Exploring the Role of Urban Identity in Sustainable Development: The Conceptual Framework and Methodological Steps for its Application in Serbia

Ana Niković, Božidar Manić, Nataša Čolić Marković

(Dr Ana Niković, DipEngArch, Institute of Architecture and Urban&Spatial Planning of Serbia, Belgrade, 73/II Bulevar kralja Aleksandra St., anan@iaus.ac.rs)

(Dr Božidar Manić, DipEngArch, Institute of Architecture and Urban&Spatial Planning of Serbia, Belgrade, 73/II Bulevar kralja Aleksandra St., bozam@iaus.ac.rs)

(Dr Nataša Čolić Marković, MSc in Urban Studies, Institute of Architecture and Urban&Spatial Planning of Serbia, Belgrade, 73/II Bulevar kralja Aleksandra St., natasac@iaus.ac.rs)

1 ABSTRACT

Similar to other regions in Europe, the strategic positioning of medium-sized and small towns in Serbia has not yet been developed to its full extent. At the same time, its potential to contribute to sustainable, balanced territorial development and cohesion at national, regional, and local levels has been recognized through planning documents, strategies, and academic literature. The role of urban identity in the sustainable development of small and medium-sized towns has been especially emphasized. Therefore, there is a need to explore the complex concept of urban identity through analyzing the relevant literature dealing with its definition and practical use in planning. The main goal of the identity analysis is to highlight the specific characteristics of the selected settlements and value them as spatial, material, and immaterial elements that should be at the same time protected and developed. This implies the application of a place-based approach in planning and developing strategies to include the concept of identity as an important parameter for the qualitative assessment of planning solutions. The resulting conceptual framework consists of material and immaterial elements of identity that can be grouped into sets of specific characteristics. Secondly, the sustainable development policy framework for small urban areas in Europe has been investigated, resulting in a set of key thematic fields applicable in general practice and all contexts. The third step subsumes relating the elements of identity with the key thematic fields and creating the framework for measures and strategic directions that would enable simultaneous protection of existing and creation of new place values. This methodology has been applied to the study of identity of five territorially connected municipalities in Western Serbia, that already share a number of common characteristics. Consequently, not only their individual but also their common identity, compared to other regions in Serbia, can be examined. The uniqueness of the individual towns affects the sustainable development policies at the urban level – for regeneration and revitalization of urban centers, their specialization, and positioning. The uniqueness of the common territory opens up possibilities for sustainable development policies at the regional level, for catalyzing economic growth and reinforcing polycentric development at the national level.

Keywords: urban identity, sustainable development, planning strategies, medium-sized and small cities and towns, Serbia

2 INTRODUCTION

Strategic positioning of medium and small towns in Serbia is still not fully developed. At the same time, their potential to contribute to sustainable, balanced territorial development and cohesion at the national, regional, and local levels has been recognized through planning documents (NARS, 2010), strategies (NARS, 2019), and scientific literature (Spasić, 1995, Kokotović Kanazir, 2016, Manić, Niković, 2014). The role of urban identity in the sustainable development of small and medium-sized urban settlements is highlighted in this paper. It explores the complex concept of urban identity through an analysis of relevant literature that deals with the definition and practical application of the urban identity concept in sustainable development strategies and planning.

The position of the urban identity concept in recent European legislation (EUI, EC, 2020, UN, 2017) is examined, as well as in the legal, planning, and strategic documents in Serbia (NARS, 2010, 2013, 2019, 2020, 2023). Key determinants and opportunities for applying this concept in urban planning practice are identified based on a review of theoretical research (Mansour et al., 2023, Duan et al., 2021, Rifaioglu, Güçhan, 2007, etc.). A methodology is proposed that can be applied to study the identity of urban areas with the aim of formulating strategic guidelines for their sustainable development. This methodology has been used in a study of the identity of five territorially connected municipalities in Western Serbia, which is currently being developed at the Institute of Architecture and Urban and Spatial Planning of Serbia – IAUS

(GOA, 2024-2025). Due to their territorial connection, these municipalities already share a number of common characteristics. Therefore, not only can their individual identities be examined, but also their collective identity, in comparison with other regions in Serbia. The implementation of the results of the identity study through strategic projects, using various financial instruments for urban development, contributes to the affirmation of urban areas as active advocates of sustainable and integrated urban and territorial development.

