
Governance Beyond Administrative Borders: Sustainable Urban Development in Baltic Metropolitan Areas

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of this research is to analyse whether the metropolitan areas of Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius implement the concept of governance and whether their development strategies aspire to sustainable development. It examines how these capitals integrate Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their policies and governance structures to address urban sustainability challenges.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A comparative case study approach was used, incorporating desk research and secondary data analysis. The study examines strategic development documents, policy reports, and governance frameworks to assess how these metropolitan areas implement sustainability principles and inter-municipal cooperation strategies.

Findings: The research identifies varying degrees of institutionalized metropolitan governance in the Baltic capitals. Tallinn exhibits the most structured approach with formalized regional cooperation, while Riga faces governance fragmentation. Vilnius employs regional development councils but lacks a fully integrated metropolitan governance model. The alignment of urban strategies with the SDGs is inconsistent across cities, with Tallinn demonstrating the strongest commitment.

Practical Implications: The findings provide insights for policymakers on improving metropolitan governance, enhancing inter-municipal cooperation, and effectively integrating SDGs into urban development strategies. The study highlights the need for stronger legal frameworks for metropolitan governance, improved spatial planning integration, and targeted sustainability policies.

Originality/Value: The analysis of these cities is expected to contribute to a broader understanding of how small but rapidly developing metropolitan areas align their growth strategies with global sustainability goals and an integrated approach to development planning.

Keywords: Sustainable urban development, metropolitan governance, Baltic capitals, SDGs, inter-municipal cooperation, functional urban areas.

JEL Codes: R58, O18, Q01.

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1. Introduction

As urban areas across the globe continue to grapple with the repercussions of rapid urbanisation—a phenomenon that has resulted in over half of the global population residing in metropolitan areas—there is an urgent need to address the related challenges of environmental degradation, social inequality, and inadequate infrastructure (Randeree and Ahmed, 2019). Integration of sustainability and inclusivity into urban planning has been identified as a pivotal approach to improve resilience, promote social equity, and foster vibrant communities.

This unprecedented urban expansion has resulted in elevated levels of air pollution and deficient basic services, increasing the vulnerability of cities to disasters (Sustainable Urban Development...). Consequently, sustainable urban development has emerged as a key strategy to address these challenges and cultivate inclusive communities that are resilient to future pressures. The subjects of this research are the metropolitan areas of capitals in the Baltic States, which are members of the EU and strongly promote the SDGs through their policies and funding mechanisms.

As capital cities, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius serve as political, economic, and administrative hubs, where national policies on sustainable development are often formulated and implemented. Their metropolitan regions drive national growth and innovation (Cincikaite and Meidute-Kavaliauskiene, 2021).

These cities have undergone significant transformations since gaining independence in the early 1990s, making them attractive case studies for exploring the integration of sustainability into rapidly evolving urban landscapes (Kaveckis, 2017). They face common urban sustainability challenges, including population decline, urban sprawl, economic disparities, and climate adaptation needs, making them pertinent examples for studying SDG-driven development strategies. The study of these urban areas provides insights into the influence of EU directives on local urban sustainability strategies.

Although decentralisation enables cities to better address local needs and challenges, inter-municipal cooperation and agglomeration development allow for high-quality and innovative public services. Governance beyond administrative boundaries, at the level of functional urban areas, serves as the foundation on which sustainable policies and initiatives are built, guiding the planning process (Basysta and Smirnova, 2024).

This collaborative effort involves strategic decision-making, active stakeholder participation, and the integration of diverse perspectives. Spatial planning constitutes a key domain of integration. In order to impede uncontrolled urban expansion, it is imperative to institute a comprehensive spatial policy for the entire metropolitan area (Ruiz-Tagle, 2013). The objective of this article is to analyse whether Baltic capitals implement the concept of governance and whether their development strategies

aspire to sustainable development. Spatial management and land use integration are crucial aspects of integrated urban planning; therefore, spatial development issues in functional areas were also analysed. The following questions were posed for investigation:

Q1: Do the metropolitan areas of the Baltic capitals include the SDGs in their development documents?

Q2: What form does cooperation take in metropolitan areas?

Q3: Do functional areas have spatial plans that extend beyond the administrative boundaries of local units?

The analysis of these cities is expected to contribute to a broader understanding of how small but rapidly developing metropolitan areas align their growth strategies with global sustainability goals and an integrated approach to development planning.

2. Sustainable Development in Metropolitan Areas

Metropolitan areas are defined as regions that encompass a collection of cities and counties characterised by strong socioeconomic ties and interconnectivity (Wang and Mu, 2024). These areas extend beyond the main urban centre, integrating the surrounding territories into a cohesive economic and social unit. The definition emphasises the functional relationships and interactions among various urban and suburban components, which are crucial to understanding urban dynamics and planning (Kübler, 2023).

