deliver Better Regulation actions, attributing these mainly to their **short-term strategic focus**. Operating through limited-duration Action Plans, Partnerships often struggle to align with the longer-term policy challenges they seek to address, leading to uncertainty about continuity beyond the planning period. The timing of actions and their alignment with the EU policy and funding cycles have repeatedly been identified as key conditions for effective implementation (KED, 2021; Ipsos Mori et al., 2019). For instance, it took the Housing Partnership nearly a decade to gain significant political traction (Interview 3). **Sustained commitment** and support for the Thematic Partnerships would enhance the delivery of Better Regulation objectives by strengthening policy alignment and increasing overall effectiveness (Interview 3).

Moreover, targeted support for Partnerships could be enhanced by addressing the **limited effectiveness of the Ex-ante Assessment (EAA)**, which currently functions as a snapshot analysis of windows of opportunity. Interviewees observed that the EAA is overly lengthy and offers limited practical value in its present form (Interviews 1, 2 and 3). A shorter and more accessible version that still provides a comprehensive overview was widely regarded as more useful (Interview 2). Incorporating factors such as political momentum, potential for change and impact, and readiness to advocate for reform would strengthen the EAA's capacity to identify and assess long-term opportunities for Partnerships (Interview 1)..

Related to this, several interviewees highlighted the **limited advocacy activity** that takes place beyond the Partnerships themselves. Developing structured advocacy plans – supported by umbrella organisations, Member States, and the European Parliament – could help reinforce external engagement and increase the Partnerships' overall policy influence (Interview 1).

Another recurring challenge is the **limited technical, legal, and administrative capacities** of the actors involved. Effective participation in and implementation of recommendations require that administrators and civil servants possess adequate expertise and resources. In some cases, partners and experts lack sufficient leadership, management, or political advocacy skills, partly due to unclear communication about expected roles, required competencies, and contributions at the outset of each Partnership (Interview 1). Clearer guidance on the necessary skills, time commitment, and responsibilities before launching new Partnerships could help to prevent mismatches and address existing capacity gaps. Partnership composition could also be designed more strategically for greater policy impact – ensuring not only thematic relevance but also the inclusion of expertise in leadership, advocacy, legislative processes, and outreach to political actors at the EU level. In particular, access to legal expertise at an early stage, provided through the EUI Secretariat, would be a key enabler (Interview 3). Additional legal review towards the final stages of a Partnership could also help verify whether the Better Regulation-related recommendations are legally and technically feasible for implementation.

Furthermore, the high degree of flexibility within the Partnerships has resulted in limited clarity regarding Action Plan requirements and the articulation of specific objectives. This lack of direction has also weakened accountability for implementation, frequently leading to delays in the delivery of Action Plans (Ipsos MORI et al., 2019). By contrast, the 2019 Assessment Study and the support provided through the EUI were widely regarded by interviewees as valuable in identifying windows of opportunity for change. Interviewed Partnerships expressed appreciation for the practical and expert support provided by the EUI in enhancing the effectiveness of the Thematic Partnerships. Support tools and platforms – such as Have Your Say and the former Better Regulation Initiative (BRI) Quick Scan – were also considered useful for engaging with legislative processes and identifying potential entry points for action (Interviews 1–2).

Stakeholder engagement and legacy building

Gaps in engagement across governance levels hinder effective coordination and the translation from legislative and policy recommendations into action. This section examines the institutional ownership of stakeholders involved and their role in encouraging or hindering Better Regulation actions.

Interview insights confirm that **imbalanced and inconsistent stakeholder involvement** remains a vital problem for the effectiveness of the UAEU. This underlines the importance of technical and resource support to members to overcome obstacles of ineffectiveness due to insufficient capacities to participate.

