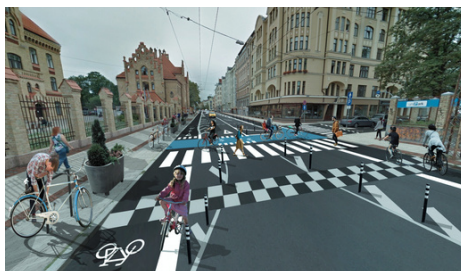


RIGA RULES

Riga's urban mobility strategy prioritises accessibility, sustainability, and inclusivity. Having defined its strategic objectives, Riga embraces the challenges in planning by conducting projects focused on lowering the volume of traffic and tackling air pollution to make the city's streets safer, more attractive, vibrant and accessible for all users.

POLIS: As an urban planner, what do you think are the key goals that city administrations should strive to achieve to improve the sustainability and living standards of cities? And what would you say are the main priorities when it comes to approaching projects or plans for the city?

Mihails Potihonins: I think that accessibility in urban environments is essential—every citizen should have barrier-free access to the city according to their needs and abilities.



INTERVIEW WITH
MIHAILS POTIHONINS

ELABORATED BY
SARA MECATTI

*In order, from top to bottom:
Bruņinieku Street, Mūkusalas street along
the promenade, Rīgas Satiksme buses*
City of Riga



Mihails Potihonins

Lead Project Manager for
Transportation and Mobility Strategic
Planning
City of Riga

Since commuting occupies a large part of daily life, planners must prioritise inclusive, efficient mobility for all.

Riga's Development Programme for 2022-2027 aligns closely with the EU's sustainability goals, including a strong focus on convenient, environmentally friendly mobility. This aligns with the city's Sustainable Development Strategy until 2030, which outlines a hierarchy of mobility priorities.

Riga puts pedestrian mobility, cycling infrastructure, and micromobility at the top of its planning agenda. Public transport is considered the backbone of the urban mobility system and is expected to offer barrier-free access. Meanwhile, due to their environmental impact, private and cargo vehicles will face access restrictions in central Riga starting in 2027.

POLIS: You are working on low-emission zones and their feasibility. What are the main challenges and possible solutions? And what could other cities learn from Riga's experience?

Potihonins: The low-emission zone (LEZ) initiative in Riga began in 2021, when the then-mayor signed the Paris Climate Declaration 'Cities leading the way to climate neutrality'.

In 2020, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development published the 'Air Pollution Reduction action plan 2020-2030', which identified the establishment of a LEZ in Riga as a key measure to tackle air pollution and CO₂ emissions.

The initial feasibility study was carried out with a consultancy agency and research institutions. The aim was to identify the sources and volume of the most polluting elements and propose initial mitigation strategies. The findings revealed that urban transport accounts for approximately 40% of total air pollution and is the main source of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and particulate matter (PM_x) emissions.

In addition, data showed that on the worst days, the high levels of pollution affect more than 70% of the city—particularly near main roads and high-density residential areas.

The planned coverage of the future LEZ is expected to be substantial, setting off from the central area of the city and potentially expanding to encompass the entire municipal territory.

Currently, we are actively developing implementation scenarios with the goal of launching the LEZ by the end of 2027. We are also working to build local political support and foster international knowledge exchange and cooperation to ensure that the LEZ introduced is both effective and equitable for all user groups.

POLIS: Riga has developed an ambitious Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP) and is truly dedicated to lowering emissions and improving environmental conditions. Where do you think this drive to act and change things for the better comes from?

Potihonins: Several meaningful actions have been taken to lay the groundwork for a SUMP, such as the Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan 2020-2030, which outlines Riga's primary goals for climate-resilient development. However, many more steps must be taken to develop a proper SUMP.

Currently, a cross-organisational working group of experts led by the Riga Planning Region aims to establish a collaborative structure for developing, financing, and deploying the SUMP.

There is a general agreement to create a SUMP at the level of the Riga metropolitan area, as it hosts around 70% of all workplaces in Latvia.

This area also contains the TEN-T node of Riga. Thus, the SUMP should be a well-coordinated effort by many planning and administrative bodies to meet expectations and produce the desired outcome.

