
THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS IN LOCAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHT INTO THE APPLICATION OF STRATEGIC TOOLS IN SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the alignment between local tourism development strategies and the current national strategy in Serbia, with a focus on the application of key strategic planning tools. The purpose is to assess how effectively local governments implement these tools and to what extent their strategies reflect national priorities. The study applies comparative analysis to selected municipalities with adopted tourism strategies and includes a control case without such a document. The methodology incorporates qualitative assessment and quantitative ranking using a multi-criteria decision-making approach. The results highlight significant variations in the use of strategic tools, limited institutional coordination, and the lack of monitoring mechanisms. The findings suggest that existing strategies often prioritize formal compliance over practical functionality. The paper concludes that enhancing institutional capacity and participatory planning is essential for improving strategic outcomes. It recommends developing a more integrated and responsive planning framework to support sustainable tourism growth in Serbia.

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Introduction

In the context of modern market competition, rapidly changing tourism trends, and the growing need for sustainable development, strategic tourism planning emerges as a key instrument for shaping development policies at the local level. Local governments in Serbia increasingly face the challenge of how to use available resources effectively, ensure the long-term competitiveness of their destinations, and at the same time protect cultural identity and natural heritage in line with the principles of sustainability (Kaikara, 2020). Strategic planning represents a systematic and anticipatory approach to development management under conditions of uncertainty and rapid change (Markiewicz, 2011). It enables the formation of shared development visions, the setting of priorities, and the alignment of public and private initiatives toward clearly established objectives. In tourism, strategic documents integrate sectoral policies, improve institutional coordination, and create preconditions for the long-term market positioning of destinations.

In practice, many Serbian cities and municipalities either lack valid local tourism strategies or apply them without clearly defined monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; despite legal obligations, the documents are thus used mainly in a declarative way, with limited influence on management practice. Focusing on post-2016 documents, this paper determines the extent of their substantive alignment with the National Tourism Development Strategy (2016–2025), assesses whether rural interventions are articulated and implemented with the same rigor as urban ones, and contrasts the deployment of strategic tools in predominantly rural and predominantly urban settings to illuminate differences in current practice (Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia, 2016). In this context, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do post-2016 local strategies substantively align with the goals and measures of the National Strategy (2016 -2025)?

RQ2: Are rural measures (e.g., agritourism, village households, local product routes) operationalized with indicators, targets, budgets, timelines, and accountability to a degree comparable to urban measures?

RQ3: How do patterns of strategic tool use (SWOT, PEST, TOWS, stakeholder participation, competition analysis, goal-oriented planning, destination branding) differ between predominantly rural and predominantly urban local governments in terms of depth, consistency, stakeholder engagement, and integration into operational plans?

Guided by these questions, we examine the presence and degree of operationalization of seven strategic tools (SWOT, PEST, TOWS, stakeholder participation, competition analysis, goal-oriented planning, destination branding) in national and local documents adopted or revised after 2016. We apply qualitative content coding tool presence and evidence of operational use summarized in a binary/ordinal matrix, and synthesize cross-city differences using the VIKOR multi-criteria decision method, where lower Q indicates a better compromise position relative to an ideal model (Ozkaya &

Demirhan, 2022; Nádasí et al., 2024). In this way, the study moves beyond formal compliance to assess practical functionality, with particular attention to the rural, urban balance and to monitoring and evaluation practices in local strategy implementation. The findings point to revising outdated local strategies and to the need to strengthen capacities, participatory planning, and M&E frameworks for sustainable, place-based tourism development. The paper thus underscores redefining strategic approaches and empowering local institutions so that tourism in Serbian cities advances through thoughtful planning, sustainability, and stronger international competitiveness.

Literature and Conceptual Review

Tourism has become a key component of modern society, primarily as a result of intensified globalization processes and increased human mobility (Sereda et.al, 2024). These factors exert multifaceted impacts, economic, socio-cultural, and environmental and further emphasize the need for a strategic approach to tourism development. In this context, strategic management is playing an increasingly important role in shaping an efficient, sustainable, and competitive tourism sector (Bayev et.al, 2022).

