

Abstract

This paper explores the pioneering experience of the City of Niš in conducting the first Voluntary Local Review (VLR) in Serbia during 2023–2024, marking a significant step towards localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a post-transition urban context. The VLR evaluated 26 indicators across 12 SDGs, providing a structured assessment of the city's progress and establishing a framework for translating global sustainability agendas into local development priorities. As Serbia's inaugural VLR, the initiative offers valuable lessons on how municipalities in post-socialist settings can integrate international sustainability standards into local planning and decision-making processes.

The research analyses the institutional and methodological processes behind the preparation of the VLR, including data collection, indicator selection, interdepartmental coordination within the local administration, and stakeholder engagement. Particular attention is given to the role of the VLR as a governance mechanism that enables municipalities to translate global sustainability goals into locally measurable development priorities.

The case of Niš is situated within the broader context of regional disparities and development challenges in Serbia and the Western Balkans, where post-socialist institutional legacies, uneven economic development, demographic decline, and limited local data capacities continue to shape territorial development outcomes. In this context, voluntary reporting mechanisms such as VLRs represent an emerging tool for strengthening evidence-based policymaking and improving coordination between local development strategies and global sustainability agendas.

By examining both the governance and analytical dimensions of the VLR process, the paper identifies key opportunities and limitations of SDG localisation in post-transition urban contexts. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening local data systems, institutional coordination, and multi-level governance in order to address territorial inequalities and support more inclusive and sustainable development pathways.

Finally, the paper reflects on how the experience of Niš can inform the development of more structured analytical frameworks for monitoring and evaluating SDG implementation at the local level, contributing to broader debates within regional science on place-based development and territorial governance.

Keywords: Voluntary Local Review (VLR), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Local governance, Territorial inequalities, Post-transition urban development, Evidence-based policy