

Made for People, Not Cars: Reclaiming European Cities

Article by Elena Ledda
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With the number of passenger vehicles rising across Europe, cities are grappling with air pollution, traffic accidents, and the loss of public space. In Spain, the city of Pontevedra has managed to overcome these challenges, surpassing national air quality standards and creating safer streets. The key, according to the Galician municipality's mayor, is an urban model that prioritises residents over cars – without imposing an outright ban on private vehicles.

It is a bright summer evening in Pontevedra, a Galician city in the northwest of Spain. The air is filled with a contralto accompanying a live jazz show in a corner of the big town square. A few metres away, four teenagers play soccer with an orange ball that two younger children try to touch in vain. A family takes a selfie while, seated on a nearby bench, four elderly women are engaged in a lively conversation. The intervals between one jazz piece and another are filled with the chirping of birds that are attracted to the greenery around the fountain.

Looking at the images of Pontevedra from the 1990s, with lines of cars stretching as far as the eye could see, it would be very difficult to predict a future like this. But since family doctor Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores was elected mayor in 1999, the Galician city has been implementing policies that go well beyond regulating vehicles in its streets. The goal, according to the 71-year-old mayor, is to recover public space for the people.

“When we reclaim public space and guarantee universal accessibility, then people have autonomy,” the mayor says. A politician of the Galician Nationalist Bloc party (Bloque Nacionalista Galego, BNG), Lores is now serving his seventh mandate and is willing to run for an eighth in 2027. Galicia is mainly and historically ruled by the right-wing Popular Party, and is the birthplace of several of its national leaders, which makes the local leftist and nationalist BNG's long rule in Pontevedra an exception in the region.

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In December 2022, the Spanish government approved [a royal decree](#) requiring all municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants to have a Low Emission Zone (LEZ) in operation. To improve air quality for citizens and reduce carbon emissions, the decree recommends measures such as restricting access for more polluting vehicles based on their environmental label and introducing traffic-restricted areas where entry charges apply.

Spain adopted this measure to comply with the legally binding requirements of the [Paris Agreement](#) – the international treaty on climate change – more than six years after it entered into force in November 2016.

Nevertheless, since Pontevedra was already fully complying with the air quality parameters laid out in the national Law 7/2021 on Climate Change, the city council decided to take a much more ambitious step: declaring the entire urban area (about 490 hectares) as a “[reduced traffic zone](#)”.

On a sunny, fresh noon at the end of June in his city-centre office, Lores recalls what Pontevedra looked like when he first took up his duties: “It was literally a cars’ warehouse and people, especially those with disabilities and the elderly, couldn’t go out on the streets, because everything was occupied by vehicles.”

While he speaks, the mayor mentions the 19th-century Catalan engineer Ildefons Cerdà i Sunyer, best known for the urban reform of Barcelona’s central Eixample neighbourhood, with its distinctive grid layout and symmetrical structure. Just like Cerdà, he views public space as an extension of the home.

Cars: a continental problem

[More than 75 per cent of the EU population](#) lives in urban areas, and this figure is expected to rise to [approximately 83 per cent by 2050](#). With air pollution widely recognised as [the most pressing health risk](#) in Europe, curbing road transport

