JULY 2025

ECOCORE QUARTERLY REPORT

CONTENTS

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth quarterly report of the URBACT funded EcoCore network!

The focus of work for these nine small European cities, all located in strategic transport corridors is to learn together and from each other, how best to accelerate the green transition in the industrial areas of their cities.

Led by Fingal County Council, Dublin the consortium also includes Dubrovnik, Ormož, Alba Iulia, Kekava, Santo Tirso, Pärnu Linnavalitsus, Villena and Tuusula.

EcoCore aims to build the capacity of small cities to address the major challenge of climate change by pursuing a green economy agenda, helping local stakeholders, particularly enterprises to transition to low-carbon economic activities, especially in their choices of energy sources for transportation, heating and electricity.

Network activities will create significant momentum for a green energy transition, especially in the work environments of the industrial areas of the partner cities

Thematic Focus

The network has identified five main transition drivers or areas where the network partners can facilitate, enable and promote the green transition in their cites, namely:

1 Planning & Development for Green Industrial Transition

2 Developing and nurturing the Innovation Ecosystem in support of the Green Transition

3 The Municipality as Green Transition leader

4 Supporting the Green Transition skills pipeline

5 Branding and Marketing

Thematic Focus

The following diagram showcases some transition driver practical examples that were identified in the partner cities. A more extensive list or 'menu' of transition drivers in each partner city is included in the appendix.
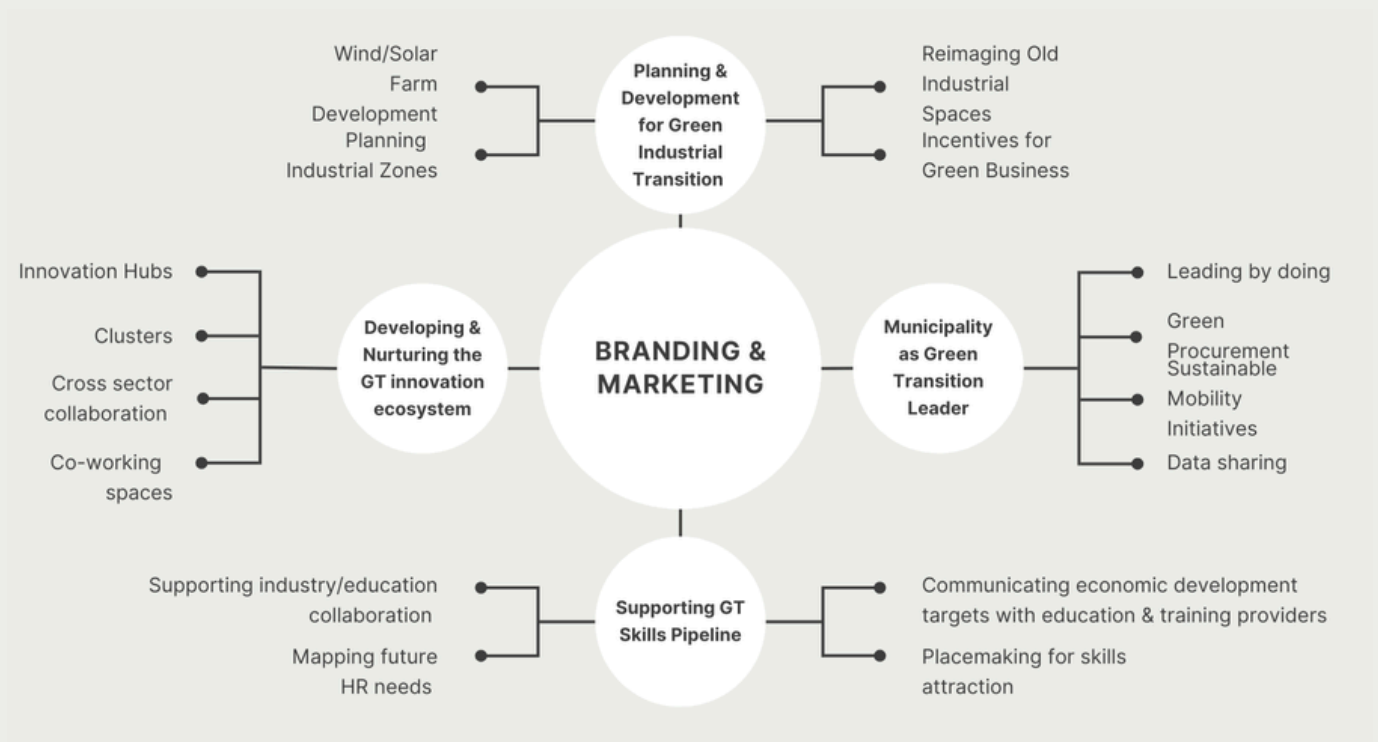