The effectiveness of Partnerships heavily depends on the **commitment and willingness of the EC and Member States** to participate in Partnerships and to act upon their recommendations (EUKN, 2017; Ipsos Mori et al., 2019; KED, 2021). Interviewees reflect that out of the many listed Partnership partners, only a few engage actively, relying heavily on those ‘hard core’ active members to drive Partnership actions (Interview 2; Ipsos Mori et al., 2019). Previous studies particularly mention the EC, a key actor to push forward Better Regulation actions, as rather inactive in completing and implementing Action Plans, especially when it comes to Directorates-General beyond DG REGIO (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019). Interviewees confirm this notion and emphasise the need for stronger and more consistent support from Directorates-General from the onset and throughout Partnerships (Interview 1,3). Several factors contribute to this suboptimal collaboration: misalignment of timing and thematic focus between Partnership activities and EC policy processes (see procedural recommendations); a lack of clarity regarding the type and scope of support that Partnerships can expect from the EC; limited resources; and, in many cases, insufficient participation of EC officials (Interview 1).

EC interviewees have acknowledged that the EC has not yet fully exploited the potential of the Partnerships, emphasising that this can only be achieved if Partnerships are better aligned with the EC’s

policy timeline and thematic priorities. Such alignment would be facilitated by anticipating political momentum through stronger coherence between UAEU themes and the EC's Political Guidelines and Annual Work Programme, which together provide a medium-term framework for emerging priorities (Interview 4). EC expert groups could also play a role in assessing the practical feasibility of UAEU recommendations. Furthermore, while the UAEU is founded on a bottom-up approach, the EC's legislative agenda operates primarily through a top-down logic, creating difficulties in aligning policy processes more effectively (Interview 4).

Another key barrier for the policy uptake of Partnerships' Better Regulation actions is the absence of **formal implementation mechanisms** within the EC. Consistent with previous studies, interviewees noted that the internal policy uptake process within the EC lacks transparency, with limited understanding of how – or whether – inputs from the Partnerships are used (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019; Interview 1). The complexity of multilevel governance and uneven stakeholder engagement further complicate the situation, as the EC cannot treat the recommendations as representative input from all Member States or cities (Interview 4).

In practice, the links between the Partnerships and the EC could be more formally institutionalised – for example, by enabling Partnerships to participate in relevant expert groups – to promote stronger alignment of strategic objectives, enhance knowledge exchange and expertise, foster more consistent dialogue between actors, and strengthen ownership and accountability for outcomes. Furthermore, strengthening the Partnerships' visibility and credibility within the EC could be achieved by more effectively communicating past achievements and presenting clear, results-oriented plans (Interviews 1, 4).

Member States also play a crucial role in facilitating effective engagement of cities (Interview 4). Interviewees describe insufficient engagement of Member States as a key barrier, as the effectiveness of UAEU Partnerships heavily relies on strong national coordination (Interview 4). The limited engagement of Member States is consistently linked to resource constraints, gaps in relevant skills, and varying levels of familiarity with the principles of multilevel governance (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019).

Diverging national and local interests can further hinder implementation. Where regulatory issues stem from national competence, cities heavily depend on Member States' willingness and commitment to provide the tools and help facilitate cities to be positioned for implementing Better Regulation actions (Interview 4; EUKN, 2017). Interviewees highlight that as long as the responsibility of Member States is bypassed, the Better Regulation goals of the UAEU remain rather conceptual than practical (Interview 4). They argue for the need to strengthen Member State-to-City support in the UAEU framework to strengthen the Better Regulation pillar. Moreover, sufficient legal room and financial incentives by national authorities could provide the necessary support to municipalities (EUKN, 2020). Furthermore, discussions at UDG and DGUM meetings could benefit from the participation of legal and policy experts, allowing debates to address substantive policy issues and not remain limited to procedural or administrative matters. In this way, Member States could increase their involvement in the design and operationalisation of Better Regulation actions (Interviews 1, 3).

While the UAEU has enabled **cities** to be represented through a bottom-up approach, limited capacities among cities remain a main barrier to meaningful participation in EU policy processes, making them dependent on capacity-building support (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019). The interviews underline this complication by highlighting how even Member States sometimes face challenges in keeping pace with political developments at EU level and that EC DGs tend to communicate primarily with national authorities, often excluding cities from these exchanges (Interviews 2, 3).

