



FROM TERRITORIAL FOCUS TO URBAN IDENTITY – THE CASE OF TERRITORIAL STRATEGIES IN SERBIA

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Abstract

After the adoption of the first national urban policy of Serbia in 2019, territorial strategies for urban areas were developed within the technical support of the European Union Program for Local Development (EU PRO Plus). These strategies were established through a communicative process during 2022-2023, encouraging collaborative governance. These are contemporary governance instruments, which are an effective tool for the integration of priority investments, thematic goals and different sources of funding within the territory. Territorial strategies are focused on the economic, ecological, climatic, social, cultural and demographic challenges of territorial development. The main contribution of this research is providing an understanding of the challenges and potentials of the spatial dimension of strategies in the collaborative urban governance. The research should explore the development of urban identity within the process of local policy formation. The research sample consists of twelve strategies, namely specific goals, measures and strategic project ideas. Place-based approach supports the development of specific locations, adapting interventions and investments to unique spatial contexts, with the intention of releasing their underutilized potential. Place-based concept and co-creative process are used in this work as a basic framework for evaluating the development of urban identity.

Key words: *Place-based approach, urban identity, sustainable and integrated urban and territorial development, collaborative governance, Serbia.*

Introduction

As a means of achieving integrated urban development, urban governance has found its role in different local contexts of more or less developed countries, but also in countries in transition [1]. With the support of international programs and projects, the shift towards urban governance in Serbia is evolving through the framework of

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sustainable and integrated urban development [2, 3, 4]. It is also encouraged through the adoption of the Action Plan for Chapter 22 - Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments in 2019 [5], the opening of Cluster 4 - Green agenda and sustainable connectivity [6], as well as the Draft Law on the establishment and functioning of the system of Cohesion policy management [7]. Apart from the first experiences in the practice of drafting local strategies of integrated urban development between 2007 – 2013 followed by the formation of the national policy of sustainable urban development [8] another important step in supporting urban governance is the operationalization of the national policy through adoption of local territorial strategies between 2022-2024. Within the technical support of the European Union Program for Local Development (EU PRO Plus) the application of territorial strategies for urban areas¹⁷³ was tested in 31 cities and municipalities.

In conditions of rapid and unpredictable changes, urban areas face various challenges including environmental impacts, traffic congestion, climate change, aging, urban health, social segregation, affordable housing, inclusion of migrants [9, 10, 11], while the post-socialist urban areas of Serbia are additionally under the influence of EU integration. In addition to facing a wide range of different challenges, urban areas open up opportunities for development, including diversity, creativity and innovation [12]. These challenges and opportunities occur in different urban contexts, and each of them has a specific spatial dimension [13].

European urban policies follow these processes, both through financial support and through fostering a strategic, integrated and inclusive approach to solving contemporary challenges of urban areas [14]. The new goal "Europe Closer to Citizens" was introduced into the main political framework as part of efforts and commitment to integrated territorial development and the promotion of sustainable urban development. Local actors are given opportunities to take the lead in recognizing and solving various problems, but above all, to use their endogenous (locally specific) development potentials. One of the newer instruments of support for urban areas are territorial strategies [15]. They reflect the current understanding of strategic planning as an adaptive process that requires change of governance regimes. Territorial strategies encourage the application of key principles of good urban governance, such as: urban policy for the common good; integrated approach; participation and co-creation; multi-level governance, and place-based approach [10]. These are modern instruments, which are an effective tool for the integration of priority investments, thematic goals and various sources of financing. This paper presents the development of urban identity using the place-based approach in the collaborative process of urban development planning. The research sample consists

¹⁷³Urban areas of Bor, Kruševac, Leskovac, Loznica, Novi Pazar, Smederevo, Šabac; The urban area of the city of Kragujevac and the municipalities of Arandjelovac, Batočina, Knić, Lapovo, Rača and Topola; The urban area of the city of Zaječar and the municipalities of Boljevac, Knjaževac and Sokobanja, the urban area of the city of Niš and the municipalities of Gadžin Han, Merošina and Svrlijig; The urban area of the city of Pirot and the municipalities of Babušnica, Bela Palanka and Dimitrovgrad and the urban area of the city of Užice and the municipalities of Bajina Bašta, Čajetina, Požega and Priboj.



of twelve strategies, that is, concrete goals, measures and projects. It is based on the following points of view:

- a place-based approach supports the development of specific locations, adapting interventions to unique spatial contexts with the intention of releasing their underutilized potential and improving urban identity, and
- the formation of urban development policy relies on a co-creative process and collaborative innovation.