A metropolitan area can be described as a functional urban area (FUA), while the metropolitan region also covers the zone of influence. Correct delimitation is vital because it guarantees optimal management of such an area. When a functionally coherent area is not treated as a whole and decisions are made by individual spatial units included in it, its management system becomes ineffective, which may result in the inhibition of socioeconomic development (Danielewicz and Turała, 2011).

To enable comparative analyses between different urban areas, the European Commission (EC) and the OECD define FUAs, previously known as Larger Urban Zones (LUZ), as an area consisting of cities and adjacent local units with high levels of commuting toward the cities (Dijkstra, Poelman and Veneri, 2019).). The minimum threshold for the population size of FUAs is established at 50,000 inhabitants (OECD, 2024). According to this definition, in Estonia there are 3 FUAs, in Latvia - 4, and in Lithuania - 3.

The European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (ESPON) programme classified FUAs according to their importance in terms of population, transport, tourism, industry, knowledge, and decision-making functions. One of the groups in this classification is the so-called MEGA, i.e., metropolitan European growth areas. The ESPON concept assumes that there are 76 European metropolitan growth areas

in the area covered by the programme. Due to the degree of formation and the range of impact, they were divided into global nodes (2), European engines (17), strong MEGA (8), potential MEGA (25), and weak MEGA (24).

The FUAs in the capitals of the Baltic States have been identified as weak MEGA (ESPON Project 2.3.2, 2006). Each country has its own way of defining urban areas. The criteria include population size and density, urban functionality, and historical value (Kaveckis 2017). Further considerations will concern metropolitan FUAs. Depending on the adopted delimitation, the coverage of FUAs may vary, and this is also the case with Baltic capitals, with the exception of the Tallinn FUA, as the statistical region coincides with the borders of the county (Table 1).

Table 1. *Metropolitan FUAs in Baltic States.*

FUA	Population (EUROSTAT)	Population in FUA (CENSUS)	Area (km ²)	Population in the core city (CENSUS)	Core city area (km ²)
Riga	927 953	860 142	3215	609 489	253
Vilnius	747 864	868 341	9730	586 836	401
Tallinn	638 076	638 076	4328	453 864	159.4

Source: Own elaboration.

Recent discourse has increasingly recognised urban areas as crucial agents of sustainable development, with the implementation of sustainability targets being a key aspect of this paradigm shift (Parnell, 2016). These cities have been identified as instrumental in the pursuit of sustainable development and the mitigation of climate change (Krellenberg *et al.*, 2019).

Consequently, urban areas present a multifaceted challenge, yet they also offer a range of opportunities. The interconnected nature of urban challenges requires integrated approaches to governance and development. However, economic and social policies are frequently applied separately, resulting in disjoint effects that hinder long-term effectiveness. To tackle these challenges, local authorities should form collaborations that emphasize the involvement of all stakeholders and embrace territorial strategies for urban development (The Role of Public-Private...).

Although cooperation offers clear advantages, considerable obstacles persist, including structural hurdles like disjointed governance, political opposition, and socioeconomic disparities that impede inclusive participation (World Resources Institute *et al.*, 2023).

These issues underscore the need for integrated approaches to urban governance that prioritise collaboration between all stakeholders, particularly marginalised groups who often face systemic barriers to engagement. Tackling these obstacles is essential for unlocking the complete potential of collaborative strategies in reaching the SDGs.

In general, the relevance of cooperation in urban areas extends beyond mere collaboration; it is a vital element to promote sustainable urban development, improve social equity, and ensure that cities can respond effectively to contemporary challenges. The continuous discussion on these matters indicates an increasing acknowledgement of the importance of cooperative governance in building robust and inclusive urban settings (Local Government Collaboration..., 2013).

Capacity gaps also represent a significant challenge to cooperation. Local authorities often lack the resources and expertise necessary to foster effective partnerships and implement integrated solutions. This deficiency in capacity might impede their capability to address urban challenges effectively and participate in substantial cooperation with other stakeholders.

The development of the metropolitan area and the collaboration between neighbouring municipalities and regions is necessary to address shared challenges, promote efficient resource allocation, and develop integrated solutions for urban growth and sustainability. That is why multilevel governance is so important in the management of metropolitan areas, including also higher-level, regional, and state authorities in development management processes.

FUAs play a key role in the implementation of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, which was signed in 2015 and is supported by its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to the guidelines contained in the New Urban Agenda, in the next 20 years, cities around the world are to become greener, safer, more prosperous, and foster social inclusion.

Functional Urban Areas (FUA) are related to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focussing on urban development, infrastructure, sustainability and governance. The most relevant SDGs include:

- SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities highlights the important contribution of urban areas in attaining wider sustainable development goals. It advocates for improved urban planning, secure access to essential services, cost-effective housing, environmentally friendly transportation, and protection of the environment.
- SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure emphasizes building sustainable and resilient infrastructure, vital for Functional Urban Areas (FUAs). It promotes innovation, enhanced connectivity, and inclusive industrialization.
- SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation stresses the importance of providing clean water and sanitation in urban settings, particularly in expanding FUAs.
- SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy notes the need for sustainable energy solutions in FUAs for transport, living spaces, and industries.