3 THE ROLE OF URBAN IDENTITY IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS IN RECENT EUROPEAN LEGISLATION

In 2006, ESPON (European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion) conducted a study titled "The Role of Small and Medium-Sized Cities," which highlighted the issue of insufficient research and development policies for this type of settlement compared to large cities and metropolises. The role of small and medium-sized cities is defined in relation to: a) two complementary areas: spatial organization and urban governance; and b) three levels of policies: urban policies related to the regeneration of urban centers; regional policies, which focus on opportunities for improving economic development; and spatial development policies, aimed at polycentric urban development, strengthening urban-rural links, and controlling the urban growth of large cities (ESPON, 2006). Research presented in this paper assumes that the network of small and medium-sized cities represents a key framework for achieving the goals of sustainable polycentric spatial development at all levels (Zavodnik et al., 2008, Kokotović Kanazir, 2016).

The concept of identity within the framework of the recent European legislation plays a significant role, whether directly or indirectly mentioned, through policies for sustainable, inclusive, and just cities that must respect cultural and social differences. In this context, identity refers to how cities and communities are recognized and how they connect with their cultural heritage, tradition, and face contemporary global challenges. In addition to social and cultural aspects, the physical aspects of urban identity (spatial organization, public spaces, urban form, etc.) gain a special role within the guidelines for sustainable development in these documents.

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) emphasizes that culture and cultural diversity should play an active and unique role in development initiatives, including the promotion of new sustainable consumption and production patterns that contribute to the responsible use of resources and the mitigation of harmful effects of climate change. The NUA highlights the following transformative commitments to sustainable development: 1) social inclusion and poverty reduction, with a particular role for spatial organization; the structure and arrangement of urban space; 2) sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity and opportunities for all, where urban form, infrastructure, and architectural design play a special role as drivers of efficient and sustainable resource use; urban planning that ensures appropriate compactness and density, polycentricity, and mixed land uses; 3) environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development, where a special role is played by increasing the resilience of urban centers as areas that are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of climate change, disasters, and all forms of pollution and environmental degradation; the smart city approach, which takes advantage of digitization, clean energy, technology, and innovative transportation technologies (UN, 2017).

The Territorial Agenda of the European Union until 2030 advocates for territorial cohesion and the use of the specificities/diversities of places (in the context of this study: identity) as a comparative advantage and development potential. The natural and built environment are viewed as parts of territorial capital and identity. Major threats to territorial development are identified as the neglect or degradation of ecological values, environmental quality, and cultural assets, which are exacerbated by urbanization, globalization, and uncoordinated spatial activities. The Territorial Agenda addresses higher spatial levels – regions and functional areas – through a place-based approach, sectoral policy coordination, and multilevel governance. It emphasizes the need for interventions in the areas of: 1) improving quality of life – through access to public services, enhancement of urban mobility and healthcare, creating resilient built environments, and high-quality architecture; 2) improving public services – through accessibility, user-friendliness, affordability, and quality that directly impact higher quality of life and economic development; 3) addressing demographic and social inequality challenges; 4) digitalization and the 4th industrial revolution; 5) employment and economic development (EC, 2020).

The New Leipzig Charter promotes integrative and sustainable urban development. Like the Territorial Agenda, it advocates for a place-based approach, multilevel governance, and participation (multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach). In the context of urban development, the place-based approach involves recognizing the transformative potential of European cities – small, medium, and large – through their diversity. It emphasizes that cities are unique civilizational creations and key elements of European urban heritage and citizens' identity. This further emphasizes the importance of architectural heritage, the necessity of its protection, and its simultaneous activation as a resource for sustainable development. Special emphasis is placed on the capacity of cities for social interactions at various levels, making them an active part of the polycentric urban system, as well as an adequate platform for social innovations and testing new ways to solve urban development problems. The New Leipzig Charter highlights the need for coordination of measures across three key spatial levels: 1) the neighborhood level – where urban challenges are most prominent, directly relating to local community issues, requiring specific neighborhood policies; 2) the local government unit level – strategic guidelines and specific rules for the entire urban area, serving as a formal link between the neighborhood level and higher spatial levels, and are particularly important for improving the quality of life in small and medium-sized cities, establishing connections with the environment and rural hinterland; 3) the functional area level – regional and metropolitan context based on a complex network of functional interdependencies and partnerships, premised on the idea that cities must collaborate and coordinate development policies and instruments with their rural and suburban environments (EC, 2020).

The European Urban Initiative (EUI) is part of the new EU cohesion policy for the 2021-2027 period. The EUI is a key tool to support cities of all sizes, build capacity, support innovation, and develop solutions for urban challenges, applicable in different environments and scales. The new EU cohesion policy for 2021-2027 sets five main goals that guide investments in urban areas: 1) Smart Europe – innovation, digitalization, economic transformation, and support for small and medium enterprises; 2) Green Europe – implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change; 3) Connected Europe – strategic transport and digital networks; 4) Europe for Society – support for social rights, quality jobs, education, skills, social inclusion, and access to services; 5) Europe Closer to Citizens – support for local development strategies and sustainable urban development across the EU. Although all the goals are interconnected and inseparable, the concept of identity in this work is most closely related to the fifth goal, which is achieved through territorial instruments: integrated territorial investment (ITI), community-led development (CLLD) (EC, 2021, EUI, https://www.urban-initiative.eu).