Figure 1: EcoCore Green Industrial Transition Drivers Locally

These five transition drivers represent the key themes of our network. A Core Network meeting will be held in each of the partner cities. These meetings will provide an opportunity to reflect on these topics and showcase inspiring local initiatives within these overarching themes.

EcoCore Network Highlights

Key Insights from Alba Iulia

From 19–22 May 2025, the EcoCore network convened in the historic and forward-looking city of Alba Iulia, Romania. Known as a "city of firsts," Alba Iulia served as an ideal setting for a Core Network Meeting packed with learning, inspiration, and collaborative momentum. Below is a detailed overview of the insights, experiences, and key moments that shaped this transformative meeting.

1	Alba Iulia – A Pioneer of the Green and Smart Transition

Alba Iulia's journey over the past 15 years has been defined by strategic vision, bold leadership, and effective use of over €350 million in EU funding. Participants saw first-hand how these investments have transformed the city into a national leader in urban innovation:

- Smart Mobility Initiatives: The city now boasts 300 smart bikes, 40 electric buses, and 18 km of dedicated bus lanes. These are supported by a smart traffic management centre, 95 surveillance cameras, and real-time mobility data integration.
- Sustainable Infrastructure: Through large-scale building retrofits and the creation of a municipal energy platform, Alba Iulia is reducing emissions while preparing for future local energy communities.
- Tourism Transformation: The city's Destination Management Organisation (DMO), linked with its role as the European Youth Capital 2026, is redefining the visitor experience.

The case studies relating to Smart Mobility and City Branding showcased in the following pages - offer concrete examples of how even medium-sized cities can lead major sustainability shifts.

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Green Transition in Small Cities along Transport Corridors

CASE STUDY

ALBA IULIA – SMART MOVES IN A SMALL CITY

Pioneering Sustainable Urban Mobility in Romania

Background

Alba Iulia, a city of just under 75,000 residents in central Romania, is often recognized for its historical significance - but it is also emerging as a modern leader in sustainable urban mobility. Despite its modest size, the city has implemented forward-thinking mobility infrastructure and digital innovation that position it as a replicable model for small and mid-sized cities across Europe.

Alba Iulia, a key member of the EcoCore network has aligned its mobility initiatives with broader green transition goals. The city is also a signatory of six Local Green Deals (LGDs), including two focused on mobility, with an emphasis on behavioural change, stakeholder data sharing, and system integration.

The Smart Mobility Strategy

The city launched a suite of sustainable mobility interventions between 2007 and 2025, funded largely through EU programs. Key elements included:

- 300 smart bikes provided as part of a public bike-sharing system.
- 40 electric buses integrated into the public transport fleet.
- 18 km of dedicated bus lanes developed to support reliable transit.
- 95 surveillance cameras to monitor traffic safety and flow.
- 45 upgraded bus stations with modern amenities.
- A centralized Smart Traffic Management Centre for dynamic route management, congestion monitoring, and public safety oversight.
- 3 intelligent solutions dedicated to payments in public transport, real-time info-panels, and an upgraded e-ticketing solution.

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The **EcoCore** Project

Green Transition in Small Cities along Transport Corridors

ALBA IULIA IS AMONG THE FIRST ROMANIAN CITIES TO ADOPT ELECTRIC PUBLIC BUSES ON A BROAD SCALE.

Innovation in practice

Outcomes and Benefits

- Improved air quality and reduced GHG emissions through fleet electrification and modal shift incentives.
- Enhanced public transport reliability and attractiveness, leading to a projected increase in ridership.
- Increased safety and user trust through smart surveillance and traffic control.
- Recognition as a national pioneer in smart mobility, aligned with the city's broader branding as Romania's first smart city.