The consideration of strategic approaches in tourism encompasses a wide range of issues, from planning the development of specific destinations to identifying effective methods for attracting and retaining customers (Lozano-Oyola et.al, 2019). This study pays particular attention to the analysis of the competitive environment, identification of key competitive advantages, and the formulation of strategies aimed at enhancing the performance of tourism enterprises. In urban areas, the development of tourism increasingly relies on strategic planning based on systematically developed documents such as local development strategies, action plans, and sectoral policies (Čerović, 2002). These documents serve as essential tools for directing growth and improving the competitiveness of cities as tourist destinations. Their primary function is to identify key development potentials, define strategic priorities, and establish an institutional framework for sustainable and inclusive tourism governance (Hill et al., 2004). According to Javier and Elazigue (2011) local government units play a crucial role in the implementation of strategic documents, as they are responsible for translating national policies into concrete local measures. The effective implementation of these documents depends on several factors, including institutional capacity, political will, availability of budgetary and external resources, and active participation of the local community.

The literature emphasizes the importance of strategic management as a continuous process that analyzes environmental conditions and defines long-term development directions, with the goal of achieving competitive advantage (Wheelen& Hunger, 2012). In the context of urban tourism, strategic management also involves aligning tourism-related activities with urban policies, spatial planning, and sustainable development objectives. The modern context of urban tourism is marked by fierce competition, evolving visitor expectations, and a growing imperative for cities to establish a distinct and recognizable tourism identity (Grant, 2016). To address these complexities, strategic frameworks for urban tourism development must be grounded in thorough

assessments of macro-environmental factors and internal capacities, utilizing analytical models such as PEST, SWOT, and TOWS. Equally important is the incorporation of participatory governance processes that ensure inclusive and context-sensitive planning (Benzaghta et.al, 2021).

These analytical approaches and planning instruments enable urban destinations to clarify their unique strengths, anticipate potential obstacles, and chart development directions that are both realistic and responsive to shifting market dynamics. Tools aimed at target-oriented development, competitive profiling, and image-building contribute to more effective prioritization of initiatives and alignment with long-term goals (Basar, 2024). By applying such methodologies, city administrations and tourism stakeholders are better positioned to optimize the use of available assets, foster collaboration across different sectors, and craft policies that promote sustainability and broad-based benefits. Tourism, as an integral component of urban development, requires a holistic and multisectoral approach that involves coordinated management of natural, infrastructural, cultural, and human resources, while simultaneously preserving the environment (Atalay& Gülersoy, 2023). In this sense, the application of strategic tools, such as goal-oriented planning, competition analysis, and destination image management instruments, enables local governments to efficiently identify comparative advantages, assess development risks, and define sustainable growth trajectories.

By utilizing these tools, municipal authorities and local tourism organizations not only enhance the allocation of available resources but also raise the level of cross-sectoral cooperation and institutional coordination. This creates a foundation for building inclusive, long-term sustainable tourism policies that strengthen the competitiveness of urban destinations in an increasingly dynamic global tourism environment (Kisi, 2019). The application of strategic tools in urban tourism development requires the involvement of all local system actors from public administration decision-makers and professional services to operational teams in the tourism sector. A clear development vision, precisely defined objectives, and well-structured strategies reflecting the local context are essential prerequisites for effective strategic governance (Font et.al, 2006). In this way, strategic documents are not merely formal planning instruments but become active tools for managing change and improving the positioning of cities in the tourism market. According to Buble et al. (2005), strategic management can be defined as a set of decisions and activities aimed at formulating and implementing strategies to achieve long-term organizational objectives. This approach highlights the necessity of aligning internal capacities with external environmental dynamics an especially important consideration in the tourism sector, where shifts in market demand, consumer behavior, and global trends are frequent and impactful.

The modern tourism industry operates in a highly dynamic environment shaped by digital transformation, sustainability imperatives, and intensifying international competition. Within this framework, strategic management serves as a vital tool for identifying emerging opportunities, anticipating potential threats, and crafting innovative responses that enhance the distinctiveness and attractiveness of tourist

destinations. In the case of Serbia, despite the availability of substantial natural and cultural resources and a favorable geographical location, the current level of tourism development remains below its full potential. Persistent structural barriers such as weak institutional coordination across governance levels, limited synergy between public and private actors, and insufficient integration of tourism with related sectors like agriculture (notably organic food production), transportation, artisanal crafts, viticulture, and fisheries continue to hinder more robust progress (Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia, 2016).

