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BETWEEN NORMS AND PRACTICE: HOW DO URBAN PLANNERS ASSESS HOUSING NEEDS?

ИЗМЕЂУ НОРМЕ И ПРАКСЕ: КАКО УРБАНИСТИ ПРОЦЕЊУЈУ СТАМБЕНЕ ПОТРЕБЕ?

ABSTRACT: Europe is currently facing a housing crisis that increasingly affects not only primary cities but also secondary cities, where a growing number of households are unable to secure adequate housing through market mechanisms. In this context, the key question is no longer solely the scale of housing need, but rather how such needs are assessed and to what extent these assessments are effectively translated into concrete policies and planning instruments. Against this background, the paper examines how urban planners in secondary cities assess housing needs and how these assessments are incorporated into local policy frameworks. The analysis compares four secondary cities operating under different housing systems—Aalborg in Denmark, Tübingen in Germany, Braga in Portugal, and Čačak in Serbia—which are partner municipalities in the Delivering Safe and Affordable Housing (DASH) project. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with municipal officials in urban planning, complemented by a survey conducted among urban planners in Serbia. The paper adopts a comparative perspective across four housing systems, with particular analytical emphasis on Serbia. The findings demonstrate that the capacity of local authorities to respond to housing needs is not determined solely by the quality of data and analytical tools, but more fundamentally by the institutional and political conditions that enable (or constrain) their application. In doing so, the study contributes to a better understanding of how local authorities navigate between national frameworks and locally specific needs, with particular insight into the structural constraints shaping housing policy in Serbia.

Keywords: housing needs assessment; urban planning; social housing; policy translation; secondary cities

РЕЗИМЕ: Европа се већ извесно време суочава са стамбеном кризом, која не само да погађа метрополе већ, све чешће и мале и средње градове, у којима је све више домаћинстава која не могу да обезбеде адекватне услове становања путем тржишних механизма. У том контексту, кључно питање више није само колики је обим стамбених потреба, већ како се оне процењују и у којој мери се те процене заиста преводe у конкретне политике и планске инструменте. Циљ овог рада је да анализира како урбанисти у малим и средњим градовима градовима процењују стамбене потребе и како се те процене инкорпорирају у локалне политике. Извршено је поређење четири града који функционишу у различитим стамбеним системима – Олборг у Данској, Тибинген у Немачкој, Брага у Португалу и Чачак у Србији, а који учествују у реализацији пројекта Обезбедити сигурно и приступачно становање (Delivering Safe and Affordable Housing–DASH). Анализа се заснива на полуструктурираним интервјуима са општинским службеницима у сектору урбанистичког планирања, као и на анкети међу урбанистима у Србији. Усвајањем компаративне перспективе, рад показује да се способност локалних власти да одговоре на стамбене потребе не одређује искључиво квалитетом података и аналитичких алата, већ пре свега институционалним и политичким условима који омогућавају (или ограничавају) њихову примену. На тај начин, студија доприноси разумевању како локалне власти навирају између националних оквира и локалних потреба, указујући да је кључни изазов не само у процени стамбених потреба, већ у њиховом превођењу у делотворну урбану и стамбену политику.

Кључне речи: процена стамбених потреба; урбанистичко планирање; социјално становање; мали и средњи градови

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Europe is facing a deepening housing crisis, reflected in the growing number of households unable to secure adequate housing through market mechanisms (Housing Europe Observatory, 2023). This problem is no longer confined to large metropolitan areas; it is increasingly affecting secondary cities, which simultaneously face limited resources, rising demand, and widening social inequalities in access to housing. In such a context, the assessment of housing needs becomes a key issue, as it

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provides the foundation for the formulation of effective public policies and urban planning interventions (Bramley et al., 2010; Berra-Sandin, 2025).

