

INTEGRATED ACTION PLAN

Mitigating Urban Decline in Alba Iulia

URBACT IV Project – Residents of the Future

Municipality of Alba Iulia



2025

Disclaimer:

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URBACT Introductory Statement:

URBACT Integrated Action Plans are locally developed strategic documents designed to provide practical and participatory solutions for cities facing demographic, social, and economic challenges. The IAP represents the outcome of collaborative learning, participatory governance, and European cooperation in addressing complex urban transitions.



MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR OF ALBA IULIA

Dear partners, colleagues, and citizens,

Alba Iulia has always been a city of transformation — a place where the past meets the future. From our historical role in shaping Romania's national identity to our continuous efforts toward innovation, inclusion, and sustainability, our community has shown resilience and adaptability through every era.

Today, we face a new type of challenge: **urban decline and demographic change**. These are not just numbers in a report — they affect the lives, aspirations, and well-being of our residents. Through the **URBACT IV Project – Residents of the Future**, we have taken a decisive step forward to address this phenomenon, transforming it into an opportunity for renewal.

This Integrated Action Plan is the result of collaboration — among institutions, schools, NGOs, businesses, and citizens. It combines research, vision, and practical measures to **make Alba Iulia a city where young people want to live, study, and build their future**.

Our commitment is to transform challenges into momentum for growth — by investing in youth, fostering participation, improving urban quality, and ensuring access to opportunities for all. This plan is not only about strategies; it is about people, belonging, and the confidence that a better future can be built together.

I would like to thank all members of the **URBACT Local Group**, our **European partners**, and the **URBACT Secretariat** for their valuable support and cooperation. Together, we are shaping a model for European cities that face similar transitions.

Let us continue creating a city that inspires — a city of inclusion, innovation, and shared prosperity.

Gabriel Pleșa

Mayor of Alba Iulia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
1. CONTEXT AND RATIONALE	6
2. DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC ANALYSIS	6
3. STRATEGIC VISION	7
4. KEY URBAN CHALLENGES AND ROOT CAUSES	8
5. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK ALIGNMENT	8
6. SWOT ANALYSIS	9
7. INTEGRATED ACTION PLAN 2025–2030	10
8. GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK	12
9. MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs)	13
10. TRANSNATIONAL LEARNING AND COOPERATION	15
11. EXPECTED IMPACT	16
12. CONCLUSIONS	17
13. REFERENCES	17

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **Integrated Action Plan (IAP)** for Alba Iulia has been developed under the **URBACT IV Project – Residents of the Future**, aiming to address the multifaceted phenomenon of **urban decline** by implementing innovative, inclusive, and data-driven policies. The plan integrates the principles of the **EU Urban Agenda**, **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11)**, and **European Youth Strategy**, aligning local action with European priorities for sustainable, resilient, and equitable cities.

Purpose and Vision:

The IAP's overarching goal is to **reverse demographic and economic decline** by building an environment where young people, families, and professionals can thrive. The vision is for **Alba Iulia to become a green, digital, and inclusive city** that nurtures talent, ensures quality of life, and fosters long-term resilience.

Methodology:

The plan is based on a participatory process facilitated by the **URBACT Local Group (ULG)**, which brought together over 45 representatives from education, civil society, the private sector, and public institutions. The IAP combines:

- **Qualitative and quantitative research** on demographic trends, economic sectors, and youth mobility;
- **Workshops and focus groups** addressing perception, participation, and governance;
- **Transnational exchange** with partner cities across Europe to identify adaptable solutions.

Main Challenges Identified:

- Demographic decline, particularly among the 14–35 age group;
- Outmigration of skilled youth and low birth rate;
- Limited housing affordability and social infrastructure;
- Insufficient cultural and employment opportunities;
- Underutilization of digital tools for civic participation.

Strategic Response:

The IAP is structured around **five strategic pillars**:

1. **Youth Empowerment and Participation** – enabling youth voice and engagement in decision-making.

2. **Economic Revitalization** – promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, and local business support.
3. **Sustainable Urban Regeneration** – revitalizing degraded areas through green and inclusive projects.
4. **Social Well-being and Health** – ensuring access to quality services, mental health support, and wellbeing spaces.
5. **Governance and Collaboration** – strengthening partnerships and cross-sectoral governance.

