

Riga's climate neutrality planning: an example of realistic ambition and public engagement

For more information

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Riga, the capital of Latvia, is home to 33 per cent of the country's inhabitants, around 612,000 people.¹ On top of this, daily commuters increase Riga's population even further during the work day.² This means that Riga carries a large share of the country's burden when it comes to reducing impacts on climate and adapting to change. However, it also means that Riga's city administration can have a significant impact on the country's overall performance, not simply by improving the statistics but also by leading the way for other urban areas.

This briefing provides an overview of the planning process Riga city council took when designing the Riga Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan Until 2030,³ as well as insight into the plan itself. This is an example of good practice, showcasing an approach that resulted in realistic ambition and wide involvement among

¹ Centrālā statistikas pārvalde, [Iedzīvotāju skaits pēc tautības reģionos, novados, pilsētās, pagastos \(atbilstoši robežām 2023. gada sākumā\)](#), *Oficiālās statistikas portāls*, accessed on 8 February 2023.

² Latvijas Universitāte, [Rīgas aglomerācijas robežu precizēšana](#), *Rīgas domes Pilsētas attīstības departaments*, 30 November, 2017.

³ Ekodoma Ltd., [Rīgas pilsētas enerģētikas un klimata rīcības plāns 2022.-2030. gadam](#), *Rīga Energy Agency*, October 2021.

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citizens. Although it is too early to declare the plan a success story (we need to wait until 2030 to make that judgment), Riga provides an example that could be followed by other cities.

Introduction

Almost 30 per cent of all multi-apartment buildings in Latvia are located in Riga, but until 2019, only 159 or 1.4 per cent of the city's apartment buildings had been renovated⁴, illustrating the enormity of the energy efficiency challenge ahead. The heating sector in Riga also has great potential to be decarbonised. The total energy production for heating (both district heating and decentralised) in 2020 was 8,665 gigawatt hours (GWh), with 25 per cent being renewables (biomass, biogas, solar energy) and 75 per cent fossil fuels (mainly gas).⁵

District heating provides around 56 per cent of the total heat energy demand in Riga. In 2021, district heating in Riga consisted of around 50 per cent biomass and 45 per cent fossil gas.⁶ Another major problem in Riga is poor air quality caused by two main factors: heavy traffic, which is more intense than anywhere else in Latvia, and inefficient, polluting decentralised heating sources⁷. The scale of the challenges Riga faces is largely of national importance, and Riga residents themselves are defining the route they wish to take.

In May 2022, the Riga Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan Until 2030 was approved. Its first traces can be found in 2008, when the city's mayor at the time joined the Covenant of Mayors, an initiative founded by the European Commission. Riga was the first European capital to commit to reducing CO₂ emissions by 20 per cent by 2020. Much later – on 14 October 2020 – the city's current mayor, Mārtiņš Staķis, joined the EUROCITIES initiative for the second time on behalf of the city of Riga. Together with the heads of other European cities, the mayor called on the European Parliament to set higher climate goals by making significant investments in the public transport system, improving infrastructure and renovating buildings, as well as enacting measures to improve air quality.⁸

In the spring of 2022, Riga was declared one of 100 EU cities that are taking a deliberate path towards becoming climate-neutral smart cities, thus qualifying for special funding⁹ to help achieve this ambition. Achieving climate neutrality in Riga is the overarching goal of the plan, and if it is fulfilled, Riga would become the first climate-neutral capital in the Baltic region.

1. The administrative framework of climate neutrality planning

Riga's council has several working groups consisting of elected deputies working on a range of matters that require high levels of coordination among various sectors or are of specific relevance. The first task, which initiated the whole planning process, was to establish a climate neutrality working group¹⁰ within the city

⁴ Ekodoma Ltd., [Rīgas pilsētas enerģētikas un klimata rīcības plāns 2022.-2030. gadam](#).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Indra Sprance, '[Piesārņojums mūsu plaušās. Kā Rīgā cer uzlabot gaisu?](#)', LSM, March 24, 2022.

⁸ Alex Godson, '[More than 50 European mayors call on EU to do better on climate targets](#)', Eurocities, 15 October, 2020.

⁹ European Commission, [EU Mission: Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities](#), European Commission, 28 April, 2022.

¹⁰ DELFI, '[Rīgas pašvaldībā izveido četras darba grupas mājokļu un vides jautājumu risināšanai](#)', DELFI, 1 December, 2020.

council. Energy expert and council member Selīna Vancāne was appointed as the head of the working group. The role of the working group was to follow the development of the Riga Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan Until 2030, as well as its implementation, by ensuring that all subgroups implement the planned activities, coordinating other opportunities for future cooperation, organising additional discussions on measures and making sure that all involved parties participated properly in the process.