The capacity of national and local governments to identify, quantify, and spatially articulate housing needs largely determines the scope and effectiveness of their response to the crisis (Manase & Siamuzwe, 2020). However, significant differences exist in how these assessments are conducted, both in terms of regulatory frameworks and with regard to the instruments, data, and institutional capacities involved (Housing Europe Observatory, 2023). Against this background, the paper examines four European secondary cities operating within different housing systems: Aalborg in Denmark, Tübingen in Germany, Braga in Portugal, and Čačak in Serbia (Alves, Andersen, et al., 2026). Although these cities differ in terms of institutional traditions, economic capacities, and housing models, they share a common challenge—how to respond to growing needs for affordable and adequate housing under conditions of limited resources. In Aalborg, for instance, a well-developed social housing system and the strong role of municipalities enable systematic planning and the integration of housing policies (Andersen et al., 2026). In Tübingen, local authorities actively use land policy and planning instruments to regulate development and ensure housing affordability (Keunen et al., 2026). By contrast, in Braga and Čačak, where market mechanisms are more dominant and public resources are more limited, housing needs assessments often have a weaker influence on concrete policies and planning decisions (Alves, Azevedo, et al., 2026; Vuksanović-Macura et al., 2026).

In this context, the central research question of this paper is: how do urban planners in secondary cities assess housing needs, and how are these assessments translated into local policies and planning instruments? Through a comparative approach, the paper examines three interrelated dimensions: (1) the existence and characteristics of national or federal regulatory frameworks for housing needs assessment; (2) the instruments, methods, and data used in this process; and (3) the ways in which these assessments inform local policymaking. Particular attention is given to the perspective of urban planners in Serbia to better understand how housing needs are assessed under conditions of limited institutional and financial capacity, and how these assessments relate to urban planning and social housing provision (Vuksanović-Macura, 2025). In doing so, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between normative frameworks and practice in housing policy and urban development.

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper adopts a comparative approach as an appropriate analytical framework for understanding how urban planners assess housing needs across different institutional and market contexts. The selection of four secondary cities—Aalborg, Tübingen, Braga, and Čačak—enables a comparison of diverse housing systems, ranging from well-developed social housing models in Scandinavian and continental contexts to systems characterised by a stronger reliance on market mechanisms in Southern and Southeast Europe. This diversity is particularly important, as research shows that housing needs assessment is not a universal technical procedure, but rather a process shaped by institutional frameworks, market structures, and public policies (Bramley et al., 2010). It is worth noting that four cities are participating as partners in the international project Deliver Safe and Social Housing (www.dashousing.eu), within which this research was conducted.

The theoretical framework of the paper is grounded in the understanding that housing needs are a complex, multidimensional concept encompassing not only quantitative shortages of dwellings but also issues of affordability, quality, and adequacy. As highlighted by Bramley and colleagues, housing needs assessment involves normative judgments regarding what constitutes “adequate” housing, as well as a distinction between existing (backlog) and newly arising housing deficits. Furthermore, contemporary approaches emphasise that housing needs cannot be understood in isolation from market processes, demographic dynamics, and planning decisions, but require the integration of economic, social, and spatial factors (Bramley & Watkins, 2016). In this context, a comparative analysis of different housing systems is particularly relevant, as it enables an examination of how institutional arrangements shape both the process and outcomes of housing needs assessment.

Methodologically, the research is based on a qualitative approach, primarily relying on semi-structured interviews with officials working in municipal departments responsible for urban planning in the selected cities. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow for maintaining a focus on key research questions while providing sufficient flexibility for respondents to articulate their own experiences and interpretations. This method is especially suitable for exploring complex institutional and professional practices, as it enables a deeper understanding of decision-making processes and the ways in which knowledge is produced and utilised within organisations (Liu et al., 2020).

The interviews were structured around three key thematic areas: (1) the existence and characteristics of national/ federal frameworks for housing needs assessment; (2) the specific instruments, methods, and data sources used by urban planners; and (3) the ways in which assessment results are translated into local policies and planning decisions. This structure enabled both cross-case comparison and the identification of context-specific particularities. The combination of a comparative approach and qualitative methodology allows for a more nuanced understanding of the processes underlying formal housing needs assessment procedures. In this way, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between institutional frameworks, professional practices, and policy outcomes in the field of housing.

A specific component of the research focuses on the perspectives of urban planners in Serbia on the relationship between urban planning and social housing. These perspectives were collected through a survey conducted in October 2025, involving 20 respondents. The sample includes professionals from different regions of Serbia, ensuring full territorial coverage. This part of the research provides insight into professional perceptions and practices within the national context, complementing the findings obtained through the comparative analysis.