- SDG 13: Climate Action recognizes cities as significant contributors to climate change, urging FUAs to incorporate strategies for climate resilience and low carbon emissions.
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth identifies many FUAs as economic centres, necessitating policies that foster sustainable employment and economic stability.
- SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being requires FUAs to facilitate healthcare access, mitigate pollution, and support healthy living standards.
- SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions underscores the necessity of effective governance and strong institutions for managing urban areas and their surrounding suburban or peri-urban regions (United Nations, 2015).

FUAs matter for SDGs because they extend beyond city administrative boundaries, requiring regional cooperation. Policies addressing FUAs ensure balanced urban-rural development and prevent uncontrolled urban sprawl.

3. Research Methodology and Results

The present analysis employs a comparative case study combined with desk research—a methodological approach that involves the examination of multiple cases to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in a specific phenomenon. In this research, the focus is on the metropolitan areas of the Baltic capitals, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius, to assess how they implement governance models and sustainable development strategies, as well as to identify differences and similarities in spatial governance frameworks and the implementation of SDGs.

The secondary data analysis, facilitated by desk research, encompassed the review of strategic documents, development policies, and reports from public institutions and international organisations (e.g., EU, OECD, UN). Additionally, academic publications and studies on metropolitan governance and the integration of SDGs were analysed.

3.1 Regional Cooperation and Sustainability in the Tallinn Metropolitan Area

Estonia is divided into 79 municipalities. The Estonian territory is made up of 15 counties, which are the administrative subdivisions of the state of Estonia. Counties are not administrative units as such, but territories where local governments jointly plan and implement development activities of broader regional importance and manage some public services (public transport, for instance). Local governments are required by law to work together to develop their country (Riigikogu, 2002).

The Tallinn FUA/metropolitan area largely overlaps Harju County [UPLIFT, 2022]. It consists of 16 municipalities, of which 4 are urban municipalities (linnad) and 12 are rural municipalities (vallad) (Figure 1). (<https://visitharju.ee/>).

Figure 1. Tallinn metropolitan area

Source: <https://www.riigiplaneering.ee/harju-maakond>

Both national development documents that guide the territorial development of Estonia (Regional Development Strategy and Estonia 2030) view the multilevel governance model as the foundation for the institutional framework (Sepp, 2019). Municipalities are responsible for planning for spatial and strategic development and the provision of local public services within their territories (OECD, 2024).

Municipalities in a county may establish a county association of local authorities to coordinate strategic development at the county level. Performance of the functions of an association shall be financed from membership fees, grants and donations, income received from the activities of the association as specified in its statutes, allocations from the state budget in the cases prescribed by law, or on the basis of law (Riigikogu, 2002).

The Harju County Association of Local Authorities (Harjumaa Omavalitsuste Liit, or HOL) was established to promote intermunicipal cooperation and joint projects. HOL aims to ensure balanced and sustainable development throughout the region while preserving local identity and traditions (<https://www.hol.ee/>). The HOL comprises the 16 municipalities in Harju County. Each member municipality appoints representatives to participate in HOL's decision-making processes. The primary objectives of HOL are:

- Facilitating collaboration among member municipalities.
- Implementing joint projects that benefit the entire region.
- Advocating for the interests of local governments at both the county and national levels.

- Ensuring balanced and sustainable development within Harju County.
- Preserving and promoting local identity and traditions (<https://www.hol.ee/>).

Tallinn actively cooperates mainly with Harju County and its local authorities to achieve a cohesive and well-functioning urban region. Cooperation is also developed with other local authorities and the state to achieve the development goals of Estonia. International cooperation supports the achievement of Tallinn's strategic goals and contributes to increasing international awareness of the city as well as the competitiveness of the city and the urban region.

The focus is on cities in the neighbouring region (the Nordic countries, Latvia, and Lithuania), as well as on the capitals and metropolises of the European Union and partner cities that share cultural and economic interests with Tallinn. The city actively participates in international cooperation projects, especially in research and development projects financed directly by the European Union, acting as a leading partner in them (Tallinn 2035..., 2020).

The Harju County Association of Local Authorities coordinates and implements development strategies, such as the Harju County Development Strategy 2040+ and spatial plans such as the Harju County Plan 2030+, adopted in 2018. The County Plan is a planning document (Martin and Väli, 2021). The Harju County Development Strategy 2040 was approved on 8 April 2023. Another important document for sustainable development is the Tallinn Region Sustainable Urban Mobility Strategy 2035 (SUMP), adopted in 2019.

The Harju County development strategy was also taken into account in the preparation of Tallinn 2035, and important feedback was received from the HOL. In the Tallinn Strategy, it states that the Tallinn region is viewed as a whole, and the borders between the city and the neighbouring municipalities do not disrupt this comprehensive space. The strategic goals of the city are based on the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, the European Union's Green Paper, and the objectives of the Estonian state (Tallinn 2035 Development Strategy, 2020)

Municipalities of the Harju County are members of a national network of urban development specialists - a soft coordination initiative. This is an informal multilevel governance and collaboration platform, assembling officials of urban municipalities in charge of the strategic development and spatial planning of their cities/towns and the Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities.

