

Leading for the People, Accelerating with the Digital

From Smart Technologies to Governed Urban Intelligence

Editorial to the Proceedings of the 13th Smart Cities International Conference (SCIC)

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Abstract - The 13th Smart Cities International Conference, held in Bucharest on December 3-5, 2025, marked both the institutional maturity of a conference series launched in 2013 and the 30th anniversary of the Faculty of Public Administration at SNSPA. Under the theme "Leading for the People, Accelerating with the Digital," the conference asked a question more demanding than how rapidly cities can adopt technology: who governs the transformation, for whose benefit, and under what legal, social, educational, and ecological constraints? This editorial reads the contributions to the proceedings as a collective argument against technological determinism. Across smart governance, public health, education, architecture, climate resilience, artificial intelligence, communication, and the circular economy, the papers show that urban intelligence depends on institutional capacity, interoperability, rights, public trust, professional competence, and environmental responsibility. The volume moves beyond the early equation of smartness with sensors and applications. It treats digital systems as public infrastructures that must be designed, explained, audited, and embedded in accountable institutions. The editorial therefore advances a central proposition: a city becomes smart not when it accumulates devices, but when it improves its capacity to make legitimate decisions, learn from evidence, include citizens, protect human dignity, and preserve the material conditions of urban life. The contributions gathered here do not offer a single blueprint. Their value lies in the productive tension between innovation and restraint, efficiency and rights, data and judgment, global models and local context.

Keywords - smart cities; digital governance; artificial intelligence; public value; urban resilience; smart education; citizen-centered innovation

1. A conference at institutional maturity

The 13th edition of the Smart Cities International Conference took place in Bucharest from December 3 to 5, 2025, at a moment of double significance. The conference series had reached the maturity of an institution built continuously since 2013, while the Faculty of Public Administration of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration celebrated thirty years of education, research, and service to public institutions. The main plenary setting in the Romanian Palace of Parliament, complemented by specialized sessions and the Doctoral Workshop at the SNSPA campus, placed the discussion simultaneously inside a symbol of state authority and inside a university responsible for preparing those who design and administer public policy.

The path to this edition was neither linear nor guaranteed. The conference began as a one-day event with a predominantly national audience. It changed venues, expanded its international community, and passed through the disruptions of the COVID-19 period, including online and hybrid formats. Continuity was itself an achievement. More important, however, was the evolution of the intellectual agenda. The early smart-city debate, understandably fascinated by sensors, platforms, and connected devices, gradually widened toward smart people, smart leadership, green transition, democratic resilience, and the possibility of a smarter state. By 2025, artificial intelligence had become

less a discrete conference topic than a background condition - an increasingly invisible operating layer of administration, education, mobility, health, communication, and everyday urban life.

The conference theme, "Leading for the People, Accelerating with the Digital," was therefore deliberately ordered. Leadership and public purpose come first; digital acceleration follows. Reversing that order would convert public administration into passive adaptation to technological supply. The central question posed at the opening - what will our cities look like in ten years, and who will decide that future? - is not a rhetorical ornament. It distinguishes governance from technological drift. Cities should not be shaped only by vendor roadmaps, market concentration, algorithmic convenience, or the momentum of systems already installed. Their future must remain open to public reasoning, constitutional limits, professional judgment, and citizen participation.

This volume reflects the broad architecture announced in the call for papers: smart governance, environment, technology, economy, people, mobility, living, education, young leadership, and the future of the smart(er) state. Yet the papers do more than populate separate tracks. Read together, they reveal that the boundaries between those tracks are porous. A digital permit system is also a problem of law and institutional coordination. A health platform is also a question of interoperability and trust. A climate model is also a decision-support instrument. A smart home is also a regulated space of identity and personal data. An educational building is also an assistive environment. This interdependence is the real subject of the proceedings.

The published article structure confirms this editorial guideline. The 32 contributions indexed in the volume cover smart governance, law and security, communication, education, architecture, health, environment, green AI and circular economy. This supports the thesis that smart city research cannot be reduced to technology adoption, but must combine institutional, social and ecological dimensions.

The editorial standard proposed at the conference was equally explicit: be clear-eyed about trade-offs, be practical about implementation, and be demanding of assumptions. Smart-city discourse is especially vulnerable to slogans that obscure costs and conflicts. The contributions in this volume are strongest when they resist both easy optimism and easy pessimism. Technology is neither a self-executing solution nor an autonomous threat. Its consequences depend on institutional design, competence, incentives, law, and the distribution of voice and power.