Key Enablers

- Strong leadership by the municipality under the Alba Iulia Smart City program.
- Access to and effective use of EU funding, including cohesion and recovery programs.
- Participation in international networks such as URBACT's EcoCore and CityLogo.
- Engagement with local universities and business stakeholders for technical input and co-creation.

Lessons for Other Cities

- Small size is not a limitation. With vision and strategic funding, compact cities can be innovation leaders.
- Integration matters, mobility, data, energy, and citizen behaviour must be aligned.
- Pilot projects can scale, start with manageable components like smart bikes or targeted bus routes.

More Info Visit: www.proiecte.apulum.ro

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Key Insights from Alba Iulia

2	**A Branding Revolution: From "No One" to "The Other Capital"**

Led by Tudor Drâmbărean, the city shared its powerful rebranding journey that began in 2015. Embracing its rich cultural and historical heritage - including its three-century-old citadel - the city positioned itself as "The Other Capital" of Romania.

This effort has had measurable impacts:

- Increased tourism,
- Stronger local identity,
- Enhanced attractiveness for investors and students,
- International recognition, including accolades from Europa Nostra.

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ALBA IULIA – BRANDING THE "OTHER CAPITAL" OF ROMANIA

Unlocking Identity and Heritage to Compete Globally
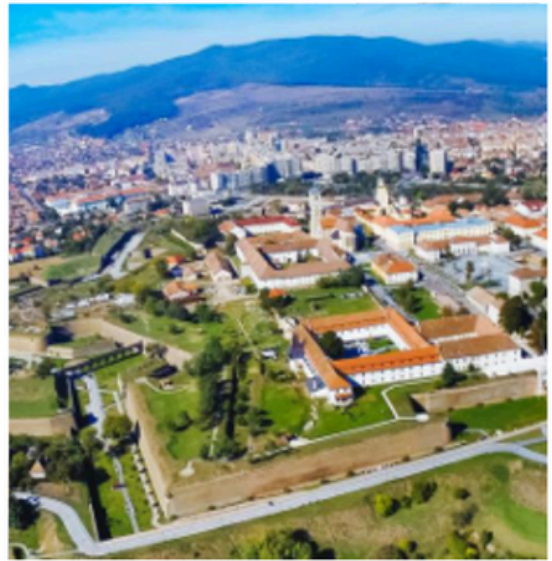
Background

As a city often overlooked due to its modest population (just under 75,000), Alba Iulia has redefined what it means to be competitive on a global stage. It emerged as a pioneer by launching Romania's first official city brand and one of the earliest branding strategies in Europe, starting in 2015.

Positioned in the heart of Transylvania, Alba Iulia historically served as a capital through various eras – Roman, medieval, ecumenical, and royal. However, its vast cultural and historical assets had remained underutilized until the municipality took a strategic decision to brand the city as "The Other Capital" of Romania.

The Branding Strategy

Rather than just a logo, Alba Iulia developed a full city identity strategy. The process involved:

- Recognizing the city's long-standing capital status over two millennia.
- Positioning the Alba Carolina Fortress—the largest in Romania—as a symbolic anchor.
- Crafting a narrative that highlighted multiple capital identities (Youth, Roman, Royal, Science, etc.).
- Leveraging EU heritage funding for fortress restoration.
- Celebrating major milestones like the 2018 Centenary of Romanian Unity, positioning the city as the cradle of national unity.

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"THE GREATEST CAPITAL YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF"

"ROMANIA'S OTHER CAPITAL"

Brand Taglines

The *Other* Capital of Romania

Innovations and Firsts

Alba Iulia became known not just for heritage but for innovation thanks in part to it's participation in URBACT's CityLogo project.

- First in SE Europe to have a World Bank strategic partnership.
- Introduced biofuel buses, free WiFi, smart tourism features, and a digital tourist welcome pack.
- Launched smart city initiatives well ahead of national peers.

Benefits

- Received EU awards (Europa Nostra, EDEN).
- Tourist numbers exceeded 500,000 in 2018.
- Became a leading EU example in city marketing.
- Attracted external investment and visibility, despite its size.
- Boosted local pride and unified stakeholders across public and private sectors.