It also involves representatives of the central government body responsible for regional and urban development policy, and other relevant ministries (OECD, 2023). Tallinn is also leading a network of 19 European cities focused on implementing the SDGs at the local level.

Table 2 shows which SDGs are addressed by the provisions of the strategic documents adopted in the Tallinn Metropolitan Area.

Table 2. Alignment of the main objectives of the Tallin MA strategic documents with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SDGs	Harju County Development Strategy 2040+	SUMP 2035	Tallinn 2035 Development Strategy
SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being	Improving healthcare access and social services	Encouraging active transport to improve health	Promoting active lifestyles and green spaces
SDG 4: Quality Education	Supporting lifelong learning and innovation		Emphasis on lifelong learning and innovation hubs
SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy	Promoting energy efficiency and renewables	Transitioning to sustainable transport energy	Committing to climate neutrality and green energy
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	Fostering a knowledge-based economy	Enhancing mobility for economic accessibility	Creating an innovative and global economy
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, Infrastructure	Digitalization and smart infrastructure	Developing smart mobility solutions	Smart city development and digital innovation
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities	Enhancing social inclusivity in services	Improving mobility for all citizens	Accessible urban planning and social integration
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	Balanced urban-rural development	Reducing car dependency, promoting public transport	15-minute city model, green spaces
SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production	Circular economy strategies	Reducing transport emissions and waste	Circular economy model and sustainable living
SDG 13: Climate Action	Climate adaptation and mitigation strategies	Reducing CO ² emissions from transport	Climate-neutral city and green policies
SDG 15: Life on Land	Preserving natural landscapes and biodiversity	Reducing land use for roads and parking	Expanding urban green networks
SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	Strengthening regional governance and cooperation	Multi-stakeholder collaboration for mobility	Open governance and community participation
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals	Regional and international cooperation	Cooperation with Helsinki and EU programs	International collaborations in sustainability

Source: Own elaboration.

It should be noted that at the national level, the implementation of the strategy is monitored, and Statistics Estonia collects Sustainable Development Indicators according to UN Goals, showing the extent to which the country has achieved each of the 17 SDGs.

There are 166 of them in total. For Goal 11, these are: share of architectural monuments in good and satisfactory condition; number of traffic accidents with casualties; emissions of fine particles (PM10); emissions of ultrafine particles (PM2.5); accessibility of green areas; satisfaction with the living environment; share of people commuting by public transport, bicycle, or on foot.

The European Commission awarded Tallinn the title of European Green Capital for 2023, acknowledging its systemic approach to sustainability with interlinked strategic goals aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (<https://environment.ec.europa.eu/>).

3.2 Fragmented Governance and the Challenges of Metropolitan Coordination in Riga Functional Area

Since the recent administrative-territorial reform carried out in 2021 to reduce the fragmentation of administrative territories and ensure broader development opportunities for local municipalities, the number of local governments was reduced to 43: seven local governments of state cities (*valstpilstas*) and 36 municipality governments (*novadi*). Alongside the administrative-territorial division, there are five planning regions (Klins *et al.*, 2022).

Although a planning region is a derived public entity and nowadays plays an important role in regional planning and development, it has no executive power. Its decision-making institution is the Planning Region Development Council. It is elected from among the councillors of the relevant local governments by a general assembly of the chairpersons of the local governments located in the planning region (Akmentina, 2023).