4 THE ROLE OF URBAN IDENTITY IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS IN LEGISLATIVE, PLANNING, AND STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS IN SERBIA

Recent planning and strategic documents in Serbia define the basic principles of spatial development, in line with the recent European legislation suppoting sustainability, territorial cohesion, strengthening competitiveness, public participation, polycentric territorial development, strengthening urban-rural links, etc. In the context of the research of urban identity discussed in the paper, the following principles are of particular importance: functional specialization, respecting comparative advantages in terms of the development potential of regional units; forming and strengthening networks of cities and settlements (clusters) that can provide the development of complementary functions; improving transportation accessibility as a dominant factor for exploiting territorial potentials and balanced development; developing cultural identity and territorial recognizability; strict adherence to the protection of public interest, public goods, and public spaces; improving and protecting natural and cultural heritage as development resources (NARS, 2010). This chapter examines the role of urban identity advancement and its underlying principles in supranational and national policies relevant to the sustainable development of urban areas in Serbia, to provide guidance on implementing these principles at the local level.

In accordance with European documents reffering to the sources of financing sustainable urban development (EC, 2021) and the application of territorial instruments, the national strategy for sustainable development (NARS, 2019) and several local strategies (GOA, 2023) have been adopted. These strategies emphasize strengthening the identity of urban areas by defining priority areas for urban interventions and directing financing towards priority projects. The methodology for developing and implementing territorial strategies encourages the application of key principles of good governance in urban and territorial development, such

as urban policy as a public good (public interest), integrated approach, participation and co-creation, multilevel governance, and a place-based approach (EC, 2020, UN, 2017).

The Law on Planning and Construction (NARS, 2009-2023) bases the planning, regulation, and use of space on the following principles: 1) Sustainable development through an integrated approach in planning; 2) Balanced territorial development; 3) Rational use of land by encouraging urban and rural renewal and reconstruction measures; 4) Rational and sustainable use of non-renewable resources and optimal use of renewable resources; 5) Protection and sustainable use of natural and immovable cultural goods;... 10) Public participation; 11) Preservation of customs and traditions; 12) Preservation of environmental values, integrity, and the uniqueness of landscapes; 13) Horizontal and vertical coordination (Article 3). Sustainable development, as defined by this law, is "the alignment of economic, social, and ecological aspects of development, the rational use of non-renewable resources, and ensuring conditions for greater use of renewable resources, thus enabling present and future generations to meet their needs and improve their quality of life." (NARS, 2009-2023). Regarding the study of the role of urban identity in this document, the broad definition of sustainable development leaves room for discussion about diverse human needs, including psychological, aesthetic, and so on, as well as quality criteria, which certainly encompass the identity of a place. The law does not specify the term "integrated approach," and terms like "identity," "character," "sense of place," etc., are not mentioned as potentially valuable qualitative parameters, while quantitative parameters are precisely defined. These concepts are only indirectly addressed through the principles of planning, regulation, and use of space.

Through recent amendments and additions to the Law on Planning and Construction, two overarching strategies have been incorporated into spatial and urban planning documents, which provide an opportunity for a more operational interpretation and application of the concept of urban identity in development projects. The Sustainable Urban Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030 (NARS, 2019) applies a participatory and integrated approach, considering the spatial dimension of sustainable urban development and the organization of processes that ensure coordination and cooperation. The integrated approach involves the inclusion of relevant thematic areas and tools/resources from various sectoral policies, actors, and institutions at different spatial and administrative levels (local, regional, national, supranational), in order to achieve a comprehensive (holistic) approach to urban development planning and management. The strategy contributes to strengthening the identity of urban areas by defining priority areas for spatial intervention, identifying development issues, and linking them to specific locations. In this way, local integrated urban development strategies are directed toward priority projects for financing. The strategy specifically highlights spatial units with cultural and architectural heritage, which are important landmarks in the cultural and historical development of urban settlements and groups of urban settlements (NARS, 2019).

