

# REFLECTIONS ON GREEN SPACES AND URBAN LEADERSHIP FROM RIGA

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**Abstract.** Emerging Urban Leaders programme hosted by the Salzburg Global Seminar coincides with the green spaces and places gaining attention internationally and Europe-wide. This focus on the green areas as crucial enablers of sustainability and quality of life of the city dwellers sets excellent grounds for a concise autoethnographic overview of how the vast green infrastructure in and around Riga serves the urban zest to explore and benefit from safe and enjoyable spaces for recreational, educational and fitness activities during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Latvia, green spaces, outdoors activities, Riga, Salzburg Global Seminar.

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## Introduction

To summarise the main lessons drawn from the Emerging Urban Leaders programme of the Salzburg Global Seminar, parks are socially, historically, culturally, and economically charged spaces. These intellectual, social, and spatial constructs mirror the developments of a specific local, regional and national entity. This viewpoint highlights the narratives that revolved around parks in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on the Latvian setting.

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The Salzburg Global Seminar was founded by three students of Harvard University (Winkler, 1999; Greene, 2003; Brownell Mitic, 2019). The Seminar has been positioned as “one of the world’s foremost international educational centres committed to global understanding through broadening the perspectives of tomorrow’s leaders” (Russon & Ryback, 2002, p. 97). The seminar is noted in the academic literature on soft power as a notable elite network of the Cold War era (Ohnesorge, 2020, p. 169). In 1947, the Seminar was launched as the Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization. Since then, it has gathered diverse circles of experts. Librarians (Lankes, Stephens and Arjona, 2015; Hunt, 2019) and representatives of the San José State University (Reade et al., 2014) are two contemporary examples. Emerging Urban Leaders programme is among the most recent thematic introductions to the overall panoply of the Seminar’s convened circles of thought leaders.

This article is based on an autoethnographic account of a visitor to various green spaces in and around Riga, the capital city of Latvia. The visits took place in 2021 during the pandemic. As the literature review, analysis of policy documents, and personal observations synthesised in the subsequent paragraphs demonstrate, parks are a conducive topic for international exchanges and help to discover the diversity of European contexts and specific nuances of European integration. The variety of publications feeding into this article confirms the earlier acknowledgement that public space is a salient topic across several academic disciplines. Green spaces benefit from a similar level of attention.

The first part of this viewpoint outlines the international context. The second part elaborates on the European setting and developments surrounding various green spaces. The third part turns attention to the city-specific experiences of Riga. The concluding part summarises the key findings.

## **The International Green Drive**

Discussions of the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort of the Emerging Urban Leaders programme coincided with a global turn towards green solutions and a reinforced gusto in Europe to promote sustainability. The (global) New Urban Agenda sets a conducive international context (Ažman Momirski, 2019, p. 352; Bravo, 2019; Mehaffy, 2019). The United Nations Environment Programme is among the most vocal international supporters of nature-based solutions in the urban setting (UNEP and Italian Presidency of the G20, 2021). On a local level, planning dwellings and incorporating natural elements in this highly regulated environment resonates among scholarly circles across Europe (Eidenskog, 2021; Slätmo, Nilsson and

Huynh, 2021; Stimilli and Sargolini, 2021; Yuille, 2021). In France, parks are praised as laboratories of health and well-being (Brua, 2021). Parks are salient subjects for sustainability debates and action because around 75 % European population lives in urban areas (Abdullah & Stainforth, 2021, p. 2). In specific contexts, there was a sense of the remarkable comeback of green spaces. The discussions among the Emerging Urban Leaders added up to the international sentiment that green spaces in many parts of the world are no longer seen as a nuisance for economic activities and constraints for commercial expansion within the urban setting.

The diversity of projects taken onboard by the Emerging Urban Leaders programme was a good reminder of the richness of aspects incorporated in the discussions revolving around parks. While displaying propensity towards different forms of artwork, diverse cultural influences, positioning of leisure activities and choice of plants governed by the local taste, aesthetics and weather conditions, many examples presented throughout the meetings of Emerging Urban Leaders captured a generic propensity towards certain traditions of planning and performance of gardening, various green spaces serving as “sites of environmental stewardship” (Vanni Accarigi & Crosby, 2019, p. 527) and areas where local and national traits are imagined for the future projection (Zakaria, Dali, & Hussein, 2019). The notable differences in the size and scope of green spaces in or close to urban areas are captured by the typology spanning from spacious nature reserves to compact parklets. Each of these green areas has a local functionality and a broader meaning as sites for advancing jointly agreed goals on a European level.