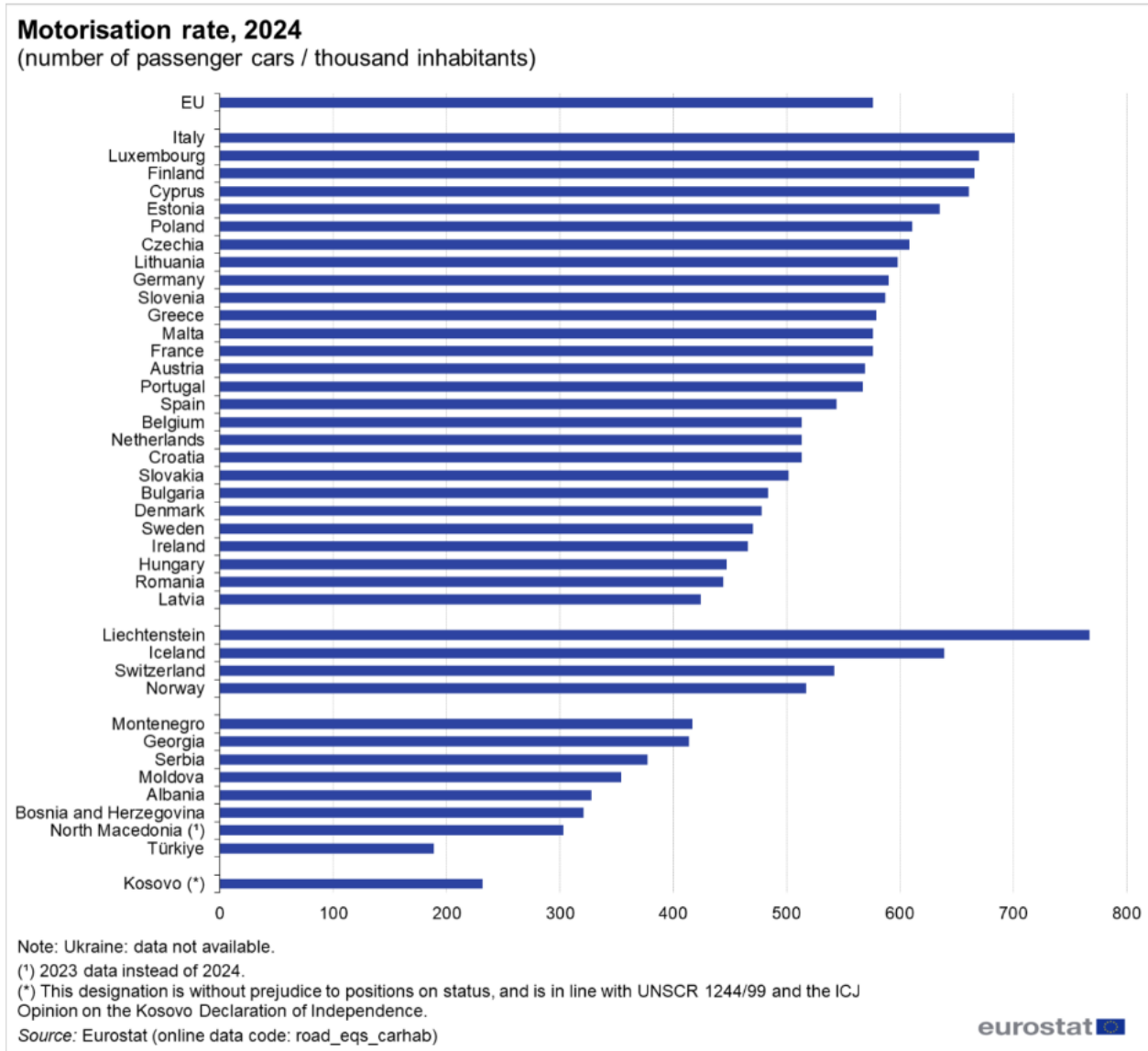
emissions – responsible for 37 per cent of nitrogen oxide pollution – is crucial.

The European Union has launched a number of initiatives to encourage cities to become cleaner and healthier. One of the most notable is the [Green City Accord](#), which invites towns with a population of 20,000 inhabitants or more to [commit](#) to improvements in areas such as air and water quality, noise reduction, biodiversity conservation, and advancing towards a circular economy. The initiative also calls on cities to connect with a wider European network to facilitate knowledge sharing.

Another initiative is the [Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities EU Mission](#), which is supporting 100 cities in the EU and 12 in countries associated with the [Horizon Europe](#) programme. The goal of the mission is to develop a pilot project to achieve climate neutrality by 2030. The solutions and models tested in these cities could then serve as an example, helping all European cities to follow suit by 2050, the year by which the EU [has committed](#) to achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.

There are also informal initiatives such as the [Ciudades que caminan](#) (“Walking Cities”) network in Spain, which is a non-profit open to city councils and other public administrations committed to walkability. The network provides participant cities with training and a forum for the exchange of information and experiences. It includes an [online school of public space](#), and is responsible for managing and promoting [Entornos escolares](#) (“school environments”), Spain’s most important website dedicated to promoting child autonomy and urban mobility.

Still, in spite of both top-down and bottom-up initiatives, the number of cars in our continent is growing: in 2024, the number of vehicles in the European Union [exceeded 259 million](#), an increase of 5.9 per cent as compared to 2019. The country with the highest motorisation rate – that is, the [number of cars per 1,000 inhabitants](#) – is Italy (701), followed by Luxembourg (670) and Finland (666 cars). With a rate of 544 (although this is based on provisional data), Spain is below the EU average of 576.



Defying the norm

Meanwhile, in Pontevedra, the number of cars has consistently diminished in recent years. The city has also introduced regulations both restricting the purposes for which cars may circulate and adjusting the times when they are permitted to do so.