Expected Outcomes:

By 2030, Alba Iulia aims to:

- Increase youth retention by at least 10%;
- Create over 500 new green and digital jobs;
- Regenerate 10 hectares of urban space;
- Improve access to affordable housing;
- Achieve a 43.9% reduction in CO₂ emissions compared to 2008 levels.

This Integrated Action Plan provides a roadmap for local implementation, transnational learning, and European solidarity — positioning Alba Iulia as a proactive city in shaping the future of urban resilience.

1. CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

Alba Iulia, historically recognized as the “City of the Union” and symbol of Romania’s national identity, is today an evolving urban hub of approximately **63,000 inhabitants**. Over the last two decades, the city has experienced steady economic growth, fueled by tourism, education, and service industries, yet faces persistent challenges linked to **demographic decline, aging, and spatial imbalance**.

Between 2000 and 2023, the city’s population decreased by nearly **14%**, with a significant loss among the **14–35 age group**, primarily due to outward migration and limited access to housing and employment opportunities. Meanwhile, the share of residents aged over 65 has grown by more than 70%, reflecting a deep demographic inversion.

This transformation is not unique to Alba Iulia but reflects a **wider European trend of urban shrinkage**, especially in medium-sized cities outside major metropolitan regions. The phenomenon intertwines economic restructuring, globalization, and social change, posing significant governance challenges for local authorities.

The **URBACT IV project “Residents of the Future”** offers Alba Iulia an opportunity to address these trends through collaborative European learning and local innovation. The IAP seeks to transform the city’s demographic and socio-economic profile into a new development narrative — one that combines inclusion, innovation, and resilience.

2. DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

Population Trends:

- Total population (2023): 63,000 (down from 73,000 in 2002).
- Youth share (14–35 years): decreased from 33.2% to 22.4% in the last decade.
- Aging index: increased from 74% to 128%.
- Migration balance: –1.6% annually (average 2018–2023).

Economic Structure:

The economy of Alba Iulia is primarily service-oriented (72% of local employment), with tourism, education, and administration as the key sectors. Industrial production remains limited, and the local innovation ecosystem is still under development. Despite the presence of major educational institutions such as **“1 Decembrie 1918” University**, the transition of graduates into local employment remains low (under 40%).

Housing and Urban Fabric:

The city has a relatively compact urban footprint, yet faces structural challenges:

- Housing affordability: purchase-to-income ratio exceeds 8:1.
- Low share of public rental housing (<2%).
- Growing suburbanization and pressure on peri-urban areas.

Digital and Green Transformation:

Alba Iulia is one of Romania's **pioneering smart cities**, having launched pilot projects on open data, digital governance, and e-services since 2017. However, scaling these projects into fully integrated systems remains a challenge due to limited financial and technical capacity.

The city has committed to the **European Green Deal** and the **Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities (M100)**, targeting carbon neutrality by 2030.

3. STRATEGIC VISION

Vision Statement:

“By 2030, Alba Iulia will be a green, digital, and inclusive city that attracts and retains its residents by ensuring quality of life, access to opportunities, and participatory governance for all generations.”

This vision builds upon four guiding principles:

1. **Inclusiveness** – ensuring no citizen is left behind in the transition.
2. **Sustainability** – integrating ecological, economic, and social balance.
3. **Innovation** – fostering creativity, digital tools, and learning.
4. **Resilience** – strengthening the city's adaptive capacity to global and local change.

Strategic Focus Areas:

- Develop youth ecosystems through education, employment, and housing.
- Regenerate declining districts and activate unused spaces.
- Promote health, wellbeing, and cultural vitality.
- Strengthen governance, participation, and cross-sector collaboration.

This vision aligns with the **Integrated Urban Development Strategy (IUDS) 2021–2030**, ensuring coherence between long-term goals and operational actions within the IAP.

