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Sea Region*

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Introduction

European policies strategically defined a vision for rural areas towards 2040 to develop towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas and communities (EC, 2021). Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and cohesion policy, complemented by a wide range of other funds, financially underpin these goals. The self-declared 'most successful policy tool for community-led local development (CLLD)' in the European Union is LEADER/CLLD¹. Defined as a methodology, it is a bottom up, area-based development approach, in which local partnerships, an integrated multi-sectoral strategy, innovation, networking and cooperation are constitutive elements.

The LEADER approach was introduced in the 1990s to promote bottom-up policies, addressing challenges of rural regions across EU member-states. Starting as an experiment, disadvantaged rural areas were financially supported at the beginning. The scope was broadened later, when the approach was further developed as an integral part of the EU rural policy. The thematic focus has changed too, including fisheries since 2007. Scientific interest in European regional policies and the related LEADER approach has been growing over the years and is still significant (e.g., Chatzichristos & Perimenis, 2022; Johansson & Holmquist, 2024; Shucksmith et al., 2021).

Starting with the 2014-2020 programme period, EU member states and regions

¹ LEADER ("Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale"); see the newly designed website: https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/networking/leader_en (17.06.2024).

requested to adopt integrated policy approaches to territorial development. This was concretized in the Community-led Local Development (CLLD) tool, that was added to the former LEADER approach. The CLLD extended LEADER's outreach to a wider range of measures and regions: rural and urban areas and fisheries. Funding instruments are by now the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD as LEADER), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Therefore, the LEADER approach has been upscaled from a rural development niche to an integrated local development initiative (Servillo, 2017). But LEADER regions and their rural obligations are still the main policy focus despite multiple funding sources, while implementation is different in individual EU Member States (Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018). As of 2024, LEADER addresses challenges and opportunities within the new EU framework of the CAP strategic plans of the member countries.

This policy brief analyses the construction of policy spaces across the Baltic Sea macro-region, focusing on the LEADER/CLLD approach. A LEADER region is rural in character and covers a clearly defined area. Local actors in rural areas are involved by forming Local Actions Groups (LAGs) which design and implement strategies. At the beginning of an EU funding period, a regional development strategy which defines objectives and fields of action has to be developed. With this strategy, a designated LEADER region can apply for funding in the respective regional administration or national state. While this policy is well researched, we take a step back and observe that the spatial features of these designated regions are not often brought together in a macro regional perspective. We investigate how such LEADER regions have been spatially constructed within the Baltic Sea EU member-states and what kind of common characteristics or differences they have. Addressing this topic may offer a fresh perspective to policies for integrated (rural) development from a spatial perspective.

EU Policy Spaces: What Makes a Difference?

A first methodological question when constructing the spatial features of the LEADER/CLLD method concerned how to identify meaningful data, and at which spatial scale. To begin with, it was decided to collect information on size (population, area) of each LEADER/CLLD region across the eight EU countries in the Baltic Sea. This was obtained in several ways, since there is no unified approach among EU countries as of if and how this kind of information becomes available to the general public. Information on policy spaces is summarized below (see also Figures 1 to 3):

