

The monitoring of clean transport zones works in Kraków and Warsaw. How are people perceiving it? How is it managed? How effective is it?

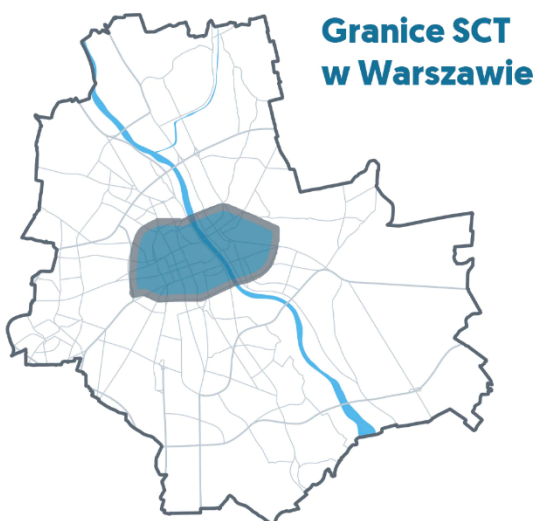
This article goes over how both Warsaw's and Kraków's Low Emission Zones are structured, enforced and how people react to them. It serves as a means of comparison between two types of LEZ, comparing the ups and downs of each of them and potentially informing future LEZ initiatives in Budapest and other cities.

How the Zones Work

Warsaw launched its SCT (Strefa Czystego Transportu, eng. Low Emission Zone) on July 1, 2024, covering only about 7% of the city's area, mainly the central district, as also presented in Figure 1 (Reddit/r/warszawa, 2026). In these zones certain vehicle types are banned based on their engine and fuel type.

Figure 1

Warsaw's SCT Area Coverage in Comparison with the City's Borders



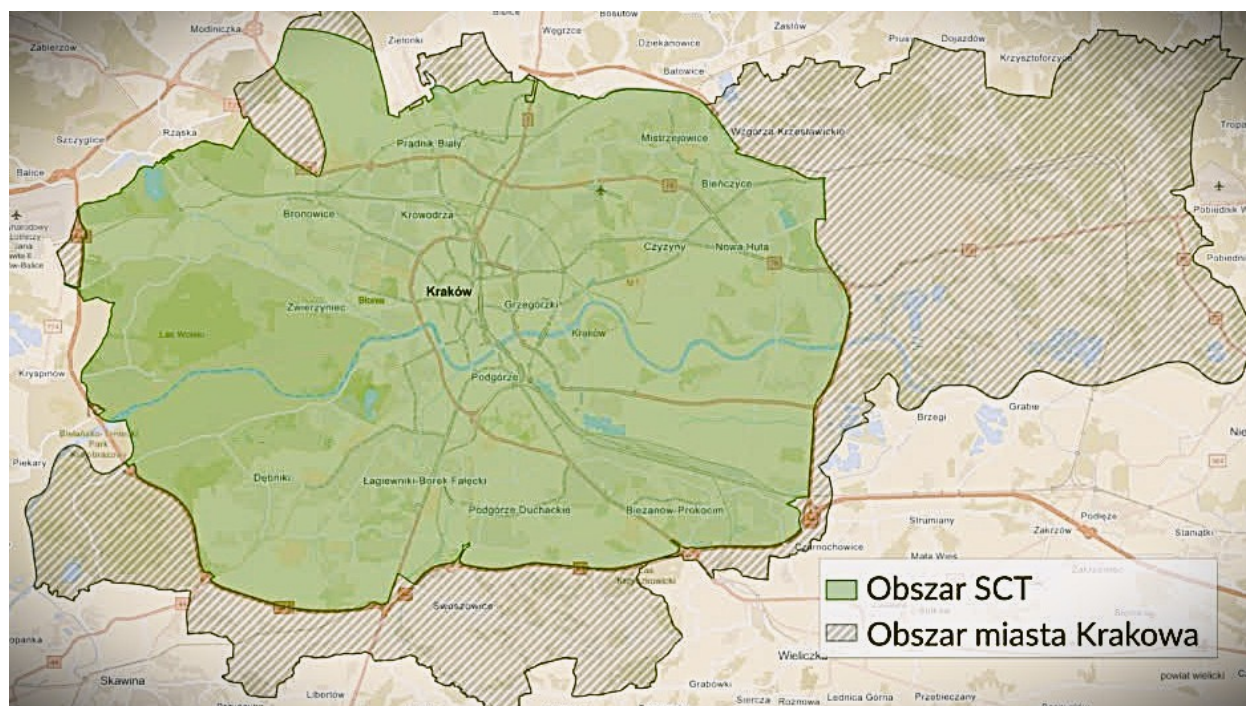
From: <https://fppe.pl/strefa-czystego-transportu-powstanie-w-warszawie/>

The bans were introduced gradually: in Stage 1 (2024-2025), the ban targeted petrol cars made before 1997, and diesel cars made before 2005. From January 1, 2026, Stage 2 tightened this to petrol cars older than 2000 and diesel cars older than 2009 (Allbag, 2026). Warsaw residents who pay local taxes and people over 70 are exempt until the end of 2027 (Allbag, 2026).

Kraków's approach is far more aggressive. The zone covers roughly 60% of the city's area, encompassing everything within the Fourth Ring Road (ZDMK Kraków, n.d.) as presented in Figure 2. Petrol cars made after 2004, and diesel cars produced from 2014 onward may enter freely. Drivers of older vehicles must pay 2.50 PLN per hour, 5 PLN per day, or 100 PLN per month in 2026. These fees will rise steeply to 250 PLN/month in 2027 and 500 PLN/month in 2028, with a full ban from 2029 (Notes from Poland, 2026). Kraków residents who owned non-compliant cars before June 26, 2025, and pay taxes in the city are exempt (Notes from Poland, 2026).