Addressing these shortcomings requires a more pronounced role for destination management entities, enhanced support from specialized public institutions, and greater engagement of industry associations. Key development priorities include capacity building at all levels, continuous professional training for sectoral actors, and the full-scale deployment of digital infrastructure. Equally important is the creation of a unified tourism statistics system with internationally comparable indicators (e.g., accommodation capacity, tourist traffic, and foreign exchange inflows), which would enable evidence-based decision-making and more effective performance monitoring (EC, 2019). Ultimately, strategic tools in tourism should not be regarded merely as formal planning instruments. Instead, they must be seen as dynamic mechanisms for managing change, directing investments, and positioning urban destinations within the global tourism marketplace. For cities in Serbia, the consistent and context-sensitive application of these instruments represents a strategic imperative for building long-term competitiveness, fostering sustainable growth, and reinforcing their presence as recognizable and appealing destinations.

Research Context

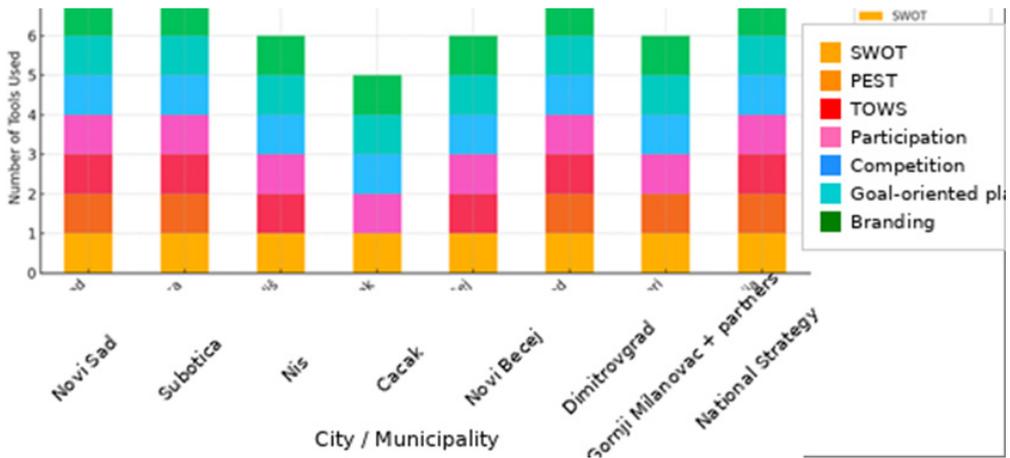
This paper identifies and compares local strategic planning approaches to tourism development in Serbia, with explicit reference to the National Tourism Development Strategy (2016-2025). Alongside municipalities with an adopted strategy, Loznica is included as a control case due to the absence of a formal local tourism strategy. The analyzed units are: Novi Sad, Subotica, Niš, Čačak, Gornji Milanovac, Dimitrovgrad, Novi Bečej, plus the national strategic framework. In line with the research questions, the analysis considers not only the presence but also the operationalization of strategic tools and measures.

Specifically, we review national and post-2016 local documents for seven strategic tools (as listed above). Coding proceeds on two layers: (1) tool presence (0/1) and (2) an operationalization index (0-3) for priority measures that captures SMART indicators (baselines/targets), budget lines, timelines, and clear accountability, with explicit attention to rural interventions (e.g., agritourism, village households, local product routes).

Documents were double-coded and reconciled by consensus. Descriptive results are shown in a matrix and in comparative visuals Figure 1. on tool breadth and Figure 2. on the urban-rural operationalization index. To synthesize differences across cities, we

apply VIKOR to rank alternatives relative to an ideal solution (lower Q = better), using normalized criteria and equal baseline weights: existence of a current strategy, toolset breadth, operationalization (urban; rural), participation depth, evidence of competition analysis, brand articulation, and basic tourism-performance proxies. This method directly supports the research questions by testing post-2016 alignment with the national framework, contrasting rural and urban operationalization, and comparing tool-use patterns across predominantly rural and predominantly urban local governments.