Figure 1: Size of Leader regions

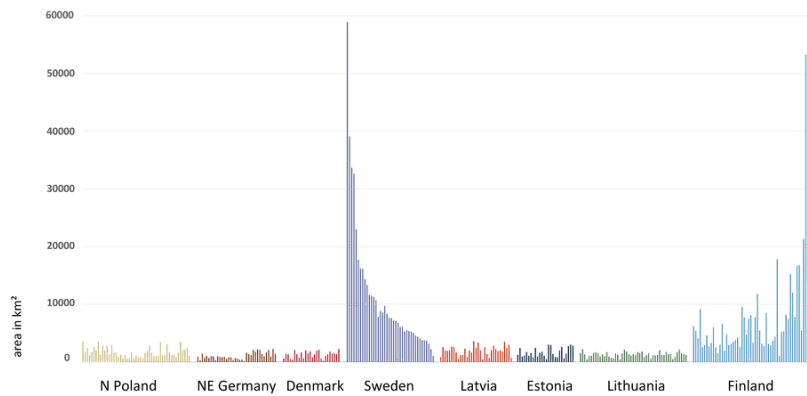


Figure 2: Population in Leader regions

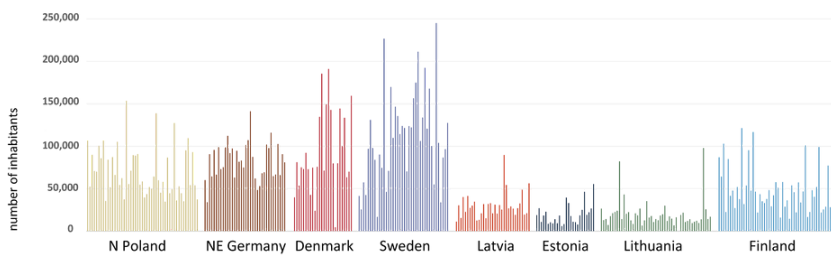
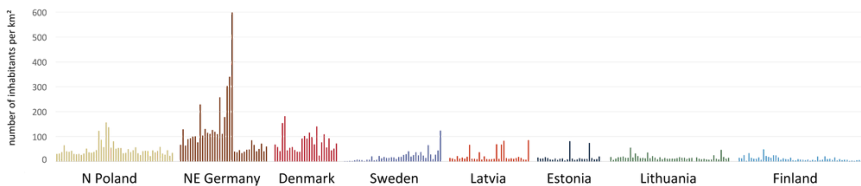


Figure 3: Density of Leader regions



Northeast Germany

The LEADER regions in the northern states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Schleswig-Holstein have, on average, similar populations and different sizes (area): The average area in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is 1620 sq.km, while the average area in Schleswig-Holstein is 694 sq.km. This results in a sharp difference in population density. There are 161 inhabitants per square kilometre at the average region in Schleswig-Holstein and only 50 in Mecklenburg Vorpommern. These differences however reflect not just the federal state differentiations within Germany. Indeed, the five most densely populated LEADER regions in the Baltic Sea are all concentrated in Schleswig-Holstein. As such, Schleswig-Holstein can be described as hosting the main outliers in terms of population density in the Baltic Sea macro-region.

Northern Poland

The regions of the four selected voivodeships (Warmia-Masuria, Pomerania, West Pomerania and Podlaskie) are, in contrast, fairly homogenous. The population of the average region is approximately 78,350 persons in Warmia-Masuria, 71,350 in Pomerania, 65,100 in West Pomerania and 63,900 in Podlaskie. The size of regions in these voivodeships is also fairly mixed but without significant deviations: None is smaller than 500 sq.km or larger than 3,530 sq.km. A balanced distribution is reflected in density: With the exception of a few densely populated cases in Pomerania, LEADER regions in the four voivodeships have a density ranging from 20 to 60 inhabitants per sq.km, with a total average of 47.6, almost identical to Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in northern Germany.

Denmark

The 26 Danish regions follow a middle way, between the small, densely inhabited cases of Schleswig-Holstein on the one hand, and the larger, sparsely inhabited ones in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Poland on the other: With the exception of the very thinly populated island case (Småøerne) and two regions having almost 200,000 inhabitants, the population of the other 23 Danish regions ranges from 50,000 to 150,000. The average size is 1,282 sq.km, right between Schleswig-Holstein (694) and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (1,620). In terms of density, Danish LEADER regions are quite diverse and range from 23 to 182 inhabitants per sq.km.

Sweden

Sweden is a distinct case, as it hosts some of the largest and most populous regions: With a size of almost 60,000 sq.km, Lappland LEADER has the size of a Baltic country or a large German federal state. Several others exceed 30,000 sq.km and, in any case, most Swedish regions are larger than the largest of any other country in the macro-region, with the exception of Finland. On the flipside, it is worth noting that Sweden demonstrates some of the lowest population densities in the Baltic Sea: Seven regions have a population density below 5 persons/sq.km. Taking this approach however has resulted in many others being comparatively populous. Indeed, Sweden's three most populous regions (Sydost, Nordvästra Skåne/ Mittskåne and Östra Skåne) are the most populous in the entire Baltic Sea.

Latvia

With an average size of 1,946 sq.km, the size of the 33 regions in Latvia is very similar to LEADER designations in Poland, Denmark and Germany. Almost identical to what happens in the four Polish voivodeships, no region in Latvia is smaller than 440 sq.km or larger than 3,600 sq.km. This, however, is the only shared feature: with the exception of four cases with populations similar to designated regions in the above-mentioned countries, all other Latvian regions are significantly underpopulated. As a result, their average population density (22.1 persons/sq.km) is very close to that of Sweden (20.0 persons/sq.km). However, Sweden features a few extremely sparsely populated cases which distort the country's average, while in Latvia almost all regions are sparsely populated, with few exceptions located close to the Riga agglomeration.

