

B40 Balkan Cities Network Zagreb Declaration

We, the Mayors and representatives of the B40 Balkan Cities Network, convened at the B40 Zagreb Summit on 26 January 2026, reaffirm our shared commitment to sustainable urban development, inclusive governance, and cultural diversity as essential foundations for resilient, thriving, and future-oriented cities. At a time when democratic pressures are increasingly felt in our region—and echoed in various parts of the world—we underline the indispensable role of cities as the primary spaces where democratic values are exercised, protected, and sustained in everyday life.

Rooted in our shared commitment to democratic values and fundamental human rights, we emphasise that democracy derives its legitimacy from the free will of citizens and its resilience from institutions that faithfully reflect that will. In this regard, we reaffirm our unwavering support for the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the protection of freedom of expression and civic engagement. Drawing on experiences observed across our region, and increasingly mirrored beyond it, we express serious concern over practices that weaken democratic governance by constraining the autonomy and democratic mandate of elected local authorities. Such practices undermine citizens' trust in public institutions and erode democracy at the level where it is most directly experienced.

We therefore firmly oppose any actions that compromise judicial independence or restrict civic and political freedoms, recognising that when local democratic institutions are weakened, the foundations of democracy as a whole are put at risk.

As cities confront the urgent challenges of climate change, energy transition, and social inequality, we acknowledge the necessity of advancing the green transition while addressing energy poverty. We commit to pursuing innovative and practical solutions that reduce emissions, improve energy efficiency, and ensure fair access to affordable and sustainable energy. We stress that the success of this transition depends not only on technological solutions, but also on democratic, accountable, and participatory local governance that ensures social justice and leaves no community behind.

We further recognise the vital contribution of culture and sustainable tourism in shaping dynamic, inclusive, and interconnected cities. By fostering cultural exchange, supporting local creative talent, and promoting responsible tourism, we aim to strengthen community identity, enhance social cohesion, and support inclusive economic development. We view culture as a vital democratic public space—particularly at the local level—where diversity is expressed, dialogue is nurtured, and citizens engage freely and peacefully in the life of their cities. Through these efforts, we seek to cultivate vibrant urban environments that encourage openness, creativity, and lasting cooperation across the Balkans.

As members of the B40 Balkan Cities Network, we commit to:

- Strengthening cooperation between our cities through the exchange of knowledge, experience, and best practices;
- Advancing democratic local governance, transparency, and meaningful citizen participation as foundational principles of sustainable development;

- Upholding human rights, the rule of law, and the democratic legitimacy of elected local authorities as essential and non-negotiable pillars of municipal governance;
- Accelerating the adoption of green solutions and sustainable urban policies to build climate-resilient cities and enhance the quality of life for all residents;
- Supporting culture and sustainable tourism as drivers of social inclusion, economic vitality, democratic dialogue, intercultural understanding, and inter-city cooperation.

With shared values and a common vision for the future, we affirm our conviction that cities are not merely administrative entities, but the most immediate democratic institutions through which citizens experience representation, accountability, and participation. In the Balkans—where democracy has been hard-won and remains deeply valued—local governments represent the first line of democratic legitimacy. By reinforcing local democratic governance, standing firmly by the principle of elected representation, and investing in inclusive and sustainable urban development, we choose cooperation over division and inclusion over exclusion. Together, we commit to shaping open, resilient, and humane cities—cities that embody democracy, sustainability, and cultural diversity in practice, not only in principle.