Early inclusion of cities in policy design would not only improve their access to information but also strengthen impact assessments, ensuring that EU policies better reflect urban realities and implementation conditions. This would promote visibility of urban issues at EU level, support alignment with local implementation capacities, and enable a more coordinated response to territorial challenges (Interview 2). The case of the Nature Restoration Regulation illustrates how the exclusion of urban stakeholders can lead to missed opportunities: because the legislation was not sufficiently adapted to urban policy contexts or aligned with local objectives, implementation challenges emerged (Interview 2).

Strategic alignment and policy coherence

Effective Better Regulation actions depend on targeted alignment with policy cycles, legislative processes, and windows of opportunity to translate recommendations into tangible results. Strategic timing, political momentum, and close linkages with the TA2030, as well as alignment with current and forthcoming EU initiatives are critical to achieving sustained Better Regulation.

A persistent barrier to effective Better Regulation is the **misalignment and suboptimal timing** between Partnership outputs and EU policy cycles. This challenge stems from limited time and resources available to Partnerships for implementing recommendations, as well as from their fixed and relatively short-term timeframes, which constrain policy impact beyond the duration of each Partnership (Ipsos Mori et al., 2019; KED, 2021). Stakeholders have therefore identified strategic and timely alignment with EU policymaking processes as a key enabler for overcoming this implementation barrier (Interview 1).

The **Greening Cities Partnership** exemplifies successful timing and strategic policy integration: by focusing on the implementation of the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) and aligning its activities with the informal interest of the relevant Commission DG, it established productive and relevant feedback loops between the EC and cities in shaping the implementing the NRR plans (Interview 3).

Limited internal and external coherence continues to undermine the effectiveness of the UAEU in achieving Better Regulation outcomes. Cooperation between UAEU Partnerships remain limited. The aim of ‘urban proofing’ EU policies through TIAs has not been structurally embedded or fully internalised by Partnership members. Despite their combined strategic potential, the UAEU and the TA2030 have not succeeded in establishing more regular or systematic TIAs at EU level. Key barriers to stronger territorial cooperation include limited exchange and low awareness of the TA2030 and its interlinkages with the UAEU among Partnership members (Interview 1). Urban stakeholders also reported practical difficulties in aligning the two agendas due to their differing scales and levels of operationalisation (Interviews 1, 2).

Considering **linkages between the UAEU and the TA2030**, alignment between the two frameworks and other EU initiatives, instruments and platforms remains limited, reflecting weak connections to sector policies at EU and national levels (Böhme et al., 2024). Territorial and place-based approaches would become more visible by better linking and integrating the UAEU and TA2030 into existing EU frameworks and structures, such as the European Semester, which is increasingly gaining importance from a perspective of implementation and thus also simplification (Interview 4; Palmieri, 2024). A key enabler is thus the strategic leveraging of territorial synergies between the UAEU and TA2030 to collectively advocate for a place-based policy approach. Proposed recommendations to achieve this include regularly informing each other on policy developments and territorial challenges (Interviews 1, 3); establishing more frequent joint sessions between DGTC and DGUM with clear priority themes and alignment strategies (Interview 3) and utilising UDG meetings to systematically combine linkages between the agendas. All in all, stakeholders called for an overall more coherent and strong direction of the UAEU and TA2030 (Interview 3).

Limited strategic advocacy and political backing significantly continue to constrain the long-term impact of Better Regulation actions beyond the lifespan of individual Partnerships. Partnerships currently have few channels for advocacy and lobbying at EU level and often conclude their work with written recommendations, rather than proactively promoting the uptake of their recommendations in EU legislation (Interviews 1, 3).

Key enablers to address this challenge include the early and strategic **identification of political actors and networks** that can champion Partnership recommendations vis-à-vis the EC and other EU institutions (Interview 1). Securing political support from cities and broader urban and territorial networks at the outset of each UAEU Partnership is particularly important. Relying solely on civil servants or other administrative actors does not guarantee substantive political impact (Interview 1). The Housing Partnership provides a positive example: through its engagement with the European Parliament, it ensured visibility on the political agenda and contributed to shaping relevant regulation (Interview 3).

