FEASIBILITY STUDY: LAND-BASED PLANNERS' FORUM

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2025

LAND-BASED PLANNERS' FORUM

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Study Background

This feasibility study for a Land-based Planners' Forum in the Baltic Sea Region has been developed within the framework of the Land-based Planners' Forum project, funded by the Swedish Institute. The project seeks to establish an inclusive and informal network of spatial planners operating at various governance levels across the region. Its primary aim is to promote dialogue, mutual learning, and cross-border collaboration among planning professionals.

The initiative is led by Nordregio, in collaboration with VASAB (Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea), Stockholm University, the ARL - Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association, and the Estonian Association of Spatial Planners. This diverse partnership brings together both academic and practical expertise from four Baltic Sea Region (BSR) countries, offering a well-rounded and collaborative approach to addressing shared spatial planning challenges in the region.

Introduction

This feasibility study explores the key actors involved in land-based spatial planning across the seven countries of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) and assesses their networking needs. To this end, the study includes a comprehensive stakeholder mapping of the land-based spatial planning community across the region, along with the results and analysis of a detailed stakeholder survey conducted in early 2025.

The findings provide valuable insights into current collaboration gaps, opportunities, and priorities—offering a solid foundation to inform future initiatives and capacity-building efforts in the BSR.

Stakeholder mapping

Stakeholders were identified and mapped by all five project partners: Nordregio, VASAB, Stockholm University, the ARL - Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association, and the Estonian Association of Spatial Planners. These partners represent a balanced mix of research and practice-oriented institutions across 3 countries and VASAB, representing a cooperation initiative in spatial development planning between the 7 countries of the Baltic Sea region, each contributing extensive expertise in spatial planning at local, regional, national, and transnational levels.

The partnership structure itself reflects a strong multi-level governance perspective, with all five organisations possessing significant experience in spatial planning across various governance tiers. Notably, VASAB functions as an intergovernmental organisation dedicated specifically to spatial planning cooperation within the BSR, further strengthening the macro-regional relevance of this initiative.

The stakeholder mapping considered actors at all governance levels, with a primary focus on the local and regional levels. This focus is justified by the fact that cross-country cooperation

already exists at the national and ministerial levels through frameworks such as VASAB or activities facilitated by the EUSBSR Policy Area Spatial Planning (e.g. the MSP Planners' Forum). In contrast, collaboration among local and regional planners remains fragmented. At present, there is limited capacity to consolidate and represent the needs of local and regional stakeholders in macro-regional policy development. Therefore, this project places particular emphasis on understanding and addressing the challenges and needs faced by planners operating at these levels.

Table: Number of stakeholders mapped by country and governance level

	MUNICIPALITIES	PLANNING REGIONS	MINISTRIES	PUBLIC AGENCIES	ASSOCIATIONS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS
FINLAND	20	26	3	7	2
GERMANY	33*	17	6	–	–
ESTONIA	81	–	4	1	4
LATVIA	44	7	1	–	7
LITHUANIA	–	–	1	–	–
POLAND	2812	16	3	3	–
SWEDEN	88**	21	3	4	3

*only covers northern Germany bordering the Baltic Sea
**unicipalities with more than 30 000 inhabitants

It should be noted that relevant transnational organisations and cooperation platforms were also mapped and included in the mapping process, and the survey was likewise distributed to these actors.

Survey

About

The survey was specifically designed for land-based spatial planners currently employed by local, regional, or national public authorities in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, and Sweden. Its purpose is to inform the development of the Land-Based Planners' Forum, a future platform intended to promote knowledge exchange and cooperation among spatial planners across the BSR.

The survey consists of ten questions and was implemented using the software tool Ungapped. It was distributed via email and later promoted through social media channels to key stakeholders identified through the stakeholder mapping process. The survey was open for a period of two months.

The survey explores participants' involvement in existing international spatial planning networks and their perceptions of the importance of various types of networks. Respondents were asked to rate the relevance of national, regional, and local-level networks, as well as specific focus areas such as urban–rural partnerships and cross-border collaboration, using a High / Medium / Low scale.

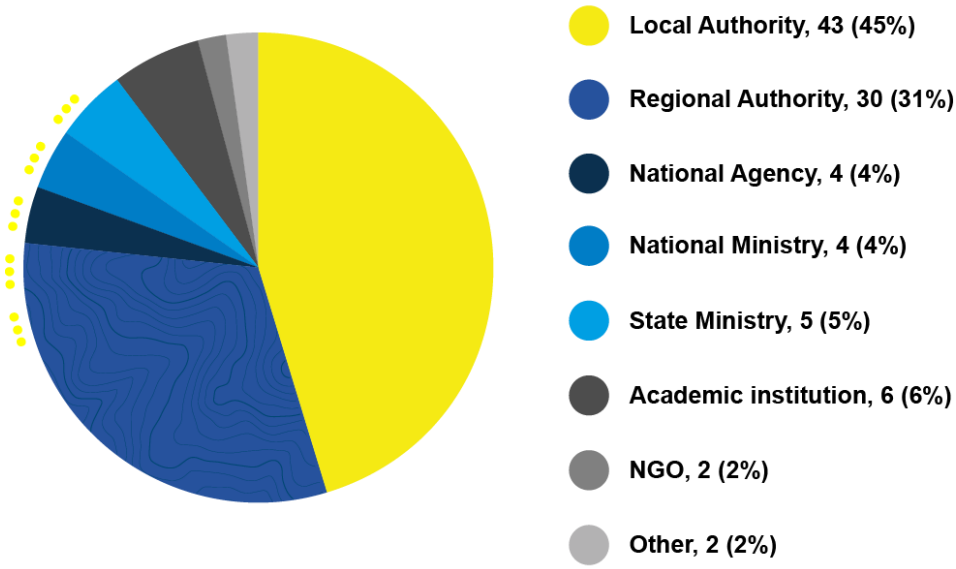
In addition, the survey assesses the perceived importance of different spatial planning themes, including urban and rural development, climate change, and land use management, using the same rating scale. Finally, it collects input on preferred support tools and platforms for knowledge sharing. The full survey questionnaire is included in the annex.

