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COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AND URBAN ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY: EVIDENCE FROM EU-FUNDED URBAN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between collaborative governance and administrative capacity in implementing EU-funded urban development projects in Romania. It compares six municipalities - Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Craiova, Baia Mare, and Galați - selected because each is confirmed, by direct extraction from the European Commission's Kohesio database, to be the beneficiary of a substantial, multi-project Cohesion Policy portfolio in its own right. The analysis prioritises direct, official sources (Kohesio, Regulations on Organisation and Functioning, Council decisions and mayoral dispositions, census data) over indirect ones (press coverage, reported statements), and states explicitly, source by source, which tier each claim rests on. Two composite, exploratory indices - a Collaborative Governance Index (CGI) and an Administrative Capacity Index (ACI) - are constructed from qualitative evidence, while a Fund Absorption Rate (FAR) is calculated directly from Kohesio's EU-contribution-per-capita figures for all six cities on a single consistent basis. The findings show that richer collaborative-governance ecosystems and more developed administrative infrastructure generally coincide with stronger EU fund mobilisation, but the relationship is not linear: the city with the richest collaborative ecosystem ranks only second-lowest on per-capita fund mobilisation, while a low-ranking city on governance ranks second on FAR. Set against a literature that studies administrative capacity mainly at national or regional level, the article's main contribution is empirical and methodological rather than theoretical: a transparently sourced, city-level test of how collaborative governance and administrative capacity relate to EU fund mobilisation in a Central and Eastern European member state, illustrating a source-hierarchy approach that later, larger comparative work could extend beyond Romania.

Keywords: collaborative governance; urban development; EU funds; network governance; administrative capacity.

JEL Classification: H70, H83, O18, R58, F55.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cities are increasingly confronted with complex and interrelated challenges resulting from the pre-existing urban vulnerabilities. At the same time, they must navigate profound technological transformations associated with data-driven governance, artificial intelligence, fifth-generation (5G) communication technologies, the Internet of Things (IoT), and other digital innovations, while continuing to deliver essential municipal services such as waste management, street maintenance, and recreational and sporting activities. In response to these multifaceted pressures, many cities have established multilevel stakeholder networks to design and implement resilience and smart city policies that can address increasingly complex governance demands. These collaborative governance arrangements extend beyond the urban public administration to encompass a diverse range of actors, including private sector organisations, non-profit organisations, citizen groups, and foundations. However, despite the growing reliance on networked forms of policymaking, governance structures have not evolved at the same pace. Although urban public administrations are increasingly adopting collaborative and network-based approaches, the development of the administrative capacities required to effectively coordinate, manage, and sustain these complex stakeholder networks remains a significant challenge.

Urban governance is inherently shaped by the complexity of cities as socio-technical systems and by the political processes through which they are managed. In response to the interconnected challenges of climate change, digital transformation, and urban sustainability, public administrations across the world are increasingly adopting resilience and smart city strategies while establishing new institutional arrangements. These policy agendas are intrinsically cross-cutting, requiring collaboration across multiple sectors and stakeholders, while simultaneously challenging the traditional Weberian model of hierarchical public administration.

These institutional developments reflect an ongoing transition toward more reflexive forms of governance. The concept of reflexivity provides a useful lens for understanding governance approaches that seek to address "social-ecological vulnerabilities, flawed conceptualisations of human-nature relations, fragmented governance regimes, and the conditions necessary for sustainability transitions" (Feindt and Weiland, 2018, p. 661). Such governance arrangements are particularly relevant in addressing wicked problems, whose complexity exceeds the problem-solving capacity of conventional bureaucratic structures. Consequently, urban public administrations increasingly incorporate innovative

governance approaches, including social innovation and collaborative governance mechanisms.

Within urban contexts, innovation is predominantly procedural rather than technological, focusing on the processes through which diverse stakeholders participate in the co-design, co-creation, and co-production of public policies and services (Lodge and Wegrich, 2014). From this perspective, innovation represents an institutional problem-solving capacity that can be examined through the policy instruments embedded within governance regimes (Normandin *et al.*, 2019). However, considerably less attention has been devoted to the administrative capacities required to sustain these innovations. As Lodge and Wegrich (2014) argue, the relationship between policy instruments and administrative capacity is reciprocal: policy instruments require specific combinations of administrative capabilities, while successful innovation depends upon the existence of organisational capacities capable of supporting their implementation. Consequently, discussions of governance innovation must extend beyond the design of policy instruments to encompass the administrative capacities necessary for their effective execution.

Despite the growing emphasis on collaborative governance, urban public administrations continue to bear primary responsibility for policy implementation. Nevertheless, the co-creation of policies frequently overlooks the institutional and administrative capacities required to translate collaborative initiatives into effective practice. Municipal administrations increasingly operate under conditions characterised by expanding responsibilities, fiscal constraints, and limited organisational resources, reflecting broader processes of state hollowing at the urban scale. In this context, collaboration with external stakeholders often emerges as a pragmatic response to capacity deficits rather than solely as a normative commitment to participatory governance.