Roles & Key Players

- Municipality-led initiative with support from EU funds and the World Bank.
- Strong leadership from city staff and political figures.
- Collaborative approach involving local tourism, business, and cultural institutions.

Lessons for Other Cities

- A compelling story can outperform population size in global visibility.
- Heritage can be repositioned as a modern identity driver.
- Bold branding requires long-term political will and community involvement.
- Small cities can lead national innovation in branding and smart governance.

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Key Insights from Alba Iulia

3   **Peer Review: Refining the IAPs**

A major component of the meeting was the Integrated Action Plan (IAP) Peer Review. Nine EcoCore cities presented their near-final IAP drafts and received structured feedback facilitated by URBACT expert Jose Costero.

Feedback focused on:

- Vision alignment and clarity,
- Stakeholder engagement and governance structures,
- Visibility of URBACT's added value,
- Action detail and financial realism.

The exchange was rigorous and practical, with cities committing to refining their sections ahead of final submission. The URBACT self assessment tool provided the basis for guiding the process, ensuring a thorough review of all the action plans.

Key Insights from Alba Iulia

4 **Challenge-Based Workshop: Fast-Paced, High-Energy Collaboration**

In a World Café format, partners tackled three key challenges provided by Alba Iulia's municipal team:

1.**How to empower vulnerable workers in the age of AI**
Proposals included AI literacy labs, "train the trainer" models, micro-accredited training, ethical tech design, and safe, inclusive innovation spaces.

2. **How to encourage sustainable mobility uptake**
Ideas ranged from "bike buses" for children, car-use disincentives, to creative commuting perks and social campaigns.

3. **How to boost overnight tourism around the Fortress**
Proposals included themed dinners, spa retreats, night-time programming, and cross-promotional packages with local heritage sites.

Each idea was documented and shared with the host city for follow-up, with many being transferable across the network.

Key Insights from Alba Iulia

5 **Site Visits: Local Solutions with Global Relevance**

After their hard work inside the meeting room partners had the opportunity to undertake a series of site visits including to the:

- **Delex Net-Zero Building:** A fully energy-independent office space using solar PV, batteries, and heat pumps.

- **Star Transmission Mercedes-Benz Facility in Sebeș:** An industry leader in embedding sustainability into automotive manufacturing.

- **Alba Iulia Fortress:** The heart of the city's tourism and identity strategy, now a living heritage hub.

These visits gave life to the policies and plans discussed during the meeting. Evenings were filled with cultural warmth and informal exchange. A guided tour of the illuminated citadel, traditional Romanian dinners, and local wine tastings provided the backdrop for meaningful conversations and strengthened relationships across the network.

Start, Stop, Continue Alba Iulia

Before departing the group participated in a "Start, Stop, Continue" exercise. This exercise encouraged partners to reflect on what they saw and learned over the past two days and to share with their peers in Alba Iulia, advice and feedback under the headings of things they should 'start' doing, 'stop' doing and 'continue' doing.

STOP

Over-Reliance on the Citadel

- Stop focusing exclusively on the Citadel; Alba Iulia is a beautiful city with many other attributes worth promoting.
- Avoid restricting branding opportunities to just the Citadel or allowing private business branding to dominate its space.
- Refrain from selling unrelated items like Pokémon merchandise in historic areas.

Car Dominance & Urban Design

- Stop allowing cars everywhere, especially in the city centre.
- Eliminate free car parking and reduce parking availability in central areas.
- Avoid placing bike lanes on footpaths.
- Limit traffic lanes in the inner city to encourage alternative transport modes.

START

Tourism & Promotion

- Promote Alba Iulia & Transylvania more actively in international markets, especially in countries with direct flights.
- Leverage the powerful image of Transylvania & the Dracula brand through storytelling & creative marketing.
- Expand the city's brand to target wider audiences and international visitors.
- Develop joint tourism packages with neighbouring regions
- Identify and promote attractions beyond the Citadel to offer a more diverse visitor experience.
- Embrace river-related tourism and activities.
- Develop a waterpark or spa, for family tourism.

Cycling & Mobility

- Promote cycling through public incentives and partnerships with private companies.
- Install bike parking at key destinations.
- Organise cycling events or competitions.