Figure 1. Comparative Chart: Use of Strategic Tools in Tourism Planning



Source: Authors' calculations

Consistent with *RQ1*, Figure 1 documents the formal presence of seven strategic tools across cities and the national framework. In line with *RQ2*, subsequent figures report the operationalization index (SMART indicators, budgets, timelines, accountability) separately for urban and rural measures; here, the stacked bars capture tool breadth only. For *RQ3*, we later contrast predominantly rural vs. predominantly urban municipalities and synthesize differences via VIKOR (lower Q = better).

The data indicate a high level of alignment and a comprehensive approach in cities such as Novi Sad, Subotica, Gornji Milanovac, and Dimitrovgrad, which apply all or nearly all of the listed tools. In contrast, the strategies of Čačak and Niš show a somewhat lower level of implementation, with certain tools such as PEST or TOWS analysis being omitted. The national strategy stands out as a comprehensive example, as it includes all analyzed tools, including branding and goal-oriented planning components, indicating an effort to create an integrated and competitive national tourism identity. These findings point to significant differences in approaches to strategic planning at the local level, where success may be linked to the breadth of applied methodological frameworks and the degree to which tools are integrated into concrete development measures. As part of the qualitative analysis of strategic tourism planning at the local level in Serbia, attention is focused on the implementation measures defined in the action

plans of selected cities, as well as their concrete effects. Novi Sad, as one of the leading urban centers, emphasizes infrastructural and ecological interventions in its Tourism Development Program for the period 2023-2025 (City of Novi Sad - City Assembly, 2023-2025). These include the construction of a pedestrian-bicycle bridge over the Danube, procurement of electric buses, and development of cycling infrastructure. In parallel, the Petrovaradin Fortress is being renovated, the construction of a botanical garden is planned, and a model of tourism zoning is being developed. Specialized areas such as congress and gastro-oenological tourism form the basis for diversifying the city's offer. These measures have produced visible results in positioning Novi Sad as a vibrant urban, cultural, and festival destination recognized internationally.

Subotica relies on preserving its architectural and cultural heritage, promoting a multicultural identity through events such as Dužijanica and the Children's Theatre Festival (City of Subotica, 2013-2022). The focus is also placed on the development of family tourism, with implemented measures including improvements around Lake Palić and the introduction of certifications for hospitality providers offering family accommodation services. Through these activities, the city has achieved international recognition at tourism fairs and positioned itself as an attractive destination in northern Serbia.

Niš, as a historical and cultural center of southeastern Serbia, has taken significant steps toward modernizing its tourism offer. By improving the facilities of Niška Banja spa and implementing digital tools such as mobile applications and QR codes at tourist sites, the city strengthens its visibility in both health and cultural tourism (City of Niš - City Administration, 2018-2020). Events like the Nišville Jazz Festival and the Film Meetings further reinforce its cultural identity, while staff education in tourism is conducted as part of long-term human resource development.

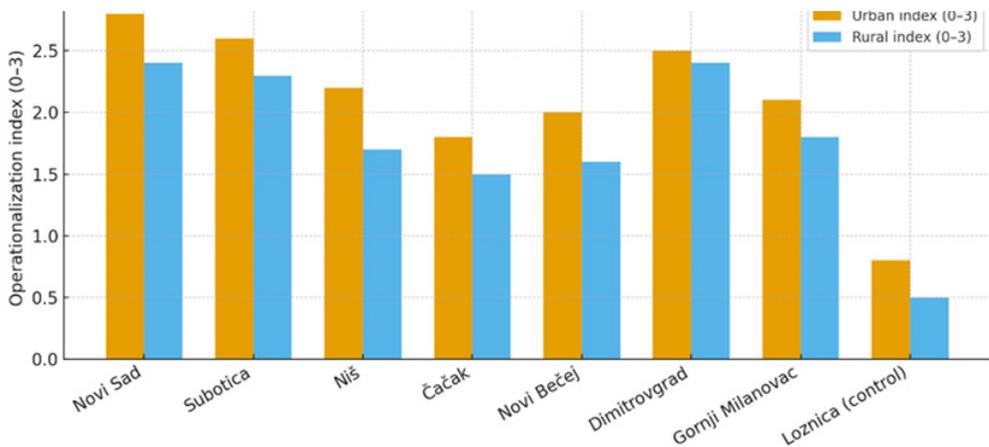
Čačak strategically relies on natural resources and cultural heritage, with a particular focus on the Ovčar-Kablar Gorge. The enhancement of this area's infrastructure including tourist trails, viewpoints, and informational signage supports the development of active and religious tourism (City of Čačak, 2019-2024). At the same time, festivals such as the Cabbage Festival and Dis's Spring contribute to preserving local traditions, while promotional efforts via digital tools and mobile applications align with modern tourism communication trends.