This dynamic presents an important governance challenge. In pursuing collaborative innovation, urban public administrations risk diminishing their role as the central coordinating actor within governance networks, potentially underestimating both their authority and their responsibility for ensuring coherent policy implementation. Addressing this challenge requires developing robust capacities for network governance, including the ability to coordinate heterogeneous actors, align institutional capacities with policy objectives, establish implementation mechanisms, and facilitate boundary-spanning activities that strengthen collaboration across organisational and sectoral divides. Such capacities are essential if collaborative governance is to move beyond policy design and deliver effective and sustainable implementation outcomes.

This article aims to investigate how collaborative governance, the structured coordination of public, private, academic, and civil-society actors around shared development goals, relates to the administrative capacity of Romanian municipalities to design, attract, and implement EU-funded urban development

projects. It compares six cities confirmed, through direct extraction from Kohesio, to be substantial beneficiaries of Cohesion Policy funding in their own right: Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Craiova, Baia Mare, and Galați. Direct official sources are prioritised throughout over press coverage or reported statements, and each statement is labeled by level of evidence. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and states the research gap. Section 3 sets out a governance - capacity - performance conceptual framework. Section 4 describes the research design, data sources, and index construction. Section 5 presents the profiles of the six cities analyzed in the study. For each city, the analysis is supported by two illustrative composite assessments: the Collaborative Governance Index (CGI) and the Administrative Capacity Index (ACI). The section concludes with a comparison of the cities, based on data directly extracted from the Kohesio database and the resulting FAR indicator, followed by a summary of the CGI, ACI, and FAR scores for all six cities. Section 6 discusses the results, and Section 7 concludes with theoretical and policy implications.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Collaborative Network Governance. The growing body of research on collaborative governance has consistently emphasized the value of collaboration in addressing complex public policy challenges (Chandler, 2018). Public organizations have long engaged in partnerships with a wide range of actors, albeit with varying degrees of success. Consequently, identifying the conditions that foster effective collaboration has become a central concern within the collaborative governance literature (Huxham, 2003; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Torfing, 2019). Existing scholarship suggests that successful collaboration depends on both the design and quality of the collaborative process itself and the broader institutional and governance context within which collaboration occurs, with these dimensions reinforcing one another (Emerson *et al.*, 2012). For instance, the circumstances under which stakeholders are convened influence collaborative dynamics, including participant commitment, governance structures, and leadership arrangements (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015). Collaborative governance regimes may emerge voluntarily among stakeholders or be externally convened in response to particularly complex policy challenges requiring coordinated action (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015). Nevertheless, empirical evidence remains limited regarding cases in which urban public administrations deliberately employ collaborative network governance as an implementation mechanism for addressing wicked policy challenges such as climate adaptation, urban resilience, or digital transformation.

A foundational contribution to this literature is the collaborative governance model proposed by Ansell and Gash (2008), which identifies *starting conditions* as critical determinants of collaborative performance. These conditions comprise three interrelated dimensions: existing power and resource asymmetries among

stakeholders, incentives for participation, and the history of prior interactions, whether characterised by cooperation or conflict. Power imbalances may constrain meaningful participation by less-resourced actors, particularly where technical expertise or sustained engagement is required. Such disparities can reinforce distrust, facilitate strategic manipulation by dominant stakeholders, and ultimately weaken collective commitment (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Participation incentives are similarly important, as stakeholders evaluate collaboration according to their anticipated costs and benefits. One of the strongest incentives arises from perceived interdependence, whereby stakeholders recognise that collective action offers greater potential for addressing shared challenges than unilateral efforts. Although previous conflicts may complicate collaboration, evidence suggests that, in the context of highly interdependent wicked problems, historical tensions do not necessarily preclude the development of productive collaborative relationships (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

The collaborative process itself has been conceptualised both as a sequence of developmental stages (Madden, 2017) and as a cyclical process characterised by continuous interaction and adaptation (Huxham, 2003; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Chandler, 2018). Despite these conceptual differences, the literature broadly converges around five reinforcing elements that sustain successful collaboration: face-to-face dialogue, trust building, commitment to the collaborative process, the development of shared understanding, and the achievement of intermediate outcomes. Direct interaction facilitates communication and enables stakeholders to negotiate differences more effectively, thereby establishing the foundation for collaborative relationships (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Trust, in turn, emerges gradually through repeated interactions and is essential for maintaining long-term stakeholder engagement, although it remains vulnerable to organisational turnover and changes in individual representatives (Huxham, 2003). Stakeholder commitment depends not only on trust but also on procedural fairness, transparency, and equitable participation, fostering the recognition that negotiated collective action offers the most effective pathway toward shared objectives (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Shared understanding develops through agreement on both common goals and the knowledge required to address complex policy issues, while intermediate achievements or "small wins" reinforce trust and commitment throughout extended collaborative processes.