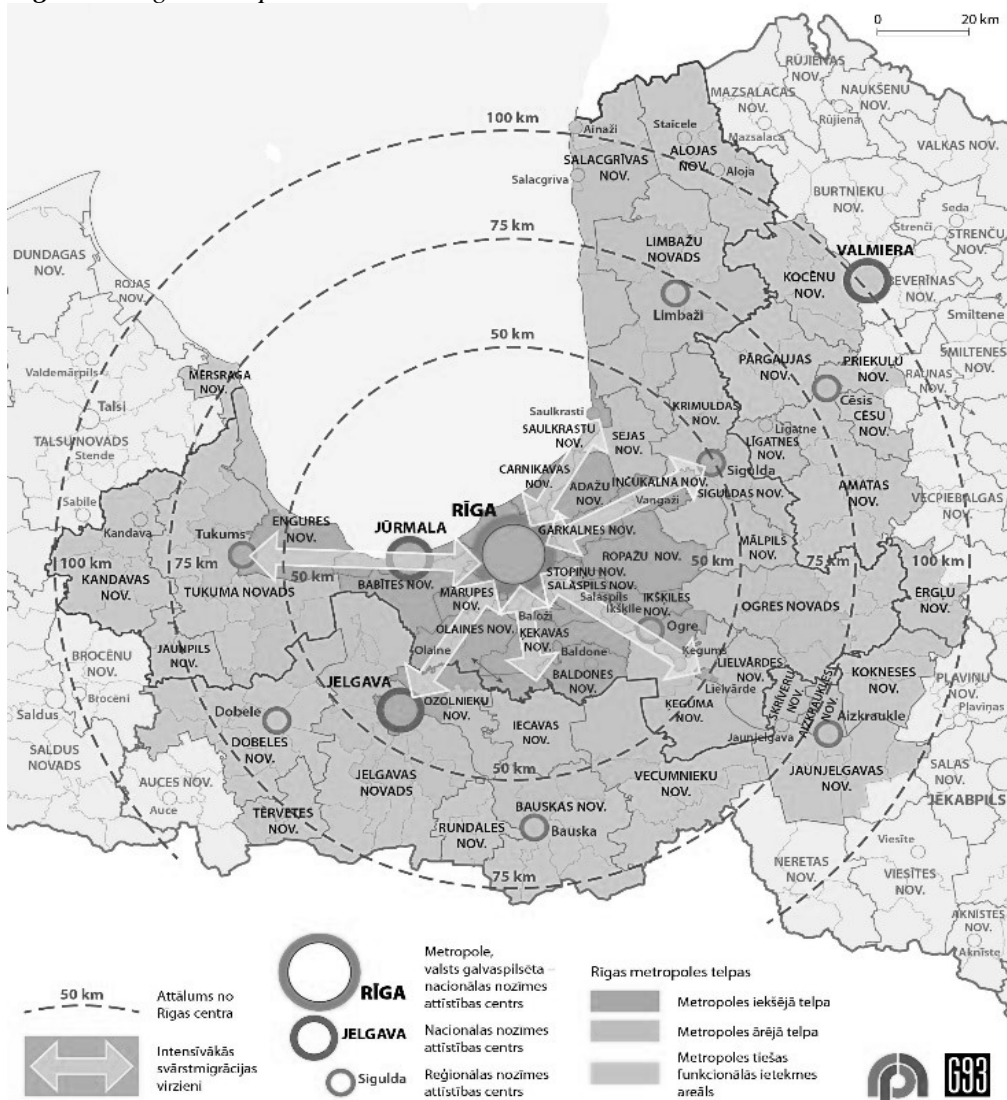
The Riga Metropolitan Area has been defined in the Latvia 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy as a space of national importance, having exceptional value and significance for the sustainable development of the country, the preservation of identity, as well as including strategic resources important for the country's development (Latvija 2030, 2010). The Riga Metropolitan Area is divided into three functional zones:

- Inner space: Directly adjacent to Riga, including suburban areas, overlaps with the Riga planning region and consists of two cities of republican significance—Riga and Jūrmala—as well as 7 district municipalities—Ādaži, Ropažu, Salaspils, Sigulda, Ķekava, Olaine, and Marupe. (<https://rpr.gov.lv/teritorija/>)

- Outside Space: Surrounding towns and municipalities within a radius of approximately 50-75 km from Riga.
- Direct impact area: Areas within a radius of up to 100 km from Riga that are functionally connected to the metropolitan area (Figure 2).

In the central part of the area, there live around 915 thousand, and in the whole agglomeration, 1.2 million residents (LR CSP, 2012). The area of the inner space is 3.335 km², and the whole agglomeration is 6.145 km².

Figure 2. Riga Metropolitan Area



Source: <https://www.rpad.lv/paraksta-sadarbibas-memorandu-rigas-metropoles-areala-attistibas-veicinasanai/>

Initial informal activities promoting collaboration between the Riga Planning Region (RPR), Riga, and Pierīga (suburban areas around Riga) municipalities led to the creation in January 2021 of the association "Riga Metropolis," which aims to promote mutual cooperation and support economic and social development in the Riga metropolitan area. The association initially consisted of eight municipalities, forming the "inner space" (excluding Jūrmala), and Saulkrasti, a municipality not directly adjacent to Riga (<https://rigasmetropole.lv>).

The governing organs of the association are:

- General Meeting of Members (Biedru sapulce)—the highest decision-making body composed of all association members, represented by municipal leaders (mayors or authorised representatives).
- Board (Valde)—the executive body responsible for daily operations composed of four members: two co-chairpersons, one nominated by Riga, one nominated by Pierīga municipalities and two additional members, also nominated by the members of the association.
- Auditor (Revisor)—an independent financial control body elected by the General Meeting for a three-year term (<https://rigasmetropole.lv/>).

The association primarily finances its activities through membership fees, with additional possible sources of income. Riga City pays €40,000 per year due to its larger role and influence; others pay €5,000 per year. Riga also participates in international networks and research (METREX, ESPON).

On 1 December 2024, the Riga City Council, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (MARAM), the Riga Planning Region, and the "Riga Metropolis" signed a memorandum of cooperation, confirming their support for the creation and implementation of a cooperation model for the Riga metropolitan area and the strengthening of Riga's international role as a northern European metropolis.

