THE DARK SIDE OF THE RULE

Rules and realities for micromobility

As cities try to **regulate shared micromobility**, good intentions can clash with real-world complexity. From speed limits to sustainability, every rule carries operational trade-offs. How can cities move from reactive policies to smarter governance—balancing safety, efficiency, and fairness in the fast-evolving landscape of urban mobility?

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Shared bikes
Karen Vancluysen

It is easier to say what should be regulated than to regulate effectively. This much is clear from the last seven years of shared micromobility in Europe. Since the sudden arrival of e-scooters and e-bikes in public spaces, local authorities have been under increasing pressure to respond. What has followed is a rapid and often reactive cycle of regulation—sometimes in the form of legislation, sometimes through public tendering, and often both.

The POLIS report 'Careful what you wish for: Practical implications of rules and requirements for shared micromobility' does not aim to pass judgment on individual policies. Instead, it documents what happens when rules are brought to life—when they meet the daily routines of operators, the practicalities of enforcement, and the expectations of the public.

Moreover, it focuses on six rules often discussed in the context of shared micromobility: speed limits, parking, helmets, user education, local employment, and life cycle assessment—and examines their operational implications.

Take it slow

Few rules sound more intuitive than speed limits. However, limiting the speed of e-scooters and e-bikes without similar restrictions on cars, vans, and buses only widens the speed gap between users of the same road.

Geofencing is often used as a tool to implement speed limits, but it is not a magic wand, as GPS accuracy remains a limitation, especially in dense urban environments. This can lead to vehicles slowing down abruptly or failing to slow down when required—turning a safety measure into a source of confusion, user frustration, or even increased danger.

While field testing and fine-tuning are necessary, these processes are quite resource-intensive. Overly complex or frequently changing low-speed zones further complicate compliance and may ultimately reduce overall service quality.

Where do I park this?

Improperly parked shared vehicles have sparked public backlash in many cities: addressing this issue is more complicated than simply enforcing fines or creating new regulations. There is no universally accepted definition of 'proper parking' for micromobility, and public expectations often clash with operational realities.

Dedicated parking zones—whether hotspots, hubs, or docking stations—are a step forward. But questions remain: Who pays for their installation? Can parking be reallocated without political fallout? How will compliance be monitored when GPS accuracy is limited? Should shared micromobility vehicles be excluded from public bike racks, even if there are no other options?

Shared bikes and e-scooters
Karen Vancluysen

In many places, the parking debate has moved faster than the infrastructure needed to support it.

Helmets for all (?)

Mandatory helmet use continues to pose questions. While most European countries have stopped requiring adult cyclists and scooter users to wear helmets, some cities have tried to make it compulsory for operators to provide them.

This seems sensible, but nonetheless impractical: indeed, storing helmets on vehicles presents both technical and hygienic challenges. Moreover, ensuring proper sizing, maintenance, and theft prevention requires a level of operational oversight that many services are not equipped to provide.

Crucially, the assumption that making helmets available will lead to their consistent use is not backed up by experience, nor is there conclusive evidence that helmet distribution schemes improve safety outcomes, especially if wider traffic conditions remain unaddressed.

Better behave

The desire for users to 'behave properly' is a recurring theme in micromobility regulation. Cities now routinely require operators to invest in education—through app onboarding, awareness campaigns, and even face-to-face training.

However, such initiatives have limited impact. Users often skip messages or tutorials, attendance at events is low, and operators report that the behavioural impact of these programmes is marginal.

This raises a wider question: Should operators be solely responsible for educating users, or should this start at the school level?

Riding the job curve

A growing number of cities include employment conditions in their tendering criteria. The intention is to encourage more stable, fair, and local employment practices. But the reality for operators is complicated, as demand for micromobility fluctuates. Staffing levels that work in the summer may not be sustainable in the winter, and short-term contracts with cities create further instability.

Operators face a structural dilemma: invest in in-house teams and risk financial strain or rely on third-party providers. Some cities have responded by offering longer licence periods—typically five years—in the hope that this will provide the stability needed to support better jobs. However, longer contracts also require robust performance monitoring and enforcement to prevent complacency.

Multimodal mix in Paris

Philippe Crist

Is it OK, like, for the planet?

Sustainability is becoming a central aspect of micromobility policy. Indeed, cities are asking operators to provide Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs) of their fleets.

LCAs should cover everything from raw materials and manufacturing processes to use, maintenance and end-of-life recycling, yet, many assessments focus narrowly on headline figures, leaving out key details such as spare parts, power sources, or emissions from collection and rebalancing operations.

Also, only a few city staff are trained to properly evaluate LCA documentation. As a consequence, verifying the accuracy of environmental claims remains a challenge.

When good things take time

Regulation is never neutral. Every rule introduced, however well-intentioned, comes with practical requirements for compliance, verification, enforcement, and adaptation. These demands often remain hidden until the rule meets the realities of city streets, operational constraints, and user behaviour. When overlooked, even the best ideas can backfire.

Reactive regulation, based primarily on complaints and quick fixes, risks creating systems that work better for those who shout the loudest than for those who use the services. This, too, is beginning to change: cities are starting to think more long-term—building infrastructure, aligning policies with public goals, and engaging more meaningfully with operators.
This does not mean less regulation—it means smarter regulation.

Good regulation takes time. It requires being grounded in clear priorities and having realistic expectations. Above all, it requires the humility to test assumptions and to learn from those who have to make the rules work every day.