Strategic urban development in medium-sized Romanian municipalities: a comparative assessment

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Abstract: Romania's medium-sized municipalities are now required to invest in Integrated Urban Development Strategies (SIDU), but the coherence and alignment with the EU policies remain untested. We compiled the 2021-27 SIDUs of 32 municipalities and coded each along a nine-dimension rubric. Results showed high average scores for strategic vision clarity and EU-policy referencing, but persistent gaps in monitoring-and-evaluation architecture and digital-governance readiness. Three robust clusters emerged: Green-Smart Pioneers, Heritage-Tourism Balancers, and Just-Transition Cities. Alignment with the EU Green Deal is strongest when stakeholder participation and KPI dashboards are explicit, suggesting an interaction between administrative capacity and environmental ambition. The findings refute theories of Europeanisation by evidencing how cohesion-policy conditionalities shape local strategic language while leaving capacity deficits unresolved. Policy-wise, they justify targeted capacity-building and streamlined KPI guidelines for small municipalities. This is the first systematic, post-2021 comparative appraisal of Romanian SIDUs, providing an evaluative framework transferable to other Central-Eastern-European contexts.