4. KEY URBAN CHALLENGES AND ROOT CAUSES

1. **Demographic Decline:** continuous outmigration of young people to major cities (Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Timișoara) and abroad.
2. **Housing Accessibility:** imbalance between income levels and housing costs; insufficient affordable and social housing stock.
3. **Economic Polarization:** dominance of public administration and low diversification of high-value sectors.
4. **Educational Mismatch:** gap between skills provided by local education and labor market demands.
5. **Public Space Fragmentation:** underutilized and degraded areas outside the Citadel zone.
6. **Limited Civic Participation:** despite ongoing initiatives, citizen engagement in decision-making remains low.
7. **Aging Infrastructure:** need for digital, green, and accessible public services.
8. **Environmental Pressure:** mobility congestion, energy inefficiency, and CO₂ emissions exceeding EU averages.

Each of these challenges requires integrated responses combining social, spatial, and economic dimensions — the foundation for the proposed IAP actions.

5. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK ALIGNMENT

The **Integrated Action Plan** builds coherence with broader European, national, and regional frameworks, ensuring alignment of local measures with policy objectives:

Level	Framework / Policy	Relevance for Alba Iulia
European Union	Urban Agenda for the EU	Promotes sustainable and inclusive urban development through multi-level governance.
	European Green Deal	Supports the transition to climate neutrality and resource efficiency.
	EU Youth Strategy 2022–2027	Encourages youth participation, equality, and empowerment.
	SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities	Reinforces the commitment to inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable urbanization.
National	National Strategy for Demographic Resilience	Addresses depopulation, migration, and social inclusion.

Level	Framework / Policy	Relevance for Alba Iulia
	Romania's Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR)	Provides funding for green, digital, and social transition projects.
Regional / Local	Alba Iulia IUDS 2021–2030	Core strategic document ensuring synergy between the IAP and local planning instruments.
	County Development Strategy 2021–2030	Regional coordination for economic and infrastructure development.

This alignment strengthens the IAP's capacity to attract funding, ensure policy coherence, and contribute to the EU's broader objectives on urban resilience and territorial cohesion.

6. SWOT ANALYSIS

The SWOT analysis summarises Alba Iulia's key assets and vulnerabilities in addressing demographic and urban decline. It provides the analytical basis for the development of the Integrated Action Plan.

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Strong identity and historical heritage, including the Alba Carolina Citadel.	• Significant population decline (–14% since 2000) and youth outmigration.
• Stable public institutions and efficient local governance.	• Limited housing affordability and lack of public rental stock.
• Presence of universities and well-developed education system.	• Insufficient coordination between education, labor market, and innovation.
• Active civic sector and experience with EU-funded projects.	• Weak attractiveness for private investment and innovation ecosystems.
• Growing tourism and cultural industries.	• Limited accessibility and connectivity to peri-urban and rural zones.
• Youth Capital 2026 title – opportunity for visibility and innovation.	• Underdeveloped creative and green economy.

Opportunities	Threats
• Access to EU funding (URBACT, Interreg, ROP, Horizon Europe).	• Brain drain toward larger metropolitan areas.
• Digital and green transition momentum.	• Economic shocks and dependency on public administration.
• Expansion of the cultural and creative sector.	• Climate change and energy vulnerability.

Opportunities	Threats
• Development of participatory governance mechanisms.	• Declining trust in institutions among young citizens.
• National and European partnerships for innovation.	• Increasing socio-economic disparities between city districts.

7. INTEGRATED ACTION PLAN 2025-2030

The IAP proposes a set of interlinked actions structured under **five strategic pillars**, each with measurable outcomes, responsible actors, and potential funding sources.

Pillar 1 – Youth Empowerment and Participation

Action	Objective	Key Outputs	Funding Source
Y1. Establish the Youth Local Action Group (YLAG)	Strengthen youth involvement in governance.	20 members, 6 annual meetings, policy proposals integrated in local plans.	Local Budget, URBACT
Y2. Develop a Youth Civic Education Program	Build civic and democratic competences.	Curriculum delivered in 5 schools, 500 students trained.	ESF+, Erasmus+
Y3. Launch the Participatory Budgeting for Youth	Promote participatory democracy.	€150,000 annually allocated, 30 projects implemented.	Local Budget