Place-based approach and collaborative innovation and co-creation in urban governance are used as an analytical framework for evaluating the collaborative process of creating urban identity. The evaluation of the results of research can indicate the potentials and weaknesses of the applied methodology when defining the priority areas of intervention, measures and projects, but also the need for further improvement of knowledge capacities for future collaborative governance initiatives.

Place-based approach, co-creation and collaborative innovation

Place-based approach is based on a clear understanding of different contexts, their vulnerabilities or their unique complexities, and implies a comprehensive strategic orientation in the creation of policies [16]. The impetus for the application of the place-based approach was given by Fabrizio Barca's report, in which this approach is placed at the center of the idea of a reformed EU cohesion policy as a chance to release endogenous potential. The report advocated a territorial approach to cohesion policy that would involve relying on 1) a long-term strategy to reduce the underutilization of local potential for economic development and social inequalities in specific places, which would 2) be implemented through integrated and tailored interventions designed on the basis of local preferences and knowledge through participatory processes and 3) was supported by multi-level governance including transfers of funding [17]. A place-based approach emphasizes the importance of geographic context for developing policies and the need for multi-level collaboration to generate and leverage local knowledge [18]. Also, this approach does not refer only to the specific needs of each territory but considers the concentration of knowledge and skills in the local setting, which shape interventions and solutions. The development and implementation of a territorial strategy with the application of a place-based approach contributes to the long-term development, competitiveness of a place, its positioning and identity [19]. Other terms such as spatial dimension, territorial focus, area-based approach are also used as terms under the umbrella of the placed based approach [20].

Co-creation refers to similar practices such as collaborative governance, local community involvement, citizen participation and public involvement [21, 22]. Collaborative processes of action through networks, cooperation and partnerships, on which co-creation relies, represent key aspects of governance. Co-creation in the public sector is defined as "a process through which two or more public and private actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competencies, and ideas that



enhance the production of public value in terms of visions, plans, policies, strategies, regulatory frameworks, or services, either through a continuous improvement of outputs or outcomes or through innovative step-changes that transform the understanding of the problem or task at hand and lead to new ways of solving it" [23]. Co-creation highlights the potential of collaborative interaction between different actors and the possibility of creating new and innovative solutions. Expanding collaborative arenas aim to foster collaborative innovation processes [24].

Collaborative innovation is defined as "a process of creative problem solving through which relevant and affected actors work across formal institutional boundaries to develop and implement innovative solutions to urgent problems" [25]. There, the effort to involve relevant actors is key to enable cooperation in order to generate new solutions [26]. Innovation itself involves the development and realization of a new and creative idea. Innovation implies a departure from established practices and views in a certain context [27]. Also, it can imply either the invention of something completely new, or it results from the adoption of innovative solutions developed elsewhere.

The next chapter presents a methodological framework for assessment of the collaborative process of (re)creating urban identity, which is manifested through co-creation, a step towards innovative solutions and points to the importance of the spatial dimension of urban governance.

Methodology

The main contribution of the presented research is to provide an understanding of the challenges and potentials of the spatial dimension is strategies derived within the framework of collaborative urban governance. The research explores the development of urban identity within the process of local territorial strategy formation. The research sample consists of twelve strategies, namely their specific goals, measures and projects. Relying on theoretical research, the paper proposes the following framework for analysis: 1) place-based approach - through which it is possible to see the key priorities and quality of the territory; 2) co-creative process - through the involvement of various actors in the creation of proposals in the form of consultations, workshops with relevant actors and public forums with citizens in order to evaluate project proposals and outcomes, and impacts, i.e. the main opportunities and obstacles for the development of new governance practices for sustainable urban development, and 3) innovation - through the introduction of new topics, connecting spatial interventions with actors and resources, and the application of new governance instruments. Triangulation of data from observations, analysis of projects and events at thematic round tables and workshops with local actors provided multiple insights into the process and formulation of territorial strategies. Although each of these data sources is insufficient in and on its own, together they provide a deeper insight into the complex processes of introducing innovations in urban governance.