Effective advocacy also requires **powerful communication and dissemination** of the outcomes of actions, demonstrating their policy relevance, transferability, and added value to EU policymaking. An example of proactive, long-term advocacy is the Public Procurement Partnership, which successfully benefitted from the Better Regulation Initiative (Interview 3). In line with these examples, several interviewees have emphasised the need for the Partnerships to strengthen ties with political actors at all governmental levels (Interview 2). To operationalise this shift, interviewees suggested to increase synergies with the URBACT programme, including political meetings bringing together partners of the Thematic Partnerships and city mayors from cities involved in both the UAEU and URBACT networks.

Looking ahead: policy momentum for Better Regulation

The EU's current focus on simplification provides an important window of opportunity for strengthening the UAEU's Better Regulation pillar. As an instrument for intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration between Member States and the EC, the UAEU and the TA2030 has the potential to function as a strategic tool for creating impact across EU policy silos. The EU's simplification agenda – including Implementation Dialogues, annual implementation reports, the Simplification Omnibus, and Reality Checks – offers new entry points for cities and regions to promote their perspectives and territorial approaches to policy design and delivery (Interview 4). This policy momentum could be further leveraged by strengthening engagement with the EU's Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM) and relevant Commissioners (Interviews 3, 4) to ensure that urban and territorial perspectives are reflected in future policy development.

Building on this policy momentum, the EU Agenda for Cities (EUAC) offers concrete structures and tools to translate the EU's broader simplification and Better Regulation objectives into practice at the urban and territorial level. The EUAC, outlined in the mission letter to Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms Raffaele Fitto and published in December 2025, demonstrates the EC's renewed commitment to supporting cities. It presents a critical opportunity for urban stakeholders to advance the Better Regulation agenda and to connect it more effectively to the UAEU. To realise this potential, meaningful and proactive co-creation will be needed across all levels of governance, both within and between Member States and the EC. If implemented effectively and supported across the EC's Directorates-General, the EUAC could further legitimise cities' voices and strengthen the urban dimension in EU policymaking (Interview 3).

To ensure cities' representation in EU policymaking, stronger coordination between the UAEU, the EUAC, the TA2030, and national governance structures will be essential. A coherent strategic approach linking urban and territorial agendas can help bridge policy silos, enhance multilevel cooperation, and ensure



that cities and regions remain active partners in shaping and implementing EU policies. Strengthening these connections would not only reinforce the urban and territorial dimensions of the EU's policy framework but also contribute to more responsive, inclusive, and place-based policymaking across all levels of governance.

10 Recommendations to strengthen Better Regulation

The below recommendations provide concrete and action-oriented suggestions for strengthening the effectiveness of the UAEU's Better Regulation pillar. These strategic recommendations are structured along the three thematic clusters presented in the analysis, pinpointing areas and actions for improvement: (1) Institutional and procedural effectiveness, (2) Stakeholder engagement and legacy building, and (3) Strategic alignment and policy coherence.

Institutional and procedural effectiveness

1. **Strengthen political alignment and commitment across the full lifecycle of UAEU Partnerships**
Continuously monitor and assess political alignment and commitment throughout the entire lifespan of UAEU Partnerships. Implement a structured mechanism to provide comprehensive analyses of political dynamics and legislative momentum at every key stage, including the Ex-ante Assessment, Orientation Paper, Action Plan, and implementation phase. This will ensure sustained political coherence and responsiveness to evolving legislative priorities.
2. **Secure long-term continuity and sustainable funding for UAEU Partnerships**
Guarantee the long-term sustainability of UAEU Partnerships by extending their scope and funding beyond the predefined life cycle. Ensuring continuity will allow Partnerships to remain active contributors to ongoing and emerging policy debates, thereby maximising their political influence and policy relevance over time.
3. **Prioritise high-impact and feasible Better Regulation actions**
Concentrate efforts on Better Regulation actions that offer strong potential for measurable impact and feasibility. Further expand the use of Other Forms of Cooperation (OFCs) for targeted, ad-hoc Better Regulation initiatives. Establish a Legal and Technical Review Board to systematically evaluate Better Regulation actions for legal soundness, technical feasibility, and alignment with the EU policy cycle and thematic priorities.
4. **Institutionalise structured policy and legislative dialogue at all governance levels**
Embed systematic discussions on EU legislation within UDG/DGUM, NTCCP/DGTC, and EUI (Coordinators and Action Leaders – CALM) meetings, supported by external legal and policy expertise. Make UAEU Better Regulation actions and TA2030 pilot actions a standing agenda item in all DGUM and DGTC meetings to ensure continuous monitoring, informed decision-making, and policy coherence across the EU governance framework.