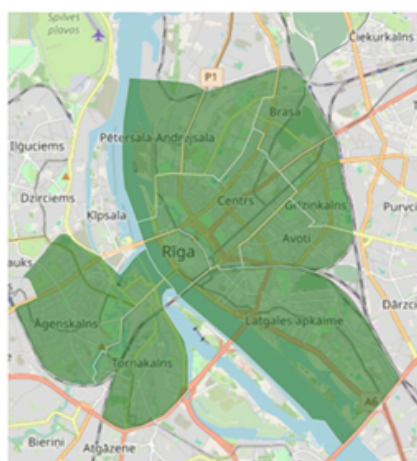
LEZ v1 2030+



RESTRICTIONS

the most polluting internal combustion cars

LEZ v2 2030+



RESTRICTIONS

the most internal combustion cars

LEZ v3 2035+



RESTRICTIONS

all internal combustion cars

Low-emission zone territory vision 2030-2035 [WIP]

City of Riga

POLIS: Riga is already very dedicated to sustainability. Do you think there is still room for improvement? What are the next steps regarding sustainable transport and mobility in the city?

Potihonins: There is always room for improvement. In my opinion, a more structured and consistent system of cooperation between different levels of governance—and with citizens—should be established to ensure more efficient implementation of planned solutions.

As it stands, we are very effective at identifying gaps in planning, developing feasibility studies, exploring scenarios, and modelling potential outcomes. However, much of what is planned remains on paper.

We must strive for an efficient yet inclusive decision-making process, adopt a more incremental approach to urban planning, and maintain a strong focus on tailoring solutions to the needs of local communities.

POLIS: Let's talk about some projects that are currently underway in Riga. One of them is **Cycle4Climate – Sustainable Mobility Solutions for Reducing CO₂ Emissions**, which focuses on improving infrastructure for active travel and encourages citizens to opt for cycling (or walking) over using motorised vehicles. Could you tell us more about the project, how it is progressing, and what results you have seen so far?

Potihonins: As the project has just recently started, it is still in the planning phase. However, several pilot activities are already scheduled.

These include a pro-cycling social awareness campaign and the installation of secure bicycle parking facilities in the densely populated Torņakalns and Ziepniekkalns neighbourhoods.

These areas will also serve as focal points for data collection on residents' travel habits, infrastructure improvements, and targeted information campaigns.

Another notable initiative is **JUST STREETS**, which prioritises just and active mobility while championing sustainability and inclusivity for all. In our current international socio-political landscape, inclusivity is more important than ever. What advice would you offer to administrations that may underestimate the importance of an inclusive approach to urban planning?

Potihonins: I want to emphasise once again that the degree of engagement of local citizens and communities is key to achieving a better quality of the urban environment.

My advice to administrations is to look beyond the car-centric planning models and allow more interactions at the tactical, 'everyday' level.

I strongly believe that small systemic changes can illustrate how accessible and vibrant streets enhance the urban experience for everyone. Crucially, this requires a stronger focus on pedestrians—something the **JUST STREETS** project fosters by analysing how the spatial configuration of Riga affects human movement.

POLIS: Are there any other projects you are particularly invested in that you would like to highlight?

Potihonins: Yes, and in fact, Riga is engaged in multiple initiatives, all of which are featured on the Smart Riga portal.

One of the most ambitious projects is the Unified Mobility Data Ecosystem, which aims to establish a smart mobility data management system to support more effective transport planning and traffic

organisation across Riga and its metropolitan area. One of the project's key performance indicators is to reduce the city's resources spent on mobility planning by at least 10%.

Another significant initiative is the Horizon Europe project UNCHAIN, which seeks to facilitate public and private sector cooperation, data exchange, and interoperability to improve logistics planning and support the development of a European space for mobility data.

It also aims to create a suite of services for optimal and flexible urban logistics operation, management, planning, and policymaking—capitalising on to help cities move toward climate-neutrality.

Finally, a major undertaking in Riga is the restructuring of the public transport network.

As previously mentioned, public transport is the backbone of our mobility system, yet it has not been comprehensively reviewed in decades. Our objective is to make it more attractive and user-friendly in support of our SUMP and low-emission zone goals.