## **The European Green Deal and smaller-scale developments**

One of the conducive engines for bringing into the picture on-going bottom-up dynamics that contribute to the goals of framework initiatives included in the European Green Deal is a project-based international collaboration. The scholarly calls for action coincided with implementing several research-intensive projects funded by the EU Framework Programmes. Among those that address some of the topics discussed by the Emerging Urban Leaders are GREENLULUS. The project analyses greening projects of cities in Europe and the United States to identify the risks of environmental inequalities (CORDIS, 2021a). Urban GreenUP addresses various aspects of reintroducing green spaces in the city plans (CORDIS, 2021d). UNaLabsets out to boost cities' climate and water resilience (CORDIS, 2021c). proGireg addresses the lack of green spaces

in Dortmund, Turin, and Zagreb (CORDIS, 2021b). These are some examples of the wealth of information housed by the Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS) that were found most relevant as background information for the debates of the Emerging Urban Leaders. The indicated projects capture some of the daily collaborative routines that translate the grand narratives of the European Green Deal and other overarching initiatives into tangible actions via step-by-step implementation of jointly agreed-on research-intense stages. Additionally, these projects contribute to the overall outreach and awareness-raising among the wider population and interested audiences seeking more elaborate accounts on the issues related to the safeguarding, development and introduction of green spaces in diverse urban settings.

## Green Areas of Riga

The autoethnographic account is based on the visits of two parks in the Riga city centre “Ziedoņdārzs” and “Viesturdārzs”, urban parks in the suburbs of Riga “Ziemeļblāzma” and “Mežaparks”, as well as the nature reserve “Vecdaugava” and nature park “Piejūra” both located in the outskirts of Riga. These green spaces were selected randomly, in other words, either based on convenient access or personal preference. Frequenting of these green areas mirrors what the World Urban Parks have coined as the “newfound interest in amplifying the critical role that parks can play in addressing today’s most pressing global health challenges and provide essential infrastructure and services during this time of crisis and recovery” (World Urban Parks, 2020, p. 5). Riga and Latvia are well-positioned to offer plenty of such services founded upon various traditions and functionality characterising specific types of green areas. The 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Viesturdārzs and the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mežaparks celebrated in 2021, are the best examples of the enduring efforts to maintain proper places for pleasant strolls and the well-being of city dwellers.

The visits to the listed places throughout 2020 and 2021 draw attention to the myriad of considerations that support the notion of Latvia as “one of Europe’s greenest nations” (Forrest, 2020) that span well beyond the vastly forested territory. However, as the earlier listing displays, the forest is far from the only green area widely accessible to city dwellers and visitors. It is not simply a matter of distinction between various policy areas. Lifestyle patterns and traditions tied to these green areas are unique and grounded in historical and cultural influences that have shaped the city.

## Conclusions

The international and European context provided excellent grounds for the discussions of Emerging Urban Leaders. The attention paid to the promotion of various green areas in the city, its outskirts, and beyond was an excellent opportunity to realise the wealth and value of recreational, cultural, and fitness resources established and preserved by dedicated professionals in and around Riga years, decades, even centuries before the global pandemic. It reminds us about the role of tradition and local lifestyle traits attuned to specific geographical and climatic settings. This autoethnographic account concludes with an enthusiastic spirit that the capital of Latvia has a lot to offer its dwellers and visitors. Nevertheless, these ‘good’ practices should be treated as a source of inspiration and reflection, not as ‘best’ practices for replication elsewhere. The tradition of embracing and cherishing green spaces and places in their variety is anchored in the local culture and ways of organising public space that might not be attuned to all logics governing city planning elsewhere, not least to mention various climatic contexts. The sustainability principles, as well as the core logic of the quality of life that allow Riga to remain a flourishing green city, are locally unique and characteristic of its historical trajectory. The Emerging Urban Leaders programme was an opportunity to fully appreciate this nuance of place-specific path dependencies and striking echoes of globally and Europe-wide sweeping trends and governance directions.

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