Stakeholder engagement and legacy building

5. **Define transparent guidelines and strengthen institutional linkages to EU policy processes**
Adopt transparent guidelines clarifying partner roles and strengthening pathways through which Better Regulation actions inform EU legislative development. Incentivising engagement across governance levels will strengthen policy coherence, shared ownership, and capacity.
- UAEU Partnerships are encouraged to:
- a) Set clear expectations regarding partner skills, time commitments, and support needs from the outset.
 - b) Ensure that Better Regulation actions follow consistent and visible procedures for consideration by the European Commission and other EU institutions.

- c) Reinforce structured connections between Partnerships and EU policymaking fora, such as through engagement in EC Expert Groups or equivalent advisory bodies, including the newly established European Urban Forum, an independent, non-profit and neutral forum, led by Members of the European Parliament debating urban policies issues with public and private stakeholders.

Member States are encouraged to:

- a) Strengthen intra- and interdepartmental communication and consultation to overcome policy silos, including by systematically leveraging their representation in EU Council Working Groups.
- b) Systematically consult cities and regions, e.g. through national and European umbrella organisations, on legislative initiatives that have implications for subnational public authorities.

The EC is encouraged to:

- a) Continue to support the UAEU Partnerships through the EUI, allowing legal expert support upon request of the Partnerships.
- b) Ensure that DG REGIO and other sectoral DGs support the Partnerships by actively cooperating with them.
- c) Ensure that recommendations from the UAEU Partnerships are systematically addressed with other sectoral DGs within the EC.

6. Reinforce Member States-to-City support in the UAEU framework

Increase Member State engagement in designing and operationalising Actions to enhance the effectiveness of Thematic Partnerships by:

- a) Holding Member States involved in the Partnerships accountable to ensure regular attendance and active participation, and incentivising all Member States to provide strategic, technical, and legal support to cities.
- b) Discussions at UDG and DGUM meetings could benefit from the participation of legal and policy experts, allowing debates to address substantive policy issues and not remain limited to procedural or administrative matters.
- c) Facilitate better political alignment between Member States and cities. Cities require additional guidance to achieve political alignment with national authorities through the Partnerships to effectively implement Partnership goals.

7. Empower cities to participate early and effectively in EU legislative processes

This can be achieved by:

- a) Providing targeted capacity-building programmes that enhance cities' ability to contribute meaningfully to EU policymaking.
- b) Systematically embedding urban perspectives into the impact assessment of EU policies to ensure their feasibility and effectiveness at the local level.
- c) Fostering knowledge exchange and awareness-raising activities that deepen understanding of EU legislative processes among Partnership members through expert support and sharing of policy information by national and European policymakers.

Strategic alignment and policy coherence

8. Strengthen the strategic alignment between the Urban Agenda for the EU and Territorial Agenda 2030 to ensure coherence across EU urban and territorial policy frameworks

The current gap between the Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) and the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA2030) can be addressed by:

- a) Ensuring that Better Regulation actions under the UAEU explicitly reflect TA2030 priorities and other relevant EU frameworks.
- b) Fostering joint governance mechanisms through structured coordination sessions between the DGUM and DGTC under each EU Council Presidency. Establishing regular feedback loops between both meetings will improve stakeholder engagement, ensure alignment of technical and political guidance, and enhance the overall coherence of EU urban and territorial policies.

9. Strengthen networking and strategic information exchange across all governance levels

Enhance strategic communication and cooperation among the EU, Member States, cities, and urban networks to promote mutual learning and policy coherence.