Figure 2

Kraków's SCT Area Coverage in Comparison with the City's Borders



From: <https://krknews.pl/stc-co-kazdy-mieszkaniec-podkrakowskich-gmin-powinien-wiedziec/>

How Monitoring and Enforcement Work

In Warsaw, enforcement is handled by the Municipal Police using CEPiK data (Warszawa 19115, 2026). Unauthorized entry into either zone carries a fine of up to 500 PLN (Warszawa 19115, 2026; Motoryzacja Interia, 2026). Warsaw is also partnering with the TRUE Initiative and the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) to deploy roadside remote-sensing equipment that measures real-world vehicle emissions inside and outside the zone, generating evidence-based data to evaluate the LEZ's effectiveness (TRUE Initiative, 2025).

In Kraków, enforcement is built around a network of cameras that automatically read license plates and cross-check them against the Central Register of Vehicles and Drivers (CEPiK) (Globenergia, 2026). The city plans to expand this to around 300 cameras and eventually introduce fully automated fines similar to speed cameras, though this requires changes in national legislation that are currently being drafted (Globenergia, 2026). In the meantime, the Municipal Police (Straż Miejska) and regular police units conduct roadside checks, especially near the zone's boundaries (Transinfo, 2026). Drivers can also check their vehicle's compliance through the city's online portal (sct.zdmk.krakow.pl) or the mKraków app (Kraków.pl, 2026). The fine for entering the zone in a non-compliant vehicle is up to 500 PLN, or the owners of such vehicles can opt to pay 2,5 PLN per hour or 5 PLN per 24 hours in the zone. The foreign plates that do not register to the database, can only be monitored and fined through roadside checks.

How People Are Reacting

Public opinion is deeply divided in Kraków. A protest was held in front of Kraków's City Hall on January 10, 2026 (YouTube, 2026). One national poll found that roughly half of Poles dislike the SCT system, while only about a quarter approve (Notes from Poland, 2026). Critics,

including MP Andrzej Adamczyk from the opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party, labeled it a "tax on poverty," arguing it disproportionately burdens lower-income drivers who tend to own older cars (Notes from Poland, 2026). Several local officials and the governor of the Małopolska province filed legal challenges to overturn Kraków's zone, though a provincial court rejected those attempts in early 2026, ruling the measures were lawful and proportionate to the public health goal (Notes from Poland, 2026).

The political pressure has been significant enough that Kraków mayor Aleksander Miszalski has announced plans to revise the scheme, while also facing a campaign to trigger a recall referendum (Notes from Poland, 2026). Anti-smog activists, however, are pushing back against any dilution of the rules. Kraków Smog Alert urged stable, predictable legislation, warning that constant changes would undermine air quality improvements (Notes from Poland, 2026).

Warsaw's public reaction has been calmer and more favorable than Kraków's, largely because the city took a much more cautious and consultative approach from the start. Before the zone was even launched, Warsaw authorities ran several rounds of public consultations and commissioned surveys. A December 2022 poll found that 87% of Warsaw residents wanted the city to take action on air quality, and 76% specifically supported restricting the most polluting vehicles from entering the city (IEEP, 2024). A separate city-commissioned survey in early 2023 found roughly 70% support for introducing the SCT (TVN24 Warszawa, 2023). When residents were asked about scope, 46% said the proposed zone was actually too small and should cover a larger area (Gazeta Żoliborza, 2023).

That said, the process was not entirely smooth. When the Warsaw City Council voted to approve the SCT in December 2023, opponents packed the gallery, whistling and shouting to disrupt the session (TVN24 Warszawa, 2023). Much of this opposition came from right-wing political parties, and city leaders ultimately compromised by shrinking the zone to just 7% of the city and by exempting Warsaw residents from the rules until 2028, meaning only visitors and commuters currently face restrictions (Triple Pundit, 2025). Critics from the left, like city councillor Marek Szolc of Nowa Lewica, went in the opposite direction, calling the final proposal "not ambitious enough" (SmogLab, 2024). Experts from the International Council on Clean Transportation pointed to a broader pattern where many residents simply did not know enough about the health benefits or the transition timeline, and poor communication made it harder to build lasting public acceptance (Triple Pundit, 2025).

How Effective Is It So Far?

It is too early for definitive results, but the context of the air quality case is strong. Around 80% of nitrogen dioxide (NO_x) emissions in Kraków come directly from vehicle exhaust pipes, making transport restrictions a key intervention (Notes from Poland, 2026). Kraków already banned the burning of solid fuels like coal and wood in 2019, so the SCT is the next major policy step (Notes from Poland, 2026).

In Warsaw, road traffic accounted for 40% of NO_x and 51% of PM₁₀ emissions in 2024 (TRUE Initiative, 2025). The TRUE Initiative's first study from 2022 showed that a small number of the oldest diesel vehicles caused a disproportionately large share of total emissions, which directly shaped the design of Warsaw's zone (TRUE Initiative, 2025). A comprehensive study assessing emission reductions and health impacts of Warsaw's LEZ is expected in early 2027 (TRUE Initiative, 2025).

In practical enforcement terms, Kraków recorded 58 warnings and 3 fines in just the first days of January 2026, with authorities focusing on education before shifting to stricter

enforcement in April 2026 (TVN24 Kraków, 2026). The phased and lenient start was intentional, giving drivers time to adjust (Motoryzacja Interia, 2026).

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