Territorial focus

Sustainable and integrated urban and territorial strategies are created in a way to target specific areas, with a special territorial focus. In planning practice in the EU, territorial strategies can have diverse spatial focus: the area within the city/town (districts/neighbourhoods), that is, one or more specific districts or localities within the administrative area; cities, towns or suburbs, i.e. an individual municipality without restrictions in terms of size or population density; a functional area or more municipalities, that is, two or more municipalities that connect in the development of a strategy [13].

It is considered crucial to identify a consistent area for policy action and stakeholders, define the spatial scale and specific area for achieving policy goals [20]. The diversity of administrative traditions in Europe – ranging from strongly centralized to decentralized states, the size of local and intermediate authorities and their attitude towards cooperation – are additional characteristics that influence the choice of territorial focus [28]. At the same time, the selection of strategies is not only a question of methods, but also a political decision [13]. The analysis of strategies implemented during the 2014-2020 program period in the EU shows that most sustainable urban development strategies focus on cities, settlements or suburbs (45%), followed by districts/settlements (31%), functional areas (20%), city networks (4%) and parts of territories with specific characteristics such as parks, archaeological sites or others (0.4%) [13].

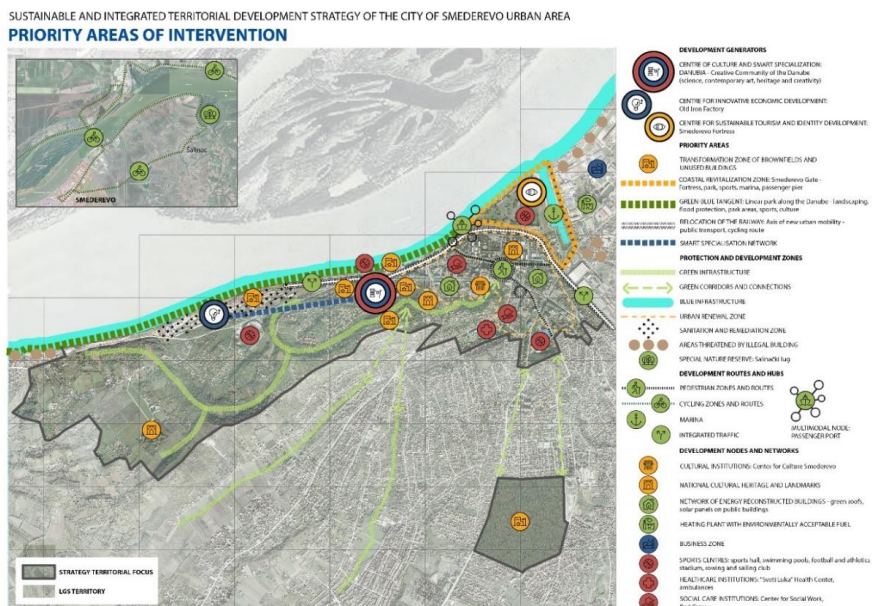


Figure 1. Narrow spatial focus



Similar to the EU practice, the territorial strategies implemented in Serbia had a narrow (Figure 1) and wider (Figure 2) spatial focus. Specific to the local context is that in addition to international guidelines, the territorial focus was also influenced by the priority areas of intervention defined by the national policy of sustainable urban development - brownfield locations and industrial and commercial zone development; regulation and upgrading of informal settlements; inner-city urban regeneration; upgrading areas with a concentration of social problems; renewing areas exposed to problems of environmental protection and climate change, and protection of the cultural and architectural heritage [8].