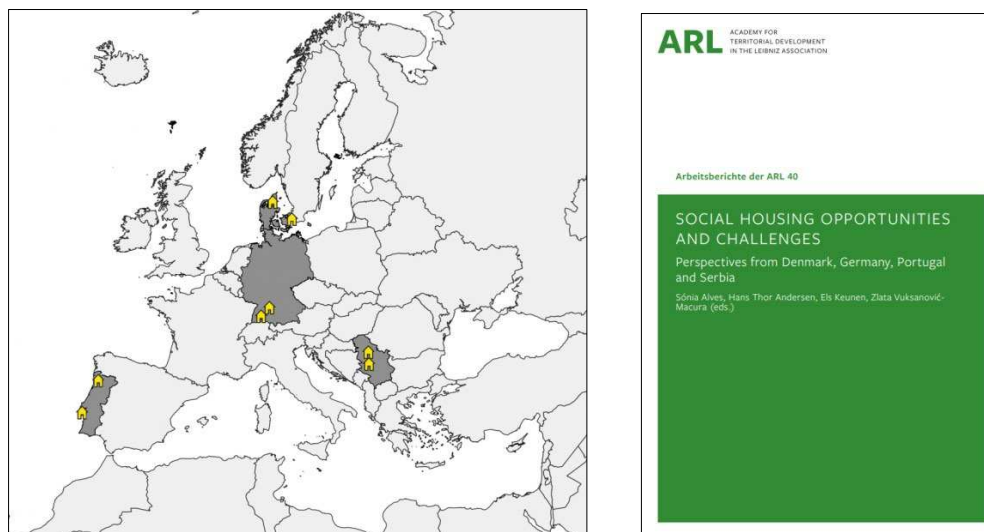


Figure no 1. The map showing the analysed secondary cities and the DASH project participating countries (left). The cover page of the publication, *Social Housing Opportunities and Challenges: Perspectives from Denmark, Germany, Portugal and Serbia* (right) (Source: Alves, Andersen, et al., 2026)

3. NORMATIVE AND REGULATORY CONTEXT

The normative and regulatory framework for assessing housing needs at the local level varies significantly across Denmark, Germany, Portugal, and Serbia, directly shaping the role of municipalities in housing policy planning. These differences constitute the first analytical dimension of this paper: what local authorities are required to do, and what they are merely able to do, in the domain of housing needs assessment and its translation into local policies. The publication *Social Housing Opportunities and Challenges: Perspectives from Denmark, Germany, Portugal and Serbia* (Alves, Andersen, et al., 2026) highlights that the four countries under analysis operate within distinct housing regimes—ranging from highly institutionalised systems of public intervention to residual and ad hoc approaches.

In Denmark, local governments operate within a well-developed and institutionally stable social housing system (non-profit housing) based on a universalist model. This framework enables municipalities to play an active and structured role in identifying local housing needs, in coordination with non-profit housing associations, and by integrating housing issues into the broader urban development system. Although national regulations define the general framework, the local level possesses well-developed capacities to link housing needs assessments with concrete programmes and policy instruments. This configuration allows such assessments to have a direct impact on policy implementation and the spatial distribution of housing.

The German system is characterised by a federal structure in which responsibilities are distributed across national, regional, and local levels. As a result, competencies are not concentrated at a single level of governance: federal and regional frameworks establish general rules, while municipalities operate within these parameters. Although there is no unified national model for housing needs assessment, local governments, such as Tübingen, enjoy a significant degree of autonomy in developing their own methodologies and instruments. Urban planning and land policy play a key role, and municipalities frequently use planning instruments to secure housing affordability. However, the obligation to conduct formal housing needs assessments is not universal.

In Portugal, the system is more centralised: the central government is supposed to provide the main regulatory framework (including defining a national housing strategy), while the municipalities are tasked with developing local housing plans including the assessment of housing needs) and implement policies. However, the municipalities' autonomy is in fact often limited by the lack of sufficient administrative and financial capacities. In other words, while theoretically tasked with the responsibility of carrying out housing policy, most municipalities (and especially since the early 2000s) have little resources to do so without the funds made available by the central government.