Results

Number of respondents

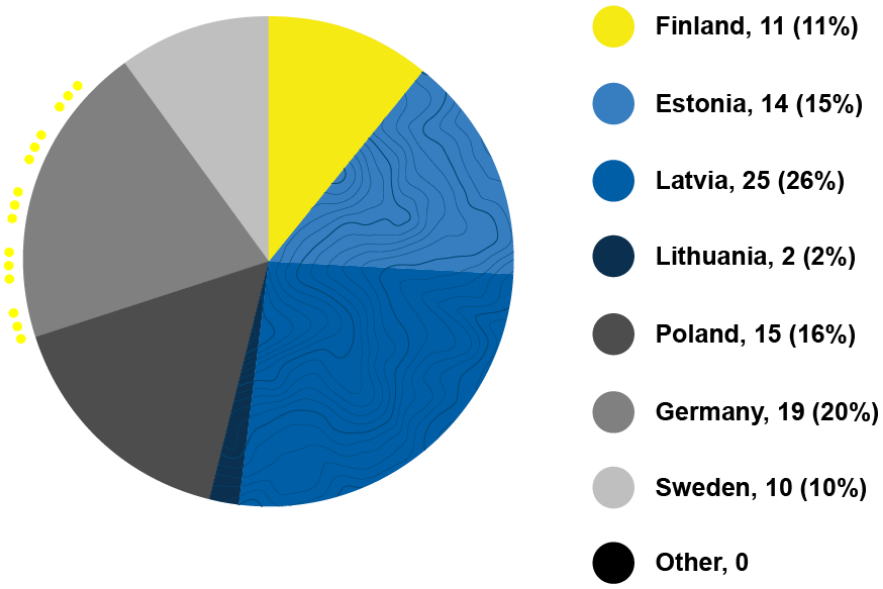
A total of 96 professionals participated in this survey (37 chose to remain anonymous) providing a comprehensive insight into the current state of spatial planning networks and practices across various levels and regions.

Organisational affiliations of respondents



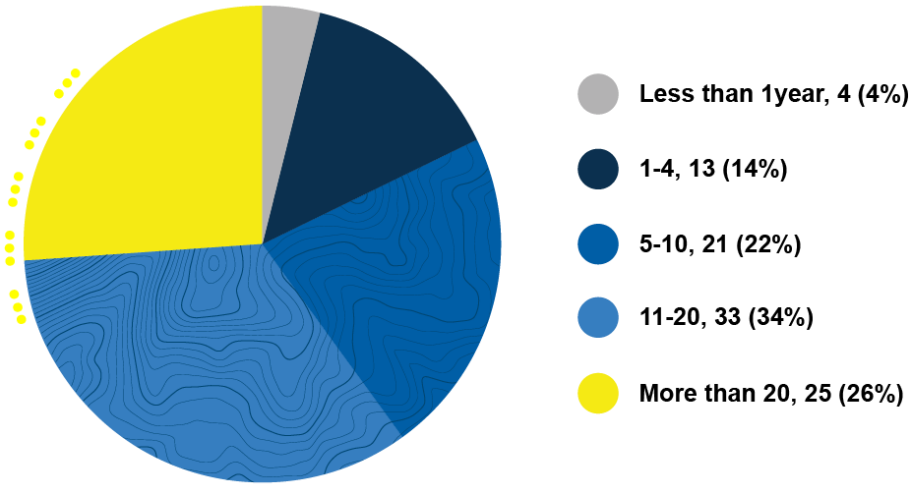
A majority of respondents (75%) represented sub-national governments.
The full list of institutional affiliation of respondents can be found in the annex.

Country of origin of respondents



Respondents were evenly spread out across the BSR countries.

Professional experience of respondents



50% of respondents had 10 or more years of experience working with spatial planning.

Role and position of respondents

The respondents represent a wide range of professional roles within spatial planning, encompassing both senior leadership and technical specialist positions. Many hold

managerial or head-of-department roles, indicating significant experience and decision-making responsibilities. There is also a presence of technical experts such as spatial planners and architects reflecting deep practical knowledge across various planning fields. Academic and research professionals, including professors and researchers, are part of the group, highlighting connections between theory and practice.

The Full list of role and positions of respondents can be found in the annex.

Existing networks

Respondents were asked to identify the existing networks they are currently involved in, highlighting the collaborative frameworks that support spatial planning efforts. The following networks were mentioned by respondents, illustrating active participation in both regional and international initiatives:

Baltic Sea–focused networks or programmes

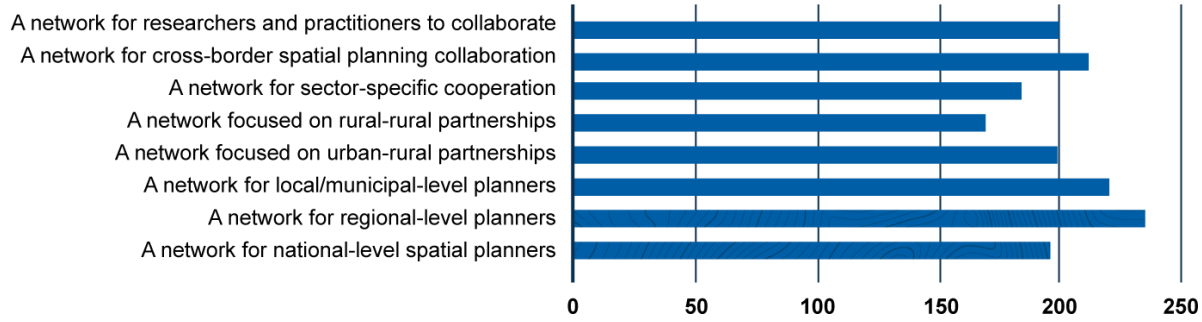
- **VASAB (Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea)**
  - **Goal:** Promote sustainable spatial development in the Baltic Sea Region, coordinate MSP and spatial planning.
  - **Target group:** National ministries, planning authorities.
  - **Form:** Intergovernmental cooperation, policy coordination, joint strategies.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum:** Highly relevant
- **UBC (Union of Baltic Cities)**
  - **Goal:** Cooperation of cities around the Baltic Sea for sustainable urban development.
  - **Target group:** Municipalities and local authorities.
  - **Form:** Networking, thematic commissions, joint projects.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum:** Brings in local government perspective — valuable complement to state-level initiatives.
- **Interreg BSR (Baltic Sea Region Programme)**
  - **Goal:** EU funding programme for transnational cooperation in the BSR.
  - **Target group:** Public authorities, NGOs, universities, private actors.
  - **Form:** Project-based cooperation, funding instrument.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum:** Not a "network" in a strict sense, but key enabler of cooperation; worth knowing.
- **BSR Youth Forum / HELCOM-VASAB**
  - **Goal:** Engage youth in MSP and sustainability discussions.
  - **Target group:** Young people, student/youth organizations.
  - **Form**: Events, forums, input to policy debates.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum:** Interesting for participation/next generation dimension.
- **BUP (Baltic University Programme)**
  - **Goal:** Education and research cooperation on sustainable development in the Baltic Sea Region.
  - **Target group:** Universities, students, academics.
  - **Form:** Courses, joint projects, conferences.
- **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum:**: Brings in academic knowledge and capacity-building
- **Metropolregion Stettin**