Administrative capacities. EU Cohesion Policy is the largest supranational instrument financing urban development in Europe; for many municipalities, especially in less-developed regions, non-reimbursable European funding is one of the principal sources of local capital investment (Marcu, Kandzija, and Dorotic, 2020). Cities increasingly face interconnected challenges - climate adaptation, digital transformation, and social inclusion that push Cohesion Policy towards integrated, place-based, multi-level approaches (Van der Zwet *et al.*, 2017).

A recurring puzzle in this literature is that cities facing broadly comparable rules and allocations achieve markedly different implementation outcomes. Financial availability alone is not a sufficient explanation; administrative capacity, governance quality, and inter-organisational collaboration are increasingly treated as decisive intervening variables (Bachtrögler-Unger, 2024; Bachtler *et al.*, 2024), alongside the related but distinct notion of absorptive capacity, a territory's overall ability to use the funds allocated to it (Santos, Conte, and Molica, 2025).

The relationship between Cohesion Policy implementation and local governance capacity has been approached from several angles, read here as complementary layers of one question: why implementation performance varies so much across jurisdictions facing similar rules and allocations. Administrative capacity is a central explanatory variable in this literature, though its effects are heterogeneous across regions (Bachtrögler-Unger, 2024) and the concept itself remains under-theorised relative to broader institutional-quality measures (Bachtler *et al.*, 2024). A recent critique argues the concept is measured mostly through proxies, conflated with adjacent notions, and rarely examined below the regional level (Fratesi *et al.*, 2026) - a gap this article's city-level design addresses directly. A related but distinct concept, absorptive capacity, captures how programme design and territorial characteristics jointly shape the pace of spending (Santos *et al.*, 2025); for Central and Eastern Europe specifically, administrative capacity and institutional quality have been shown to shape Structural Funds absorption at national and regional level (Țigănașu, Încălțărău, and Pascariu, 2018), a finding this article extends to individual municipalities.

Collaborative governance treats an organisation's external relationships as a resource, tracing back to Ostrom's (1990) demonstration that self-organised institutions can govern shared resources without hierarchy or markets, and to Rhodes's (1996, 1997) account of governments increasingly steering rather than directly controlling policy delivery through networks. Provan and Kenis (2008) gave this a structure of shared, lead-organisation, and network-administrative-organisation governance modes; Healey (1997) and Agranoff and McGuire (2003) applied similar logic to planning and local economic development respectively. Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh (2012; Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015) synthesised this into contemporary collaborative-governance-regime theory, since applied to EU-funded urban regeneration to show collaboration can itself build local capacity rather than merely presuppose it (Bradley, Mahmoud and Arlati, 2022).

What happens when capacity and governance meet a specific policy instrument? Comparing delegation models in Scotland and Veneto, Polverari, Domorenok, and Graziano (2024) identify an “administrative capacity paradox” in which narrow delegation incentivises compliance but not durable capacity-building. The Institutional Collective Action framework asks a prior question treating

collaboration as a response to transaction costs that specific governance mechanisms can lower (Kim *et al.*, 2022); relatedly, Europeanization - the reshaping of domestic administrative practice through sustained EU engagement operates unevenly across member states and levels of government (Vichi, 2025), which matters for Romania's comparatively recent engagement with place-based instruments.

Indicator-based measurement of collaborative arrangements, meanwhile, remains an open problem even in more mature fields (Chapman *et al.*, 2024; Waardenburg, Groenleer and de Jong, 2025; Mahmoud *et al.*, 2025), motivating this study's exploratory framing of its own indices. Directly modelling the governance–capacity link, Zia ud din *et al.* (2023) find capacity-building mediates the relationship between collaborative governance and service delivery, while other evidence finds administrative capacity, not collaborative governance, significantly predicts outcomes in some sectors, a reminder that the relationship is conditional, not law-like.

What remains scarce, across all these strands, is comparative evidence at municipal rather than national or regional level. Romania is a useful test case precisely because its administrative-capacity constraints are well documented in the aggregate (Marcu, Kandzija and Dorotic, 2020; Țigănașu *et al.*, 2018) but rarely disaggregated to individual, actively performing cities; this article does that for six of them, prioritising direct official sources throughout, on a design set out next.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Beyond facilitating collective decision-making, collaborative governance generates what Huxham (2003) and Doberstein (2015) describe as **collaborative advantage**: outcomes that cannot be achieved by organisations acting independently. This advantage derives from the capacity of governance networks to co-produce knowledge, mobilise complementary resources, and coordinate diverse expertise in the pursuit of shared objectives. Achieving collaborative advantage, however, depends upon several interrelated governance conditions, including the articulation of common aims, the composition of network membership, the distribution of power, the development of trust, and effective leadership (Huxham, 2003). Because stakeholders frequently enter collaborative arrangements with divergent interests and limited prior experience of cooperation, establishing consensus on substantive goals may prove difficult. Under such circumstances, developing agreement on common practices and collaborative procedures may represent a more realistic and productive foundation for long-term cooperation.