Serbia exemplifies a residual, ad hoc approach to housing, with a very limited policy focus on the issue. In such a context, the normative framework for housing needs assessment at the local level remains underdeveloped. The national Law on Housing and Building Maintenance requires local governments to annually collect data on the housing situation and housing needs within their territories and report it to the relevant ministry. However, there are no clearly established legal or institutional mechanisms to monitor local governments' fulfillment of these obligations, and the number of annual reports submitted is very limited. In addition, although they formally have the possibility to develop local programmes and incorporate housing issues into planning documents, their competencies are constrained by weak institutional capacities, limited financial instruments, and the absence of a comprehensive national housing policy. Urban planning remains formally separated from housing policy, resulting in limited integration of housing needs assessments into planning documents and weak linkages with social housing provision (Vuksanović-Macura & Jevtić, 2024).

Overall, the key differences between the analysed housing systems can be understood in terms of the degree of normative obligation, institutional coordination, and availability of policy instruments. While Denmark and, to some extent, Germany exhibit a stronger connection between housing needs assessment and urban planning, this relationship remains weaker and less institutionalised in Portugal and Serbia. These differences directly affect the capacity of local governments to respond to housing challenges and to translate identified needs into concrete policies and spatial outcomes.

4. INSTRUMENTS, METHODS, AND DATA FOR ASSESSING HOUSING NEEDS

This chapter is based on findings from semi-structured interviews with municipal officials working in the field of urban planning. The analysis shows that housing needs assessment in the selected cities relies on different combinations of statistical indicators, administrative data sources, and analytical tools, with clear differences between formalised and ad hoc approaches. At the same time, the findings indicate that the quality and reliability of these assessments depend directly on data availability, institutional infrastructure, and the degree of methodological standardisation.

4.1. Aalborg (Denmark)

In Aalborg, housing supply broadly meets aggregate demand, with even a current surplus in student housing. About a third of all housing is provided by non-profit organisations, which mitigates the profit-driven market pressures that typically inflate residential costs. Yet, even if it is more affordable than private rental, it can still be unaffordable due to size, housing quality, and/or the recency of construction or renovation. The non-profit organisations have waiting lists, but these are mostly for desirable areas, with households able to find accommodation elsewhere while being on the waiting list. Aalborg municipality has the right to allocate every fourth housing unit that becomes available in the non-profit sector for providing housing for those in need; however, it only needs to make use of this in only a fraction of the units. Therefore, Aalborg municipality is able to offer a service that is tailored to the needs of each individual or household in need. In the case of homeless people, most of them have more complex needs that are not necessarily solved by providing housing, but need an integrated, long-term approach. Integrating this group in existing communities can create disruptions; therefore, housing projects are being developed that provide housing in separate locations. For people with an acute and immediate housing need, such as people being released from prison or a mental care institution, victims of partner violence or people going through a divorce, the municipality assists in finding accommodation. Refugees are a special case as this is coordinated with the national level. Looking towards the future, the municipality uses overall population projections for estimating housing demand, and closely monitors expected demand of elderly and students; no specific prognoses are done for refugee flows as they are considered too unpredictable.

4.2. Tübingen (Germany)

The situation is quite different in Tübingen, as it is experiencing a severe housing crisis. The high quality of life and economic opportunities for high earners have created a vicious cycle of rising housing costs to the extent that housing has become unaffordable to a large segment of the population. The limited availability of municipal land and high construction costs, together with the acknowledgment that merely building more housing will not provide a durable solution, have made the municipality turn to a variety of other instruments and measures to try to curb housing prices. However, as they take time to take effect, they do little to address the acute housing stress, and the municipality has had to resort to emergency measures such as container housing for refugees. As the responsible agency for giving out social housing eligibility certificates (*Wohnberechtigungsschein* or *WBS* in German), the municipality has detailed data about those eligible. However, since housing needs greatly surpass available supply, municipal officers do not see the need to estimate housing needs quantitatively. Rather, the municipality developed priority criteria to assess the urgency of the housing need in order to be able to prioritise. Yet, even those high on the list may be there for years. In view of the aging population, projections about elderly people, their expected care needs and housing requirements are closely monitored, at the municipal as well as the state level.