  - **Goal:** Cross-border regional cooperation (Poland-Germany) on development, planning, transport.
  - **Target group:** Local/regional authorities, business, NGOs.
  - **Form:** Cross-border projects, joint planning, regional development initiatives.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum:** Useful case of cross-border governance.
- **Maritime Spatial Planning Working Group of the Polish-German Committee for Spatial Development**
  - **Goal:** Coordinate Polish-German MSP, tackle cross-border issues.
  - **Target group:** National and regional MSP authorities.
  - **Form:** Working group, regular coordination.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum:** Very relevant case of bilateral cooperation.

European-wide networks

- **URBACT**
  - **Goal:** Exchange and learning programme for sustainable urban development.
  - **Target group:** Cities across Europe.
  - **Form:** Funded networks, peer learning, capacity-building.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum**: Urban-focused; relevant for integrated planning.
- **Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR)**
  - **Goal:** Lobbying and advocacy for maritime/peripheral regions in EU policies.
  - **Target group:** Regional authorities.
  - **Form:** Advocacy, networking, policy position papers.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum**: Good for policy influence perspective.
- **METREX (Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas)**
  - **Goal:** Platform for exchange on metropolitan governance and planning.
  - **Target group:** Metropolitan regions.
  - **Form:** Working groups, conferences, projects.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum**: Broader spatial planning focus, not BSR-specific, but useful for comparisons.
- **LDnet (Local Development Network)**
  - **Goal:** Connect practitioners and researchers in local development and cohesion policy.
  - **Target group:** Researchers, policymakers, practitioners.
  - **Form:** Online platform, workshops, reports.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum**: Concerns local/regional development.
- **Vidzeme Planning Region Networks via Projects**
  - **Goal:** Project-based cooperation involving Vidzeme region (Latvia).
  - **Target group:** Regional authorities, project partners.
  - **Form:** Project participation.
  - **Relevance for Land Based Planners' Forum**: More localised — interesting as a Latvian regional example.

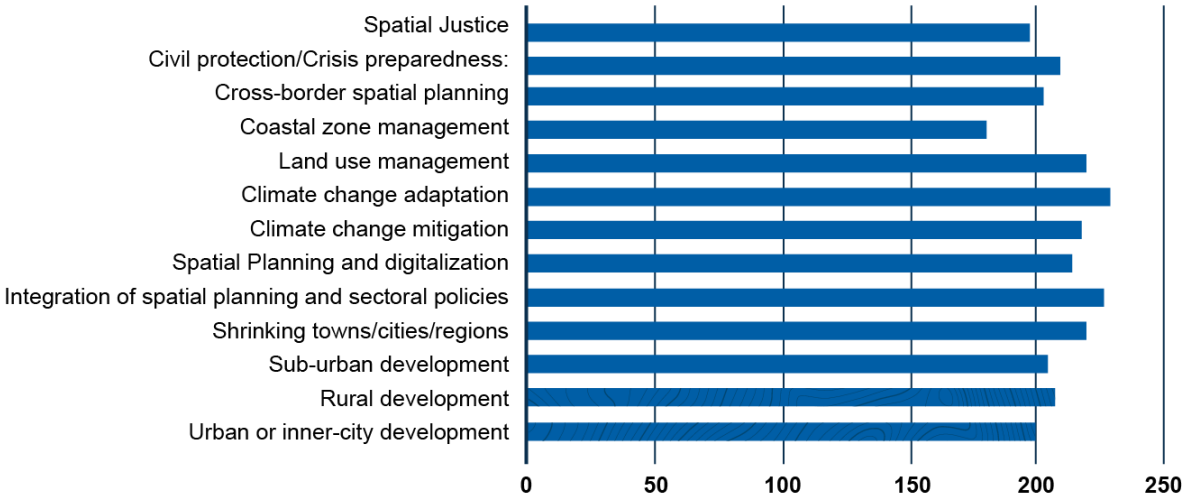
Interest in types of networks



Respondents rated each item using a three-point scale: High (3 points), Medium (2 points), Low (1 point).

The three types of networks that received the most points are: a network for regional-level planners, followed by a network for local/municipal-level planners, and then a network for cross-border spatial planning collaboration. A country breakdown is provided in the annex.