Estonia

The features in Estonia are very similar to those of Latvia. With an average size of 1,649 sq.km, regions in Estonia are similar to those of other countries. The population here is, however, significantly smaller, with only four regions having a total population matching those of other countries. As in Latvia, the combination of a comparatively average size and small population results in sparsely populated regions, with an average density of 15.6 persons per sq.km at the national level.

Lithuania

The case of Lithuania is similar to the two other Baltic states. Lithuania has slightly smaller designated regions, averaging 1,292 sq.km. In relation to the entire Baltic Sea, this size is very close to the average found in Schleswig-Holstein. But the number of inhabitants in the average region in Schleswig-Holstein is over 80,000 while in Lithuania it is less than 20,000. Thus and again similar to Estonia and Latvia, Lithuanian regions have a low population density (15.3 persons/sq.km).

Finland

The case of Finland is very similar to Sweden, in both absolute terms and in the logic of designation: A single vast LEADER space is designated in the North (Lapland, 53,261 sq.km). Of the remaining 52 regions, many are still much larger than those in the Southern Baltic Sea or the three Baltic states. Similar to the design in Sweden, half of Finnish regions are as populous as those in the Southern Baltic Sea, while the rest are equally populous to the regions found in the three Baltic states. Overall, Finland has an average density of 10.5 persons/sq.km, the smallest among all states in the Baltic Sea. This is not surprising, considering that 13 Finnish regions have a population density below 5 persons per sq.km.

Following the description of the basic characteristics of LEADER regions at country level, a first attempt for applying a spatial lens follows. This first grouping of countries within the Baltic Sea macro-region uses its main three features:

Area, Population and Density.

Density: Three different groups.

1. The federal state of Schleswig-Holstein stands on its own. Here, even the least densely populated LEADER region has higher density than the Baltic Sea average and, likewise, Schleswig-Holstein's average region has substantially higher density than any single case in the Baltic Sea macro-region.
2. Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Northern Poland and Denmark. Here densities range from 20 to 180 persons per sq.km, but the distribution is rather even in the middles, and there are not many extremes in either highs or lows. Within this group Denmark has slightly higher densities, while regions in Northern Poland and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern are very similar to each other.
3. Sweden, Finland and the Baltic states have very low densities. Few exceptions that match group 2 can be found only in peri-urban areas in these countries. The proximity to an urban centre explains why these are exceptions. The average region has a population density of 20.0 (Sweden), 22.1 (Latvia), 18.3 (Estonia) 15.3 (Lithuania) and 10.5 (Finland).

Population: A small but observable division along an East-West line.

1. The three Baltic states have, by far, the least populated regions in the entire Baltic Sea macro-region.
2. Among the other five countries, the Swedish regions are comparably uneven, with several outliers in both lows and highs. Here one can clearly see the effect of geography and climate with very low population densities in northern Sweden, and densities comparable to the ones in continental Europe in southern Sweden.
3. With respect to the population pattern, the picture is mixed in Finland, with an average close to the selected Polish voivodeships. However, with the exception of ten highly populated regions that match those in Schleswig-Holstein, the population of all other Finnish cases is low and very close to those in Latvia.
4. This corresponds to the population pattern across the Baltic Sea: A few highly populated LEADER regions tend to raise the country average. Most of them, however, correspond to peri-urban and suburban areas, e.g. in Lithuania (two highly populated, four medium populated), Estonia (three/three) and Latvia (one/three).

Area: Distinct logic in Sweden and Finland, opposed to all others.

1. LEADER policy spaces in the three Baltic countries, Denmark and the studied parts of Germany and Poland have a size of 100 to 3,500 sq.km, with the vast majority being in the 500 to 2,000 sq.km. size-range. An outlier is the state of Schleswig-Holstein with slightly smaller regions.
2. Sweden and Finland have adopted a completely different approach to create policy spaces. The average size of a Swedish LEADER region is over 10,000 sq.km, with only three out of 40 being smaller than 3,500 sq.km. Similar features are observed in Finland.

Conclusions

The results show that LEADER regions have been constructed as policy spaces in varying ways in different countries of the Baltic Sea macro-region. There is no single Baltic approach, but some similarities exist. Varying degrees of difference can be observed in relation to size (area), population and density.

We argue that differences in the construction of policy spaces have direct impacts on financing systems and the service provision in rural areas, in particular in peripheral locations. This sets the basis for future research that will analyse EU funding at the regional level in different time periods. Making these differences visible is important, as it contributes to recent discussions about a more efficient, rational, proportional, fair and targeted use of EU policies for rural development.

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