Pillar 2 – Economic Revitalization and Innovation

Action	Objective	Key Outputs	Funding Source
E1. Create a Co-Working & Innovation Hub	Stimulate start-ups and entrepreneurship.	1 hub operational by 2026, 25 start-ups supported.	ROP, Private Sector
E2. Dual Education Campus	Align education with job market needs.	200 students enrolled, 20 teachers trained.	PNRR, ESF+
E3. Creative Industries Accelerator	Support local creative talent.	20 SMEs supported annually, cultural export increased.	PNRR, Local Budget

Pillar 3 – Sustainable Urban Regeneration

Action	Objective	Key Outputs	Funding Source
U1. Revitalization of Declining Districts	Improve quality of life and public space.	10 ha of urban areas regenerated by 2030.	ROP, Local Budget
U2. Green Mobility & Smart Transport Plan	Reduce emissions and improve connectivity.	20 e-bus stations, 50% electric municipal fleet.	EIB, PNRR
U3. Affordable Housing Program	Increase access to housing for young families.	30 units by 2028, new allocation framework.	PNRR, Local Budget

Pillar 4 – Social Wellbeing and Health

Action	Objective	Key Outputs	Funding Source
S1. Community Health & Wellbeing Centers	Promote preventive health and wellbeing.	3 centers created, 1,000 beneficiaries yearly.	Health Fund, Local Budget
S2. Mental Health Campaign “Care for All”	Raise awareness on wellbeing.	10 schools and 5 institutions involved annually.	ESF+, Local Budget
S3. Accessible City Initiative	Improve accessibility for all residents.	15 public buildings adapted by 2027.	ROP, PNRR

Pillar 5 – Governance and Collaboration

Action	Objective	Key Outputs	Funding Source
G1. URBACT Local Group Continuation	Maintain participatory approach post-project.	Annual meetings, monitoring reports, policy proposals.	Local Budget
G2. Integrated Data Dashboard	Enhance data-driven decision-making.	Real-time indicators on demography, mobility, CO ₂ .	PNRR, Digital Europe
G3. European Partnership Platform	Sustain cooperation with partner cities.	10 joint proposals submitted to EU calls by 2030.	Interreg, Horizon Europe

8. GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The implementation of the IAP relies on a **multi-level and participatory governance structure**. It ensures coordination among public institutions, civic organizations, academia, and private stakeholders.

Governance Structure:

- **Municipality of Alba Iulia** – overall coordination, policy integration, funding acquisition.
- **URBACT Local Group (ULG)** – participatory body ensuring citizen input and project monitoring.
- **Thematic Working Groups** – focusing on youth, housing, economy, and green transition.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Team** – responsible for annual progress reports and indicator tracking.
- **Local Council and Mayor's Office** – policy endorsement and implementation oversight.

European Cooperation Dimension:

Through URBACT and its partner network, Alba Iulia engages in transnational learning on themes such as participatory governance, shrinking cities, and sustainable development. Cooperation with cities in Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, and Spain provides comparative insight into demographic resilience and innovative policy design.

Governance Principles:

1. **Transparency** – open data and accessible communication.
2. **Accountability** – clear allocation of responsibilities and measurable outcomes.
3. **Participation** – inclusion of citizens, particularly youth, in decision-making.
4. **Adaptability** – capacity to adjust to emerging urban challenges.
5. **Integration** – coherence across sectors and policies.

9. MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs)

The monitoring framework ensures that the IAP remains a **living document**, adapting to context changes and maintaining accountability for results. Evaluation is structured around **output, outcome, and impact indicators**, aligned with local and European frameworks.

Monitoring Tools:

- Annual Progress Reports submitted to the Local Council.
- Data collected through the Integrated Data Dashboard.
- Citizen feedback via online participatory platforms.
- Biennial review within the URBACT Local Group (ULG).