Under the supervision of the climate neutrality working group, six subgroups were created to work on specific areas: energy production, multi-apartment residential buildings, municipal infrastructure, transport, adaptation and urban planning and climate neutrality policy. The climate neutrality policy subgroup will evaluate how climate neutrality is achieved and how the main obstacles to climate neutrality are eliminated at the national and local levels. It will address the application of the energy/CO₂ tax, the future of fossil gas cogeneration plants and the renovation of apartment buildings.

2. Expert involvement, public participation and communication

The plan was one of the most discussed energy and climate action plans in Latvia. In total, 18 meetings and seven focus group discussions of varying sizes were organised, more than 280 specialists were involved and 14 thematic descriptions were prepared. Meaningful cooperation has been taking place with representatives of municipal companies that manage a large part of the city's infrastructure. Non-governmental organisations and educators, as well as industry experts and the general public, were involved extensively. The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development and the Ministry of Economics both made supportive official statements on how the plan fits into Latvia's larger policies. Although it is not obligatory for such plans to receive wide stakeholder input, this was done to obtain a cross-sectoral perspective and improve the quality and acceptance of the plan.

Environmental communication, which permeates the work of all subgroups, began during the development of the plan. Selīna Vancāne remembers¹¹ this as a form of extensive educational work that involved explaining to decision makers step by step what sustainable energy, energy efficiency and heat supply mean. This helped create an understanding of both the topic in general and support for the objectives included in the plan. Environmental communication is important both for measures related to decentralised heat energy consumers and electricity consumption in the city as a whole and in public buildings.

In the spring of 2023, in cooperation with Riga Technical University's environment and technology science centre, Futurimo Riga will open its doors and invite students and families with children to visit and learn more about climate, nature and technology in an interactive way. There are also plans to prepare school programmes that will educate young people about the common challenge of climate neutrality. The main goal of these communication efforts is to encourage people to change their habits.

During the elaboration of the plan in 2021, the first climate festival¹² in Riga was organised online to jointly evaluate the fulfilment of the set climate goals and outline the next steps on the way to Riga's climate neutrality. At the conference, the plan was presented, as were the solutions it offered and the biggest

¹¹ Selīna Vancāne, interview with the author, 16 February 2022.

¹² Rīgas Enerģētikas Aģentūra, [Rīgas Klimata festivāls 2021](#), 17 December 2021.

challenges in their implementation. Examples of good practice from other municipalities were included. This was followed by discussions and conclusions from experts in the field about the actions each of us can take to adapt to climate change.

The 2021 climate festival marked the first time such comprehensive and meaningful environmental communication with the inhabitants of Riga and employees of utility companies within the city had taken place. Reflecting on this, Selīna Vancāne said:

We want to involve and inform Riga residents about the importance of climate change globally, in Riga and also in everyone's everyday life. Climate change communication often lacks highlights of the positive aspects – we want to show that not only in Europe, but also here in Latvia, there are several pioneers in this field, from whom we can all get inspired.¹³

In late 2022, the second climate festival¹⁴ took place (both online and in-person). This event detailed the progress made since the previous year on the specific challenges posed by the energy crisis, the results of energy-saving activities in that context, plans for decarbonising the heating sector, the soon-to-be-opened science centre for young people and the status of public involvement in reaching climate neutrality.

All municipalities' capital companies have now implemented climate performance indicators that come with environmental communication duties: 1) communication between institutions and 2) communication with society to promote climate-friendly habits.

Since Riga initiated a deliberate path towards climate neutrality, there is also more involvement of experts in city-related climate change work.¹⁵ The Riga Energy Agency, which was revived in 2020¹⁶ after the ruling coalition of Riga's council changed, has worked on communicating, educating and consulting over the past two years and from now on will also provide financial support for the promotion of multi-apartment renovation and renewable heating solutions. Representatives from the agency take part in meetings of apartment resident associations to convince doubtful residents to vote in favour of renovation. Any resident of Riga can set up a free consultation meeting with the Riga Energy Agency. The agency can now also provide financial support for renovations by financing the development of energy audits and technical documentation.

3. The climate neutrality plan

Riga aims to become climate-neutral by 2050. As an interim step, the city has a plan to become the first climate-neutral capital in the Baltics by 2030 in terms of climate-neutral infrastructure, ensuring that the municipality's own building stock is energy-efficient. The plan demonstrates a systematic approach to the implementation of these goals. It outlines long-term and short-term goals, as well as specific actions that can be taken to achieve them.

