



INTEGRATED ACTION PLAN

VALGA



Location and territorial context

The municipality of Valga is located in South-Estonia, lying along Estonian-Latvian border and extending over 750 square kilometres. Valga is the municipality centre, being also Valga County centre. Valga is situated 240 kilometres from Tallinn, 160 kilometres from Riga and 170 kilometres from Pskov.

Valga has been formed on the medieval junction of important trade and military roads, which shapes the structure of the town. The first train arrived from Tartu to Valka in 1887. The following year Valga-Riga railway was completed and in 1889 a connection was established between Valga and Pskov. In 1896 the narrow-gauge lines Valga-Mõisaküla-Pärnu and in 1903 Valga-Mõniste-Aluksne were opened. With its five railway branches (Riga, Tartu, Pskov, Pärnu and Aluksne), Valga became the second largest railway junction in Estonia after Tallinn and one of the most important hubs on route between Tallinn and Riga. Nowadays trains from Valga go in three directions: Tartu, Pskov and Riga.

Together with Valka in Latvian side, Valga forms a unique twin city which, despite of its small size reaches two countries, boasting two languages and cultures. Valga-Valka descend from the town of Walk, which was divided between Estonia and Latvia when both countries got independence from the Russian empire in 1917-1918. The common slogan of Valga and Valka is „1 City, 2 States” to acknowledge both cities as one for its inhabitants and visitors.

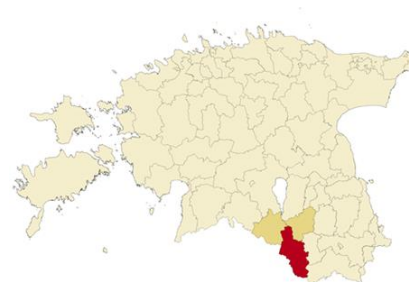


Figure 1. Location of Valga Municipality

Population, demography and employment

Valga Municipality has an estimated population of 15 500 people. The population is mainly concentrated in the city of Valga, villages and sparsely populated areas covering the rest of the territory. With its 11 576 inhabitants Valga places 12th out of a total of 47 Estonian cities. Twin town Valka has approximately 4000 inhabitants.

The rapid development of the town began at the end of 19th century when Valga was connected to the railway network and became an important junction. Extensive urban development followed and in the beginning of 20th century Valga was the most rapidly growing city in Estonia. After WW II Valga became an important industrial and military centre with almost 20 000 citizens and the town expanded rapidly.

However, after the fall of the Soviet Union and withdrawal of military forces at the beginning of the 1990s the population declined fast to the current 12 000 inhabitants and there became a surplus of all sorts of buildings - apartments, industrial buildings and administrative buildings. As a result, only 72% of the town territory is currently in use. Nowadays Valga is a typical example of a shrinking city as it is located in the border region far from the capital cities.

Population of Valga Municipality is still on a downward trend. The population projection until 2040 shows that declining will continue. As of 01.01.2022, there were 15 291 inhabitants in Valga municipality, of whom 7 358 were men and 7 933 were women. According to nationality, there is 9 275 Estonians living in the municipality followed by Russians – 3 154 people, and Latvians – 733 people. Representatives of several other nationalities also live in the municipality: Ukrainians, Romas, Belarusians, Finns, Germans, Lithuanians etc.