2. Governance before automation

The first cluster of contributions demonstrates that public-sector intelligence must be understood as an organizational capacity rather than a property of software. Vrabie examines the use of machine learning and computer vision to analyze images submitted by citizens in municipal petitioning systems. Using 5,712 anonymized images and a workflow combining Faster R-CNN and ResNet-50, the study reports high classification performance and a substantial reduction in processing time. Its more important implication is institutional: easier reporting may increase demand, so efficiency gains must be accompanied by scalable workflows, legal safeguards, and realistic capacity planning [1]. Pană-Micu places such applications within the wider history of decision-making models in public administration, showing how rational choice, bounded rationality, incrementalism, prospect theory, and organizational models are reconfigured when data, simulations, and artificial intelligence enter policy processes. Digital tools can improve evidence use, but data quality, ethical limits, and model opacity remain part of the decision rather than external technical details [2].

This is particularly evident in the range of the published contributions: from AI-supported analysis of municipal citizen images to openBIM and hospital interoperability to SHIFT-HUB. The publications thus show not only different use cases, but also different levels of maturity of digital transformation – from strategic preparation to standardization to the transfer of pilots into permanent ecosystems.

The Romanian e-governance landscape is addressed at different levels of abstraction and implementation. Sfrijan and Bercu compare legislative alignment, digital service development, DESI-related indicators, and institutional realities, concluding that a favorable legal framework does not by

itself eliminate regional disparities, uneven digital skills, or fragmented service quality [3]. Băluță and Dumitru, through the SMART 6 project in Bucharest Sector 6, show why strategic preparation, project management, social innovation, and collaborative organizational forms are necessary before local administrations can move credibly toward artificial-intelligence-supported operations [4]. The common lesson is uncomfortable but essential: digital transformation does not begin with procurement. It begins with diagnosis, process redesign, governance arrangements, and the capacity to maintain systems after the initial project cycle.

The same conclusion emerges from the proposed openBIM framework for digital construction permitting. Zhang, Constantinescu, Theodorou, Covatariu, and Vlăsceanu map Romanian legal requirements to IFC and IDS standards and report that a large share of the information needed to verify a site plan can be checked automatically. The contribution is valuable not because automation removes administration, but because it makes rules more explicit, reusable, and auditable while connecting national procedures to interoperable standards [5]. In a parallel institutional domain, Agheorghiesei and Bercu argue that interoperability between hospitals and public administration must be governed as a service-oriented public infrastructure. Their comparison of Romanian arrangements, Estonia's X-Road, and MyHealth@EU emphasizes co-governance, shared responsibility, data ethics, and service-level commitments rather than mere technical connectivity [6].

Health-sector studies extend this governance argument beyond Europe. Khouna, Baalla, Bousselame, Amri, Jellouli, and El Fethouni analyze digital logistics in Morocco's public hospitals, finding that integrated enterprise systems, warehouse management, IoT, and AI can improve traceability, coordination, and responsiveness, but that fragmented technologies, insufficient competencies, and weak data governance can prevent those tools from producing smart governance [7]. At the pan-European level, Niculae, Stalidi, Suciu, and Serbanica present SHIFT-HUB as an ecosystem linking technology providers, clinicians, policymakers, and citizens through Living Labs, open innovation activities, demonstrations, and an applications repository. The project addresses a recurring European problem: promising pilots often remain isolated because regulatory, financial, organizational, and interoperability pathways from experiment to adoption are incomplete [8].

Taken together, these papers reject a persistent misconception: that acceleration means bypassing institutions. In fact, the faster and more consequential a digital system becomes, the more it depends on clearly assigned responsibility, common standards, data stewardship, professional competence, and mechanisms of review. Automation without governance does not remove fragmentation; it reproduces fragmentation at machine speed. A smart administration is therefore not one that makes every decision automatically, but one that knows which decisions can be supported by machines, which require human judgment, how evidence should be challenged, and who remains accountable when systems fail.

3. Rights, trust, and democratic resilience

A second cluster moves the volume from administrative capacity to the normative foundations of smart societies. Bădescu and Bădescu examine artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, judicial security, and human rights in Romania. Their argument that cybersecurity should be treated as a human-rights issue is particularly important: the security of digital systems is inseparable from the security, autonomy, and legal protection of individuals who are affected by them [9]. In a related but distinct contribution, Bădescu considers digitalized constitutionality and the modernization of constitutional justice. The paper insists that technological efficiency must preserve the balance between public authority and the citizen, rather than making constitutional guarantees conditional on technical convenience [10].