CONTINUE

EU Projects & Governance

- Managing EU funds efficiently
- A strong municipal team dedicated to EU projects & the Green Agenda.
- Leading & participating in EU projects, showcasing Alba Iulia's proactive stance.
- Electing visionary local leaders (smart presidents).

Urban Development & Sustainability

- Support sustainable mobility & green infrastructure
- Improving the city's green areas (parks, trees), including night-time watering.
- Promoting the city's unique brand and identity to attract visitors and residents.
- Improve public access to the Citadel

Community & Hospitality

- Nurture hospitality, food culture & welcoming vibe
- Encourage experimentation and learning from it
- Keep lively atmosphere with events & activities
- Celebrate local culture and embrace a European identity.

16

EcoCore Podcast Series

In the autumn EcoCore partners will record a five -part series of podcasts. This will constitute the network's final product. The series will share real stories from our partner cities who are transforming their industrial areas into spaces of opportunity, innovation, and resilience.

Each episode dives into a key theme of the green transition - from building green skills to redesigning public services, from test actions to cross-border partnerships.

With voices from local leaders and changemakers, the podcast will highlight not just the what, but the how - the practical steps, challenges, and breakthroughs shaping Europe's greener future from the ground up.

Episode 1 – Why Small Cities, Why Now?
We will reflect on why small cities are stepping up to lead the green transition and why early action matters.

Episode 2 – Skills for the Future
We will look at how cities are preparing their people and economies for green jobs and inclusive growth.

Episode 3 – Leading the Green Transition
We will be talking about how small cities are using planning, innovation, and public leadership to drive sustainability.

Episode 4 – Beyond Borders
We will look at the power of collaboration across sectors and regions to build critical mass and lasting impact.

Episode 5 – The Future of Small Cities in a Green Europe
This will consist of partner reflections, takeaways, and a bold look at what's next for small cities as green transition leaders.

Keep an eye on our social media channels to catch the recordings and be inspired by our EcoCore cities who are shaping their own futures one action at a a time.

Next Steps

Coming up in quarter three of 2025, partners will be busy recording the podcast series in early September.

Partners will also come together for the final EcoCore meeting in Dubrovnik at the end of September. This will be the last official meeting of EcoCore partners. It will be an opportunity to share the final draft of IAPs and plan for their implementation.

In addition, partners will have an opportunity to visit good practices in Dubrovnik and participate in a challenge based workshop to support the host partner with idea generation in response to series of locally identified challenges.

From October to December partners will plan and host local IAP launch events and prepare with local stakeholders for the implementation phase of their action plans.
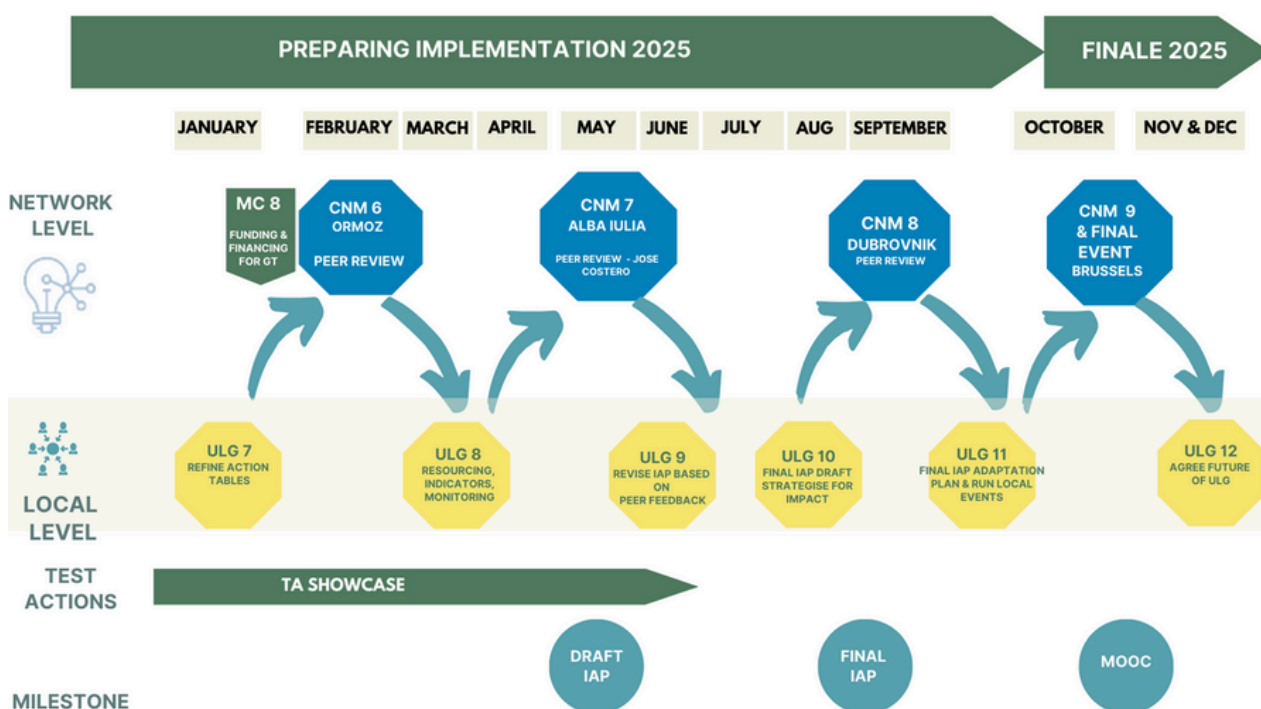
Appendix 1: Menu of Transition Drivers