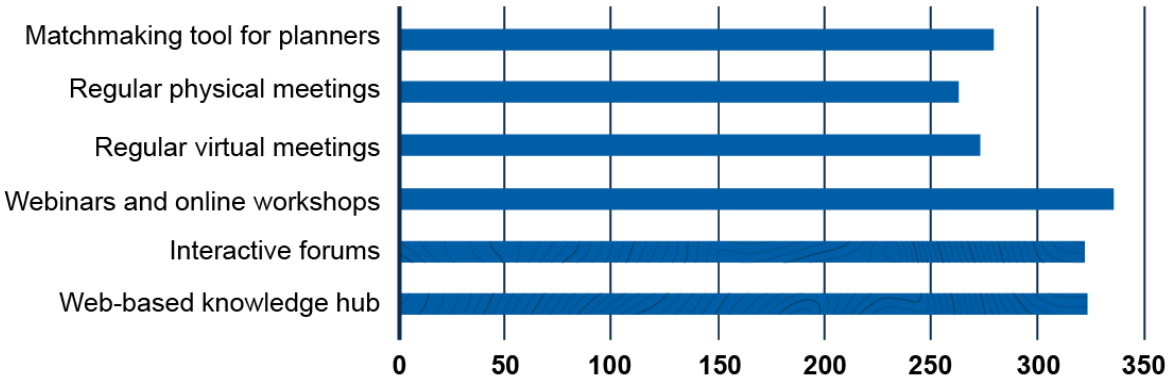
Interest in thematic areas



Respondents rated each item using a three-point scale: High (3 points), Medium (2 points), Low (1 point).

The top three themes that received the most points are: climate change adaptation, integration of spatial planning and sectoral policies, and land use management. A country breakdown is provided in the annex.

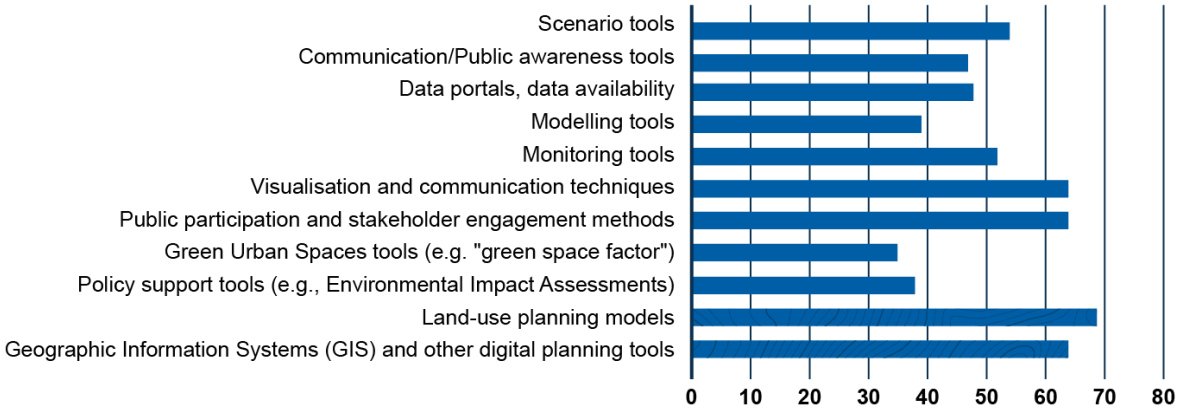
Interest in types of platform



Respondents rated each item using a three-point scale: High (3 points), Medium (2 points), Low (1 point).

The top three types of platforms that received the most points are webinars and online workshops, web-based knowledge hubs, and interactive forums.

Interest in types of support tools



The top four types of support tools that received the most votes are land-based planning models, visualisation and communication techniques, public participation and stakeholder engagement methods, GIS and other digital planning tools.

Key takeaways

- **Strong response across the Baltic Sea Region**
  The survey captured input from 96 spatial planning professionals across seven countries, reflecting a broad and diverse representation of expertise and institutional backgrounds. Over half of the respondents had more than ten years of experience in spatial planning, indicating a high level of professional expertise. This diversity and experience, underscores the regional interest in, and capacity for, enhanced cooperation in spatial planning.
- **Participation in existing networks**
  Respondents reported engagement in established international spatial planning networks and programmes, such as VASAB, the Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC), URBACT, and Interreg BSR.
  Networks worth deeper exploration due to their strong spatial planning relevance:
  - VASAB – Core Baltic Sea Region spatial planning platform.
  - MSP Planners' Forum – Practitioner-oriented, peer-to-peer exchange; not always visible but highly relevant.
  - Maritime Spatial Planning Working Group of the Polish-German Committee – Practical cross-border cooperation case.
  - Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC) – Municipal perspective, complementary to national-level planning.
  - Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) – Regional lobbying and EU policy link.
  - BSR Youth Forum / HELCOM–VASAB – Highlights participation and next-generation perspectives.
- **Strong overall interest across all themes**
  All listed themes received a high level of interest, indicating that spatial planners in the Baltic Sea Region are actively engaged across a broad spectrum of topics. The themes Climate change adaptation, Integration of spatial planning and sectoral policies, Land use management and Spatial planning and digitalisation received the highest levels of interest.
- **High demand for web-based and digital tools**
  The highest levels of interest were recorded for Webinars and Online Workshops, Interactive Forums, and a Web-Based Knowledge Hub. This shows a clear preference for digital, flexible, and accessible platforms that facilitate ongoing knowledge sharing and engagement.
- **Demand for Strategic Planning and Visualisation Tools**
  Respondents showed the greatest interest in Land-Use Planning Models (69%), highlighting a strong preference for tools that support structured, evidence-based territorial development. Similarly, high interest (64%) in GIS, visualisation techniques, and stakeholder engagement methods reflects the need for tools that enhance data-driven decision-making, transparency, and public involvement.

Recommendations for the Planners' Forum

Drawing on both survey results and stakeholder mapping, a phased approach to developing a planners' forum appears better suited to the current reality of limited formal collaboration among local and regional planners. This approach emphasises simplicity, accessibility and organic growth, beginning with informal connections and trust building and gradually progressing toward more structured cooperation.

What could the Planners' Forum be? A gradual and practical development path

The Land-Based Planners' Forum should start as a simple, low-barrier initiative connecting spatial planners at subnational levels, including municipalities, regions, associations, and NGOs, across the Baltic Sea Region. Its initial goal is not to build a large institution but to seed a community of practice that grows organically, based on trust, usefulness, and shared interests.