The democratic problem is not limited to formal institutions. Rosca and Ciobanu analyze Moldovan society under sustained disinformation pressure and show that smart citizenship requires cognitive resilience, media literacy, inclusive education, and credible national responses. Rural and marginalized communities are especially vulnerable when access to quality information and digital competencies is uneven [11]. This contribution widens the concept of urban and societal intelligence:

a population connected to digital platforms is not necessarily an informed public. Connectivity can distribute knowledge, but it can also industrialize manipulation. The smart citizen is therefore not merely a user of services; the smart citizen must be capable of evaluating claims, recognizing incentives, and participating in democratic judgment.

Communication is equally central to legitimacy. Zuhdy and Alrasyidi find that stakeholders in Surabaya do not share a common understanding of the smart-city concept. Government may possess technical capacity while public communication remains one-directional, collaboration platforms are weak, and citizens reduce smartness to the existence of applications. The authors therefore recommend community-based education, sustained digital-literacy efforts, and participatory forums [12]. Oprea reaches a comparable conclusion in the field of destination and place branding in Romania. Her communication-centered framework challenges top-down promotional models and emphasizes narrative co-creation, resident agency, digital mediation, and culturally valid evaluation. A place brand that lacks community legitimacy may be visible, but it is not sustainable [13].

Architecture and domestic space introduce further dimensions of power. Coțovanu Toader analyzes the cognitive map of the smart city and the behavioral influence of architectural landmarks, symbols, spectacle, and urban atmosphere. The paper reminds us that urban design is never neutral: public authority materializes priorities, hierarchies, and identities in the built environment, where technological visual culture can intensify their reach [14]. Marinică and Dogeanu bring the analysis inside the home, where AI-assisted design and sensor-based personalization transform domestic life into data. Their integration of data-protection law, AI ethics, environmental psychology, and aesthetics shows that privacy by design cannot be reduced to a compliance checkbox when homes increasingly encode health, emotional, cultural, and lifestyle preferences [15].

The published articles on digitized constitutionality, judicial security, disinformation, smart city communication, place branding, smart homes and wearables expand the concept of trust to include concrete institutional touchstones: legal protection, explainability, media literacy, co-creation, data protection and protection against misleading AI promises.

Drobot's study of smart fitness bands and smart watches similarly connects smart living, digital health, autonomy, inclusion, and fraud. Wearables may encourage active health engagement, yet misleading AI-generated advertising and false claims about device capabilities create new forms of vulnerability. Digital literacy therefore includes skepticism toward technologically embellished promises, not simply confidence in device use [16]. Across these contributions, trust appears neither as a public-relations outcome nor as a psychological residue of adoption. Trust is produced when institutions explain systems, limit data use, correct errors, protect rights, and permit meaningful challenge.

The broader implication is that citizen-centered design must be more demanding than user-centered design. A user can be optimized, nudged, profiled, and retained. A citizen possesses rights, duties, political standing, and the capacity to contest public choices. When the conference theme places people before digital acceleration, it is this distinction that must be preserved. Smart governance requires citizens to be co-authors of public value, not merely data sources for systems designed elsewhere.

4. Smart people and education as public infrastructure

The conference's celebration of thirty years of the Faculty of Public Administration made the smart-people and smart-education tracks more than ceremonial additions. Institutions cannot govern technologies that their personnel do not understand, and societies cannot debate digital change if education trains only passive consumption.

Sula, Qosja, Prendi, Komina, and Cania locate the same capacity problem at the regional level. Their comparative analysis of the Western Balkans identifies fragmentation in research systems, uneven digital infrastructure, underdeveloped technology-transfer mechanisms, and insufficient coordination with European smart-research frameworks. The paper's emphasis on regional

cooperation is a reminder that institutional intelligence is networked: universities, public authorities, industry, and civil society become more capable when knowledge, infrastructure, and policy learning circulate across borders [17]. This was also the rationale for the conference's Doctoral Workshop, which treated emerging researchers not as peripheral participants but as future builders of the research and administrative systems under discussion.

Marchis develops a broad vision of transformative learning that combines technical rigor, humanistic judgment, creativity, ethical awareness, and sustainability. New quality-assurance standards and emerging technologies are important, but the paper resists the idea that curricular modernization means simply adding tools. Education must prepare learners to navigate complex social problems and to connect disciplinary depth with interdisciplinary responsibility [18]. Dumitrescu and Adam provide a more operational view through Romania's effort to equip high schools using the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Their analysis of funder-beneficiary relations finds that capacity and expertise gaps on both sides contribute to delays, implementation difficulties, and reluctance to pursue future funding. Equipment is therefore an input, not an educational outcome; evaluation must examine mechanisms, context, and secondary effects [19].

