



TEN YEARS OF RIGA AVIATION FORUM — INSIGHTS FROM ZIGMARS VESTFALS ON GROWTH, MILESTONES AND THE ROAD AHEAD

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As the 10th edition of the Riga Aviation Forum was getting ready to open, 50SkyShades — a long-standing Media Partner of the event — took the opportunity to sit down with Zigmars Vestfals, CEO of the Latvian Aviation Association, just hours before the official kick-off.

Marking a decade of strategic dialogue and industry collaboration, Zigmars Vestfals reflects on how the Forum began, the milestones that shaped its evolution, and the achievements he is most proud of. What started as a focused initiative to strengthen aviation cooperation in the Baltic region has grown into a recognized European platform where leaders, operators, regulators, and innovators converge to address the sector's most relevant challenges and opportunities.

In this interview, Zigmars Vestfals underscores the Forum's importance as a catalyst for regional connectivity, economic development, and long-term strategic thinking. He also offers insight into what participants and stakeholders can expect in the future: an expanding agenda, new contributors, and a continued commitment to delivering a forum

that reflects the ambitions and responsibilities of the aviation industry.

T.O.: Zigmars, just a few hours left before we open the 10th Riga Aviation Forum tomorrow morning. I know you're already in full motion, and it will be almost impossible to catch you once the day starts. What are you feeling tonight? And are you proud of everything you've built over these ten years?

Z.V.: Well, thank you for the kind words. Indeed, it has been an interesting journey. When I look back at how this event started years ago, it was essentially a gathering for the local aviation sector — a meeting point mainly for our local companies.

Today, we can proudly say that it has grown into a truly Baltic-wide event, and we are increasingly engaging with the Nordic countries, including Scandinavia. We believe the Baltic region is important for Scandinavia, and of course, the Scandinavian region is equally important for us.

So yes, this has become a real stage — a platform for many companies, policymakers, innovators, and more. A place to meet, exchange ideas, build new contacts, develop new networks, and hopefully create new business opportunities and possibilities.

T.O.: I've been observing this for years now, and it strikes me every time. You are profoundly Baltic in the best sense of the word — you don't shout that you are "an important event." You remain discreet, decent, humble. Yet I see people coming from Germany. I see my French colleagues coming here. And when I receive their feedback, they all say the same thing: they never expected to find such a high-quality network here. This is something you never promote, even though it truly matters. From my perspective, next time, I will make sure to say it loud and clear. People need to know. This is the 10th Riga Aviation Forum, so it's a first big anniversary. What comes next, and what are you planning or hoping for the next 10 editions?

Z.V.: Yeah, good question — thank you. And yes, it is truly an honor to host such wonderful guests, speakers, and presenters. But you know, this is the work of many colleagues: colleagues from the airport, from airBaltic, from SIT, and from so many companies who contribute to making this event possible.

And you're right — we don't shout about this event. You are completely right. Maybe it's our small weakness. But this is simply how we are. As smaller, but very dynamic Baltic nations, we are proud of what we do and what we can achieve. We are open and friendly to the whole world — we always have been.

We genuinely look forward to meeting new partners and inviting even more companies to the Baltic region. Because over all these years, we have seen that aviation is a very important sector — one of the most critical parts of a country's economy. You cannot imagine well-being, you cannot imagine a high-level society without aviation. It's a very simple rule. And there have been many examples in the past: when airlines disappear and connectivity drops, everyone feels it immediately.

So yes, we know the value of the aviation sector here, and we are proud of what we are doing. And yes, there are plans for the coming years, some very interesting ideas — but they are not ready to be discussed yet.

T.O.: You're always keeping the secret.

Z.V.: Yes — because in the end, it always comes down to the same thing: the right moment, the right people, the right attitude. And when those elements come together, a lot becomes possible.

T.O.: I have a very simple and very direct question. You've mentioned that you have an amazing team of passionate professionals who come together to make this event possible. Are you ready to welcome new contributors? Are you open to seeing new companies step forward and say: *"We have an idea of how we can help — and we are willing to help."*

Z.V.: Definitely, yes. Absolutely. And in fact, tomorrow you will see that some of the panel discussions are entirely led by companies — companies that proposed their own ideas and topics, and took the initiative to shape the content.

Of course, the Riga Aviation Forum's organizing team makes the final decision: whether the topic fits, whether it is logical, whether it aligns with the overall framework. But generally, we are very happy to welcome new companies and new potential contributors. There is so much more we could talk about. If I had the time and the resources, I would even dare to organize two additional days of conference.

T.O.: I think you will

Z.V.: Because tomorrow you will also see that the program is very packed — extremely packed, in fact. And you still need to find the right way to shape the presentations: to structure them properly, to deliver the right messages, to make sure the ideas and the sessions are not too short, but also not too long.

Because what we all appreciate — and what every company values — is effectiveness.

T.O.: You're a platform connecting people.

Z.V.: Exactly. And that's precisely why we have these professionals here — people who lead their companies and who know better than anyone how to express themselves effectively, delivering the right words at the right moment.

T.O.: My last question — because I'll have many more for you after the conference. I know tomorrow will be fast-paced, very informative, and very interesting, and we never have enough time. People are constantly catching each other during the sessions, during lunch, everywhere. For the next edition, are you planning to keep the same dates? It's important for companies that want to jump on board and join this group of professionals. So will it be early September again, as usual?

Z.V.: It will be early September again, as usual. We've tried organizing the Riga Aviation Forum in June and in May, but there are many other major events happening across Europe during that period, and we don't want to compete with them. We have our own clear vision, our own rhythm, and our own common sense about what works best for the Forum. So yes — September. Early September remains the right timing for us.

T.O.: Perfect. Yeah, I know how many different agendas you have to juggle — bringing all of them together, finding the right date, the right moment, and making everything align.

Z.V.: Yeah — back to school, back to work after the holidays... yes, exactly. And still, we have 25 degrees today here in Riga. It's a bit rainy, but you know. And in the Old Town, you can see a lot of tourists at the moment — many people coming to Riga, which is great. We love that. So yes —

September it is.

T.O.: Do you envision introducing a static display in the future — even if only for one edition?

Z.V.: Maybe — let's take some time to think it through.

T.O.: Thank you — I'm really looking forward to seeing what tomorrow brings for the 10th edition.

Z.V.: Let's have fun tomorrow.

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