4.3. Braga (Portugal)

In Portugal, housing policy is in the process of gradual institutionalisation, which has so far brought mixed results. The declared ambition of the most important policy documents is to assess housing needs through the continuous exchange of information between the national and local level - a relation which is supposed to be developing within the framework of a national housing strategy and dedicated monitoring bodies. However, many of these policy documents and institutions are either still nonexistent or only partially fulfilling these functions. In particular, the process of assessment of housing needs has usually followed a much less linear and straightforward path. While in 2018 the governmental agency for housing policy promoted a national survey of housing needs (IHRU 2018), this has only very partially registered the scale and territorial spread of the country's housing needs - indeed, subsequent surveys conducted just a few years later produced very different accounts. Our empirical work in Braga has shown that while civil servants make use of a variety of data in their work (e.g. census data or statistical reports), the figures on local housing needs are built essentially by patching together lists that already exist (e.g. the waiting list of the municipal social housing company) or by bringing new partners (e.g. parishes, NGO's) into the policy process together with their list of "clients". In other words, the assessment is not so much the product of continuous monitoring based on some objective criteria, but rather "policy-

driven”: housing needs are counted because there is a practical need to implement a given housing program; and the assessment does not measure “housing needs” per se, but rather the housing needs of those who can enter the program as beneficiaries.

4.4. Čačak (Serbia)

In Čačak, housing needs assessment largely relies on non-formalized methods and is based on limited data. The main data sources include census data, information on the existing housing stock, and records of beneficiaries of social and housing programmes. However, there is no integrated system linking these data sources, nor a standardised methodology for their analysis. GIS tools are rarely used and typically only within individual projects or studies, without systematic application in everyday planning practice. Assessments often rely on indirect indicators, such as the number of applications for social assistance or the availability of publicly owned housing, as well as on expert judgments by local officials. Such practices result in limited precision and insufficient reliability of the data. The lack of continuous and detailed information on affordability, overcrowding, and housing quality further complicates the assessment process. Consequently, housing needs assessments have a limited impact on urban planning and local policies, as they are neither institutionally mandated nor systematically embedded in decision-making processes.

Overall, the analysis indicates that formalised systems, such as those in Denmark and, to some extent, Germany, enable continuous and analytically grounded monitoring of housing needs, whereas in Portugal and Serbia, partially developed or ad hoc approaches prevail. This difference directly affects the capacity of local authorities to translate assessments into effective policies and planning instruments.

5. FROM ASSESSMENT TO POLICY

The key analytical question of this paper concerns how housing needs assessments are translated into concrete measures of local housing policy and urban planning. The comparative analysis of four cities—Aalborg, Tübingen, Braga, and Čačak—demonstrates that this process is not linear, but rather shaped by institutional frameworks, available instruments, and the relationship between the public and private sectors. In line with contemporary approaches, housing needs assessment constitutes not only an analytical but also a normative process, involving choices regarding priorities, target groups, and interventions (Bramley et al., 2010), while outcomes depend on how market and planning mechanisms are interconnected (Bramley & Watkins, 2016). It is precisely within this space between formal assessments (“norm”) and their practical implementation (“practice”) that the key differences between the analysed cases emerge.

In Aalborg, the translation of assessments into policy represents an institutionalised and relatively coherent process. The local government plays an active role in coordinating between the planning system and the non-profit housing sector, enabling expected demand to be operationalised through housing construction and allocation. Current needs are largely met, so that the municipality can offer a highly individualised approach to those in need. This model reflects what Bramley defines as an “outcome-oriented” approach, in which planning is guided not only by numerical targets but also by expected impacts in terms of accessibility and social inclusion. Although constraints related to market dynamics and financing persist, the link between assessment and policy is institutionally supported and relatively stable. At the same time, it should be noted that this system operates within a strong normative and political framework shaped by state influence, particularly through the Parallel Society Act and the “ghetto list” instrument, which define areas for targeted intervention and impose specific obligations on municipalities in designated zones (Olsen & Larsen, 2023). Based on this, municipalities frequently override waiting lists by using flexible letting (preferential treatment for people with employment) or combined letting (denying access for those unemployed) to steer the resident composition, thereby making the system less equal and more difficult to navigate.