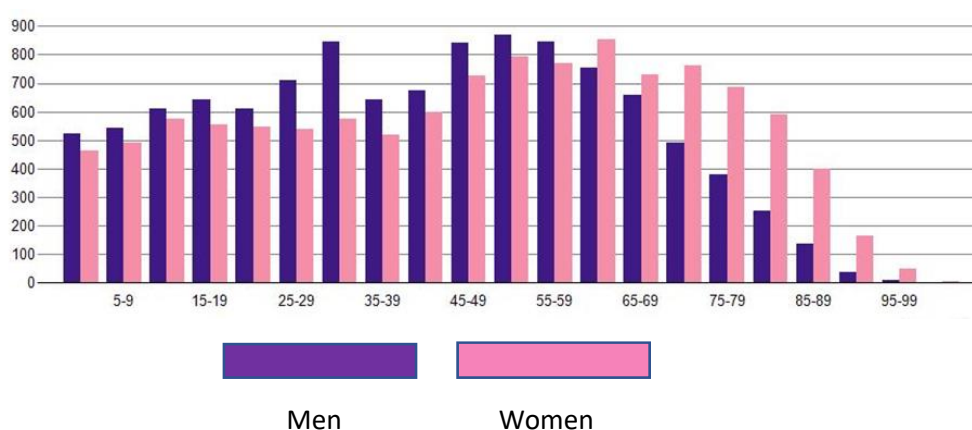


Figure 2. Distribution of population by sex and age

The aging and shrinking population has in turn created problems in the labor market and in the social sphere.

Inhabitants 2022	Population decline 2021-2022	Rate of dependents ¹ 2020	Demographic labor market pressure index ² 2020	Registered unemployed in November 2021	Average monthly gross income of an employee 2020
15 291	-1,2%	62%	0,69	769	1079

¹ The rate of dependents is the number of non-working-age residents (aged 0–14 and over 65) per 100 working-age residents (aged 15–64).

² The demographic labor market pressure index is the ratio of young people (aged 5-14) entering the labor market over the next decade to those leaving (55-64). If the index is higher than one, more people will enter the labor market in the next decade than potentially drop out due to old age

Figure 3. Overview of social sphere.

Industrial composition

After Valga was connected to the railway network and became an important junction in the beginning of 20th century, a locomotive and wagon factory, depot for locomotives and other buildings serving the railway were built. In those days, more than 1 500 people worked in railway-related businesses. During the Soviet era Valga also became an important industrial and military centre.

The legacy of the past affects the current business environment. The city has developed former industrial areas with the necessary communications and there is a considerable amount of free business land for organizing industry, production and other activities. An important value of Valga municipality is the unique border area and beautiful nature, which offers great potential for tourism business.

There are 875 companies in Valga municipality, 592 of them operate in Valga city (68%). 95% of enterprises are small enterprises with less than 10 employees (831 enterprises). There are 9 companies in the region with more than 50 employees, 7 of which are located in Valga.

By economic activity, enterprises are divided as follows: 20% agriculture and forestry, 20% wholesale and retail trade, 10% construction, 10% other service activities, 8% manufacturing.

The business environment of Valga Municipality is characterized by a logistically favorable location at the intersection of important international roads. Location on Estonian-Latvian border gives an advantage to international business development as cross-border labor market is quite active. The difference in wages and taxes favors the employment of Latvian labor. According to Statistics Estonia, the average monthly gross income of an employee in Valga municipality is about 20% lower than Estonian average.

Summary of relevant EU programmes covering the city

Valga remains within the scope of the European programmes as follows:

- European Regional Development Fond:
 - Cross-border Cooperation (Estonia-Latvia, Central Baltic),
 - Interregional Cooperation (INTERACT III, Interreg Europe, ESPON 2020 and URBACT III)
 - Transnational Cooperation (Baltic Sea Region) Program
- European Social Fund
- Cohesion Fund
- The European Economic Area (EEA) and Norwegian Financial Mechanisms

Estonia is not divided into smaller groups on the basis of NUTS I and NUTS II. Regarding NUTS III level Valga is classified in region EE008 Southern Estonia, consisting of Jõgeva, Põlva, Tartu, Valga, Viljandi and Võru counties.

Summary of existing policies and strategies

Eesti 2035

"Estonia 2035" is the country's long-term development strategy. The aim of creating the strategy is to cultivate and support the well-being of our people so that Estonia would be the best place to live and work within twenty years. The strategy provides a coherent direction for policymakers and decision-makers in different areas and for the use of European funds.

- the living environment is designed taking into account the needs of all people.
- decisions are based on the basics of high-quality space and the principles of inclusive design
- planning public space, preference is given to solutions that promote safe, secure and healthy behavior and ensure accessibility
- living environment is created in cooperation with all target groups
- people are space-conscious and spatial decisions improve their opportunities for joint action and participation

Valga Municipality Development Plan

In Valga Municipality Development Plan there are several objectives related to current issue. Objective E2 states, that Valga is an attractive municipality with a good living environment.