The main goal of the cooperation is to strengthen regional governance and coordination between Riga and surrounding municipalities to ensure effective development, infrastructure planning, and investment attraction. Instead of introducing a two-tier municipal governance system, the association supports reinforcing the existing Riga Planning Region with expanded responsibilities and advocates for redirecting Municipal Equalization Fund contributions toward regional development (<https://rigasmetropole.lv/>).

Until now, the municipalities of the metropolis have had to pay a significant part of the funds to the Municipal Equalisation Fund instead of financing the balanced development of municipalities in the metropolis. Multilevel governance is also manifested in the membership of the co-chair of "Rīgas Metropole" in the Council of the Municipal Financial Equalisation Fund.

It is one of six chairmen of local government councils nominated by the Association of Local Governments. The Council also includes representatives of the Saeima (Latvian parliament), the Ministry of Finance, the Treasury, the State Revenue Service, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Ministry of Welfare, as well as the Chairman of the Riga City Council (<https://rigasmetropole.lv/>).

At the regional level, the metropolitan planning framework is created primarily by the 2030 Riga Planning Region Sustainable Development Strategy (Update of the 2014-2030 RPR Strategy), approved on 24.03.2023, along with the Action Plan for the Development of the Riga Metropolitan Area, adopted in 2020 as a result of this cooperation. Both documents are complementary.

The strategy is a long-term spatial development planning document that outlines the long-term vision, strategic objectives, priorities, and the spatial development perspective in texts and graphs. It is strategically binding for municipalities.

The action plan translates this vision into practical actions, specifying projects, investments, and implementation steps focused on the metropolitan area in the medium term (2021–2027). It uses an integrated approach to reconcile the interests of the state, Riga City, surrounding municipalities, and residents of the Riga Metropolitan Area.

Furthermore, the plan serves as a foundational document for negotiations and dialogue between government levels (Rīgas plānošanas reģions, 2020).

These documents do not contain direct links to the SDGs, primarily because the strategy was created in 2014, when the 2030 agenda had not yet been adopted; however, the objectives and actions adopted in them include references to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in the context of sustainable urban development and regional planning (Table 3).

Table 3. Alignment of the Riga Metropolitan Development Plans with the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN

SDG	Action Plan for the Development of the Riga Metropolitan Area	Riga Planning Region Sustainable Development Strategy 2030
SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being	Public-private partnerships for healthcare, emergency services, and rescue operations.	Integration of green spaces, recreational areas, and environmental quality improvements.
SDG 4: Quality.; Education	Enhancing education infrastructure and cooperation between municipalities.	Focus on outstanding and flexible education, lifelong learning, and vocational training.
SDG 7: Affordable and	Promotion of renewable	Energy efficiency and self-

Clean Energy	energy sources, decarbonization, and green mobility.	sufficiency initiatives.
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	Business-friendly tax policies, entrepreneurship hubs, and logistics investments.	Support for knowledge-based industries, creative industries, and tourism.
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	Investment in Rail Baltica, urban transit, and digitalization.	Smart development through technology, biotechnologies, and infrastructure improvements.
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	Integrated mobility solutions, waste management, and environmental conservation.	Sustainable urban planning, balanced development, and heritage preservation.
SDG 13: Climate Action	Regional adaptation to climate change, flood prevention, and energy resilience.	Sustainable resource management and environmental monitoring.
SDG 15: Life on Land	Green corridor planning, forest conservation, and biodiversity protection.	Sustainable land use and conservation efforts.
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals	International cooperation through METREX, ESPON, and other networks.	Cross-border collaborations and regional partnerships.

Source: Own elaboration.

These references are integrated into the broader goals of the Riga Metropolitan Area Development Plan, which seeks to create a sustainable, competitive, and well-coordinated metropolitan region (Rīgas plānošanas reģions, 2020).

An integrated approach to management is already noticeable at the national level, as in the "Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia 2030", which states that "a coherent development of the spatial structure of the Riga metropolitan area and coordination of the ongoing processes should be achieved by developing an integrated spatial development perspective and using an integrated approach and complex solutions to reconcile the different interests of the city of Riga, the surrounding municipalities, the state, and the population" (Latvija 2030, 2010).

The action plan stresses the importance of integrated spatial planning to ensure that development in the Riga metropolitan area is coordinated across different sectors, such as housing, transportation, and environmental protection.

It calls for a unified approach to spatial planning that aligns the interests of the state, municipalities, and residents. It highlights the need for integrated solutions to address issues such as urban sprawl, transportation congestion, and the preservation of green spaces (Rīgas plānošanas reģions, 2020).

3.3 Vilnius Functional Zone Strategies and Regional Development Initiatives

Lithuania is a unitary country with 10 regions and 60 municipalities (cities and districts). The regions correspond to the NUTS 3 level and are managed by the government ([https://osp.stat.gov.lt/...](https://osp.stat.gov.lt/)). Regional Development Councils (RDCs) are constituted as joint municipal cooperation bodies, representing a distinct institutional entity within the broader governance structure.