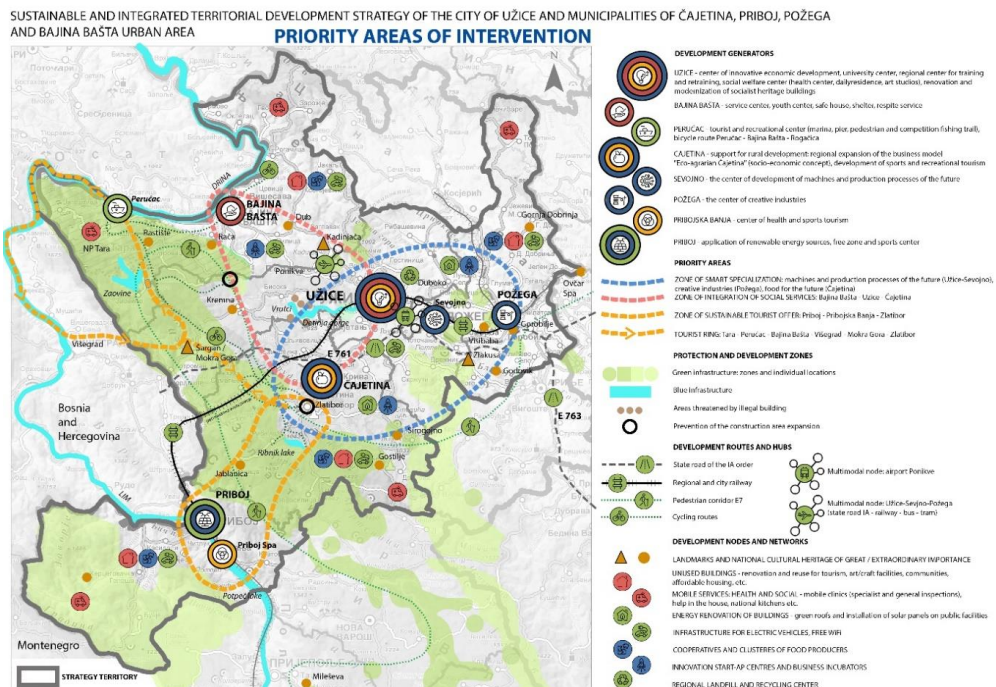


Figure 2. Wider spatial focus

Co-creative process

The territorial strategy starts from the topics contained in international and national policies of sustainable and integrated urban and territorial development, which are adapted to the local context in Serbia. This was achieved by applying a co-creative process - through public dialogue and inter and transdisciplinary cooperation of a wide range of actors from different sectors, professional fields and levels of administration. With the aim of better understanding of proposals through critical reflection and verification, as well as through collection of different ideas, the exchange of knowledge and the stimulation of innovative thinking, the following were organized: citizen survey (November-December 2022); thematic expert round



tables (February-March, 2023); workshops with local actors - members of working groups and strategy councils (April-July, 2023), public forums with citizens (May-June, 2023), and public inquiry (September, 2023).

By harmonizing the goals and measures from EU and national policies, a framework for sustainable and integrated development of urban areas was formulated, which consists of the following objectives: 1) Strengthening urban identity and renewal of urban areas by encouraging sustainable and integrated development; 2) Promoting the transition to clean and fair energy, green and blue investments, climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management, and sustainable urban mobility; 3) Promotion of innovative and smart economic transformation, circular and low-carbon economy and ICT integration; 4) Improvement of social welfare, and 5) Improvement of urban governance. Namely, the "localization" of goals, specific goals and measures was checked for each territory and adapted to the local context through a collaborative process. Based on the place-based approach, priority areas of intervention were created (Figure 3), consisting of development generators, intervention areas, development routes and hubs, protection and development zones, development points and networks.