- comprehensive development of Valga-Valka city center and revitalization of Valga's historic city centre
- design and construction of car parks on the basis of a ride-and-park trip
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- development of sustainable mobility and public transport that meets the needs of the population, construction of bicycle parking and building a network of cycling paths
- participation in networks and projects supporting and promoting sustainable, smart and integrated urban development (URBACT, Smart City Center of Excellence, European Green Leaf, etc.)

General plan of Valga Municipality

The strategic goal of Valga Municipality is to concentrate life back to the historic city centre by developing attractive and modern urban space, which meets the needs of citizens and guests. The spatial environment of the city will be adapted to the current population.

Next to the city center, the area of the railway station will be raised as the second development area and the centre of attraction. It is important to improve the connectivity between the city centre and the train station to make it convenient to move on foot, by bicycle and motor vehicle.

Presentation and analysis of problems and options for solutions

The main challenge in Valga derives from its poor public space quality and the shrinkage of population. Both together create a loss of civic pride of Valga's inhabitants. As a shrinking town, Valga needs more than ever to be developed sustainably and should offer the kind of quality of life that makes people want to live in it and businesses wanting to invest.

The main problems are:

- for historical reasons the city is too large for its population. Businesses and services are scattered and there is no attractive central area where people would like to spend their free time, which in turn affects the development of small businesses
- urban environment, predominantly built during Soviet-era is car-oriented and does not offer opportunities for the different sustainable modes of transport or their convenient cross-use
- local government has not adapted to the situation where the person and his or her mobility preferences should be at the forefront of the planning process.

To stop population decline, citizens of Valga need attractive environment to live, work and relax in. Well maintained public areas are important to ensure a future of healthy, attractive and vibrant towns for future generations. Valga sees the quality of urban space in the town centre as a main tool to deal with outcomes of the population shrinkage. Attractive centre improves emotional bond of locals towards their hometown and boosts the citizens activity.

Consequently, Valga puts priority at creating quality public spaces and concentrating the city life back to its historical centre. The municipality is improving public urban space in central area of the city by constructing a new town square between the oldest streets in Valga (2018) and developing the new joint city centre linking twin towns Valga and Valka together (2020).

The main challenge though - the poor pedestrian connection and public space quality between the Valga Railway station and Valga/Valka town squares - remains unchanged so far.

The most problematic but as well most promising area on that route is Vabaduse street. Here, road design sees large road space with unregulated car parking on-street albeit parking options off-street in backyards are at hand, too. Pedestrian space is narrow, heritage protected houses in poor state. Small businesses located at the street as well as cafés are hardly perceptible for potential clients. Additionally, the road design is made for quick passing through and does not support stopping and visiting the cafes and shops. A new school moved to the street lately and adds further traffic to the road. Also, problems connected to road safety challenges due to parents dropping their children at school are have risen.

In order to ensure a high-quality living environment, sustainable development and options for different modes of transport, careful planning is at utmost importance before vast investments into infrastructure can be made. Within the framework of the URBACT Space4People project, the leaders of the municipality, the council members and the citizens have begun more aware of the problem.

Description of focus of IAP

The focus of work for the Integrated Action Plan in Valga Municipality will be on Vabaduse street.

Creation and implementation of a new spatial concept for Vabaduse Street in the city of Valga

Vision: To co create a detailed plan of activities for changing one of the city's main streets into an urban space that meets the needs of all user groups and supports the development of small businesses.

Vabaduse Street is the main business street in Valga. The street was created after the city was connected to the Valga railway network in 1889, becoming a link between the city centre and the new railway station.



Figure 4. Project area on Vabaduse street.

Most of the street buildings were built before the First World War, during the city's extraordinary economic prosperity. Along with the subsequent slowdown in the development of the city, the development of Vabaduse Street also slowed down, but its business function remained. Much of the street's magnificent buildings still exist today, and many buildings still house small shops, service establishments and cafés. The dense buildings and the first floors opening to the street give a great advantage to Vabaduse street to become the city's business district again.