The RDC body comprises the General Meeting of Participants, while the governing bodies consist of the Panel, which is constituted by the mayors and members of the municipal councils, and the Administrative Director of the RDC. Representing the region, the main competencies of the RDC include the following, planning and coordinating the implementation of the national regional policy in their respective region; encouraging social and economic development of the region, sustainable development of urbanised territories, and decreasing social and economic disparities within and across regions; and encouraging cooperation among municipalities in order to increase the efficiency of public services provision.

The Administrative Director of RDC, along with a small team (4-6 persons), acts as the RDC secretariat. Furthermore, the RDC benefits from the involvement of an advisory Partner Group, tasked with the delivery of conclusions and opinions to the Panel with regard to projects, planning documents, and associated matters within the scope of regional policy (Burinskiene, 2022).

The Vilnius Planning Region is comprised of eight municipalities: Elektrėnai, Šalčininkai District, Širvintai District, Švenčioni District, Trakai District, Ukmergė District, Vilnius City, and Vilnius District. The Functional Area encompasses seven municipalities surrounding the central city, notably excluding Vilnius itself (Figure 3).

The Comprehensive Plan for the Vilnius Region territory, which was approved by the Lithuanian government on 12 March 2008, is the only plan for part of the state territory (Lithuanian legislation does not include the term 'spatial planning'). The validity of the plan is for 20 years. It was developed on the initiative of the RDC (Burinskiene, 2022).

Each county represented by the RDC prepares a Regional Development Plan (RDP), which identifies social, economic, and environmental problems and their causes within the region. It also determines the goals and objectives of regional development, the indicators of monitoring, and plans the progress measures and preliminary funds. Spatial plans are not in place at the county level, but spatial issues are integrated into the RDP.

Figure 3. *Vilnius Region*



Source: 2024–2029 M. Vilniaus Regiono Funkcinės Zonos Strategija. 2024. <https://vilniausregionas.lt/regionas/teritorines-strategijos/vilniaus-regiono-funkcines-zonos-strategija/>

On 18 June 2024, two significant agreements were endorsed at the general meeting of participants of the Vilnius Region Development Council: the agreement on the 2024-2029 implementation of the functional zone strategy of the Vilnius region. The second document, the agreement on the 2024-2029 implementation of the Sustainable Development Strategy of the City of Vilnius—an updated version of the 2022-2030 Strategy—, was also approved (<https://madeinvilnius.lt/...>).

The Vilnius Region Development Plan was adopted in January 2025, and the Functional Zone Strategy was approved by multiple municipal councils. The Development Plan was approved by the Vilnius Regional Development Council. The overarching objective of both documents is to enhance economic growth, alleviate regional disparities, and upgrade infrastructure, social services, and sustainability in the Vilnius region.

The Functional Zone Strategy is more precise, delineating functional connections between municipalities, encompassing economic collaboration, tourism development, and shared infrastructure projects (2024–2029 M. Vilniaus Regiono Funkcinės Zonos Strategija, 2024). Conversely, the Development Plan adopts a more comprehensive and strategic approach, delineating long-term objectives for the

entire region, encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions (2022–2030 M. Vilnius Regiono Plėtros Planas, 2025). The plan incorporates the city of Vilnius within its strategic framework. In contrast, the Functional Zone Strategy places greater emphasis on the municipalities adjacent to Vilnius, with the exclusion of the city itself.

The Vilnius Sustainable Development Strategy (2024–2029) maintains a close association with the aforementioned documents, yet it demonstrates a more pronounced emphasis on sustainability and climate resilience. It places a greater emphasis on urban and suburban regions, particularly the periurban settlements encircling Vilnius, as it encompasses Vilnius City, Trakai District, and Vilnius District. This overlap occurs with the Vilnius Region Development Plan and the Vilnius Region Functional Zone Strategy (2024–2029 M. Vilnius Regiono Funkcinės..., 2024).

Table 4 illustrates that all documents reference principles of sustainable development, aligning in diverse manners with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Vilnius Region Development Plan (2022–2030) integrates sustainable development as a fundamental principle within several projects. The Functional Zone Strategy emphasizes economic and inter-municipal cooperation, which indirectly contributes to the achievement of SDG-related objectives.

The Vilnius Sustainable Development Strategy is pivotal in Vilnius's long-term objective to attain climate neutrality by 2030, reinforcing the initiatives of both the Vilnius Region Development Plan and the Functional Zone Strategy. It is an essential component of the city's strategies for climate action, energy efficiency, sustainable transportation, and urban greening.