In Tübingen, the severity of the housing crisis has given rise to a plethora of policy responses, ranging from short-term measures to ease the immediate pressure to longer-term strategies aimed at addressing the underlying issues. Housing has been recognised as a priority by the political and administrative leadership of the municipality. However, housing needs assessments are still useful to build political support for specific measures, for example the need for a better spread of refugee housing across the wider district or the need for future housing that is age-adapted. Housing needs assessments are used as an analytical basis for defining urban policies, but their implementation relies on interactions with private developers and land policy instruments. Urban planning acts as a key intermediary: through instruments such as land-use plans, building regulations, and urban development agreements, local authorities attempt to influence the structure and affordability of housing (Hartman, 2023). However, as research indicates, in market-oriented systems the outcomes of assessments are often mediated through compromises between public interest and economic feasibility (Bramley et al., 2010). Thus, the link between assessment and policy is present but not direct, being shaped by institutional and economic constraints.

In Braga, the translation of assessments into policy is characterised by a stronger dependence on project-based and programmatic frameworks. Although housing needs are recognised in local documents, their implementation often depends on the availability of financial resources, national initiatives, or European funding. This aligns with findings that in systems with less developed public housing sectors, assessments tend to have a limited direct impact on housing supply and more often serve to justify specific interventions (Alves et al., 2026). Indeed, recent history shows that these interventions have taken place because of the pressure of rather dramatic challenges (such as the “plague of shacks” in Porto and Lisbon in the early 1990s, which originated the rehousing program PER; and the generalized housing crisis of the late 2010s, which triggered the launch of the so-

called New Generation of Housing Policy). Urban planning and social housing are not always integrated: planning documents may identify problems but lack the instruments necessary to address them. This discontinuity between analysis and implementation reflects a combination of institutional transition, limited resources, and insufficient intersectoral coordination.

In the case of Čačak, the gap between assessment and policy is the most pronounced and most clearly illustrates the problem of the relationship “between norm and practice.” Interviews with local professionals indicate that housing needs assessments do exist, but are fragmented, partly based on available statistical data, and largely reliant on expert judgment and sectoral records. Although data from censuses, cadastral records, planning documents, and local programmes are used, they are not integrated into a unified system, limiting their analytical value. A particular challenge is the lack of data on effective demand, purchasing power, and migration, as well as the absence of a local housing register. The most significant finding concerns the weak influence of assessments on policymaking. According to interviewees, housing policy in Čačak is not based on systematic analysis but develops in an ad hoc manner under conditions of private sector dominance. Furthermore, urban planning and social housing operate as separate domains: social housing is limited to project-based programmes for vulnerable groups, while urban plans do not include binding instruments to ensure housing affordability. Although assessments are used as a prerequisite for applying to national and international funding schemes, their role remains primarily indicative rather than operational. This confirms the argument that, in the absence of institutional and financial support, assessments cannot be translated into effective policy (Bramley & Watkins, 2016).

A comparison of the four cases highlights several key factors shaping the relationship between norm and practice. The first is institutional capacity: systems with clearly defined competencies and coordination mechanisms (as in Aalborg) enable a more direct translation of assessments into policy. The second is the availability of instruments and financial mechanisms: without these, assessments remain declarative (as in Braga and Čačak). The third is the degree of integration between urban planning and housing policy: where these domains are interconnected, assessments exert a stronger influence on spatial decisions. The fourth is the relationship with the market: in market-oriented systems, as illustrated by the German case, translating assessments into policy involves negotiation and compromise. Finally, a significant constraint across all cases is the temporal mismatch between assessments and political decision-making. While assessments aim to anticipate long-term trends, policies are often short-term and shaped by budgetary and political cycles, further deepening the gap between norm and practice.