Unfortunately, the current spatial solution of Vabaduse Street does not support the potential of the surrounding buildings. The wide roadway of the street is convenient for quick transit, but it does not invite you to stop and visit the businesses there. There is also a shortage of parking spaces. High speeds create dust and noise, which is why people have started to avoid walking on Vabaduse Street. Narrow sidewalks are awkward to navigate.

Also, there is no greenery on the street that would provide shade during hot days, which would make the urban environment more pleasant and healthier. In the current street space, it is difficult for businesses to make themselves visible, there is no possibility to erect a summer terrace or outdoor counter. The school route for children attending nearby schools is also dangerous and inconvenient.

Vabaduse street is also home to the local museum, which faces the challenge that it is barely noticeable for people passing by and for through-driving vehicles. There is no possibility for the museum to expand its expositions to the street.

Connected with the need to address the challenges in Vabaduse street with the aim to provide public space meeting user needs, Valga meets the challenge of low participation levels and low

knowledge of the actual needs of people. Both are interconnected since the experience of the municipality is that stakeholders and citizens alike are reluctant to articulate their needs.

In 2021, Valga Municipality conducted a survey in a form of paper questionnaire delivered to all citizens together with municipality newspaper. Also, the survey was available in a form of on-line map application on Vabaduse Street Transformation page (<https://urbact-space4people-valga-valgavv.hub.arcgis.com/>), created specially to support the project activities during Covid outbreak.

The aim of the survey was to start the co-creation process to find a new vision for Vabaduse Street and to gather citizens user experiences about the usability of the public space on Vabaduse Street, as well as thoughts that could be different in the future. Also, all observations, ideas, thematic developments and suggestions, as well as examples from other parts of Estonia and all over the world were welcome. The results were used to compile the terms of reference for the Vabaduse Street architectural competition. Citizens gave us very important and interesting information about sensing the public space.

Positive aspects:

- Buildings with a tidy façade and living shop windows behind which small businesses operate are adding a positive image to the milieu of Vabaduse Street.
- The restaurants, the flower shop, the Müllerson business center, the hairdresser and the small shops were recognized throughout.
- The location of the museum and school in the historical houses in city centre was mentioned as a good example among the public buildings.

Negative aspects:

- There are many dilapidated and unused buildings on the street.
- It is very much pointed out that the movement on Vabaduse Street is awkward for pedestrians and slight traffic users, but also for the driver.
- Bus stop locations need to be changed.

What is missing:

- Greenery on street. Landscaping, trees and colorful flower beds.
- Neuland Park has a potential in the development of a recreation area in the city center.
- There is a lack of seats, resting and playing areas. Seating would be recommended at public transport stops, in front of cafés and in the intermediate areas.
- According to the feedback, smaller shops, kiosks and galleries are still needed to enliven the street.
- A good observation was that there is no clock in urban space.

Summary of main aspirations for the IAP

IAP is a policy instrument which helps Valga municipality officers to address the challenges:

- stakeholder mapping and involvement
- planning and implementing the SSA
- evaluating the results of SSA
- scheduling activities
- risk analysis
- applying for City council's approval
- creating initial task for an architectural competition
- conducting an architectural competition
- finding a suitable funding for implementation.

Being part of the URBACT network “Space4People” allows us to learn from best practices and be inspired by other cities on how successfully redesign the urban space and to find new innovative ways of public engagement in planning process. Other URBACT networks have been a good learning points, too such as **Health&Greenspace** for example.

Great inspiration has been **Placemaking Europe** - the network for placemaking in Europe, connecting practitioners, academics, community leaders, market actors and policy makers throughout Europe in the field of placemaking, public space, social life, human scale and the city at eye level. The network is meant for developing and sharing knowledge; develop, test and use different tools; exchanging ideas and actively shaping projects together. Network supports and collaborates with organisations who want to work on placemaking, social life, human scale, and a better eye level experience. Also, **Urban Innovative Actions** (UIA), an initiative of the European Union providing urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges.