	1: Planning & Development For Green Industrial Transition	2: Developing & Nurturing the innovation ecosystem in support of GT	3: Municipality as GT Leader	4: Supporting the GT skills pipeline	5: Branding & Marketing
Balbriggan	• Economic Corridor Strategy (Governance Model) • Digital solutions driving green transition	• Women in business network • Creative Innovation Hub	• Our Balbriggan Rejuvenation Strategy - Public engagement and community led local development • Reducing car dependency, promoting behavioural change for sustainable transport measures	• Enterprise & Training Centre • Skills strategy • Facilitating engagement between industry and education providers	

	1: Planning & Development For Green Industrial Transition	2: Developing & Nurturing the innovation ecosystem in support of GT	3: Municipality as GT Leader	4: Supporting the GT skills pipeline	5: Branding & Marketing
Pärnu	• Metsa Plywood Manufacturing – digital transition supporting efficiency • Biofuel and Hydrogenvalley • Pärnu city general planning • Off-shore wind farm development	• E-residency, entrepreneurship ip supports • Local infrastructure round table • Developing an innovation ecosystem (incl. clubs, tubes & biobooster hackathons) • Co-working & incubator spaces • Women's business network	• Green urban development (car dependency reduction measures, housing construction policy, cycle way/roads policy, parks, biogas buses, methane extraction from landfill etc).	• Facilitating engagement between industry and education providers,	• Local DMO (Destination Management Organisation) • Green Destination • Visit Estonia • Green Key

1: Planning & Development For Green Industrial Transition	2: Developing & Nurturing the innovation ecosystem in support of GT	3: Municipality as GT Leader	4: Supporting the GT skills pipeline	5: Branding & Marketing
Tuusula				
• Scoping study: What businesses to target for the Circular industrial area • Regulations & incentives to enhance circular economy activities • Involving other strategic groups not directly involved in ULG • Logistics company seeking to become net zero • Facilitating heated discussions (campfire) in the planning of industrial spaces	• Citizen & stakeholder participation methods: Participatory budgeting, hackathons • Logistics industry of 100 companies, business network with 440 companies • Several nationally significant logistics companies	• Calculating carbon emissions of municipality purchases; adopting new procurement criteria, with incentives for tenderers to lower emissions. • How to plan for district heating from the outset, example of redistribution of datacentre heat to local houses selling excess heat to network • Investing in education, playgrounds, housing fair, quality of life	• Education possibilities locally about responsible leadership, circular economy, and green transition • Using organic and locally sourced food	• Supporting tourism businesses to become carbon neutral & achieve Sustainable Travel Finland certification. • Joint commercial marketing campaign with 10 municipalities: Helsinki Ring of Industry • Co-operation with airport network and airport logistics • Taking care of well-being and nature brand despite strong industrial development

1: Planning & Development For Green Industrial Transition	2: Developing & Nurturing the innovation ecosystem in support of GT	3: Municipality as GT Leader	4: Supporting the GT skills pipeline	5: Branding & Marketing
Kekava				
• Green Renaissance of old Industrial Spaces - museum railway on a former peat extraction bog • Showcasing progress towards more sustainable business using the case study: Kekava Poultry Plant	• Showcasing Riga Tech Girls (Encouraging women's participation in STEAM)	• Kekava – A cycle friendly city • Lessons from URBACT APN Agents of Co-Existence (social innovation & inclusion in local government) • Culture & creativity as economic drivers (forest gallery) • Public utility company using more sustainable energy sources for heat (e.g. wood chips, solar.)		