Key actions include:

- a) Developing a comprehensive dissemination, advocacy, and exploitation plan for UAEU Partnerships to ensure visibility and impact.
- b) Leveraging existing networks and exchange platforms to promote coordination and information sharing.
- c) Building stronger synergies between Partnerships, the TA2030, and urban and territorial umbrella organisations to foster continuous alignment and knowledge exchange.

10. Leverage the current political momentum for Better Regulation and simplification

Capitalise on the current political momentum to advance Better Regulation and simplification agendas across EU policies impacting urban areas.

Key actions include:

- a) Establishing strategic linkages between UAEU initiatives, the Secretariat-General (SG REFORM), and other relevant EC DGs to ensure cross-institutional alignment.
- b) Using the EU Agenda for Cities as a strategic tool to improve existing legislation and help shape new initiatives affecting local and regional authorities, ensuring that urban and territorial perspectives are fully reflected in their design and implementation.
- c) Promoting a place-based and territorially sensitive approach in the design of future EU policies, in line with objectives of the Territorial Agenda 2030.

Conclusions

The Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) represents a crucial instrument for embedding multilevel governance and place-based approaches into EU policymaking. UAEU Partnerships have contributed to Better Regulation by ensuring that implementation experiences on the ground inform EU legislation, reducing unintended territorial impacts and making policies more effective and targeted.

Nevertheless, the UAEU's Better Regulation pillar remains comparatively weak in delivering concrete and sustained legislative impact. This study identifies shortcomings across three critical dimensions and offers action-oriented recommendations in each of those areas: (1) Strengthening institutional and procedural effectiveness, (2) improving stakeholder engagement and legacy building and (3) advancing strategic alignment and policy coherence.

Key issues include procedural and timeframe misalignment between short-term Partnership frameworks, long-term urban challenges and EU policy cycles, compounded by limited resources, technical capacities, and unclear Action Plan requirements. The limited effectiveness of Ex-ante Assessments and the absence of formalised implementation mechanisms further undermine overall impact.

Institutionally, stakeholder engagement within and across the Partnerships remains imbalanced, characterised by inconsistent participation from Member States and limited commitment from the EC to systematically process and embed Partnership recommendations into EU policy. The lack of clear pathways for recommendation uptake, combined with undefined partner responsibilities, continues to constrain the effective translation of multilevel governance efforts into policy outcomes.

The current EU policy landscape presents a pivotal window of opportunity to implement these recommendations and to further strengthen the Better Regulation dimension of both frameworks. The EC's upcoming policy cycle, marked by the Simplification Omnibus and the EU Agenda for Cities (EUAC), provides essential momentum for amplifying cities' voices in policy processes. In particular, the EUAC offers significant potential to reinforce the urban perspective in EU policymaking, provided it is co-created meaningfully across governance levels and supported throughout the EC. By strategically leveraging current EU policy developments, the UAEU and TA2030 can realise their full potential as instruments for Better Regulation, ensuring that European policies reflect the diverse realities of cities and territories while delivering effectively on long-term EU objectives.

Looking ahead, this study identifies multiple avenues for future research. A first step would be to conduct a comprehensive analysis comparing the realised policy impacts of UAEU Partnerships against their intended impact, following an ex-post assessment approach. Such analysis would generate valuable insights for improving internal and procedural processes and enhancing alignment with EU policy cycles. A second step would explore the role of urban and territorial policy tools within emerging EU policy frameworks and priorities, including the recently launched Omnibus Package, the Competitiveness Compass, and the newly published EUAC. This will help define the measures needed to recalibrate and align urban and territorial frameworks, ensuring their coherent contribution to and active role in co-creating future EU policies.

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Appendix

Methodology

This study applied a qualitative research design, combining secondary research through content analysis with primary data collection via stakeholder interviews and expert workshops. The methodology aimed to capture both the institutional dynamics and the experiences of key stakeholders engaged in the UAEU and TA2030, with a particular focus on the integration and effectiveness of the Better Regulation pillar to date, while looking ahead to current and upcoming policy momentum regarding the role of cities and territories in the EU's simplification agenda.