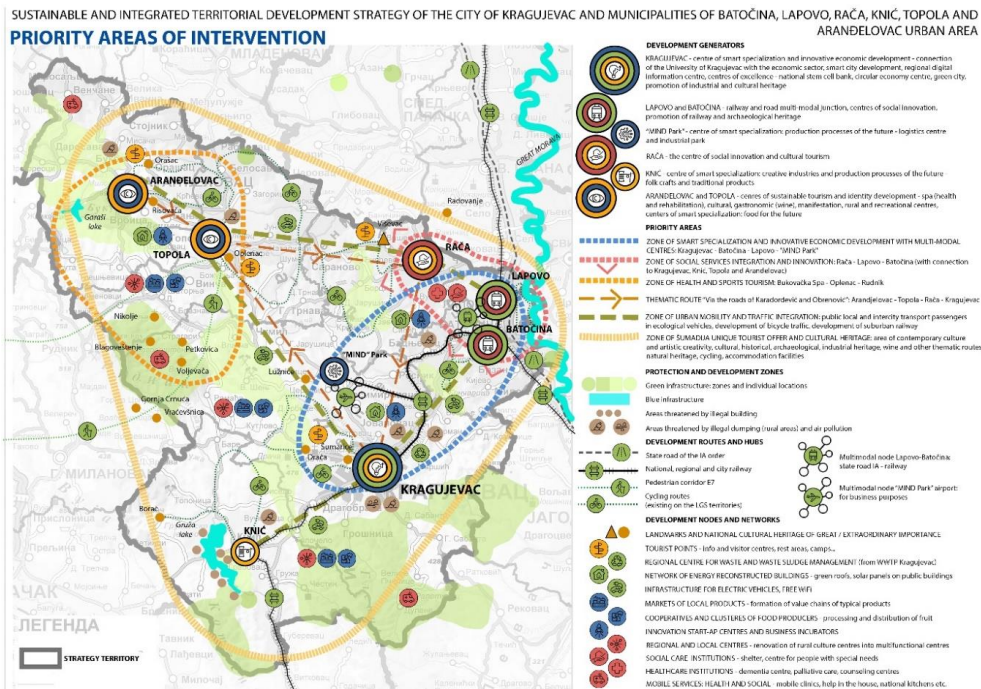


Figure 3. Priority areas of intervention

In addition to 1) "traditional" measures, which are an integral part of the special thematic goal *Strengthening urban identity and renewal of the urban area by encouraging sustainable and integrated development - urban regeneration and conversion, arrangement of public spaces, affirmation of architectural, cultural and natural heritage, development of*



tourism, as well as infrastructural equipment, rehabilitation and prevention of informal construction and environmental devastation, which are characteristic of the category of "re-activating places" [19], the 2) additional categories were also defined, which refer to: 2.1) the transition to the knowledge economy, including the connection with smart specialization; 2.2) adapting to climate change and applying nature-based solutions, switching to low-carbon energy systems, encouraging circular economy; 2.3) digital connectivity and literacy, e-government support, social innovation and strengthening of health and social care services, as well as 2.4) multi-level governance, co-creation, citizen participation, networks and partnerships.

Namely, the planned measures from the territorial strategies are in line with categories of policy approaches that can be applied to improve urban identity - raising the quality of life of citizens and their living environment and initiating sustainable and harmonious territorial development [19]. They consist of: Re-activating places for people and community; Re-discovering uniqueness; Re-connecting with nature for a sustainable future; Re-inventing smart public services, and Re-imaging governance and partnerships. They were formulated based on the analysis of examples from the practice of applying innovative solutions in the EU¹⁷⁴. These policy approaches are multidimensional, touching upon different policy areas.

Innovative outcomes

During 2024, a public call was announced for the submission of project proposals for the implementation of strategies. The specific goal of this call was to help solve the challenges of sustainable urban development through the implementation of integrated projects arising from territorial strategies¹⁷⁵. The total value of the approved projects is about 12.8 million euros.

Out of all, the following projects are accepted in the category of re-activating places: "Study of the unique identity of urban areas on the territory of the Užice ITI (ERA-URBAN-NET)" (public spaces, regeneration of residential architectural heritage from the socialist period, knowledge-based economy); "In honor of the past, shaping the future: Preparation of a preliminary feasibility study for the revitalization of the Machine Shop at the Military Technical Institute (VTZ), Kragujevac" (industrial heritage, brownfield); "Master plan for the area of the former Viscose factory on the territory of the city of Loznica" (brownfield), and "Better traffic for a better life": General study of traffic solutions and challenges, urban mobility, green and energy

¹⁷⁴ The following databases on projects and good practices of urban development were analyzed: URBACT, Urban Innovative Actions (UIA), the Urban Agenda Partnerships, the New European Bauhaus, the European Covenant of Mayors, the Territorial Agenda 2030, as well as other specific EU projects gathering innovative urban solutions such as VARCITIES and the FUTURE project.

¹⁷⁵ The public call also envisaged alignment with the Smart Specialization Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020-2027, following the recommendation given for territorial strategies in the Urban Agenda for the EU. The call promotes links to the four main priorities identified in the Strategy: (1) Food for the Future; (2) Information communication technologies; (3) Machines and production processes of the future (4) Creative industries.



transition in the City of Novi Pazar (regulation of public space, accessibility for people with special needs, environmental impacts and innovative mobility technologies).