Description of the process

URBACT local group in Valga consists of 11 persons – core group members who are responsible for all the activities and 7 local group members who have a supporting role. 3 core group members are also the members of Space4People project team. As all core group members are the public servants in Valga Municipality, the planning and obtaining the necessary permits and approvals is simplified. In a small municipality like Valga, all employees and politicians are familiar with each other and administration is faster and more flexible.

The URBACT Local Group



ULG work structure



Figure 5. Urbact Local group.

Core group gathers once a week. Local group members are participating in meetings according to the need and topics to be addressed.

The project hired an engagement expert who planned and conducted engagement events for target groups and the general public. The expert also prepared the report based on the results of the SSA and the engagement events and workshops. Engagement expert is a member of URBACT local group.

Stakeholders were mapped by ULG in 2020.

The URBACT Local Group



Stakeholder assessment grid

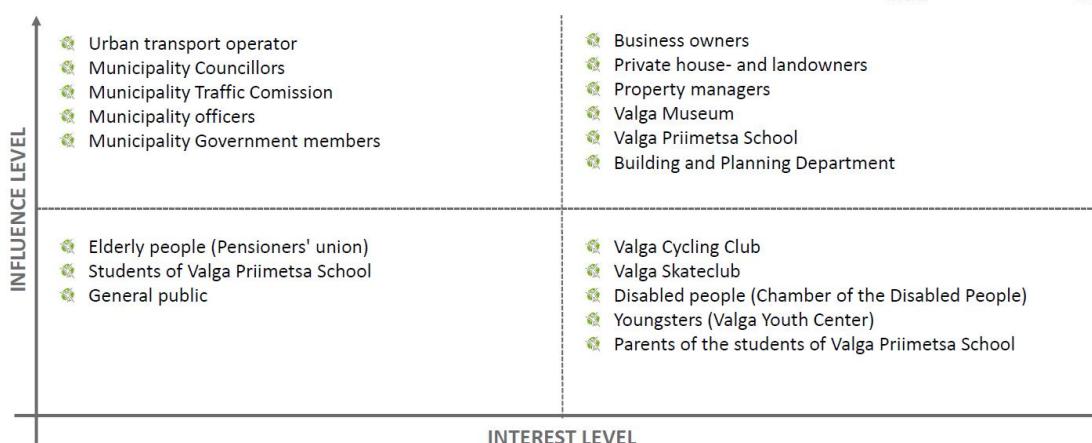


Figure 6. Stakeholder mapping.

The local ULG core group held several meetings with stakeholders with the help of an engagement expert - Vabaduse Street business owners, Valga Museum employees, Priimetsa school students and teachers, the general public, Valga Youth Center and municipality politicians.

The start of engagement activities came at a time when gathering people was restricted due to the Covid pandemic. Valga solved the situation by creating a separate website for the project, through which an online survey was conducted and information on the planned activities was provided. In parallel, it was possible to answer the survey with a paper questionnaire, which reached the mailbox of each resident together with the municipality newspaper.

The survey was planned for the time when the SSA was freshly installed on Vabaduse street – the road for cars was narrowed down and the rest of the area made available to pedestrians. The street space experiment sparked a lively discussion, which is why responding to the survey was very active.

Information about the project activities was shared throughout the project in Valga municipality official social media channel on Facebook, on Valga Municipality website, in Valga Municipality newspaper and local radio. Residents were very active in commenting on the SSA as it was the first time in Valga to implement spatial intervention.



Figure 7. Small scale action in Vabaduse street

URBACT network **Space4People** enables Valga municipality officers to work together on developing effective and sustainable responses to major urban challenges, reaffirming the key role they play in facing increasingly complex societal changes and encouraging cooperation through network. Mutual discussions and learning from each other's experiences are invaluable. Different learning sessions and webinars are improving the ability to use the right tools from problem identification to engagement activities, both on-line and offline. The Lead partner of the network, the expert and the project partners have been step by step support in identifying problems and setting goals.

Objectives, actions and schedule

Valga sees the quality of urban space in the town centre as a main tool to deal with outcomes of the population shrinkage and public space design from communist time. Attractive centre improves emotional bonds of locals towards their hometown and boosts the citizens activity. Quality pedestrian places are playing the key role in the town centre attractiveness. The focus of work for the Integrated Action Plan will be on Vabaduse street transformation.