Data collection

The research process combined desk-based content analysis and semi-structured group interviews with experts and urban stakeholders with different institutional backgrounds.

1. **Secondary research** consisted of an extensive desk review and content analysis of existing literature, including previous policy reports, evaluations, and institutional assessments related to the UAEU and the TA2030. This review provided the analytical foundation for understanding the evolution, institutional framing, and policy impact of Better Regulation efforts across thematic and territorial contexts (see References).
2. **Primary data collection** included online semi-structured interviews in small group formats with 14 selected stakeholders, including representatives from the EC, Member States, cities, UAEU Thematic Partnerships and TA2030 Pilot Actions. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes based on a set of open questions (see Appendix for a list of the interviewees).

The discussions in the interviews centred around three key themes:

- a. Perceptions, evaluations, and uptake of past and current Better Regulation actions and recommendations within the UAEU and TA2030 frameworks.
- b. Institutional barriers and enablers for promoting Better Regulation principles more effectively across EU policies affecting urban areas and regions.
- c. Forward-looking recommendations and expectations in view of the forthcoming MaWP 2026 and wider policy developments at the EU level.

Insights gathered during the group interviews allowed for peer reflection and the identification of cross-cutting themes and divergences among stakeholder perspectives.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed through a combination of thematic synthesis and content analysis, applied to both primary and secondary sources.

Primary data analysis involved thematic clustering of interview responses, identifying convergences and divergences among stakeholders' perceptions of Better Regulation's role, enablers, and obstacles within the UAEU and TA2030 processes.

Secondary data analysis focused on synthesising findings from existing reports and evaluations, contextualising them against the institutional development of the Better Regulation pillar, particularly following the BRI and the 2019 UAEU Impact Assessment Study.

A cross-validation analysis was then performed to cross-reference insights from primary and secondary sources and to inform visions and recommendations for going forward. This process highlighted areas of alignment and tension between stakeholder experiences and formal policy assessments, helping to map

dominant themes concerning the effectiveness, institutional positioning, and future potential of Better Regulation in the UAEU and TA2030 framework.

Limitations

The study's findings are qualitative and exploratory in nature. The interview sample, while diverse in institutional representation, is not statistically representative due to its limited size and scope. The analysed data should therefore be interpreted as a 'set of experiences, opinions, and expectations' (EUKN, 2017). Nevertheless, this qualitative approach provided rich, nuanced insights into the perceptions and practical realities shaping the future integration of Better Regulation across EU urban and territorial governance frameworks.

List of Interviewees

No.	Interview	Name	Institution	UAEU/TA2030 Involvement
1	1	Valentina Schippers-Opejko	City of Haarlem	Innovative & Responsible Public Procurement Partnership
2		Bodgan Micu	Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration of Romania	Greening Cities Partnership, Jobs & Skills Partnership
3		Albin Hunia	City of Utrecht	Greening Cities Partnership
4	2	Joanna Śliz	Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy of Poland	Greening Cities Partnership, Sustainable Use of Land Partnership
5		Sabrina Abdi	French National Agency for the Cohesion of Territories (ANCT)	Cities of Equality Partnership, Urban Poverty Partnership
6	3	Karen van Dantzig	Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands	UDG/DGUM, Urban Envoy
7		Robert-Jan van Lotringen	Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands	UDG/DGUM
8		Alfredo Corbalan	Perspective.brussels	UDG/DGUM
9		Sandrine de Meyer	Perspective.brussels	UDG/DGUM
10		Michael Roth	Austrian Federal Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management	UDG/DGUM
11		Marcia van der Vlugt	Dutch Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning	Regulatory TIA Pilot Action coordinator
12	4	Judit Rózsa	SG REFORM, formerly Head of Unit at DG REGIO at the time of the establishment of the Pact of Amsterdam	n/a
13		Francesco Amodeo	DG REGIO, Housing Taskforce	n/a
14		Philippe Froissard	DG Research & Innovation / EU Mission Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities	n/a