When asked to name one of the best examples of what his administration has achieved in terms of prioritising pedestrians over vehicles, the mayor does not hesitate to mention the transformation of one of the main squares in Pontevedra. Next to the remains of the 14th-century Gothic convent of Santo Domingo lies the wide Praza de España, regarded as the city's "kilometre zero" – the starting point of its main natural and historical routes. Nowadays, the site serves as a lively hub where on any summer day walkers, drawn by the frequent cultural events hosted in the city, meet with pilgrims of the St. James' Way.

Lores points out that at the end of the 1990s, about 26,000 cars passed by this square every day. Remarkably, many of these vehicles were simply trying to reach destinations out of town, such as the beaches of Sanxenxo – a touristic municipality some 30 kilometres away, as well as the mayor's birthplace – and to do so they passed through Praza de España. But today, transit traffic and circling for parking are not allowed anywhere in the city, and according to Lores, only 800 cars reach the square on a daily basis. As he explains, the decision to prohibit passing traffic and divert it to beltways has led to a 40-per cent reduction in the city's overall traffic.

Only "necessary traffic" is allowed in Pontevedra: vehicles used for emergency and public safety, public services (including

garbage and water trucks, etc.), transportation of people with reduced mobility, and accessing private garages are permitted 24/7. However, loading and unloading for commercial supplies, home delivery, transporting bulky objects, and house moving and related activities, are permitted only during certain hours. Free parking spaces are scattered all over the city so that people can temporarily stop while carrying out any of these activities. In case of violations, police have the option to issue fines of up to several hundred euros.

“There is no place in town that can’t be reached by car, but only by those who need to, not those who feel like it,” Lores explains. And with his characteristic tone, direct yet polite, he adds: “The fact that you park your private car in a public space is crazy: if you don’t have room for your freezer, do you put it on the sidewalk?”

In the order of priorities, all cars, including electric ones, come last in Pontevedra: “The entire pyramid of preferences was changed: pedestrians come first, then bicycles, scooters, public transportation, and only lastly private transportation.” Inspired by Jane Jacobs’ 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Lores has placed maintaining a “compact city” at the heart of his administration’s policies on urban expansion: concentrating most activities in the city centre, discouraging large department stores on the outskirts, encouraging mixed-use neighbourhoods instead of single-purpose zones (such as a separate ‘city of justice’), like Barcelona’s law courts complex and improving public transport. The aim is not only to reduce unnecessary car travel, but also to bring life to neighbourhoods and strengthen social cohesion.

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Wandering through the downtown area on any working day, it is surprising to see the large number and diversity of shops, especially for a provincial city. Local boutiques, jewellers, florists, and bookstores all thrive side by side.

In addition to the Galician municipality, some other European cities are also taking steps towards more sustainability. Freiburg, for instance, is well known for its sustainable policies, including its regulation of car traffic. In the vibrant university city in southwest Germany, the urban planning process involves local people, bikes account for about 30 per cent of all journeys, and one district – Vauban – is almost entirely car-free. Moreover, in 2019, Oslo became the first European capital to completely ban cars in its central areas. The city has expanded the public transportation network and eliminated hundreds of parking spaces, replacing them with benches, green spaces, and bike paths.

In Pontevedra, pedestrians clearly take precedence in the centre – and in roughly a third of the city overall. There, the roads and the sidewalks are indistinguishable. For those who see it for the first time, it is startling to witness people walking in the middle of the street, apparently unconcerned, while cars slowly wait behind them until they spontaneously move and let them pass. No one honks; no traffic light is there to tell people when they can or can’t move. And no parking is allowed in the whole area between 6 PM and 8 AM.

In the rest of the city, streets are single-track roads with wide sidewalks. Cars can stop during working hours for a limited time (15 minutes for services and 30 for loading and unloading), and parking is allowed between 9 PM and 9 AM. Traffic lights can only be found on the two-lane avenues on the city’s external ring, where pedestrian overpasses and roundabouts remind vehicles to slow down. Only ten minutes away from the city centre, an open-air parking area offers an alternative to the roughly 4,500 private underground parking spaces available in the city. In total, Pontevedra has more than ten free municipal parking sites and approximately 3,500 free parking spaces, all located within a walking distance of 10-15 minutes maximum from the centre. This is especially useful for people who don’t live in the city but have to commute from surrounding areas for work.