In the first phase, spatial planners should be gathered into an informal group or community. This could take the form of a mailing list, an online discussion group, or a shared digital space hosted on an existing platform. The focus should be on connecting local and regional spatial planning professionals, especially those who are not currently well-represented in macro-regional policy processes. At this stage, no formal commitments are needed. The aim is simply to provide opportunities to exchange, learn, and explore common challenges.

As relationships begin to form, the Forum could host online exchanges and virtual meetups. Informal sessions such as "Spatial Planners' Cafés" could serve as spaces for matchmaking, knowledge sharing, and peer support. Lightweight online workshops could be introduced on topics of shared interest, including climate adaptation, land-use models, stakeholder engagement, or digital tools. These events could be co-organised across countries or institutions to encourage broad ownership and participation.

Over time, the Forum could seek visibility by linking itself to larger events already taking place in the region. Side events or breakout sessions at platforms such as the EUSBSR Annual Forum or VASAB ministerial conferences would allow in-person meetings without the burden of organising new standalone events. These opportunities would also help showcase early outputs and attract new participants.

As interest grows, the next step could be to establish a shared knowledge hub. This could begin as a simple digital repository containing case studies, sptial planning templates, recordings of webinars, and useful tools shared by members. The purpose of the hub is to collect and make visible the wealth of knowledge already circulating informally among planners rather than creating new content.

Once the community becomes more stable, lightweight thematic groups could form around specific spatial planning challenges. These groups would not be heavy working groups but small, self-organising circles in which spatial planners co-develop short outputs such as checklists, problem statements, or small visual tools based on real needs from the field. Groups could be led by volunteers or rotating facilitators.

Eventually, as trust and collaboration deepen, the Forum could support cross-border pilot projects. These projects could involve two or more municipalities or regions jointly testing

planning tools or engaging in a shared territorial experiment. Pilots could be aligned with Interreg or other funding instruments. At this stage, the Forum could gradually open up to academic partners or spatial planning experts from the private sector, depending on the needs of the pilot or thematic group. In the early stages, however, the focus should remain firmly on the public sector and its concrete planning challenges.

Throughout this evolution, the Forum should remain open, adaptive, and grounded in the realities of local and regional spatial planning practice. It is not a top-down initiative, but a growing collaboration shaped by its members, supported by lightweight coordination, and built step by step through shared experience.

LAND-BASED PLANNERS' FORUM

About the project

The **Land-based Planners' Forum** project aims to tackle critical challenges in spatial planning across the Baltic Sea Region, shaped by recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and geopolitical tensions.

Land-based Planners' Forum seeks to create an inclusive network that brings together spatial planners from various governance levels for open dialogue and shared learning. This forum will help planners build capacity, foster collaboration, and promote sustainable growth across urban and rural areas. Additionally, it aims to enhance the coherence of spatial planning in the BSR, aligning with EU and regional strategies such as the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and VASAB's Vision 2040.

https://vasab.org/project/land-based-planners-forum/

Funded by Swedish Institute

Nordregio

VASAB
VISION & STRATEGIES AROUND THE BALTIC SEA

Eesti Planeerijate Ühing
Estonian Association of Spatial Planners

Stockholm University

ARL ACADEMY FOR TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE LEIBNIZ ASSOCIATION

ANNEX

Institutional affiliation of survey respondents

- Marshal's Office of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship in Rzeszów
- Kosakowo Municipality Office
- Sillamäe City Government
- Kraslava Municipality
- University of Latvia, Master Course in Territorial Development Planning and RISEBA, Faculty of Architecture
- Örebro County – Regional Development
- Szczecin City Planning Office
- City of Tallinn
- Joint Municipal Administration of the City of Barmstedt and Amt Hörnerkirchen
- Lübeck University of Applied Sciences
- Estonian University of Life Sciences
- Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg – Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, Department of State Planning
- University of Latvia
- County Administrative Board of Skåne
- Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development
- City Development Department
- Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth
- Limbaži Municipality
- Greater Poland Office for Spatial Planning in Poznań
- Elva Municipality
- Region Blekinge
- Rēzekne Municipality
- Municipality of Danderyd
- Joint Spatial Planning Department of Berlin-Brandenburg
- Haljala Rural Municipality Government
- Ventspils State City Municipality
- Świętokrzyskie Regional Development Office
- Council of the Oulu Region
- Kuldiga Development Agency
- Vidzeme Planning Region
- Central Finland Regional Council
- City of Helsinki – Land Use and City Structure, Detailed Planning
- Ustronie Morskie Municipality Office
- Cēsis Municipality
- VASAB Secretariat
- Rapla Municipality Government
- Office for Urban Development, Urban Planning and Mobility – Hanseatic and University City of Rostock
- Building Sector Development Agency (SSVA)
- District Office of Mitte, Berlin
- Regional Council of North Karelia
- Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania
- Municipality of Nyköping
- Kosakowo Commune Office

- Institute for Territorial Development – Lower Silesian Regional Government
- Regional Planning Office Uckermark-Barnim
- Ministry of Economics, Infrastructure, Tourism and Labour – Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania
- Zemgale Planning Region
- Office for Regional State Development – Lüneburg Region
- Władysławowo Municipality
- Ministry of the Environment
- Liepaja City Municipality – Building Board
- IC2 Integration and Cooperation – International Communication (non-profit)
- Regional Council of Ostrobothnia
- Salaspils County Municipality
- Region Dalarna
- Region Sörmland
- Riga Municipality
- Office for Spatial Planning and State Planning – Vorpommern
- Ministry of the Interior, Municipal Affairs, Housing and Sports
- Maritime Office in Szczecin
- Warmian-Masurian Office for Spatial Planning in Olsztyn
- Małopolska Region
- Võru Municipality