The National Architectural Strategy for the period 2023-2035 (NARS, 2023) represents a document through which the state establishes a course of action aimed at: creating a high-quality built environment and space, protecting and improving the quality of the living environment, and, within that, preserving natural and cultural heritage. Some of the goals of architectural policy are: the valorization of real architectural values, protection, and improvement of spatial and environmental parts and units, protection of architectural heritage as one of the most important aspects of cultural identity and heritage of a state and its people; affirming the importance of architecture as a key factor in the economic development of the state and the stimulation of overall economic growth; raising awareness among the professional, scientific, and wider public about the significance of architecture and urban planning as one of the most important elements of the quality of life and work (NARS, 2023).

5 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF URBAN IDENTITY IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A review of recent European and national documents indicates the presence and affirmation of the concept of urban identity and its role in sustainable development. However, there is a lack of concretization in the application of this concept, particularly through more precise definition and linking to action points. Comprehensive studies on urban identity highlight its theoretical foundation in psychology, environmental studies, and urbanism (Mansour et al., 2023), as well as its insufficiently precise definition, which calls for its differentiation from related concepts such as place identity, sense of place, attachment to place, authenticity, and character (Jiven and Larkham, 2003).

5.1 Key Determinants of the Concept of Urban Identity in Theory: Complexity, Multifacetdness, and Dynamic Nature

An analysis of contemporary theoretical contributions on the topic of urban identity reveals three key characteristics of this concept: complexity, multifacetdness, and dynamism.

Complexity: This characteristic implies that urban identity is composed of various elements, which can be identified through content analysis. It is not a simple, singular concept, but rather a combination of many factors acting in synergy. It is emphasized that urban identity is a complex, composite concept containing both material (built and natural environment) and immaterial elements (people, culture, activities etc.), where a specific combination of characteristics produces a spatial and visual effect, i.e., urban identity, which makes places recognizable (Rifaioglu and Güçhan, 2007; Kropf, 1996). We perceive urban areas because they distinctly differ from the surrounding natural or undeveloped environment, or from other places we carry in our memory (Kropf, 1996).

Multifacetdness: This characteristic emphasizes that urban identity can be linked to different aspects of the spatial context. These could include regional, urban, ecological, landscape, social, and other aspects that reflect the diverse layers that constitute the identity of urban space. The extended definition of urban spatial identity becomes a subject of interpretation through three paradigms: landscape, culture, and economy (Duan et al., 2021). In the landscape paradigm, urban spatial identity refers to the cumulative effect of heterogeneous spatial characteristics. In the culture paradigm, the component of cultural values to be protected is added exclusively to the physical component of the landscape paradigm. In the economy paradigm, existing spatial values, comparative advantages, and local resources are viewed as drivers of urban development with positive economic effects. Furthermore, the authors add a fourth, humanistic paradigm, considering the experiences, needs, behaviors of inhabitants, local practices, and culture (Duan et al., 2021).

Dynamism: The concept of urban identity is dynamic, depending on the observer and time, which are not static categories. It constantly changes and develops based on interactions between people and space over time. Urban identity is explained as the relationship between people and their environment; a dynamic interaction of tangible and abstract elements, where the environment encompasses not only built structures but also economic practices and social interactions (Mansour et al., 2023). The relationships between space users and the physical, social, and cultural aspects of that space shape urban identity over time (Rifaioglu and Güçhan, 2007).

5.2 Application of the Concept of Urban Identity in Urban Planning Practice and Sustainable Urban Development Strategies through an Analytical Approach to the Complexity, Multifacetdness, and Dynamism of the Concept

In contemporary research, urban identity is considered a conceptual tool for developing strategic thinking about sustainable urban development, as a response to the processes of globalization, rapid urbanization, and homogenization. Its application is especially significant in historical urban areas, but also in all processes of urban renewal in general (Mansour, 2023; Duan et al., 2021; Rifaioglu and Güçhan, 2007; Appendino, 2017; Salah Ouf, 2001; Taşçioğlu and Sirel, 2020). The application of urban identity in formulating policies and strategies for sustainable development involves addressing the three key determinants of the concept: complexity, multifacetdness and dynamic nature.

The analytical approach to the complexity of the concept involves identifying the elements of urban identity within a specific spatial context: breaking down the complex concept into components, both material and immaterial (Mansour et al., 2023; Rifaioglu and Güçhan, 2007). Complexity is emphasized as a key determinant for describing identity, which underlies every theory of built form. The analysis of complexity involves deconstructing the whole into parts and observing their connections, hierarchy, and patterns of organization (Kropf, 1996).