Effective collaboration also requires institutional mechanisms capable of steering, coordinating, and sustaining network interactions (Doberstein, 2015). Institutional design contributes to procedural legitimacy by establishing transparent decision-making processes, governance rules, and accountability mechanisms (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Nevertheless, collaborative governance

frequently encounters ambiguity regarding stakeholder participation, role allocation, and organizational boundaries (Huxham, 2003). Since collaborative relationships often depend upon interpersonal interactions, governance networks remain inherently fragile and require continuous maintenance as participants, organizations, and institutional contexts evolve. Moreover, power within collaborative networks should not be understood as a fixed attribute possessed by a single actor but rather as a distributed and dynamic phenomenon. Huxham (2003) conceptualizes this as multiple "points of power," reflecting the shifting influence of actors throughout the collaborative process. Similarly, trust is not a precondition of collaboration but an outcome that develops incrementally through successful interactions, shared risks, and cumulative achievements (Chandler, 2018).

This perspective suggests that successful collaborative governance requires more than effective network design; it also depends upon the administrative capabilities necessary to manage the boundaries separating organizations, sectors, and knowledge domains. Urban public administrations often devote considerable attention to collaborative policy design while providing less explicit consideration of the boundary strategies and administrative capacities required to sustain implementation. Consequently, understanding how public administrations strategically develop these capacities becomes essential for explaining why some collaborative governance arrangements successfully translate collective intentions into practical outcomes while others do not.

The analysis organises evidence around a governance-capacity-performance model: collaborative governance (stakeholder engagement, inter-organisational cooperation, knowledge sharing) is treated as an antecedent that feeds into administrative capacity (planning, project management, resource mobilisation, institutional learning), which in turn shapes urban development performance, proxied here by EU fund mobilisation. This is a directional working hypothesis, not a tested causal chain: the design (Section 4) can establish whether the expected pattern holds across six cities, but cannot rule out reverse or reciprocal relationships.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1. Design and case selection

The study uses a comparative qualitative multiple-case design. The six cities - Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Craiova, Baia Mare, and Galați - were selected on a verifiable criterion: each is confirmed, by direct Kohesio extraction, to hold a substantial EU Cohesion Policy portfolio (44–69 projects; Table 13) in its own right, rather than selected on press visibility alone.

4.2. Data sources and source hierarchy

Evidence is drawn, in descending order of priority, from: (i) Kohesio project data, Regulations on Organization and Functioning (ROF), council decisions and mayoral dispositions, census and Eurostat data, and European Parliament/Commission reports (Tier 1); (ii) official but less granular municipal communications (Tier 2); and (iii) press coverage and reported statements (Tier 3). Each dimension was given a score per level.

The main data on which this study is based were extracted directly, manually for all six cities, this process validating and supporting the FAR component.

4.3. Measuring CGI, ACI, and FAR

The Collaborative Governance Index (CGI) and Administrative Capacity Index (ACI) are composite 0-100 scores built from five dimensions each, scored 0-4 points per dimension by a single coder without inter-rater reliability testing; both are illustrative, not validated instruments, and are not existing published metrics. FAR is calculated directly from Kohesio's EU-contribution-per-capita figures (Table 13), normalized to Oradea's figure (=100), and is materially more rigorous than CGI or ACI because it rests on a single consistent official source for all six cities; it captures municipality-beneficiary contribution specifically.

4.4. Limitations

The sample is too small for statistical inference; case selection, though Kohesio-verified, still favours active EU-fund users; scoring lacks a second coder; strategy documents (SIDUs and equivalents) are treated as a floor, not a ceiling, on each city's project portfolio; and most figures beyond FAR were only partially cross-checked against primary records such as ROFs and budget execution reports, a priority for follow-up work.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Oradea

With 65 projects confirmed in the Kohesio database for which the municipality is listed as beneficiary - covering the period from 27 January 2015 to 30 April 2029 and involving approximately €313.5 million in EU contribution - Oradea records the highest absolute figure in the sample and, when standardized by its comparatively small population, by far the highest per-capita figure (Kohesio, 2026). Oradea is also the most extensively documented city in administrative terms among those studied. Its Directorate for Internationally Financed Projects (DMPFI), established in 2008 with 25 sector-specialised staff, operates under a Regulation on Organisation and Functioning (ROF) that assigns Human Resources and Procurement services explicit EU-funds duties and names NGOs and universities among DMPFI's own external relations (Municipiul Oradea, 2021; Transilvania Business, 2025).