6. THE PERSPECTIVE OF URBAN PLANNERS IN SERBIA: BETWEEN NORM AND PRACTICE

The views of urban planners in Serbia, based on survey results collected from 20 professionals, reveal a key paradox: a near-complete consensus on what should be done in the field of social housing is accompanied by a pronounced divergence regarding whether planners possess sufficient capacity and influence to implement these positions in practice. This gap between professional values and actual agency most clearly reflects the tension “between norm and practice.”

With regard to general attitudes, the survey results indicate an exceptionally high level of agreement. As many as 18 out of 20 respondents assigned the highest score (5) to the statement that locations for social housing should be designated in urban plans, while the remaining two respondents assigned scores of 4 and 3. This finding points to an almost unanimous professional position that social housing should be an integral component of urban planning. In contrast, the existing institutional framework in Serbia does not provide clear mechanisms for systematically integrating these needs into planning practice, resulting in a situation where strong normative convictions do not translate into effective implementation (Vuksanović-Macura & Jevtić, 2024; Vuksanović-Macura & Alves, 2025).

This discrepancy becomes even more evident when analysing planners' perceptions of their own influence on policymaking. Unlike the near-universal agreement on the importance of planning, responses regarding influence are highly dispersed: an equal number of respondents (six each) rated their influence as very high (5) and low (2), while the remaining responses are distributed across the middle of the scale. This finding points not only to institutional constraints, but also to a lack of consistent professional self-confidence and a clearly defined role of urban planners within the broader system of urban governance. In other words, the issue is not solely the absence of instruments, but also the ambiguous positioning of the profession within decision-making structures (Đokić & Graovac, 2025).

Regarding the content of housing policies, the survey reveals another important and unambiguous finding: all 20 respondents agree on the need to increase the public housing stock. This absolute consensus represents a strong indication that the professional community recognises a structural deficiency in the existing system, where market logic predominates and public intervention remains limited. In this sense, urban planners not only identify the problem but also articulate a clear orientation toward strengthening the public sector in housing provision.

Particularly significant are the findings related to the spatial dimension of social housing. A majority of respondents (15 out of 20) support the development of social housing across all parts of the city, including central locations, while a smaller number favour peripheral zones. This position reflects a professional orientation toward an integrated and inclusive model of urban development that seeks to avoid spatial segregation and the marginalisation of social housing beneficiaries. This orientation is further reinforced by the preference for urban regeneration as the dominant instrument, indicating a tendency to utilise existing urban structures rather than relying solely on peripheral expansion.

Similarly, planners demonstrate a broader understanding of the target groups of social housing. As many as 17 out of 20 respondents believe that social housing should not be limited exclusively to socially vulnerable groups, but should also include all those unable to secure adequate housing on the market. This position departs from prevailing practices in Serbia, where social

housing is largely treated as a residual category. In this way, the professional community exhibits a tendency toward a broader conception of affordable housing.

However, despite these clearly articulated positions, the survey simultaneously highlights key obstacles to their implementation. The most significant finding in this regard concerns the role of political will: as many as 14 out of 20 respondents identify it as the primary barrier, while financial and institutional factors are mentioned considerably less frequently. This result shifts the understanding of the causes of inaction. Rather than being primarily attributed to technical or resource constraints, the lack of effective action is linked above all to political priorities and the absence of clear political support for the development of social housing.

In this context, the relationship between urban planning and social housing can be understood as structurally misaligned. On the one hand, urban planners recognise the need for integration and articulate relatively progressive positions—from support for central locations to a broader definition of beneficiaries. On the other hand, the institutional framework and political priorities do not enable these positions to be systematically translated into planning instruments and concrete measures. As a result, social housing in Serbia remains present at the level of professional awareness, yet marginalised in practice, as this awareness is not accompanied by corresponding institutional and political conditions.

7. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS, WITH A FOCUS ON SERBIA

This paper has demonstrated that housing needs assessment in small and medium-sized cities is not merely a technical issue of methodology and data, but fundamentally an institutional and political question—namely, how local authorities operate within nationally defined frameworks while responding to specific local needs. The comparative analysis of Aalborg, Tübingen, Braga, and Čačak shows that this action unfolds under different conditions, which shape not only the quality of assessments but also their capacity to be translated into concrete policies (Alves et al., 2026; Bramley et al., 2010).