The analytical approach to multifacetdness involves linking elements of urban identity with various aspects of sustainable development. This includes considering how identity can contribute to or enhance ecological, social, economic, and cultural sustainability in urban areas. The main hypothesis is that every context possesses a unique identity that arises from physical, social, cultural, and historical aspects and elements. Understanding and taking urban identity into account should be the starting point for policies and decision-making. In urban conservation projects (Rifaioglu and Güçhan, 2007), the identity study encompasses three

phases: 1) documentation, which includes literature research, fieldwork, and workshops with local residents; 2) evaluation, which includes conducting a SWOT analysis and selecting identity components for different levels of intervention, considering the goals of sustainable development; and 3) the decision-making phase, which defines several thematic areas to ensure an integrative, sustainable, and manageable conservation process (Rifaioglu and Güçhan, 2007).

The analytical approach to the dynamism of the concept involves stepping out of the comfort zone of an exclusively expert approach – through the engagement of various stakeholders, particularly local residents, to ensure that urban identity is shaped by those who live in the observed area as its direct users. According to Kropf's research, understanding urban identity/character involves a dynamic approach between people and the urban area, namely, the observer and what is observed. Observers are experts who are part of a collaborative study that includes expertise from different fields: spatial planning, demographics, urbanism, urban protection, architecture, environmental protection, sociology, etc. The observed area is the territory on which experts focus, and whose spatial elements are subject of their expertises. The methodological approach balances the perspectives of conservation and planning, protection and development. It includes careful and systematic documentation, analysis, and evaluation of data related to territorial, administrative, ecological, urban, historical, and socio-economic aspects of a given area, to make informed decisions regarding the protection of existing and the creation of new spatial values (Kropf, 1997).

In addition to the analytical approach to the three key determinants of urban identity, to define a particular territory and target population is also important for the application of the concept of urban identity. Although the concept is not solely composed of material factors, its perception is conditioned by the physical framework, as well as by the users of the space. It is not in the observed or the observer, but in the response to a specific place, where conceptual tools are needed to construct the idea of urban identity (Kropf, 1996). Therefore, Duan posits urban spatial identity as a methodology for structural thinking about space as an instrument for planners, conservators, and architects when facing the pressures of globalization (Duan, 2021). The authors propose an integrated, systematic, and consistent methodology for assessing urban identity that addresses the complexity and diversity of urban systems, enabling planners, decision-makers, and communities to develop more resilient, just, and sustainable cities. The main goals are to understand cities as a whole, develop strategies that are economically viable, socially inclusive, ecologically sustainable, and culturally aware. The methodology for exploring urban identity does not use quantification, but rather the analysis of the state-of-the-art and needs assessment through participatory approach, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and inform policies and decision-making processes (Mansour et al, 2023).

6 STUDY OF URBAN IDENTITY OF FIVE LOCAL GOVERNMENTS UNITS IN WESTERN SERBIA

Western Serbia is considered one of the regions in Serbia where depopulation and unfavorable demographic structure are particularly evident, which calls for strengthening human and social capital, as well as increasing the attractiveness of the area for living and working. Additionally, Western Serbia faces the serious issue of fragmentation due to the geomorphological characteristics of the hilly and mountainous area, which is interspersed with waterways. Special emphasis is placed on the physical arrangement of space and the protected environment, which should increase the area's appeal to investors and tourists, as well as strengthen the local residents' identification with their living environment. Key priorities include solutions to the problem of illegal construction, urban planning and revitalisation of cities, rural revitalization, and areas with protected, well-arranged, and properly presented cultural heritage as factors of attractiveness (NARS, 2010). The region is marked by significant socio-economic and territorial polarization, primarily between the northern and southern parts of the area. In terms of development, 5 local government units presented in this research are compared to the national average: one is above average (the municipality of Užice); one is between 80-100% (the municipality of Čajetina); two are underdeveloped, at 60-80% (Bajina Bašta and Požega); and one is below average (the municipality of Priboj). The structure of the economy is dominated by the industrial sector, with a preserved competitiveness of several successful companies, agricultural means of production, along relatively developed tertiary sector activities (trade, transportation, tourism, etc.) (NARS, 2013).
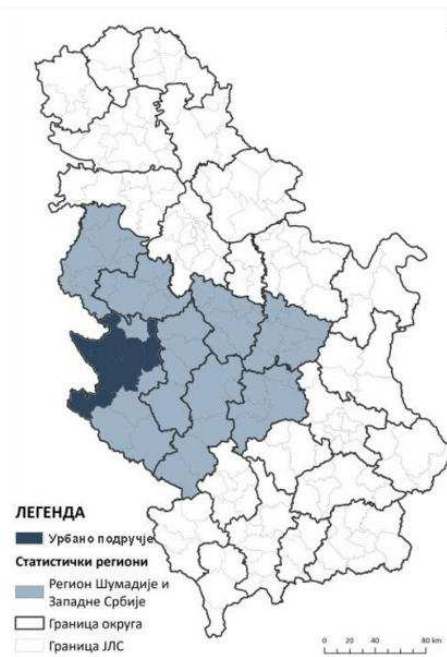
Fig. 1: The position of the targeted territory of five municipalities within Serbia and Western Serbia.