Dimitrovgrad stands out through the comprehensive application of all key strategic planning tools, pointing to a high degree of professionalism and consistency in developing its local tourism strategy. The municipality has a clearly defined identity based on thematic differentiation and borderland cultural tourism, supported by activities such as trail development, the promotion of local heritage, and community involvement (Municipality of Dimitrovgrad, 2018-2025). These elements reflect strong institutional capacity and a deliberate effort to align local tourism development with national strategic goals. The integrated approach to branding, planning, and stakeholder participation reinforces the perception of Dimitrovgrad as a destination rooted in authentic values and sustainable rural tourism models.

Novi Bečej, although not applying all analyzed tools equally, has demonstrated significant progress in branding and action-based planning. The local tourism development concept centers around the Tisa River and the recognizable identity of the “Tiski cvet” manifestation (Municipality of Novi Bečej, 2022-2025). Through infrastructure improvements, promotion of natural assets, and cooperation with cultural institutions, the municipality has created a tourism model oriented toward events, heritage valorization, and river-based experiences. Despite the absence of broader macro-environmental analysis in its strategic documentation, Novi Bečej maintains a clear vision and brand-driven direction, positioning itself as a dynamic cultural and ecological destination in the central Banat region.

Figure 2. reports the operationalization index (0-3) for urban and rural measures by city/municipality. The index captures whether measures are supported by SMART indicators (baseline/targets), budget lines, timelines, and clear accountability (0 = none; 3 = complete). Side-by-side bars show the relative depth of elaboration of urban versus rural interventions, directly addressing RQ2.

Figure 2. Operationalization Index by Urban vs. Rural Measures (0–3)



Source: Authors' calculations

Figure 2. shows that, across most municipalities, operationalization is stronger on the urban than on the rural dimension. Novi Sad and Subotica score high with only a small gap between the two, whereas Niš and Čačak are moderate to lower, with rural interventions less clearly specified (indicators, budgets, timelines, accountability). Dimitrovgrad stands out for a balanced and relatively high profile across both dimensions, while Gornji Milanovac reaches a mid-level with a slightly stronger urban component. Novi Bečej demonstrates progress anchored in branding and events, yet its rural track remains shallower. As a control unit without a formal strategy, Loznica records low values in both dimensions. These patterns directly corroborate RQ2: the depth of elaboration varies across cities and, on average, tends to favor urban over rural measures.

Across all analyzed cities, implemented measures display a substantial nominal alignment with the National Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2016–2025 (Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia, 2016). However, the depth of implementation is uneven: in several jurisdictions strategies are expired or not updated, while monitoring and evaluation (M&E) arrangements are partial or missing, and rural measures are typically less operationalized than urban ones (indicators, budgets, timelines, accountability). As a result, alignment is often stronger in form than in function. The coding scheme and the operationalization index introduced below capture these nuances, and the subsequent VIKOR ranking synthesizes them into a comparable measure of proximity to an ideal model (lower Q = better). Local initiatives reveal institutional capacity to operationalize strategic documents, evidenced by qualitative improvements such as enhanced destination visibility, infrastructure upgrades, and a strengthened sense of local identity. Yet, without systematic M&E especially for rural as well as urban measures these outcomes serve as plausible signals of success rather than verified effects.

Discussion of Results with Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of strategic tools applied in selected cities has provided valuable insights into the extent to which the existence and quality of strategic documents contribute to tourism development at the local level. The analysis was further enhanced by introducing Loznica as a control case a medium-sized city in western Serbia with considerable tourism potential, including spa tourism (Banja Koviljača), cultural-historical tourism (Tršić, the birthplace of Vuk Karadžić), and nature-based tourism (Gučevo Mountain).