Table 1. Collaborative Governance Index (CGI) - Oradea

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Stakeholder Participation	3/4	Public–private partnership emphasis; no standing citizen-platform found.	T3
Institutionalized Collaboration	4/4	ROF: DMPFI must collaborate with “all directorates”; names NGOs/universities as external relations.	T1
Inter-organizational Networks	3/4	>€2.6bn combined public+private investment since 2008, mostly in aggregate.	T3
Strategic Coordination	3/4	Continuous engagement across 3 programming cycles (2007–2027), Kohesio-corroborated dates.	T1/T3
Knowledge Sharing & Learning	3/4	17 years of continuous sector-specialized staffing.	T3

Subtotal: 16/20 → CGI = 80

Table 2. Administrative Capacity Index (ACI) - Oradea

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Human Resources	4/4	DMPFI: 25 specialists; ROF confirms HR handles EU-project-team payroll.	T1
Organizational Structures	4/4	ROF: DMPFI's formal two-deputy-director structure, 18-yr history.	T1
Financial & Resource Mgmt.	4/4	Kohesio: 65 projects, ≈€313.5m EU contribution - highest in sample.	T1
Project Management	4/4	Kohesio confirms 65 projects; press: 58 implementing + 47 in evaluation.	T1
Institutional Learning	3/4	Multi-cycle continuity; less explicit “change” narrative than Cluj-Napoca.	T3

Subtotal: 19/20 → ACI = 95

5.2. Cluj-Napoca

Since 2017, Cluj-Napoca has run a standing participatory instrument, the Centre for Innovation and Civic Imagination, and was selected for the EU's 100 Climate-Neutral Cities mission through a process involving more than twenty local actors (Municipiul Cluj-Napoca, 2026a, 2026b). Its ROF assigns EU funds reporting jointly across “all the offices, services, and directorates” of the city hall (Municipiul Cluj-Napoca, 2026c), and a 2025 budget-execution surplus separately itemises non-reimbursable-fund income (Monitorul de Cluj, 2026). Yet the richest

collaborative-governance profile in the sample, 44 Kohesio-confirmed projects, ≈€187.5 million in EU contribution, translates into only the second-lowest FAR once standardised by population (Kohesio, 2026).

Table 3. Collaborative Governance Index (CGI) - Cluj-Napoca

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Stakeholder Participation	4/4	CIIC (since 2017), city-attributed to City Hall + Local Council jointly.	T2
Institutionalized Collaboration	4/4	Net Zero Cities consortium + Climate Coalition under CIIC, named partners.	T2
Inter-organizational Networks	3/4	Climate Action Plan: 20+ actors incl. 2 universities, clusters, metro area.	T2
Strategic Coordination	3/4	Metro Area independently rated among Romania's most active (IRPPS).	T2
Knowledge Sharing & Learning	3/4	World Bank input; EU city advisors; IT-cluster ties to Oradea/Alba Iulia.	T2

Subtotal: 17/20 → CGI = 85

Table 4. Administrative Capacity Index (ACI) – Cluj-Napoca

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Human Resources	3/4	Dedicated EU-funds department; no public headcount found.	T2
Organizational Structures	4/4	ROF: cross-departmental mandate - “all offices, services, directorates.”	T1
Financial & Resource Mgmt.	3/4	Kohesio: 44 projects, ≈€187.5m; budget-execution surplus itemizes EU funds.	T1
Project Management	3/4	Sustained portfolio 2014-2027; Climate Action Plan technical planning.	T2
Institutional Learning	4/4	Documented shift from top-down (2008-10) to participatory selection.	T3

Subtotal: 17/20 → ACI = 85

5.3. Timișoara

Timișoara's two universities anchor an internationally networked collaborative ecosystem - the West University's UNITA/GLUE alliance and the Politehnica University's partnership with NXP Semiconductors - alongside the mayor's repeated public emphasis on community partnership (Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara, 2026; Universitatea Politehnica Timișoara, 2026; Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2025a). Administratively, the picture is less settled: an April 2026 reform merged the city's project and economic directorates while

dissolving an underperforming sport/rail directorate, a live process whose outcome cannot yet be assessed (Stiridetimisoara.ro, 2026; Ecopolitica.ro, 2026). None of that unsettledness shows up in fund mobilisation - 64 Kohesio-confirmed projects, ≈€233.8 million in EU contribution, second-highest per capita in the sample.