For the integrated territory of the five local government units (Fig. 1), a Development Strategy for the Urban Area has previously been adopted, which defines one of the thematic goals as "strengthening urban identity and the revitalization of the urban area by promoting sustainable and integrated urban development" (GOA, 2023). The Study of the Unique Identity of Urban Environments within the territory of the Development Strategy for Urban Area of Užice, Priboj, Bajina Bašta, Čajetina and Požega local government units (GOA, 2024-2025) elaborates on this goal through three phases/steps: 1) state-of-the-art analysis, 2) defining directions for action, and 3) gathering project ideas. All three phases include expertises from various areas of sustainable urban development and a participatory process. The introductory (zero) step, which is the subject of this paper, covers the initial considerations for the operationalization of the concept of urban identity in order to formulate methodological guidelines, approaches, and steps for the development of the Study.
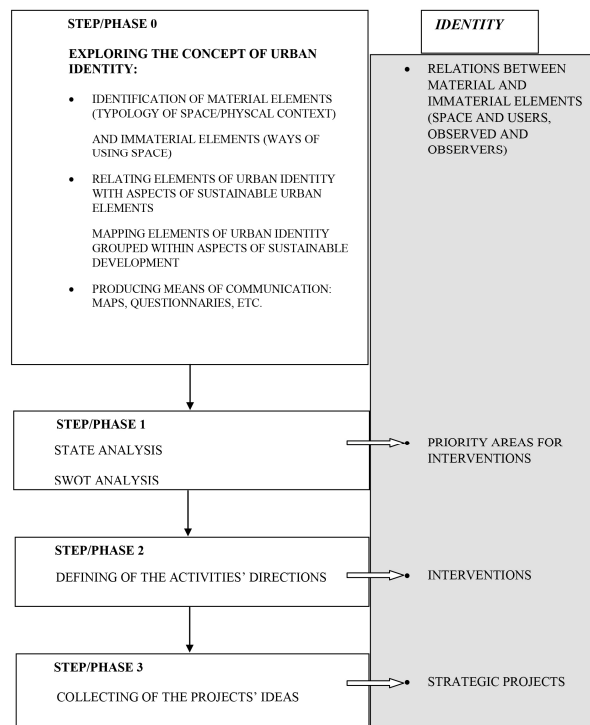

Fig. 2: Steps in the development of the urban identity study.

6.1 Operationalization of the Concept of Urban Identity

6.1.1 Identification of Identity Elements: Analytical Approach to the Complexity of the Concept

In this study, identity is viewed as a complex concept composed of material elements (aspects of the natural and built environment, systematized according to the scope and complexity of spatial organization) and immaterial elements (qualities of space that arise from its interaction with users: the way it is used, perceived, and experienced in real-time and historically) – Table 1. Identity is considered a dynamic concept that depends on the local context and is constructed through the creation of relationships between material (physical environment) and immaterial elements (forms of interactions between physcial environement and users).

Material elements	Immaterial elements
Natural Heritage - City in nature – natural environment and determinants - Nature in the city - Routes – connections between settlements Architectural Heritage (including cultural heritage under institutional protection) - Archaeological sites - Industrial and military heritage - Modern heritage (socialist and post-socialist) - Monuments - Fountains - Bridges - Public and shared spaces - Squares - Plazas - Passages - Urban pockets - Streets and sidewalks - Roof terraces - Shared courtyards - Shared spaces in buildings - Vernacular - Private houses and buildings - Public buildings - Municipality - Library - Theatre - Gallery - Museum - Bus station - Railway station - Stadium - Educational institutions - Nursing homes etc. Partially Built and Unbuilt Areas - Unbuilt land within construction areas - Landfills and waste sites - Agricultural land and farms/land for urban farming - Infrastructure corridors	Activities - Housing - Commercial and Production - Education - Culture - Sports and recreation Urban History, Memory, and Perception - Notable personalities - Significant events - Urban landmarks - Meeting places/points, hubs - Places of memory/demolished buildings, etc., oriental past, etc. - Everyday routes/paths - Everyday routines/walks, gatherings, etc. - Vistas and viewpoints/within the settlement, from the settlement to the surroundings, from the surroundings to the settlement - Connection with the wider environment Intangible Cultural Heritage (according to official classification, whether or not under institutional protection) - Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a bearer of intangible cultural heritage - Performing arts - Social practices, rituals, and festive events - Knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe - Traditional craftsmanship

Table 1: Material and immaterial elements of urban identity

6.1.2 Positioning Identity Elements within the Framework of Sustainable Development: Analytical Approach to Multifacetdness of the Concept:

To connect the elements of identity with aspects of sustainable development and to engage the professional capacities of the 18-member IAUS working team in the study's preparation, the following aspects of identity in the context of sustainable development were defined: regional, urban, environmental, social, economic, and governance aspects.