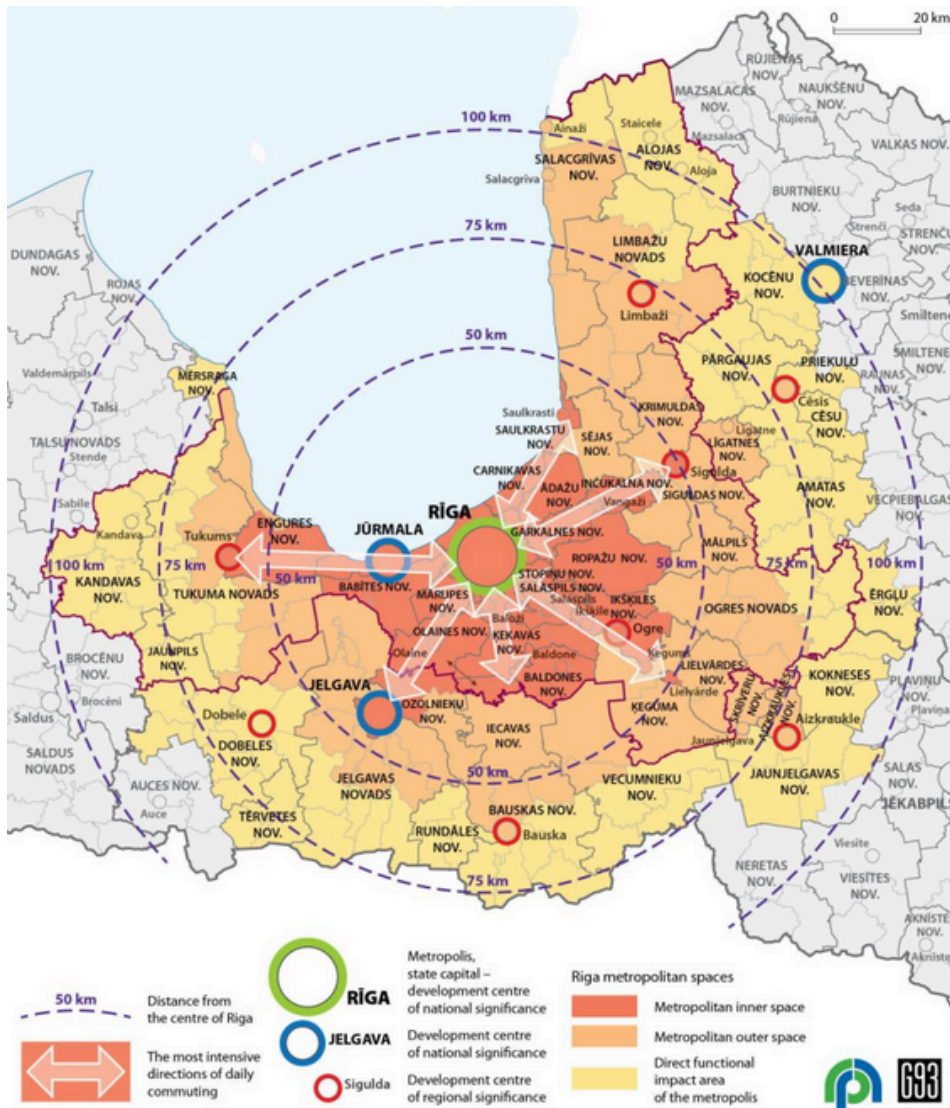
The initial phase involves a detailed study of the existing network and its ability to meet citizens' mobility needs.

This will be followed by the development of several public transport network scenarios, which will then inform a comprehensive action plan for reforming the route network.

POLIS: Riga has developed multiple projects focused on safety. What are some of the less obvious consequences of building a safer city for pedestrians, cyclists, and all non-motorised citizens?

The Metropolitan Area of Riga

G93 Action plan for development of the Riga Metropolitan area, 2019



Building a safer city for pedestrians and cyclists in Riga has led to several less obvious consequences. One is the revitalisation of public spaces, which fosters stronger community ties and encourages more outdoor social interaction —also boosting local retail by increasing foot traffic.

Another is the shift in mobility behaviour—residents increasingly opt for walking or cycling, which can in the long term reduce healthcare costs due to improved public health. More people actively using safe and appealing street spaces encourages other users to also adopt the same modes of transport.

However, safer streets often lead to increased property values in redesigned neighbourhoods, which can unintentionally contribute to gentrification and displacement pressures. Riga needs to prepare for the possible negative outcomes by improving the available mechanisms and tools, mostly through a planning process, to mitigate these negative effects.