In systems such as the Danish one, local authorities operate within a stable institutional environment where responsibilities, instruments, and financial mechanisms are clearly defined. Under such conditions, housing needs assessment forms an integral part of the planning process, while urban planning and social housing function as complementary instruments. Local governments not only have the obligation to assess needs, but also the capacity to respond to them, corresponding to a model in which planning outcomes are evaluated in terms of their impact on housing accessibility and structure (Bramley & Watkins, 2016). By contrast, in contexts such as Serbia and, to some extent, Portugal, local authorities operate under conditions of limited resources, fragmented data, and underdeveloped instruments, which significantly constrain their room for action (Allegra & Keunen, 2026).

One of the key findings of the paper is the clear distinction between formalised and ad hoc systems of assessment and action. At one end lies the model of integrated planning (Aalborg), where assessments are directly linked to policy, while at the other lies the model of fragmented practice (Čačak), where assessments exist but have limited influence on decision-making. Between these two poles are systems such as the German and Portuguese ones, where a certain degree of institutionalisation exists alongside a significant influence of market dynamics and external factors (Allegra & Keunen, 2026; Bramley et al., 2010).

It is particularly important to emphasise that a housing needs assessment does not automatically lead to adequate policies. As the findings indicate, even when relatively good data and analytical tools are available, their application depends on institutional factors such as the capacity of local administrations, the availability of financial resources, the degree of intersectoral coordination, and political will. In this sense, the gap between “norm” and “practice” is not an exception, but rather a structural condition, the intensity of which varies across contexts (Bramley & Watkins, 2016).

Based on the comparative insights, several recommendations can be formulated for strengthening the capacity of local governments to improve housing needs assessment and its translation into effective policies. The following recommendations are specifically tailored to the Serbian context, taking into account the analytical findings presented.

First, it is necessary to establish an integrated local housing information system. Currently, multiple data sources exist (census, cadastre, local records), but they are not interconnected. The creation of a unified database encompassing demographic, spatial, economic, and social indicators would represent a key step toward systematic needs assessment. Such a database should be regularly updated and accessible across different sectors of local administration. Second, a standardised methodology for housing needs assessment at the local level should be introduced. This methodology should include not only quantitative indicators (number of households, dwellings, prices), but also qualitative aspects such as affordability, overcrowding, and housing adequacy. It should also account for different categories of need, including both vulnerable groups and broader segments of the population exposed to housing insecurity. Third, institutional coordination at the local level needs to be strengthened. As illustrated by the case of Čačak, data and activities are often dispersed across different departments (urban planning, social services, public utilities), with limited information exchange. Establishing horizontal mechanisms of cooperation, along with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, would enable more effective use of existing resources. Fourth, the link between urban planning and housing policy should be reinforced. Urban plans in Serbia often recognise housing functions, but rarely include concrete instruments to ensure affordable or social housing provision. The introduction of planning mechanisms—such as land reservation, quotas, or developer obligations—could contribute to better integration between these two domains. Fifth, local governments should develop capacities to access and utilise diverse funding sources, including national programmes and international funds. As the findings suggest, housing needs assessments often serve as a prerequisite for accessing such resources. Strengthening administrative and project-management capacities would allow municipalities to better leverage this potential. Sixth, alternative housing models should be developed, particularly for young people and elderly households, identified as key groups in the Serbian context. This includes not only social housing, but also various forms of supported housing, affordable rental schemes, and other innovative models. Finally, it is important to emphasise that strengthening local capacities cannot be an isolated process, but requires

support from the national level. The role of the state is crucial in defining clear regulatory frameworks, ensuring financial mechanisms, and promoting the development of local data systems and analytical capacities.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that the ability of local authorities to adequately assess and address housing needs is shaped by a complex interaction between institutional frameworks, available resources, and local practices. Improving this process requires not only technical, but also institutional and political interventions, enabling housing needs assessments to become a genuine instrument for governing urban development.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research was conducted within the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) research and innovation programme of the European Union's Horizon Europe, under the grant agreement ID 101086488: Delivering sAfe and Social housing (DASH).

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