Position of survey respondents

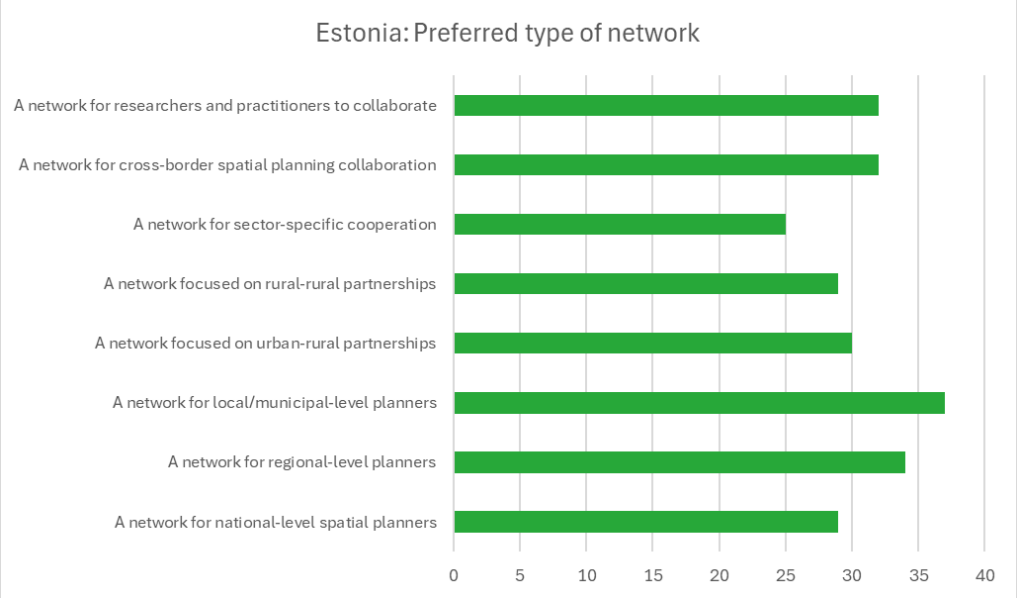
- Development Specialist
- Development Advisor
- Municipality Architect
- Detailed Planning and General Planning Specialist (translated from Estonian)
- Head of Development and Planning Department, Architect
- Planning Specialist
- Supervisor
- Head of Department
- Spatial Planning Expert
- Spatial Development Planner
- Head of Department of Spatial Planning
- Department Manager
- Land and Planning Specialist
- Chief of Planning
- National and Regional Spatial Planner
- Head of Strategic and Land Planning Unit
- Head of Plan and Infrastructure
- Head of Unit (translated from Estonian)
- Assistant Professor
- Coordinator for Regional Spatial Planning (translated from Polish)
- Senior Planner
- Team Manager
- Deputy Head, Department of Spatial Planning and Geodesy
- Team Leader
- Planning Director
- Managing Director
- Senior Ministerial Advisor
- Land Use Planner (translated from German "Bauleitplanerin")
- Spatial Planning Officer
- Spatial Planner
- Desk Officer, Spatial Planning

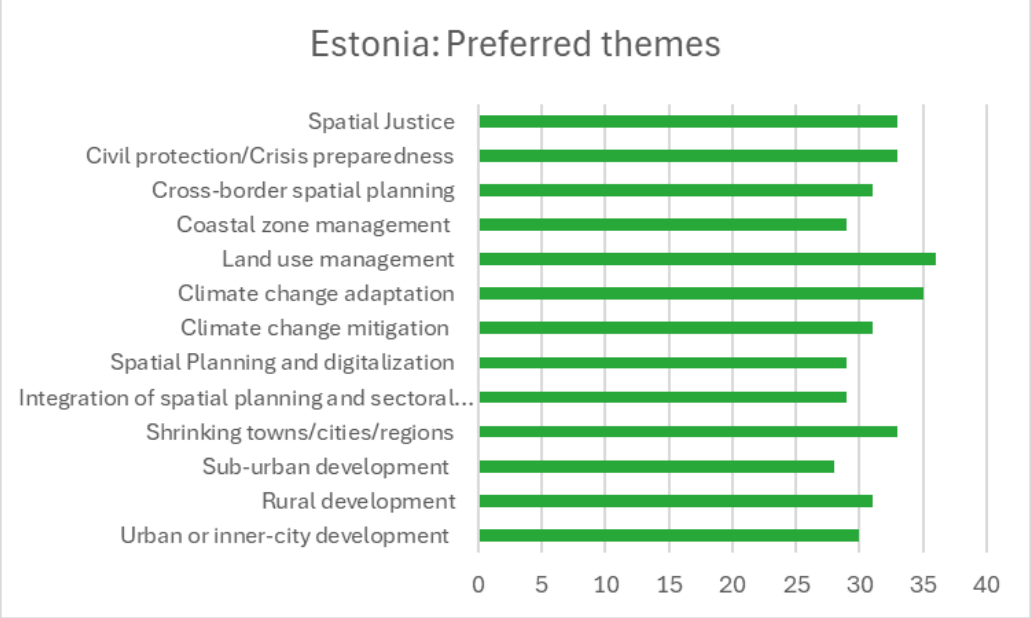
- Representative of Municipality (Alūksne County)
- Senior Expert in Strategic Planning
- Territory Planner
- Spatial Planner (Latvian)
- Rural and Environmental Spatial Planner
- Head of Territorial Planning Unit
- Head of Division, Spatial Plans and Development
- Regional Land Use Planning Architect
- Lecturer and Consultant/Analyst
- Development Manager in Spatial Planning
- Senior Expert, Land Management and Planning Supervision
- City Management Officer (translated from German "Stabsstelle")
- Head of Department (translated from German "Referatsleitung")
- Deputy Head
- Team Leader, Land-Use Planning
- Strategic Planner
- Deputy Director, Regional and Spatial Development
- Lawyer
- Project Curator
- Spatial Planning Coordinator
- Director of Operations (Swedish: Verksamhetschef)
- Head of Community Development (Swedish: Enhetschef för samhällsbyggnad)
- Urban/Spatial Planner
- Head of Urban Development Unit
- Territorial Planner
- Maritime and Land Use Planner
- Environmental Engineer
- Junior Research Fellow
- Urban Planner
- Consultant
- Regional Planner
- Regional Planning Director
- Head of Physical Planning Unit
- Regional Planning Manager
- Regional Planning Architect
- Deputy Head, Local and Detail Planning Division
- Professor
- Senior Lecturer and Research Coordinator
- Regional Planning Expert
- City Architect
- Urban Designer
- Deputy Director
- Comprehensive Planner (Swedish: Översiktsplanerare)
- Chief Spatial Planner, Voivodeship Level (Polish)
- Strategic Spatial Planner
- Researcher
- Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) Planner
- Advisor
- Senior Strategy and Development Officer
- Spatial Planning Specialist
- Head of Real Estate, Spatial Planning and Agriculture Department (Polish)
- Spatial Planning and Development Manager
- Employee (generic role, Polish: pracownik)
- Senior Specialist for Investment and Energy Transformation Areas