The aim of the transformation is:

- to improve the attractiveness of public space in order to boost the mental connection of residents to their hometown
- to improve urban space usability for commercial needs (enabling cafes summer terraces, advertisements, short time parking etc)
- to improve accessibility for all by using principles of universal design
- to develop Valga into a walking-cycling oriented city
- to reduce traffic jams in front of the school
- to enhance connection between Valga and Valka urban centres and Valga railway station.

Redesigning Vabaduse street also includes reorganizing both car traffic and car parking as main obstacles to creating an attractive public space.

As a result:

- the co-created future vision is developed
- terms of reference for architectural contest of the area is elaborated
- an architectural competition will be held
- citizens sense of place grows as they are involved in the design process

Specific objectives set:

- To improve urban space usability for commercial needs

Output indicator: improved street space

Result indicator: new businesses opened on the street, turnover of businesses

- To improve the attractiveness of public space

Output indicator: built modern urban space

Result indicator: number of people spending time in the street, time spent in the street

- To improve accessibility for all by using principles of universal design

Output indicator: convenience for people with special needs, the elderly and children to use the street space

Result indicator: number of measures taken

- To develop Valga into a walking-cycling oriented city

Output indicator: created bike path

Result indicator: number of bike users

Main planned activity composes from the physical reconstruction of Vabaduse street urban space to be more supportive for local businesses. Reconstructed Vabaduse street will have narrower road to limit the speed of car traffic and therefore dust and noise levels will decrease. Narrower road leaves more urban space for other activities. This space will be used for wider pedestrian and light traffic sidewalks, short time parking, greenery, urban furniture. Spaces for temporary cultural and commerce activities will be reserved as well. Wider sidewalks enable businesses to enlarge their activities on the street during the summertime. Reconstructed street will increase both the number of people frequenting the area and the time they are spending there. This should result in higher revenue of local businesses on the street.

Quality physical reconstruction of Vabaduse street urban space involves the organisation of architectural competition to find the best design for the area, public and stakeholders' involvement, resourcing, and elaboration of the technical project.

Valga's approach is to work together with stakeholders, residents on Vabaduse street and citizens on their needs and wishes to create a new street design resulting an attractive public space of Vabaduse street.

Elements of the work on Vabaduse street are:

- Co-design workshops with the single stakeholder groups – the new school location, residents, retailers, cafés, the museum, companies as well as clients and customers coming to the street
- Joint plenary events to confront each other with respective needs and wishes to create a joint vision and design concept for Vabaduse street
- Experimenting with road closures and preliminary design options to learn on effects of jointly proposed measures
- Formulate a strict setting of the stakeholder ideas and test results for the mandatory architectural competition to the final redesign scheme
- Elaborate the detailed design concept and adopt it in the city council.
- Preparation of architecture competition: January – May 2022
- Architecture competition: June 2022 – September 2022
- Search for the infrastructure resourcing: October 2022 – December 2023
- Design works: January – December 2023
- Public involvement in the design process: February – September 2023
- Public procurement for the builder: first half 2024
- Construction works: 2024-2025

	2021												2022								2023	2024	2025
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	2023	2024	2025
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Figure 7. Timetable

Communication with residents, stakeholders and public is consistent throughout the project. Information will be shared, public discussions and meetings with stakeholders will take place and the results are presented to politicians.

Small scale action

Partial closure of Vabaduse street was tested as IAP co-production - narrowing the main street in Valga for summer season by creating pedestrian space.

Valga aimed to use small scale action for testing redesign options of Vabaduse street:

- experimenting with tactical urbanism to simulate permanent changes
- temporary road closure to parts of the street
- creating pop-up summer-cafes
- making more space for pedestrians and people to spend time
- adding flowers and greenery to the street

The pilot was planned in cooperation with main stakeholders - business owners along the street and ULG group as well as other stakeholder groups.

So, what do we think is wrong with Vabaduse Street?