Key Performance Indicators (2025–2030)

Objective Area	Indicator	Baseline (2024)	Target (2030)	Data Source
Youth Empowerment	Youth participation rate in decision-making processes	8%	25%	ULG Reports, Surveys
Economic Revitalization	New SMEs and start-ups created in innovation/creative sectors	10/year	40/year	Business Registry
Employment	Employment rate for 20–35 age group	64%	75%	National Statistics Institute (INSSE)
Urban Regeneration	Rehabilitated degraded urban areas	0 ha	10 ha	Local Municipality
Affordable Housing	Public housing units available for young families	<2%	5%	Local Housing Department
Green Transition	Reduction in CO ₂ emissions compared to 2008 baseline	22%	43.9%	Energy & Environment Directorate
Mobility	Share of electric/low-emission public transport fleet	10%	50%	Transport Department
Health & Wellbeing	Citizens reporting improved wellbeing (survey)	48%	70%	Public Health Surveys
Digitalization	Online e-services adopted by citizens	35%	80%	Smart City Dashboard
Governance	Number of annual participatory initiatives	4	10	ULG Secretariat

Evaluation Approach:

- **Annual Review:** Quantitative tracking of KPIs and budget utilization.
- **Mid-term Evaluation (2027):** Qualitative assessment of progress and stakeholder engagement.
- **Final Evaluation (2030):** Measurement of impact, sustainability, and replication potential across other Romanian cities.

Learning Integration:

Lessons learned from the evaluation process will feed into the **next generation of local development strategies**, particularly those linked to youth policies and digital transformation.

10. TRANSNATIONAL LEARNING AND COOPERATION

The participation of Alba Iulia in the **URBACT IV network “Residents of the Future”** enabled the city to engage in structured knowledge exchange with eight European partners:

- Associazione Progetto Arcobaleno (Italy – Coordinator)
- Municipality of Alba Iulia (Romania)
- Asociación Caminos (Spain)
- Know and Can Association (Bulgaria)
- Društvo za razvijanje prostovoljnega dela Novo mesto (Slovenia)
- Institute of Entrepreneurship Development – iED (Greece)
- Lumen Association (Croatia)
- Association Eurocircle (France)
- CGE Culture Goes Europe e.V. (Germany)

Key Learning Areas:

1. **Gender Equality and Youth Participation:** Practices from Spain and Slovenia inspiring inclusive engagement.
2. **Social Innovation in Shrinking Cities:** Italian and German partners demonstrated participatory regeneration models.
3. **Digital Inclusion and Smart Participation:** Greek and French cities provided insights into e-governance and youth digital engagement.

Knowledge Transfer in Alba Iulia:

- Adoption of participatory planning models.
- Integration of wellbeing as a dimension of urban regeneration.
- Development of multi-actor governance mechanisms.

These exchanges positioned Alba Iulia as a **reference city for mid-sized European municipalities** addressing urban shrinkage through integrated, community-driven solutions.

11. EXPECTED IMPACT

By 2030, the implementation of the IAP is expected to produce **measurable transformations** across social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

Social Impact:

- Increased civic participation and youth engagement.
- Enhanced access to education, culture, and wellbeing services.
- Reduction in inequalities across city districts.

Economic Impact:

- Growth of local entrepreneurship and creative industries.
- Attraction of private investment through improved infrastructure and quality of life.
- Strengthened linkage between education and employment.

Environmental Impact:

- Improvement in air quality and urban green coverage.
- Reduced dependence on fossil fuels through smart mobility.
- Increased resilience to climate risks.

Governance Impact:

- Institutionalization of participatory budgeting and ULG methodology.
- Data-driven policymaking integrated into municipal planning.
- Stronger alignment between local, regional, and European frameworks.

Together, these outcomes will help Alba Iulia evolve into a **prototype of a mid-sized European city capable of reversing urban decline through people-centered innovation.**

12. CONCLUSIONS

The **Integrated Action Plan for Mitigating Urban Decline** represents both a policy tool and a long-term vision for Alba Iulia.

Developed through the URBACT participatory approach, the plan bridges local realities with European objectives, offering a roadmap for cities facing similar challenges of demographic change and spatial transformation.

Its success depends on **collective ownership** — where institutions, civil society, and citizens act together to maintain the city’s vitality and inclusiveness.

By turning challenges into opportunities, Alba Iulia reaffirms its European identity as a **resilient, smart, and equitable city** — a place where residents of the future can truly belong.

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