- Head of Division
- Branch Manager (Polish: Kierownik oddziału)
- Deputy Director of Department

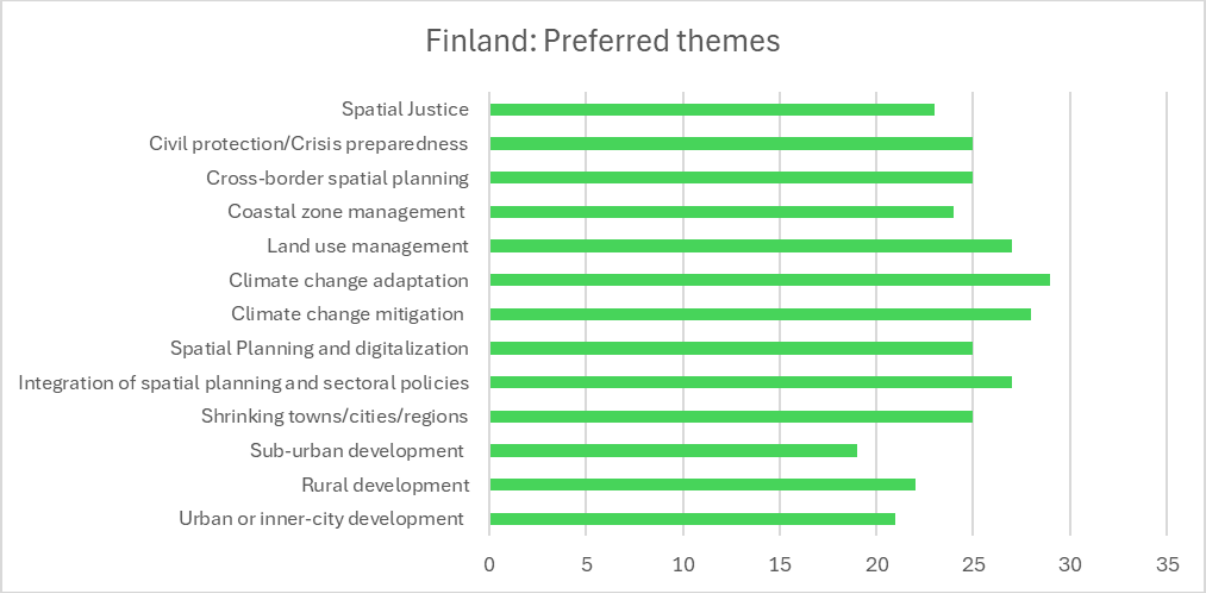
Country breakdown: Type of Network and thematic preference

Estonia





Finland


Finland: Preferred themes
Spatial Justice
Civil protection/Crisis preparedness
Cross-border spatial planning
Coastal zone management
Land use management
Climate change adaptation
Climate change mitigation
Spatial Planning and digitalization
Integration of spatial planning and sectoral policies
Shrinking towns/cities/regions
Sub-urban development
Rural development
Urban or inner-city development
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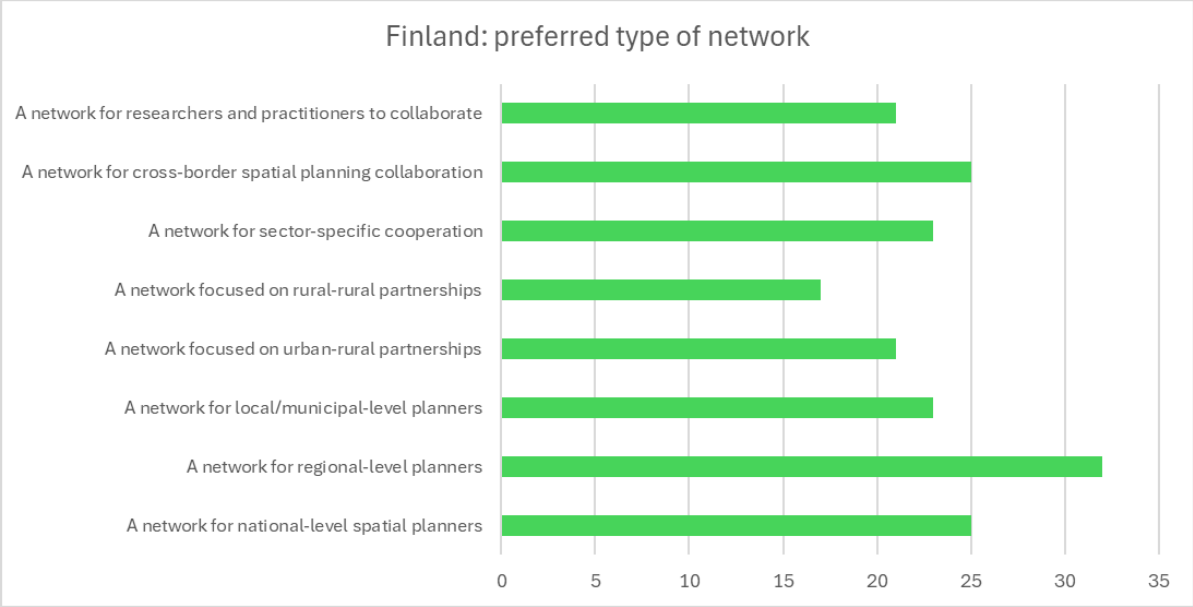
Finland: preferred type of network
A network for researchers and practitioners to collaborate
A network for cross-border spatial planning collaboration
A network for sector-specific cooperation
A network focused on rural-rural partnerships
A network focused on urban-rural partnerships
A network for local/municipal-level planners
A network for regional-level planners
A network for national-level spatial planners
0
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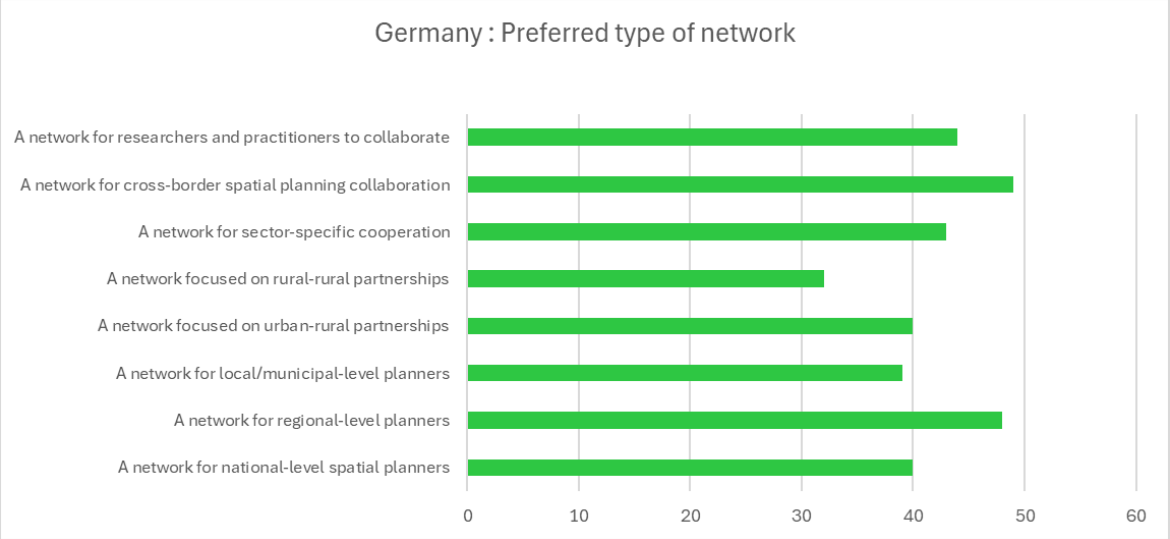
Germany