- Regional Aspects: Considers demographic changes, relationships between settlements, infrastructural corridors, and the functional integration of the territory.

- Urban Aspects: Include architectural heritage, including immovable cultural heritage under institutional protection; design guidelines and rules in urban planning documents; the use and performability of public spaces; safety and accessibility of public spaces; the usage modalities of

buildings by function and housing; and the use of shared spaces with a particular focus on multi-family residential buildings.

- Environmental Aspects: Include nature in the city, greenery, water, landscape design, and climate change; natural heritage and tourism infrastructure; waste management and municipal services; environmental quality aspects; underutilized land, agricultural land, urban agriculture, and the circular economy.

- Social Aspects: Manifested through social well-being and the availability and quality of public services.

- Economic Aspect: Refers to recognizing the territory's potential in terms of economic development, employment, and innovation.

- Urban Governance Aspects: Relate to multi-level governance, inter-municipal cooperation, co-creation, participation, and innovative civil governance systems.

Cartographic analyses and presentations of the aspects and factors of identity are important tools for communication throughout the participatory process thoughout all phases of the Study's preparation. On the maps of regional and urban levels, the elements of urban identity have been mapped according to the classification in Table 1 and then linked to the aspects of sustainable development of the territory (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Workshop in one of the municipalities (Bajina Bašta). Discussing and mapping.

6.1.3 Participatory Process: Analytical Approach to the Dynamism of the Concept

In line with previous research, the concept of urban identity is dynamic depending on time and observers. By applying a dialectical approach to the analysis of existing elements of urban and physical structures, permanent elements are identified, which testify to the continuity of the existence of settlements and territories, as well as changing elements. Permanent elements are designated as urban landmarks and may or may not be declared cultural heritage sites.

Another powerful tool for addressing the dynamism of the concept is the participatory process, which involves workshops (Fig. 3), surveys, and various forms of communication with a wide range of stakeholders: representatives of local governments, public enterprises, professionals from various fields, especially architects, urban planners, and ordinary citizens.

The foundation for applying participation and co-creation in the development of the Study lies in the theoretical premises of collaborative planning, where participation is based on the belief that social groups

and individuals are capable of learning from one another, and that this knowledge has a positive impact on problem-solving and defining frameworks for activities in space. The main characteristic of these ideas is the view of planning/governance as an active process in which social meanings emerge through discussion, and where social (including professional) practice is formed and gains legitimacy (Healey, 2003).

Planning for sustainable and integrated urban and territorial development involves action, not just a response to problems – it provides a framework for activities. When conducted in a participatory manner, it can contribute to developing the knowledge and relations between actors, fostering joint reasoning, organizing around common issues, and formulating ideas on how to improve the space (Čolić et al., 2021).

In all stages of the development of the Study, a series of events and thematic workshops are organized. Their goal is to transparently and participatively verify, supplement, and rephrase the results of research on the identity of the territory and individual areas, define action directions, and gather project ideas. Informing the broader public about the participatory process of developing the Study is carried out through local media, municipal web portals (Fig. 4), and the Zlatibor Regional Development Agency, as well as social networks used for promoting the project.
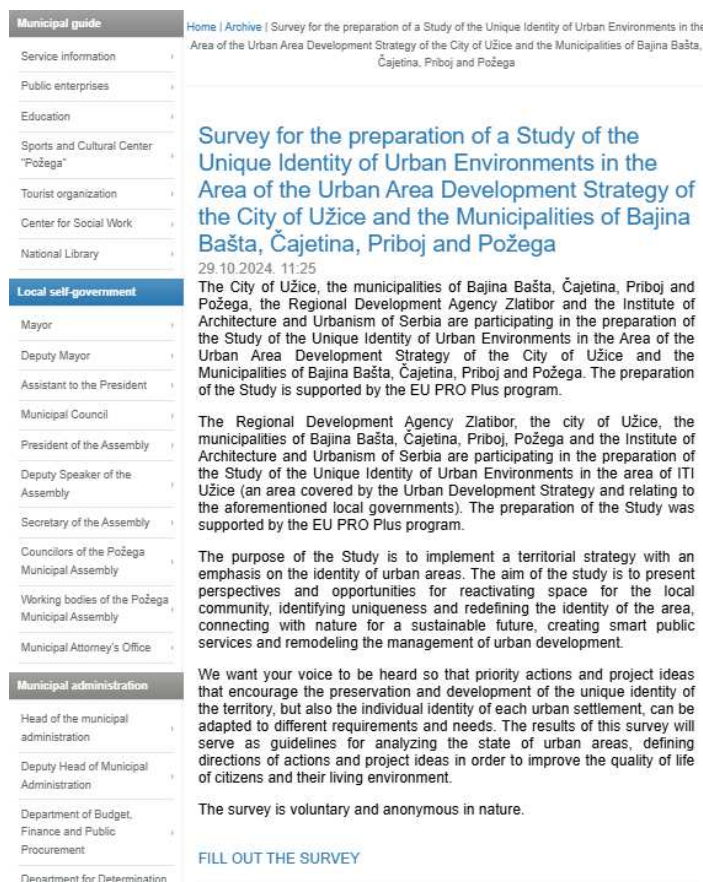