Crăcea addresses one of the most urgent pedagogical questions of 2025: whether generative AI strengthens or weakens critical thinking. His systematic review emphasizes that AI should support thinking processes rather than substitute for them, and that simulations, practical scenarios, pedagogical frameworks, and AI literacy determine whether learners remain intellectually active [20]. The challenge is not solved by prohibition or unrestricted adoption. It requires assignments that make reasoning visible, verification habitual, and human responsibility unavoidable.

Professional education and spatial design complete this section. Al Hosni proposes the "smart architect" as a professional who combines BIM, artificial intelligence, parametric methods, data literacy, sustainability, ethical judgment, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The architect of a smart city is not simply a more efficient drafter; the role becomes one of systems thinking, mediation, and human-centered urban leadership [21]. Zamfir and Zamfir focus on ADHD-friendly university spaces, integrating architecture, clinical knowledge, inclusive design, and digital assistive technologies. Their principles - including calm environments, controllable lighting and temperature, acoustic protection, spatial predictability, quiet rooms, supportive furniture, and carefully chosen interfaces - show how smart design can reduce barriers without stigmatizing users [22].

The publications on transformative education, the equipment of Romanian schools, the use of generative AI, the competence development of architects and ADHD-friendly university spaces make it visible that education is both a competence and a design infrastructure. Hardware, AI tools and spatial concepts only unfold their value through pedagogical, organisational and inclusive embedding.

These papers collectively redefine education as infrastructure. Roads, networks, platforms, and sensors may be visible components of a smart city, but the less visible infrastructure of judgment, professional competence, research cooperation, and inclusive learning determines whether those systems can be governed over time. The traditional mission of the university therefore remains indispensable precisely because technological change is rapid. Institutions must preserve standards of evidence, historical memory, disciplinary craft, and ethical argument while adapting methods and curricula to new conditions.

5. The smart environment and the material limits of the digital

The environmental contributions resist another form of abstraction: the tendency to discuss digital transformation as though computation had no material footprint and cities had no biophysical limits. Pau reframes the smart environment as a structural pillar of urban resilience and ecological transition, integrating monitoring, resource management, renewable energy, green infrastructure, and participatory governance. The conceptual shift matters because environmental intelligence should not be treated as an optional extension of a technology-centered smart city; it is a criterion by which urban technologies should be judged [23].

Coiciu, Voicu, Apostolidis, and Diaconu combine GIS analysis, distributed weather observations, public perception, and machine-learning-supported climate modeling to examine nature-based solutions in Bucharest. Their results point toward intensifying heat risks and the potential of green roofs, rain gardens, green corridors, and permeable surfaces to improve local thermal comfort and resilience [24]. Segarceanu, Niculae, Suciu, and Sachian address the informational side of environmental management through neural-network-based microscale weather prediction using IoT sensor data. Improved short-term estimates of temperature, wind speed, and wind direction can support pollution dispersion analysis, fire-risk assessment, emergency response, and neighborhood-scale planning that conventional mesoscale models may not capture adequately [25].

The environmental cost of intelligence itself is examined by Apostolidis, Coiciu, Voicu, and Diaconu. Their Green AI study combines conceptual analysis with direct power measurements comparing differently sized models on constrained hardware. The finding that a smaller model fitting available GPU memory can complete a task with far lower total energy use than a larger CPU-offloaded model turns model selection into an environmental and managerial decision, not merely a question of benchmark prestige [26]. Sîrbu places this issue in the wider relationship between artificial intelligence and sustainable development, recognizing both the technology's capacity to support complex problem solving and the uncertainty, resource use, and environmental consequences that accompany it [27].

Other papers remind us that urban innovation need not begin with software. Frangulea proposes thermochromic urban surfaces that change color with temperature, reflecting more heat in hot conditions and potentially moderating the urban heat-island effect. The concept is ambitious and requires further material, lifecycle, safety, and cost validation, but it exemplifies the value of design interventions directed at the largest continuous urban surface: the ground itself [28]. Arakelyan and Makaryan connect digital service organization, senior support, transport optimization, and greenhouse-gas reduction by proposing a platform that coordinates delivery requests and reduces unnecessary vehicle use [29]. Prendi and Murrja provide empirical evidence from Albanian SMEs that circular-economy practices are associated with improved perceived financial performance, suggesting that resource efficiency can strengthen competitiveness and resilience rather than merely impose compliance costs [30].

Rotaru and Isarie extend the environmental discussion to university governance by conceptualizing community-funded environmental innovation as a model in which universities and local communities co-finance, co-design, and co-implement sustainability projects. Drawing on a systematic review of 648 peer-reviewed articles, they identify shared funding, participatory governance, co-creation, embedded learning environments, and local sustainability impact as defining characteristics, while showing that whole-institution alignment and sustained managerial support are necessary to move from isolated partnerships to durable regional transformation [31].