Table 4. *Linking Strategic Documents in Vilnius Metropolitan Area to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*

SDG	Vilnius Region Development Plan (2022–2030)	Vilnius Region Functional Zone Strategy (2024–2029)	Vilnius Sustainable Development Strategy (2024–2029)
SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being	Improving healthcare services, social inclusion, and access to green spaces.	Indirectly supports health by promoting tourism and public infrastructure.	Focus on air quality, public health programs, and green spaces for well-being.
SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation	Water supply and wastewater treatment expansion.	Regional cooperation in water resource management.	Smart water management and wastewater treatment upgrades.
SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy	Energy-efficient housing and infrastructure	Indirect reference through business and municipal	Green energy initiatives, including building retrofits and

	projects.	cooperation.	solar power.
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	Business development, job creation, and investment attraction.	Strengthening economic ties between municipalities, especially in tourism.	Green jobs and sustainability-focused economic projects.
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	Infrastructure investments, digitalization, and innovation hubs.	Joint regional transport and infrastructure projects.	Smart city projects, sustainable urban development, and digital solutions.
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	Improving urban-rural balance, smart mobility, and housing.	Focus on inter-municipal cooperation for regional sustainability.	Urban greening, sustainable transport, and climate resilience.
SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production	Circular economy initiatives, waste reduction policies.	Encourages ecotourism and sustainable business practices.	Strong focus on recycling, sustainable procurement, and energy efficiency.
SDG 13: Climate Action	Climate adaptation measures, green initiatives.	Limited direct reference, but promotes sustainable transport.	Core focus: CO ₂ reduction, climate neutrality by 2030, air pollution control.
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals	Encourages partnerships between government, businesses, and NGOs.	Heavy emphasis on inter-municipal cooperation.	Collaboration with EU, national, and regional bodies for sustainability goals.

Source: Own elaboration.

Similar to Estonia, Lithuania is closely tracking the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The capital, Vilnius, has received recognition for its efforts in sustainability and its systematic method in enhancing environmental quality. Vilnius has been officially designated by the European Commission as the European Green Capital for 2025 (<https://environment.ec.europa.eu/>).

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In the Baltic States, FUAs or metropolitan areas, are not the administrative units and each country uses its own methods of delimitation which, in principle, are similar and are based on functional connections. On the other hand, in order to facilitate the management of the development of these areas, individual countries usually define the boundaries of metropolitan areas equal to the boundaries of the higher level of administration, statistics, or planning.

The governance structures of Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius are dissimilar but are faced with identical problems of fragmented decision making, inter municipal cooperation and regional governance. Estonia and Lithuania have regional development councils which support the coordination efforts while Latvia has not institutionalized its framework beyond the Riga Metropolis Association.

The concept of Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) is crucial for boosting the regional development, however, spatial planning is still mainly limited to the municipal or county level and is not well connected to cover the entire metropolitan areas. Out of the three capitals, only Tallinn is a metropolitan area that is aligned with a single administrative unit – Harju County. At the same time, Riga and Vilnius struggle with governance structures that do not fully correspond to the actual metropolitan dynamics.

The integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into urban strategies is not consistent across the Baltic capitals. Both core cities and supralocal levels have developed strategic documents regarding sustainability. While Estonia's Tallinn 2035 Development Strategy is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, the metropolitan plans of Riga and Vilnius contain fewer direct references to these goals despite the incorporation of sustainability principles into other policies.

Integrated decision making at the metropolitan level is crucial for addressing key urban challenges such as urban sprawl, economic disparities and climate adaptation, and hence, inter municipal cooperation is vital. However, legal and political barriers limit integrated decision making at the metropolitan level. The Riga Metropolis and the Harju County Association of Local Authorities have been identified as progressive cooperation initiatives; however, legal frameworks for inter municipal governance are still not adequately developed.

Multilevel governance is necessary for metropolitan development, which means that cities and surrounding municipalities have to work together not only among themselves, but also with the national governments and the EU. The EU gives guidelines and funding to support the green initiatives but the national regulations often hinder city collaboration. To solve these problems, the Baltic capitals need to create formal city-region institutions that would be able to make decisions on spatial planning, transport infrastructure and the management of green policies across the urban zones.

The cooperation rules between local government units should be enhanced in order to plan at the city-region level rather than being done among separate local units. Instead of each municipality handling planning separately, comprehensive metropolitan spatial plans should be developed to cover entire urban regions. The strengthening of multilevel governance and the ensuring of policy coherence across administrative boundaries will be essential for the achievement of long-term

metropolitan sustainability. Regional land-use regulations should limit unchecked urban expansion and promote sustainable city progress.

For better alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals, city strategies should directly relate to key SDGs, such as sustainable cities (SDG 11), infrastructure (SDG 9), and climate action (SDG 13). Monitoring SDG progress at the city-region level with transparent metrics can enhance accountability and measure environmental outcomes.

It is crucial to increase financial and political support for urban areas, leveraging national and EU funding for initiatives in public transportation, green areas, and smart cities. Furthermore, partnerships between the public and private sectors and international projects should attract investment in sustainable city initiatives.

Multilevel and cross-border collaboration needs to be reinforced by improved coordination between national governments, regional, and local bodies to align development strategies with EU urban sustainability standards. To foster regional integration and economic growth, links between Baltic capitals and nearby cities like Tallinn-Helsinki, Riga-Tartu, and Vilnius-Kaunas should be reinforced.

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