¹³ Rīgas Enerģētikas Aģentūra, [Rīgas Klimata festivāls 2021](#), 17 December 2021.

¹⁴ Rīgas Enerģētikas Aģentūra, [Klimata festivāla 2022 konference "Rīga – energoneatkaRīga"](#), 20 December, 2022.

¹⁵ Selīna Vancāne, interview with the author, 16 February 2022.

¹⁶ Rīgas domes Sabiedrisko attiecību nodaļa, [Konkursā meklēs Rīgas Enerģētikas aģentūras direktoru](#), *Rīgas Dome*, 2 February, 2021.

The plan can only be implemented in conjunction with the city's other strategies, each of which includes in-depth solutions for a certain range of issues. Riga's Sustainable Development Strategy until 2030¹⁷ places a special focus on the transport sector to promote the use of public transport and cycling. The Riga Development Programme for 2022-2027,¹⁸ the city's medium-term planning document associated with the strategy, also outlines housing issues and actions that can be taken to solve them.

In 2020 Riga City Sustainable Energy Action Plan 2010-2020¹⁹ was developed, later in 2014 the Sustainable Energy Action Plan of the City of Riga for the Smart City 2014-2020²⁰ was created. The vision for the city's public transport sector foresees short-term, medium-term and long-term programmes until 2030. The Short-term Action Plan until 2025²¹ and the Spatial Vision of the Mobility of the Riga Metropolitan Area in 2030²² were created to 'ensure the mobility of people and the business environment, the accessibility of territories and the availability of facilities for better quality of life'.

The Riga Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan Until 2030 presents four priority strategic areas where work can be done to achieve the vision of a climate-neutral and climate-resilient Riga:

1. **Energy** – reduce energy consumption in the city to the minimum required.
2. **CO₂ emissions** – achieve the maximum possible share of renewable energy resources in municipal infrastructure.
3. **Energy poverty** – ensure that households can afford the necessary energy resources for a comfortable life.
4. **Adaptation to climate change** – become a climate-resistant city.

The plan then includes seven directions of action and two additional directions to ensure priority areas are covered:

1. **Municipal infrastructure** (municipal buildings, city lighting, municipal vehicle fleet)
2. **Energy production** (heat and electricity, integration of renewables)
3. **Apartment buildings** (mass modernisation, innovative building materials and energy solutions)
4. **Transportation** (sustainable public, commercial and private transportation)
5. **Adaptation to climate change** (integration of adaptation measures into urban planning at all planning levels)

¹⁷ Rīgas Domes Pilsētas Attīstības Departaments, [Rīgas ilgtspējīgas attīstības stratēģija līdz 2030. gadam](#), 27 May, 2014.

¹⁸ Rīgas Dome, [Rīgas attīstības programma 2022.-2027. gadam](#), 23 February, 2022.

¹⁹ Rīgas enerģētikas aģentūra, [Rīgas pilsētas ilgtspējīgas enerģētikas rīcības plāns 2010.-2020.g.](#), Rīgas dome, 6 July, 2010.

²⁰ Rīgas enerģētikas aģentūra, [Rīgas pilsētas ilgtspējīgas enerģētikas rīcības plāns viedai pilsētai 2014.-2020.gadam](#), Rīgas dome, 8 July, 2014.

²¹ "E. Daniševska birojs" Ltd. un "Solvers" Ltd., [Rīgas transporta sistēmas ilgtspējīgas mobilitātes rīcības programma. Īstermiņa rīcības plāns 2019.-2025. gadam](#), Rīgas domes Pilsētas attīstības departaments, 2019.

²² „Grupa93” Ltd., [Rīgas metropoles areāla mobilitātes telpiskā vīzija](#), Rīgas plānošanas reģions, 2019.

6. **Environmental communication** (education, energy-efficiency measures in public buildings, energy community promotion, circular economy, open data and digitisation)
7. **Climate neutrality policy** (ambitious policy of resilience and climate neutrality)

The two additional directions to ensure that priority areas are covered are **monitoring criteria** and **monitoring systems**.

The main goals set out in the plan

In comparison to the goals set out in Latvia’s national energy and climate plan (NECP),²³ Riga’s targets are more ambitious: it has higher targets for reducing the city’s overall CO₂ emissions (15 per cent higher), emissions reduction in transportation (around 20 per cent higher) and multi-apartment building renovation, as well as a relatively ambitious target for the share of renewables in electricity generation. However, Latvia’s NECP will be updated in 2023, so these differences might even out to some extent.