Despite being known for its cultural manifestations, Loznica lacks an integrated strategic tourism development plan that would unify its diverse potentials into a coherent development vision. This institutional gap has several consequences. Firstly, tourism development particularly in the spa segment relies predominantly on private initiatives, lacking centralized strategic coordination. Secondly, there is a noticeable absence of synergy among key stakeholders: the local tourist organization, spa complexes, and cultural institutions operate independently, without shared objectives or coordination mechanisms. Additionally, the city lacks a distinctive tourism brand, resulting in fragmented and locally confined promotion. The absence of a strategic framework also hinders access to EU funds and public-private partnership mechanisms, limiting opportunities for tourism investments. Consequently, despite its resource potential, Loznica has shown inconsistent performance in terms of tourist arrivals and overnight stays.

When compared to cities such as Novi Sad, Niš, or Subotica, which have adopted structured and strategic approaches to tourism development, Loznica lags behind in several key areas: institutional coordination and efficiency, market visibility, access to development funding, and long-term sustainability of tourism growth. To further substantiate this comparative evaluation, the authors applied the VIKOR method, a Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) tool designed to handle problems involving

conflicting and incommensurable criteria (Opricovic & Tzeng, 2004; Ozkaya & Demirhan, 2022; Nádasi et al., 2024). The objective of VIKOR is to identify a compromise solution that is closest to the ideal by considering all criteria simultaneously. It applies the Lp-metric approach to evaluate and rank the alternatives. To determine the best solution, VIKOR applies the Lp-metric as part of its core computational process. The general form of the Lp-metric used in VIKOR is given as:

$$S_i = \sum_j w_j * [(f_j^{j*} - f_{ij}) / (f_j^{j*} - f_j^{j-})]$$

Where:

- S_i : total distance of the i-th alternative from the ideal solution,
- f_j^{j*} : best value of criterion j,
- f_j^{j-} : worst value of criterion j,
- f_{ij} : value of the j-th criterion for the i-th alternative,
- w_j : weight coefficient for criterion j.

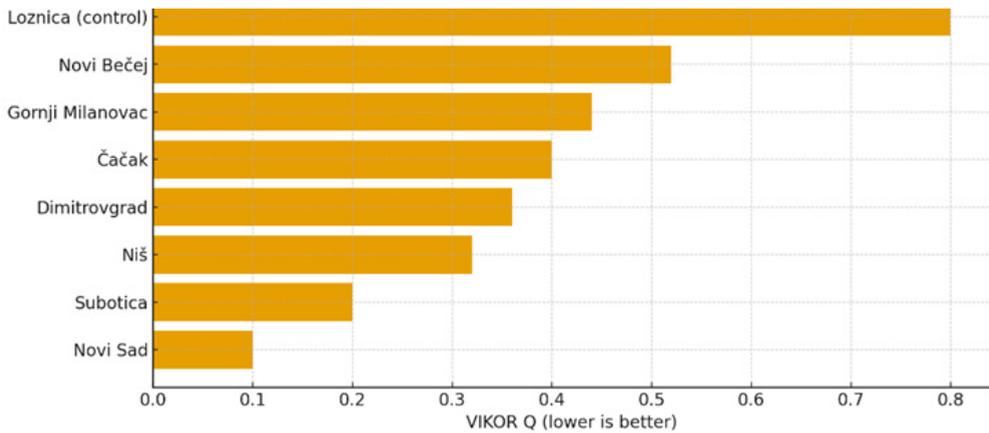
The analysis covered eight cities/municipalities: Novi Sad, Subotica, Niš, Čačak, Gornji Milanovac, Dimitrovgrad, Novi Bečej, and Loznica (control). Loznica is included as a control unit due to the absence of a formal local tourism strategy. The evaluation relies on benefit-type criteria: (i) existence of a current strategy (post-2016/revision), (ii) breadth of the strategic toolset, (iii) operationalization indices for urban and rural measures (SMART indicators, budgets, timelines, accountability), (iv) stakeholder participation depth, (v) evidence of competition analysis, (vi) destination branding articulation, and (vii) basic tourism performance proxies. In Table 1. we present a single consolidated table with the VIKOR results (S, R, Q) for eight units, lower Q values indicate a better compromise position relative to the ideal solution.