Table 5. Collaborative Governance Index (CGI) - Timișoara

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Stakeholder Participation	3/4	Mayor repeatedly frames community partnership as central to the model.	T2
Institutionalized Collaboration	3/4	UVT coordinates GLUE/UNITA (13 partners, 5 countries) - university-led.	T2
Inter-organizational Networks	3/4	UPT-NXP Semiconductors PNRR-funded microelectronics partnership.	T2
Strategic Coordination	3/4	SIDU updated to incorporate County Council culture/heritage projects.	T3
Knowledge Sharing & Learning	4/4	Hosted “Cities Summit” + Moldovan delegation; university networks above.	T2

Subtotal: 16/20 → CGI = 80

Table 6. Administrative Capacity Index (ACI) - Timișoara

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Human Resources	3/4	Project Incubator Directorate (pre-2026 reform); no headcount found.	T2/T3
Organizational Structures	3/4	Apr. 2026: merged into Economic/Project directorate; a sibling unit dissolved.	T3
Financial & Resource Mgmt.	4/4	Kohesio: 64 projects, ≈€233.8m; city reports ≈€300m/4yr.	T1
Project Management	4/4	Kohesio-confirmed 64 projects; large concurrent multi-modal portfolio.	T1
Institutional Learning	3/4	Mayoral reflection on lessons learned; reform outcome not yet assessable.	T2/T3

Subtotal: 17/20 → ACI = 85

5.4. Craiova

The single most formally documented collaborative mechanism in the sample belongs to Craiova: “Structura de Guvernanță Craiova,” created by a numbered Mayoral Disposition (nr. 4946/13.10.2023) to select South-West Regional Programme projects, with named members including a County Council representative (Primăria Municipiului Craiova, 2023). The city is also one of the

four implementing their urban strategy through a capacity-building project based on a public consultation platform, *citadini.ro* (Primăria Municipiului Craiova, 2026). This institutional depth sits alongside a comparatively modest fund-mobilisation record: 49 Kohesio-confirmed projects, ≈€194.3 million in EU contribution.

Table 7. Collaborative Governance Index (CGI) - Craiova

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Stakeholder Participation	3/4	SIDU 2030 update runs a dedicated public-consultation platform (<i>citadini.ro</i>).	T1
Institutionalized Collaboration	4/4	Mayoral Disposition 4946/2023 creates named governance body incl. County Council rep.	T1
Inter-organizational Networks	3/4	County Council formally represented; University of Craiova a further anchor.	T1
Strategic Coordination	3/4	1 of 4 cities in a coordinated, ministry-run SIDU-update exercise.	T1
Knowledge Sharing & Learning	3/4	SIDU update explicitly aimed at capacity-building, shared across 4 cities.	T1

Subtotal: 16/20 → CGI = 80

Table 8. Administrative Capacity Index (ACI) - Craiova

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Human Resources	2/4	No specific EU-funds staffing figures found.	-
Organizational Structures	4/4	Mayoral Disposition is a formal act defining a named body and remit.	T1
Financial & Resource Mgmt.	3/4	Kohesio: 49 projects, ≈€194.3m EU contribution.	T1
Project Management	3/4	49 Kohesio-confirmed projects plus formal prioritization structure.	T1
Institutional Learning	3/4	Ministry-run, multi-city capacity-building project is itself an episode.	T1

Subtotal: 15/20 → ACI = 75

5.5. Baia Mare

Baia Mare's collaborative-governance evidence is sub-municipal rather than city-wide: elected neighbourhood civic councils and a citizen-consultation app (“iReport Baia Mare”) operate as standing services, alongside a stated goal of partnership with residents, business, and a Cluj-affiliated university branch campus (Municipiul Baia Mare, 2022, 2026b). What stands out is how little this

comparatively modest governance profile constrains fund mobilisation: 57 Kohesio-confirmed projects and $\approx$ €137.7 million in EU contribution - the largest ESF share in the sample - over a corrected 2021 census population of 108,759 (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2022) yield the second-highest FAR in the sample, behind only Oradea.

Table 9. Collaborative Governance Index (CGI) – Baia Mare

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Stakeholder Participation	3/4	Elected neighbourhood civic councils; “iReport Baia Mare” consultation app.	T2
Institutionalized Collaboration	3/4	Activity report: standing goal of partnership with residents, business, university.	T2
Inter-organizational Networks	2/4	Cluj Technical University branch campus (since 2012); little else found.	T2
Strategic Coordination	2/4	Metropolitan Area membership confirmed; little coordination detail found.	T2
Knowledge Sharing & Learning	2/4	No structured EU-funds knowledge-exchange mechanism found.	-

Subtotal: 12/20 $\rightarrow$ CGI = 60

Table 10. Administrative Capacity Index (ACI) – Baia Mare

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Human Resources	2/4	No specific EU-funds staffing figures found.	-
Organizational Structures	3/4	ROF/organigramă confirmed to exist (HCL 136/2025); full text not obtained.	T1
Financial & Resource Mgmt.	3/4	Kohesio: 57 projects, $\approx$ €137.7m, largest ESF share in sample.	T1
Project Management	3/4	$\approx$ €11.2m “Piața Universității” flagship corroborated by Kohesio count.	T1
Institutional Learning	2/4	No documented change-in-approach narrative found.	-

Subtotal: 13/20 $\rightarrow$ ACI = 65

5.6. Galați

Galați's distinguishing feature is STRATEGAL, a Local Action Group legally required by the EU's Community-Led Local Development instrument, bringing public, private, and civil-society partners together for thirteen marginalised urban zones (STRATEGAL, 2018); formal responsibility for EU-funded project reporting otherwise sits with the General Directorate for Infrastructure Development rather than a dedicated unit (Primăria Municipiului

Galați, 2026a). With 69 Kohesio-confirmed projects - the largest count in the sample - but only ≈€101.4 million in EU contribution, the lowest absolute and per-capita figure, Galați's portfolio looks built from many smaller, dispersed interventions rather than fewer, larger ones.

