

# Baltic capitals duel for European WiFi crown

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A view of Riga from the top of St. Peters church on May 11, 2006

The Estonian tech-hub city of Tallinn has long laid claim to the title of WiFi capital of Europe - but now it has a challenger.

A Baltic rival has emerged in Latvia, whose capital Riga launched a war of words this week as it seeks to overtake its neighbour in all things Internet.

City authorities teamed up with Latvia's state-owned Lattelecom

telecoms company to buy billboards leading into Riga with the words "European capital of Wifi" cheekily emblazoned across the front.

Statements from city hall followed, pointing out that Riga has one free Wifi zone for every 750 residents, compared to one for every 1,263 in Tallinn.

At the unveiling of the billboards, Riga Mayor Nils Usakovs crowed that his city has "surpassed other European cities in free WiFi coverage".

Latt telecom CEO Juris Gulbis hailed Latvia as an emerging European "WiFi superpower" for the 4,000 free points dotted across the country of two million.

While the sheer numbers of free WiFi points in European metropolises like London or Paris dwarf those in both Baltic capitals, Riga now claims to trump the rest—especially its northern neighbour—on a per capita basis.

Officials in the Estonian capital are not amused.

After all, their city gave birth to Skype, hosts NATO's elite cyber-defence centre and claims to offer the highest number of public e-services on the planet.

Vaino Olev, Tallinn City Council's head of IT services leapt to defend his city's high tech credentials.

In a subtle dig at Riga's supposed modernity, Olev also suggested that free WiFi is actually yesterday's news.

"This sounds more like Riga has set an ambitious goal for itself," he told AFP.

"Due to the booming popularity of smart devices among [city](#) residents, the number of WiFi areas in Tallinn has stabilised rather than increased - interest in public free WiFi has diminished," he said.

"This, of course, is mainly due to the local mobile phone operators offering low prices on smart phone packages. The main WiFi users in Tallinn now are tourists," Olev said.

Estonia, with its population of just 1.3 million people, has made a name for itself for being a trailblazer in technology and notably pioneered e-voting in 2005.

After five decades of Soviet rule ended in 1991, Estonia opted to use existing computer engineering facilities to go hi-tech as quickly as possible.

It earned the nickname "E-stonia" as it outstripped most other members of the European Union, which it joined in 2004.

Officials in Latvia have watched Estonia's success closely, and have responded by investing heavily in infrastructure in a bid to spur growth.

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