Riga’s energy goals for 2030 compared to 2019 (selected)

Municipal infrastructure

Reduction of energy consumption in municipal buildings	20 per cent reduction compared to 2020
Portion of renewable heat energy in municipal building stock	100 per cent
Portion of renewable electricity used in municipal infrastructure	100 per cent
Portion of renewable energy in municipal lighting and traffic light infrastructure	100 per cent
Portion of renewable energy in municipal transportation	100 per cent

Multi-apartment building stock

Renovated multi-apartment residential buildings	2,000 buildings
Heat energy consumption reduction in multi-apartment buildings connected to district heating	-20 per cent

District heating

Raising the portion of renewable energy in centralised district heating	≥ 54 per cent (from 31 per cent)
Reducing relative heat loss in district heating networks	11.6 per cent (from 11.7 per cent)

²³ Ekonomikas Ministrija, [Nacionālais enerģētikas un klimata plāns 2021.-2030.gadam](#), Cabinet of Ministers, 23 January, 2020.

Decentralised heating source / gas supply

Reducing the portion of decentralised heating	40 per cent (from 44 per cent)
Raising the portion of renewable energy in decentralised heating	60 per cent (from 38 per cent)
Reducing fossil gas consumption in all sectors in Riga	-30 per cent

Electricity supply

Raising the portion of renewable electricity	>15 per cent (compared to 4 per cent)
Reducing the overall electricity consumption	-0.8 per cent

Transportation

Raising the portion of renewable energy in public transportation	50 per cent (compared to 16 per cent)
Reducing the number of private vehicle users	37.4 per cent (compared to 42.4 per cent)

CO₂ goals for 2030 compared to 2019

Reducing Riga's overall CO ₂ emissions	-25 per cent
Reducing CO ₂ emissions in energy production	-25 per cent
Reducing CO ₂ emissions in the transportation sector	-30 per cent

To achieve these specific goals, the plan contains 112 measures, which include not only specific investment projects, but also regulatory changes and planning efforts. Some of these measures are:

- Promotion of the use of solar solutions and heat pumps in small boiler houses
- Preparation of standard solutions and support mechanisms for connecting decentralised objects to district heating, which would be cost-competitive with individual natural gas heating systems
- No new gas boilers installed in Riga (in households, businesses, state or municipal buildings) from 2025. This regulation has already been adopted.
- Evaluation of the possibility of installing solar panels and other renewable energy solutions – like energy communities and companies – for residents using the infrastructure available to the municipality.
- Introduction of an energy-efficiency centre that would accumulate knowledge and examples of good practice on issues related to energy-efficiency in housing, attract existing financial sources and participate in the introduction of new financial instruments. It would also develop and promote the implementation of standardised building insulation projects and advise, inform and educate citizens.

- Introduction of a low-emissions zone in Riga.
- Modernisation of public transportation rolling stock, including transitioning to emissions-free vehicles.
- Support for shared vehicle companies, for example by providing dedicated parking spaces and mobility points. A discount policy may apply for emissions-free vehicles offered to users.
- Electric vehicle charging infrastructure development at municipal institutions, public places and multi-apartment residential buildings, actively inviting the private sector to participate in establishing the infrastructure.
- Campaigns asking employers to provide their employees with bicycles instead of cars.

At present, the greatest challenge Riga’s administration faces is resistance to change, especially to transport infrastructure, from some residents who are strongly for maintaining the existing status of private vehicle use in the city. They actively voice their dissatisfaction whenever parking spaces are limited (or are planned to be limited), public transportation is prioritised over private cars or available spaces for cars are reduced to introduce bike lanes. Changes to personal habits are required, but for some people this is very painful. This illustrates that, along with communication, efforts to raise awareness and the provision of infrastructure, political courage is required to reach climate neutrality.

Conclusion

Riga has set out a clear plan to become climate-neutral by 2050, not only by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but also by improving the livelihoods of city inhabitants. The Riga Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan Until 2030 is not just a declarative document that responds only to high-level policy changes or market situations. It demonstrates true ambition and willingness to lead the way not only for other cities, but also for the country as a whole.

Dealing with the climate crisis is an overwhelming task that requires change from all sectors. For there to be any chance of success, meaningful public involvement in the planning process is crucial. The preparation of Riga’s plan is an example of how extensive public engagement can be achieved.

A plan without knowledge and understanding from all stakeholders is impossible to realise, because all actions and efforts add up to ultimately influence the outcome. As Selīna Vancāne said, in short, the formula for success could be described as **communication and awareness-raising efforts, plus the provision of infrastructure**: ‘We create the infrastructure, but we constantly try to educate the public through communication’.

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