Fig. 4: The survey for citizens "Let Your Voice Be Heard!" on the municipality of Požega's web portal.

7 CONCLUSION

The concept of urban identity has a significant role in strategies for sustainable and integrated urban development. This role is particularly important for the development of small and medium-sized cities, both in the European Union and in Serbia – for their strategic positioning in balanced territorial development and for strengthening territorial and social cohesion (Table 2).

As stated, the urban identity is a complex, multifaceted and dynamic concept that requires an analytical, multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach, which is also place-based, i.e. conditioned by physical context (Table 3). The synergy of all these approaches produces a conceptual framework for structural thinking and decision-making, which can be aligned with sustainable development aspects.

In the case of the Study on the Unique Identity of Five Municipalities in Western Serbia, the applyied methodology has raised awareness among all participants about the important elements of urban identity that

should be protected and/or used as a trigger for development projects. It has also enhanced the capacitites of local government units to improve strategic thinking, balance between conservation and development, and introduce planning guidelines based on existing territorial and human capital. The up-to-date workshops have shown a lack of awareness among participants regarding the common identity of the entire territory, mostly due to poor traffic connectivity, socio-economic challenges, and territorial polarization. In the next steps of the tudy, by introducing the five key thematic fields of sustainable development – rediscovering uniqueness, reactivating spaces for local communities, reconnecting with nature, reinventing smart public services, and remodelling governance and partnerships (EC, 2023) – a futher wide debate will be opened. This debate should result in specific strategic projects tailored for applying financing instruments, aiming at the creation of sustainable, inclusive, and vibrant urban environments.

Document	Main points relevant for the urban identity concept
The New Urban Agenda (UN, 2017)	Relating transformative commitments to sustainable development with: spatial organization, structure and arrangement of urban space; urban form; architectural design; urban planning.
The Territorial Agenda of the European Union until 2030 (EC, 2020)	Refers to the regional level and advocates for territorial cohesion and the use of the specificities/diversities of places (natural and built, with territorial capital and identity) as a comparative advantage and development potential.
The New Leipzig Charter (EC, 2020)	Refers to the urban level and advocates a place-based approach, which involves recognizing the transformative potential of European cities – small, medium, and large – through their diversity.
The Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia (NARS, 2010)	Developing cultural identity and territorial recognizability; strict adherence to the protection of public interest, public goods, and public spaces; improving and protecting natural and cultural heritage as development resources.
The Law on Planning and Construction (NARS, 2009-2023)	Public participation; Preservation of customs and traditions; Preservation of environmental values, integrity, and the uniqueness of landscapes; Horizontal and vertical coordination.
The Sustainable Urban Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030 (NARS, 2019)	Strengthening the identity of urban areas by defining priority areas for urban intervention, identifying development issues, and linking them to specific locations.
The National Architectural Strategy for the period 2023-2035 (NARS, 2023)	Architectural heritage as one of the most important aspects of cultural identity and heritage of a state and its people; a key factor in the economic development and achieving higher quality of life.

Table 2: The role of the urban identity concept in the recent European and national documents.

The key determinants of the urban identity concept	A conceptual tool for exploring the urban identity concept in sustainable development
Complexity	Analytical decomposition of the concept into material and immaterial elements.
Multifacetdness	Multidisciplinary approach – observing the urban identity concept from various aspects of sustainable development.
Dynamism	Multi-stakeholder approach through various channels of communication and participation processes.

Table 3: Analytical approaches to complexity, multifacetdness and dynamism of the urban identity concept.

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