Mauro and Antonella Romanelli close the volume with a broader account of green cities as engines of urban renewal. Their qualitative analysis connects green planning, the protection of natural ecosystems, responsible consumption, and civic cooperation with public health, social inclusion, and quality of life. The contribution emphasizes that sustainable urban transformation depends on both policy frameworks and the everyday conduct of citizens and other local actors [32].

The published articles provide a wide range of evidence for this: nature-based solutions and green roofs, IoT-based microweather forecasting, green AI measurements on limited hardware, thermochromic city surfaces, digital logistics, circular economy in Albanian SMEs, and community-funded environmental innovation in universities. Taken together, they argue for a comparative assessment of digital and non-digital measures across their entire lifecycle.

The environmental papers therefore complicate a common policy narrative. Digitalization can help cities monitor, predict, coordinate, and optimize; it can also consume energy, intensify hardware dependence, and distract from low-tech or nature-based measures. A credible smart-environment strategy must account for the full lifecycle of systems, including infrastructure, maintenance,

computation, procurement, and eventual obsolescence. It must also compare digital interventions with architectural, ecological, organizational, and behavioral alternatives. The proper question is not whether a solution is advanced, but whether it produces durable public value within ecological limits.

6. What this volume argues collectively

The proceedings do not offer a unified model of the smart city, and that is a strength. Bucharest, Surabaya, Moldovan society, the Western Balkans, Albania, Morocco, and pan-European health ecosystems differ in law, institutional maturity, resources, administrative traditions, and political pressures. A solution that works in one context cannot be transferred responsibly by copying its interface while ignoring the institutions underneath it. Comparative learning requires attention to sequence, capacity, incentives, culture, and the distribution of risks.

These five propositions can be directly traced back to the contribution landscape. Public value can be seen, for example, in health, education and environmental contributions; interoperability in openBIM, X-Road-related comparative perspectives and SHIFT-HUB; rights and trust in the contributions to AI, constitution and disinformation; competence in the educational and research contributions; ecological accountability finally in Green AI, Nature-based Solutions and Circular Economy.

Nevertheless, five shared propositions emerge. First, public value must precede technological novelty. Systems should begin from a defined social or administrative problem, not from the availability of a fashionable tool. Second, interoperability is governance. Common formats and APIs matter, but so do responsibilities, financing, service standards, and dispute resolution. Third, rights and trust are functional requirements. Privacy, cybersecurity, explanation, inclusion, and avenues of appeal are not obstacles added after innovation; they determine whether innovation remains legitimate. Fourth, competence is infrastructure. No procurement can compensate for weak project management, inadequate digital skills, or the absence of critical and ethical education. Fifth, digital intelligence must be ecologically accounted for. The energy and material costs of computation belong inside the assessment of smart-city performance.

These propositions also sharpen the meaning of leadership. Leadership for smart cities is not the performance of certainty in a field filled with uncertainty. It is the disciplined capacity to identify trade-offs, create institutions that can learn, and preserve accountability while experimentation proceeds. It requires enough technical knowledge to question vendors and models, enough administrative knowledge to understand implementation, enough legal knowledge to recognize limits, and enough democratic humility to accept that citizens may contest the chosen direction.

The phrase "accelerating with the digital" should therefore not be confused with accelerating everything. Some processes should become faster: access to information, detection of infrastructure problems, coordination during emergencies, exchange of health data under lawful conditions, and feedback to citizens. Other processes should remain deliberately demanding: constitutional review, high-stakes adjudication, consent, public deliberation, ethical assessment, and the education of professional judgment. Institutional wisdom lies partly in knowing the difference.

The 13th Smart Cities International Conference was convened because the future of cities should not be left to chance, technological momentum, or market forces alone. The contributions to this volume answer that ambition with evidence, concepts, prototypes, warnings, and policy lessons. They show a field moving beyond its early fascination with connected objects toward a more mature concern with governed systems and human consequences. The smart city is becoming less a finished urban model than a continuing public task: to use knowledge and technology without surrendering judgment, to innovate without weakening rights, and to improve present institutions without consuming the future they are meant to serve.

On behalf of the organizing and scientific community, we thank the authors, reviewers, speakers, institutional partners, practitioners, students, and participants who sustained this conversation. The value of a conference is not measured only by the number of technologies presented or policies

proposed, but by the quality of the questions it leaves open. The most important of those questions remains before us: not merely how smart our cities can become, but what kind of intelligence - administrative, democratic, social, and ecological - we choose to build together.

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