	1: Planning & Development For Green Industrial Transition	2: Developing & Nurturing the innovation ecosystem in support of GT	3: Municipality as GT Leader	4: Supporting the GT skills pipeline	5: Branding & Marketing
Santo Tirso	• Fast tracking and incentivising industrial development • Fábrica Santo Thyrso • Support for mobility plans in industrial zones	• Incubation and matchmaking programme in Fábrica ST • Presence and operation of textile cluster • Culture of efficient collaboration between public, private and academic sectors	• Municipality walking the talk (local food sourced for canteen, local market promotion etc) • Sustainable mobility initiatives (intermodal ticketing, e-bikes, cycleways, collaboration with rail company and other municipalities)	• Invest Santo Tirso employee allocation and reallocation programme)	• International marketing of the city to industry
Alba Iulia	• Solar PV powering industrial zone • 40% of industrial land must be constructed (not e.g. car park)	• Student Climathon	• Energy poverty mapping • Sustainable and additional mobility initiatives • Renewable Energy solutions for the swimming pool • Digitisation of the planning system	• Mapping HR needs & machinery needs of companies for next 5 years • Dual Education campus project	• City branding
Villena	• Planning of the logistics dry port through multi-level governance collaboration • Solar farm development & biodiversity side by side		• Car dependency reduction measures • Cycle lane network • EU projects supporting local policy objectives	• Skills forward planning & integration of logistics in local educational offering	

	1: Planning & Development For Green Industrial Transition	2: Developing & Nurturing the innovation ecosystem in support of GT	3: Municipality as GT Leader	4: Supporting the GT skills pipeline	5: Branding & Marketing
Ormož	• Green Renaissance of old Industrial Spaces - creating space for nature, citizen awareness & ecological tourism • Green infrastructure development in new business zone • Planning the transformation of a disused claypit to new green industrial zone • Managing industrial development near Natura 2000 sites	• Business incubator - multi-level support for young entrepreneurs, both in terms of know how and the possibility of using offices for business development. • Municipal funding calls for tenders to help start-ups, sole traders, employment and various investments in equipment • Municipal scholarships for students	• Circular Repair Café & employment of people far from the labour market • Slovenia's most bee friendly municipality • Migrant Integration Programmes (Ormož People's University)	• Mapping the needs of entrepreneurs, companies and future entrepreneurs to support the green transition skills	• Sustainable Tourism Certification

	1: Planning & Development For Green Industrial Transition	2: Developing & Nurturing the innovation ecosystem in support of GT	3: Municipality as GT Leader	4: Supporting the GT skills pipeline	5: Branding & Marketing
Dubrovnik	• Green Port infrastructure (LEDs & remote app., e-cars & bikes, recycling, e-infrastructure installation) • Green Renaissance of old Industrial Spaces - creating space for citizen participation: TUP • Park'n' Ride & Multi-Modal Integration as tools to relieve traffic • Green Infrastructure: Parks development & upgrade contribute to the city's green vision	• Port collaboration with university, air quality dashboard, seabed impacts etc. • City grants to support women entrepreneurs • RemoteIT APN	• Digital mobility solutions e.g., parking app • Respect the City • Plastic Smart Cities - Action plan: The City of Dubrovnik as the first Croatian Plastic Smart City (from 2020) ; Action Plan to reduce plastic pollution in the city of Dubrovnik	• Plastic Smart City Dubrovnik: Green hospitality workshop - focused on ways of environmentally responsible action in the hospitality sector, with an emphasis on composting and reduction of single-use plastics; Aimed at catering and hospitality students	• Plastic Smart City

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Acknowledgements

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