In the re-discovering uniqueness category are the following projects: "Šumadija CONNECT: Encouraging territorial development through innovation and valorization of cultural heritage" (industrial heritage, higher education, circular economy and art); "Active protection of cultural heritage Tabula Peutingeriana" (protection and promotion of cultural heritage and cultural trails from the Roman period); "Study for the reconstruction of the medieval town in Kruševac" (archaeological site); "CREST - Cultural revival for richer tourism in Šumadija: Creating an integrated and innovative regional tourist offer" (infrastructure, digital technologies); "Magic of Eastern Serbia" (sustainable tourism, branding); "Ecosystem for innovation and smart economy in Bor" (startup center, Living Lab and Digital platform for smart economy), and "Pre-investment feasibility study for the establishment of a higher education institution in Pirot-II phase" (knowledge-based economy).

Two projects have been identified to support re-connecting with nature for a sustainable future: "Green and energy transition in the territory of ITI Užice" (energy efficiency, green infrastructure), and "Preliminary study of the reclamation of the closed solid waste landfill at the location "Brst " in Leskovac to an ecologically acceptable area of public use" (nature-led regeneration). Only one of the projects is in the public services and social innovation category, namely: "New gymnasium - fair play for inclusion" (support for inclusive sports for school-aged children, including those from vulnerable communities and with special needs).

In relation to the improved governance approach (multilevel governance, co-creation, community participation, innovative civic management systems), projects are characterized by the application of various participation measures - consultations, active participation, co-creation, living lab, open platform, awareness raising, creation of networks, along with capacity building and training, for which between 10% and 30% of the total costs are foreseen.

In addition, after the adoption of territorial strategies, local partners joined the EU programs URBACT IV, Interreg, etc. during 2024. These are the cities of Kragujevac, Leskovac, Niš and Šabac, and Municipality of Sokobanja, as well as regional development agencies - Regional Development Agency Zlatibor, Regional Agency for Economic Development of Šumadija and Pomoravlje (REDASP), Regional Development Agency Sandžak (SEDA), and Regional Development Agency SOUTH (RRA SOUTH). They participate in 7 projects with partners from over 40 European countries. The topics of the projects are as follows: taking over the good practices of the projects of Urban innovative actions (UIA); improving knowledge about creation and implementation of territorial strategies; local identity driving traditional industry transition; urban regeneration and ecosystems; future-proof living space; effectiveness of tourism policy instruments for SDG achievement; low-carbon SME development; governance model for integration of green investments into the process of sustainable urban and territorial development; digital environment; interconnecting mobility; green zero-carbon urban mobility; open, rights-based, democratic, equal and inclusive



societies. For the most part, these projects aim to encourage international exchange between different regions, allowing them to focus on re-creating local identities. They rely on a place-based approach to urban and territorial development, focusing on achieving competitiveness through a combination of innovation, sustainable development and citizen participation.

Conclusion

With the external support of the EU program, cities in Serbia are making small strides in their efforts to highlight the role of co-creative processes, collaborative innovation and spatial dimensions as a ground for experimentation and encouraging public awareness of collaborative urban governance. The main contribution of this paper is to provide an understanding of the challenges and potential of the spatial dimension of strategies in collaborative urban governance. Spatial perspective contributed to the opening of opportunities for critical observation and pointing out the possibilities of a different way of acting. Also, it opened a critical angle for looking at the key priorities of the quality of the territory and thereby shifted the focus from the existing way of acting and encouraged the coordination of attention to the insufficiently used potentials of urban and territorial development. Place-based approach supports the development of specific locations, adapting interventions and investments to unique spatial contexts, with the intention of releasing their underutilized potential.

The co-creative process enables the exchange of knowledge, competences and ideas and thus facilitates mutual learning that helps improve understanding of problems and generate new and creative solutions. Basically, collaboration can enable the review and inclusion of new and creative ideas, the testing and selection of the most promising ones, the mitigation of resistance to implementation through the development of a sense of shared ownership and the dissemination of innovative ideas [13]. The established framework for formulating strategies and project proposals through co-creation creates a complex and challenging training ground for the application and testing of innovative approaches to urban development planning, which is adapted and supplemented over time. In relation to innovations, it should be emphasized that these are primarily new themes that are introduced into the planning discourse, as well as new collaborative governance initiatives through networks and partnerships. This is supported by the inclusion of local partners in new EU programs and projects, who are at the forefront of innovation in contemporary practice in the EU.

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