The street is about 16 meters wide, of which 12 meters is ment for cars – 6 meters for both directions. Sidewalks on both sides are just 2 meters wide, street lightning and traffic signposts interrupting the free movement. One can only stop or park in couple of places.

The width of the two-way, standard carriageway typical to the city center is by standard 6 to 8 meters. Our assumption is, that a road twice as wide will encourage acceleration and high speeds will generate additional noise and dust. However, noise and dust, together with narrow sidewalks and lack of landscaping does not invite people to use the street for walking. Due to this and the lack of reasonable parking arrangement on the street, we estimate that businesses in the area also have fewer customers.

SSA helped us to understand if our assumptions are really the case. Are our assumptions correct or are experiences and knowledge adopted from elsewhere in Valga not valid? The launched space experiment was helping us to gather valuable data and find answers to our questions.

During the summer, we tested whether the restricted roadway causes traffic chaos in the city or attracts people to use more street space and sit in the pop-up cafes. The experience gained is used as a basis for the future street redevelopment process.

Valga Municipality allocated part of the Vabaduse Street roadway to pedestrians to allow street businesses to expand their activities to sidewalks during the summer. As the space intervention temporarily changed the traffic on Vabaduse Street, it caused a lively discussion among the city residents.

Observing the situation on spot, having discussions with citizens on Vabaduse street, reading the comments on our posts in Facebook and having stakeholder meetings, the ULG core group together with involment expert drew a number of conclusions which should be corrected next time.



Figure 7. Small Scale action in Vabaduse street

Lessons learnt:

- improving communication with public we - to formulate the purpose and background of the experiment more clearly and using the language which is more understandable to citizens
- linking physical change of space to organizing different activities for people in the area
- better planning of space invention and faster installation
- necessary to limit the traffic speed in order to achieve better effect

What was good:

- the narrowing of the road did not lead to traffic congestion
- a little irritation involved people even more and initiated discussion - a lot of negative and positive opinions
- colors, plants, flowers and temporary street furniture increased attractiveness
- knowledge that narrowing of motorways in the city in the future is approved by citizens
- It takes time to get used to changes, but experiments also change the way citizens are thinking about the public space.

Risk analysis**Economical risks - HIGH**

The economic slowdown, job losses and rising unemployment, which can lead to the lower income than planned in the municipality budget and therefore reduce the possibility to invest. As a result, some of the works planned in the development plan may be postponed due to lack of money and additional funds will have to be found to meet the objectives. It is possible that support will remain from public funds and the European Union Structural Funds therefore the list of investments needs to be changed. One - year budget limited preparation and non-adherence to the four-year budgetary strategy of the municipality planned restructuring. Rising prices for services / products may result in scheduled works become more expensive and projects are not implemented on time. The central government ignores the financial autonomy of local governments by imposing obligations that are not covered by resources.

Political risks - MEDIUM

Reviewing the priorities and investments set out in the Development Plan as political forces change. Rivalry between politicians, poor co-operation and trusting dialogue between stakeholders, political decision-making processes and their credibility. Political agreements do not work. There is a fragmentation of policy and up to date decisions that do not take into account the longterm and balanced development interests.

Natural disasters, pandemics, carelessness and technological risks - LOW

A natural disaster is a natural phenomenon of an exceptional nature which endangers life, health, natural environment or causes economic damage. Natural phenomena that can affect us directly or indirectly endangered, ranging from storms, thrombi and torrential rains to hot and

cold cold waves, thunderstorms, hail and thunderstorms. The risks arising from the use of technologies must not be ignored in the daily way of life, which increases the potential risks of human error. Consumer and careless attitudes towards the natural environment can lead to pollution of nature and significant deterioration of the state of the environment, as well as the risks associated with environmentally hazardous production, storage and handling of environmentally hazardous substances.

Crises and terrorist acts in Europe and elsewhere in the world require an increasing readiness of Estonia, including to protect the citizens of Valga municipality and to react quickly to crises. Coronavirus fast and unpredictable spread (2020) clearly highlighted the need to inform people more quickly and to exchange information better. There were also unforeseen costs associated with restructuring and ensuring safety budget.