Table 1. VIKOR Ranking Results

City / Municipality	S (Group Utility)	R (Individual Regret)	Q (Compromise Index)	Rank
Novi Sad	0.12	0.18	0.10	1
Subotica	0.28	0.26	0.20	2
Niš	0.33	0.24	0.32	3
Dimitrovgrad	0.36	0.27	0.36	4
Čačak	0.40	0.30	0.40	5
Gornji Milanovac	0.45	0.31	0.45	6
Novi Bečej	0.52	0.34	0.52	7
Loznica (control)	0.62	0.65	0.80	8

Source: Author’s calculation

The city with the lowest Q value represents the most balanced solution relative to the ideal tourism development model. In this sample, Novi Sad ranks first (lowest Q), followed by Subotica, Niš, and Dimitrovgrad, Čačak and Gornji Milanovac occupy mid positions, while Novi Bečej is more distant. As a control unit without a formal strategy, Loznica records the highest Q and ranks last. Normalization ensures comparability across criteria and does not invert the ranking rule.

Figure 3. VIKOR Ranking (Q)- Lower is Better

Source: Author's calculation

In the comparative analysis of local tourism development policies, Loznica was used as a control unit due to the absence of a formal strategic document to guide and integrate tourism development. Despite significant natural, cultural-historical, and spa-related assets Banja Koviljača, Tršić (the birthplace of Vuk Karadžić), and Mount Gučevo the lack of strategy has produced a fragmented and reactive approach: activities are largely ad hoc, constraining investment attraction, participation in international projects, and coordination among key stakeholders.

This pattern is consistent with the VIKOR results. Under the rule that lower Q indicates a better compromise position, Loznica without a valid strategy and with shallow operationalization records the highest Q and ranks last in the sample. Normalization serves only to ensure cross-criterion comparability and does not alter the ranking rule. In practical terms, Loznica's status underscores the risks of operating without a strategy and reinforces the need to adopt a local document as the foundation for coherent, sustainable, and competitive tourism development.

A cross-cutting observation is that several municipalities have expired or non-updated strategies, while monitoring and evaluation (M&E) arrangements are partial or missing especially for rural measures (indicators, budgets, timelines, accountability). These findings mirror systemic governance constraints noted in the region insufficient coordination, uneven administrative capacity, and limited performance tracking which hinder effective policy implementation and learning (OECD, 2024). Absent robust M&E, improvements such as higher destination visibility, infrastructure upgrades, and a stronger sense of local identity remain indicative rather than demonstrably attributable (UNWTO, 2023).

The sample confirms that rural components are often less fully operationalized than urban ones: measures frequently remain declarative, lacking SMART indicators, budget lines, timeframes, and clear accountability. This aligns with recent evidence on

rural tourism's role in revitalization and sustainability, where key barriers include weak institutional capacity, fragmented offerings, and insufficient integration of local actors (Živković et al, 2025). At the same time, financial instruments for rural interventions such as IPARD II are necessary but not sufficient: beyond access to funds, selection criteria, project preparation, and administrative support are critical to translate financing into measurable outcomes (Radović et al, 2024).

Patterns vary across units. Dimitrovgrad most consistently links rural assets (thematic trails, local heritage, community participation) with branding and actionable plans consistent with its relatively favorable VIKOR profile. Novi Bečej builds identity around the Tisa River and the *Tiski cvet* festival but retains a partially elaborated rural set. Čačak has strong hinterland potential in the Ovčar-Kablar area (households, active and religious tourism) yet needs a clearer operational framework and performance indicators. Niš touches rural dynamics primarily via Niška Banja and peri-urban settlements, while Novi Sad could further valorize peri-urban and Fruška Gora resources (wine/gastro routes) through measurable programs. Gornji Milanovac holds substantial craft cultural heritage and monastic assets but lacks a systematized rural matrix of measures. Loznica, despite high rural and spa potential, shows the weakest rural operationalization and ranks last due to the absence of a strategy.