Safer, healthier, and more accessible

In 2010, Pontevedra was the first Spanish city to enact a speed limit of 30 km/h on all roads in its urban territory. At present, the limit is 10 km/h in the downtown area, “but only if there is no one around”, explains Daniel Macenlle, an ex-local policeman and the current director general for protection of citizens at the city council. “If there are people, then it goes down to six.” In the rest of the centre, the maximum speed is 20 kilometres per hour, while in other neighbourhoods, vehicles can go as fast as 30.

The result is that there have been no fatal accidents on municipal roads for a decade. Today, according to municipality data, 73 per cent of children walk to school (including 44 per cent who go accompanied, and 29 who take the journey on their own).

A [2012 study](#) conducted in Denmark, involving 20,000 children and part of a bigger project on the links between concentration, diet, and exercise, found that those who walk or bike to school have higher concentration levels than their peers up to four hours later.

In Pontevedra, as in other Spanish cities like Barcelona, “school routes” have been implemented for years. These spaces with specific signposts are located around schools to offer students the option of walking to and from school, alone or in groups.

And the benefits extend to all residents: overall, the number of people who choose to walk or bike in the Galician municipality has risen from 66 per cent in 2011 to 90 per cent in 2021. Moreover, today about 70 per cent of all trips take place on foot or by bicycle. The city council also estimates that, since the end of the 1990s, CO2 emissions have been reduced by approximately 67 per cent.



Road and the sidewalk are indistinguishable in the city center Credit: ©Elena Ledda

In order to know not only the distance by foot, but also the number of steps and the calories burnt to reach a location, people in Pontevedra can try to use [Metrominuto](#).¹ The synoptic map includes information about the city’s historic sites, news (e.g. on recent international studies on mobility), and service information (like national subsidies for electric cars).

Though it may be assumed that geo-referenced camera checks, fines and towing in place are extensively used to ensure road rules are respected in Pontevedra, most people interviewed said that the system works simply because people find that it is convenient.

This is also true for businesses: “A city that is kind to you invites you to explore it and enjoy it. And when you walk around, you also consume,” says Andrés Martínez, 48 and owner of an optical shop in calle de la Oliva, one of the city’s more commercial streets. Andrés lives in the same building where the shop is located and parks his private car in its communal parking.

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Another resident is 57-year-old Santi Cachadas, who has been selling fish at the municipal market for 30 years. He points out a different benefit of the city's model: "People who come to buy pick up and leave, and that means an empty space where a new client can park, and so on, which leads to more movement." Santi lives about three kilometres away from where he works, and every morning he leaves his car in a free parking lot, built by the Lérez river, and walks for 500 metres to reach his market stall.

Still, it must be noted that two out of five business owners interviewed for this story, one managing a newsstand and one running an eco-products shop, say that their clients often complain about the fact that they cannot find parking spots.

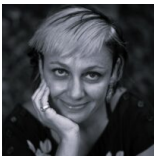
When asked why he thinks Pontevedra's policies have succeeded, the mayor points to several factors: clear communication and education about the city's goals, networking "with the most proactive and dynamic people in town", carrying out participatory processes, and the decision not to ban cars outright. And he adds: "We carried out many projects to expand sidewalks and pedestrian spaces; as soon as the project was completed, the space was automatically occupied by activities. We also allowed cars that needed it to enter, and people who had doubts were relieved."

Replicating Pontevedra's success

Over the years, the northwestern Spanish municipality has received numerous awards for its good practices, including the UN-Habitat's 2014 Dubai International Best Practices Award for Sustainable Development for its city model centred on people, and the 2020 European Commission's EU Urban Road Safety Award for "impressively achieving zero road deaths between 2011 and 2018".

When invited to answer whether he thinks Pontevedra's success is exportable, Lores quickly replies that each city has to find its own model and strategy, and that every external example needs to be translated. And when asked if there is at least some lesson he believes could serve as an inspiration for other cities, and if so, for what type of city, without hesitation he states: "Changing the paradigm by moving away from a town imagined for the cars back to one for the people".

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Elena Ledda is an independent journalist from Sardinia. She is professor of Engagement Journalism at the BCN_NY Master Degree in Journalism, and a journalism project manager. She is the author of *The stolen body. Violence and rebellion in the land of mafia*. She practices solution-focused, narrative, long-form, and slow journalism from a feminist perspective, telling stories that deal with conflicts, inequalities, and injustice, but at the same time highlighting resilience, responses and alternatives to these problems. She is an accredited trainer of the Solutions Journalism Network and a member of the International Press Institute.

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