Table 11. Collaborative Governance Index (CGI) - Galați

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Stakeholder Participation	3/4	STRATEGAL SDL: multi-round public consultation required by EU CLLD rules.	T1
Institutionalized Collaboration	3/4	STRATEGAL is a legally constituted public-private-civil-society association.	T1
Inter-organizational Networks	2/4	Little evidence of networks beyond the STRATEGAL partnership itself.	-
Strategic Coordination	2/4	EU-projects transparency page exists; no city-wide SIDU-equivalent found.	T2
Knowledge Sharing & Learning	2/4	No mechanism found beyond the STRATEGAL partnership.	-

Subtotal: 12/20 → CGI = 60

Table 12. Administrative Capacity Index (ACI) - Galați

Dimension	Sc.	Evidence and source	Tier
Human Resources	2/4	Formal responsibility confirmed (Infrastructure Directorate); no staffing figures.	T2
Organizational Structures	3/4	Public-document register confirms Infrastructure Directorate as formal home.	T1
Financial & Resource Mgmt.	3/4	Kohesio: 69 projects (most in sample), ≈€101.4m (least in sample).	T1
Project Management	3/4	69 Kohesio-confirmed projects - largest count, many smaller interventions.	T1
Institutional Learning	2/4	No documented change-in-approach narrative found.	-

Subtotal: 13/20 → ACI = 65

5.7. Comparative overview

The data below were obtained through direct, manual, and interactive extraction from the Kohesio platform, using the beneficiary municipality as the search criterion; this method allows for the isolation of each municipality's project portfolio from projects implemented by county councils, universities, or hospitals located in the same city.

Table 13. Direct Kohesio Extraction and FAR Construction

City	Proj.	Budget (€)	EU contrib. (€)	Pop. 2021	€/capita
Oradea	65	388,641,725	313,485,892	183,105	≈1,712
Baia Mare	57	158,815,347	137,661,316	108,759	≈1,266
Timișoara	64	263,138,217	233,819,589	250,849	≈932
Craiova	49	213,168,106	194,306,076	234,140	≈830
Cluj-Napoca	44	219,804,135	187,534,163	286,598	≈654
Galați	69	122,513,976	101,430,741	217,851	≈466

Source: Institutul Național de Statistică, RPL 2021 (city-proper); Kohesio, 2026.

Note: FAR = each city's €/capita as a percentage of Oradea's (=100).

Table 14. CGI, ACI and FAR scores

City	CGI	ACI	FAR
Oradea	80	95	100
Cluj-Napoca	85	85	38
Timișoara	80	85	54
Craiova	80	75	48
Baia Mare	60	65	74
Galați	60	65	27

Source: CGI and ACI: authors' illustrative construction (Section 4.3). FAR: calculated directly from Kohesio EU-contribution-per-capita data for all six cities (Oradea = 100 reference).

FAR does not track CGI closely: Cluj-Napoca leads CGI but ranks second-lowest on FAR, while Baia Mare, among the lowest an CGI/ACI, ranks second on FAR. This divergence - not a design flaw - suggests collaborative governance and per-capita fund mobilisation are related but empirically distinct achievements, shaped partly by population size and portfolio composition rather than governance quality alone.

6. DISCUSSION

This article asked how collaborative governance relates to the administrative capacity of Romanian municipalities to design, attract and implement EU-funded urban development projects. It answered the question by comparing six cities - Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Craiova, Baia Mare and Galați - each confirmed by direct extraction from Kohesio to hold a substantial Cohesion Policy portfolio in its own right (44-69 municipality-beneficiary projects), and by reporting

separately a fund-mobilisation measure resting on a single consistent official source and two exploratory indices constructed from qualitative evidence. Three findings emerge. First, the cities with the most explicit administrative infrastructure are also those in which the link between documented capacity and documented collaboration is tightest: Oradea, with a directorate for internationally financed projects and a Regulation on Organisation and Functioning that assigns EU-funds duties to its human resources and procurement services, and Craiova, whose governance structure was created by a numbered mayoral disposition naming its members. Second, the expected ordering does not survive at the level of fund mobilisation: Cluj-Napoca, highest on the Collaborative Governance Index, ranks fifth of six on the Fund Absorption Rate, while Baia Mare, among the lowest on both indices, ranks second. Third, project counts and financial volumes diverge: Galați records the largest number of Kohesio-confirmed projects in the sample yet the lowest EU contribution in both absolute and per capita terms, a portfolio assembled from many small interventions rather than fewer large ones.