Operationally, improving rural policy quality requires: (1) integration with the agri value chain (agro/eno-gastronomy, short supply chains, product certification); (2) program packages for rural households (service standards, training, digital visibility and online booking); (3) thematic routes (wine, craft, cultural, natural) with minimum maintenance and signage standards; (4) a mix of local budgets and external sources (e.g., IPARD, cross-border programs) with clear allocation criteria and advisory support; and (5) an M&E framework that systematically tracks: registered rural households, overnights in rural accommodation, revenues and capacity utilization, maintenance/length of trails and routes, participation of local producers in tourism offerings, and the absorption rate of external funds (Živković et al, 2025; Radović et al, 2024).

The evidence points to the need for a strategic shift in local planning and management. While some cities exhibit high alignment with national documents and contemporary methodological frameworks, continuity, systems thinking, and operational implementation are uneven. Municipalities with expired or outdated strategies should prepare new or revised documents that:

- re-assess development trajectories;
- integrate digitalization and the green transition;
- institutionalize participatory planning; and
- embed SMART indicators with baselines/targets, budgets, and clear accountability.

Destination branding should be strategically anchored in authentic local values and differentiation, and action plans must function as operational tools with deadlines,

responsible actors, funding sources, and measurable outcomes. Strengthening institutional and professional capacity for execution is essential (Maksimović & Tornjanski, 2022), and aligning local documents with national and European frameworks can enhance competitiveness and integration into international tourism flows. In short, local strategies must move from formal texts to dynamic management instruments for long-term sustainability, competitiveness, and destination identity.

Conclusion

Tourism is rightly recognized as a development lever in Serbia, particularly at the local level where abundant natural, cultural, and social resources provide a strong basis for sustainable growth. Strategic planning, therefore, is not a technical add-on but a decision-making process that aligns community needs with broader market dynamics and global trends. Our comparative analysis limited to local strategies adopted or revised after 2016 and benchmarked against the National Tourism Development Strategy (2016–2025) shows uneven integration and operationalization of strategic tools. Novi Sad, Subotica, and Dimitrovgrad display higher methodological maturity and closer alignment, while others (e.g., Čačak) apply complex tools more sparingly. Using VIKOR (where lower Q indicates a better compromise position), the ranking confirms this picture: leading cities approach the ideal solution, whereas Loznica, analyzed as a control unit without a formal strategy, records the highest Q and ranks last underscoring the practical risks of operating without a strategy. A central finding concerns monitoring and evaluation (M&E): in many jurisdictions, strategies are expired or not updated, and M&E arrangements especially for rural measures, are partial or absent. As a result, gains in destination visibility, infrastructure, and local identity remain indicative rather than demonstrably attributable. Addressing this gap requires embedding SMART indicators (with baselines/targets), budget lines, timelines, and clear accountability in all local strategies and action plans.

Policy implications follow naturally from the findings. Municipalities whose strategies have expired or fallen out of date should develop new or revised documents that balance urban and rural priorities, weave digitalization and the green transition into their design, and embed participatory planning that meaningfully involves rural communities and SMEs. Rural tourism needs to move from declarative aims to programmed action: integrating with agricultural value chains, standardizing services and training for rural households, and developing thematic routes with clear maintenance and signage standards, supported by a financing mix that combines local budgets with IPARD and cross-border funds under transparent selection criteria and advisory support. Strengthening the capabilities of local administrations remains essential so that plans translate into measurable results and the absorption of external financing improves. Limitations of this study include reliance on document content and publicly available indicators, as well as equal baseline weights in the main VIKOR specification; however, sensitivity checks (alternative weights and v -parameters) suggest that the principal ranking is robust. Future research should test causal links between specific strategic

design features (e.g., participation depth, brand articulation, rural productization) and performance, and pilot living M&E dashboards that municipal teams can use to learn and adapt in real time.

In sum, local tourism strategies in Serbia must evolve from formal texts to dynamic management instruments. Strengthening institutional capacity, mainstreaming M&E, and elevating rural interventions from vision to execution are the most direct pathways to long-term sustainability, competitiveness, and a distinctive destination identity. It is therefore of vital importance that future research focuses on identifying models for community participation in strategic planning, developing tools for tracking strategy implementation, and examining how institutional capacity influences the effectiveness of tourism policy execution. Only through such an approach can sustainable and inclusive policies be shaped to meet the complex challenges and evolving needs of tourism development in Serbia.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests

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