The second and third findings qualify the conceptual framework rather than confirm it, and part of that qualification is definitional. Because FAR is a per capita measure of municipality-beneficiary contributions, a smaller city converts a given portfolio into a higher score mechanically; Oradea's and Baia Mare's positions owe something to population size, and Cluj-Napoca's and Galați's to the reverse. What survives this qualification is narrower but firmer: within a set of six comparably active beneficiaries, differences in the density of collaborative arrangements do not order differences in per capita fund mobilisation. Collaborative governance and financial absorption are related but empirically distinct achievements, and a governance-capacity-performance model that treats the second as a proxy for the first will misread cases at both ends of the distribution.

Oradea and Craiova illustrate how explicit administrative infrastructure (a specialised directorate; a mayoral disposition creating a named governance body) coincides with strong outcomes, as Bachtrögler-Unger (2024) and Bachtler *et al.* (2024) would predict. Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara illustrate the collaborative-governance route, a standing participatory instrument and consortium in one case, university-led international partnerships in the other, consistent with Ansell and Gash (2008) and Zia ud din *et al.*'s (2023) mediation finding. Galați and Baia Mare show that EU-mandated or sub-municipal collaborative structures can exist and be well documented even where specialised administrative capacity is thinner, and that FAR can diverge sharply between similarly scored cities.

Read through Polverari *et al.*'s (2024) administrative capacity paradox and mixed evidence on the governance–performance link, this six-city comparison supports a relational reading of administrative capacity - partly internal (staff, procedures), partly a property of external relationships, and partly a matter of how far internal structures are organized to reach across departments, as Oradea's and Cluj-Napoca's ROFs and Craiova's mayoral disposition show directly. It does not

support a uniform, always-positive governance-to-performance link, and a six-city exploratory study cannot adjudicate how far that link generalises.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For municipalities, the Oradea and Craiova cases suggest that investment in administrative structures should be paired with the formal instruments that connect those structures to universities, businesses and civil society, and more specifically that assigning EU-funds duties to human resources and procurement services in the Regulation on Organisation and Functioning, rather than to a project directorate alone, is a low-cost design choice worth examining elsewhere. The present design establishes that this arrangement coincides with strong mobilisation in two cities; it cannot establish that it produces it.

For managing authorities and capacity-building programmes, the Galați profile argues for attention to portfolio composition and not only to project counts or absorption percentages. A city that mobilises many small operations may be demonstrating administrative persistence while remaining unable to assemble the larger integrated projects that place-based instruments are designed to fund, and the two situations call for different support.

For evaluation practice, the divergence between the governance index and FAR cautions against using per capita absorption metrics as stand-alone performance indicators, since they are sensitive to population size and portfolio composition before they are sensitive to governance quality. Monitoring of collaborative arrangements themselves remains underdeveloped (Chapman *et al.*, 2024; Waardenburg *et al.*, 2025), and would have to improve considerably before governance quality could serve as a programming criterion.

The findings support treating administrative capacity as a relational resource rather than a purely internal attribute, connecting collaborative-governance theory with Cohesion Policy research and motivating measurement below the regional level, as Fratesi *et al.* (2026) urge. Practically, they suggest investment in administrative structures should be paired with investment in the governance networks that connect those structures to universities, businesses, and civil society, alongside better monitoring of collaborative arrangements themselves (Chapman *et al.*, 2024; Waardenburg *et al.*, 2025).

These findings are hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory. Six cases selected on confirmed portfolio activity cannot support statistical inference, and the selection criterion excludes precisely the weakly absorbing municipalities against which the active cities would need to be compared. CGI and ACI are illustrative author constructions, scored by a single coder without inter-rater reliability testing, compressed in range and containing ties, so the ordering they yield should be read as a qualitative grouping rather than as a scale. Strategy documents were treated as a floor rather than a ceiling on each city's portfolio, and

most figures other than FAR were only partially cross-checked against Regulations on Organisation and Functioning and budget execution reports.

The research agenda follows from those limits. It involves extending the direct Kohesio extraction demonstrated here to a larger set of cities, weak absorbers included; completing the collection of Regulations on Organisation and Functioning for Timișoara, Galați and Baia Mare; reconciling fund figures against budget execution reports; validating CGI and ACI through structured multi-coder interviews with municipal staff and with the partners named in each governance instrument; and reporting FAR alongside population and portfolio composition rather than in place of them. Extending the design to comparable cities in other Central and Eastern European member states would establish whether the relational reading of administrative capacity proposed here travels beyond the Romanian case, or whether it is an artefact of a national administrative setting in which municipal capacity is unusually uneven.

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