Germany : Preferred type of network
A network for researchers and practitioners to collaborate
A network for cross-border spatial planning collaboration
A network for sector-specific cooperation
A network focused on rural-rural partnerships
A network focused on urban-rural partnerships
A network for local/municipal-level planners
A network for regional-level planners
A network for national-level spatial planners
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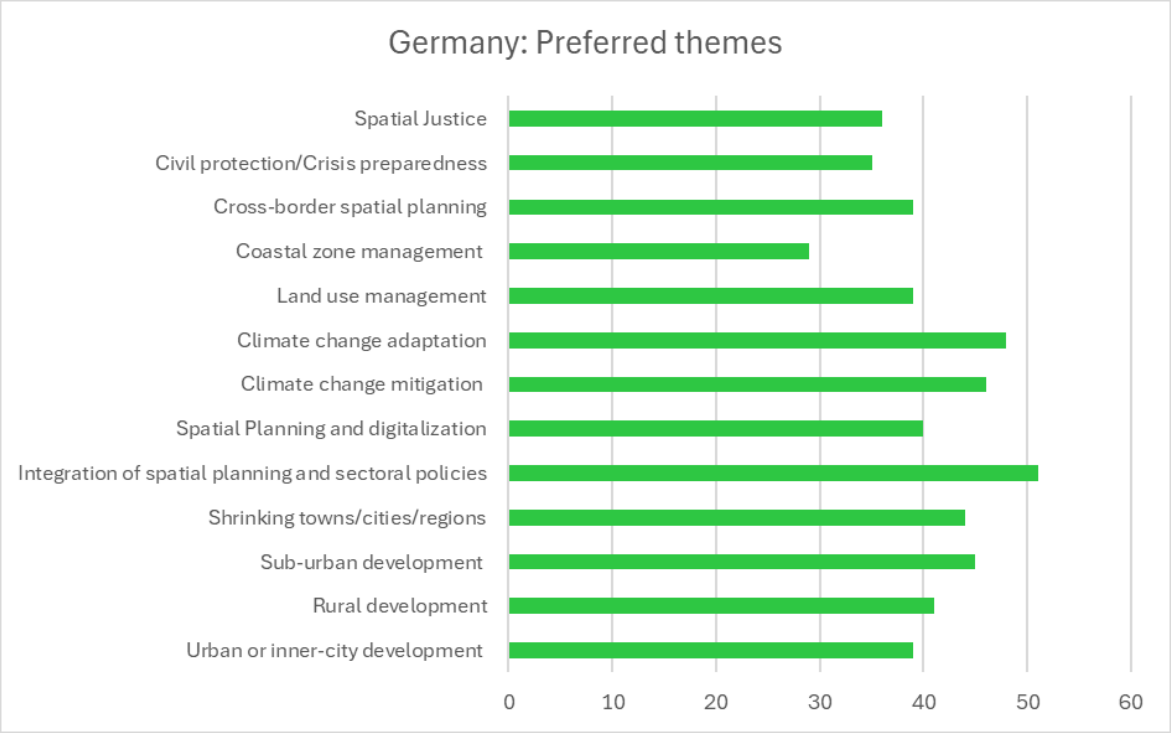
Germany: Preferred themes
Spatial Justice
Civil protection/Crisis preparedness
Cross-border spatial planning
Coastal zone management
Land use management
Climate change adaptation
Climate change mitigation
Spatial Planning and digitalization
Integration of spatial planning and sectoral policies
Shrinking towns/cities/regions
Sub-urban development
Rural development
Urban or inner-city development
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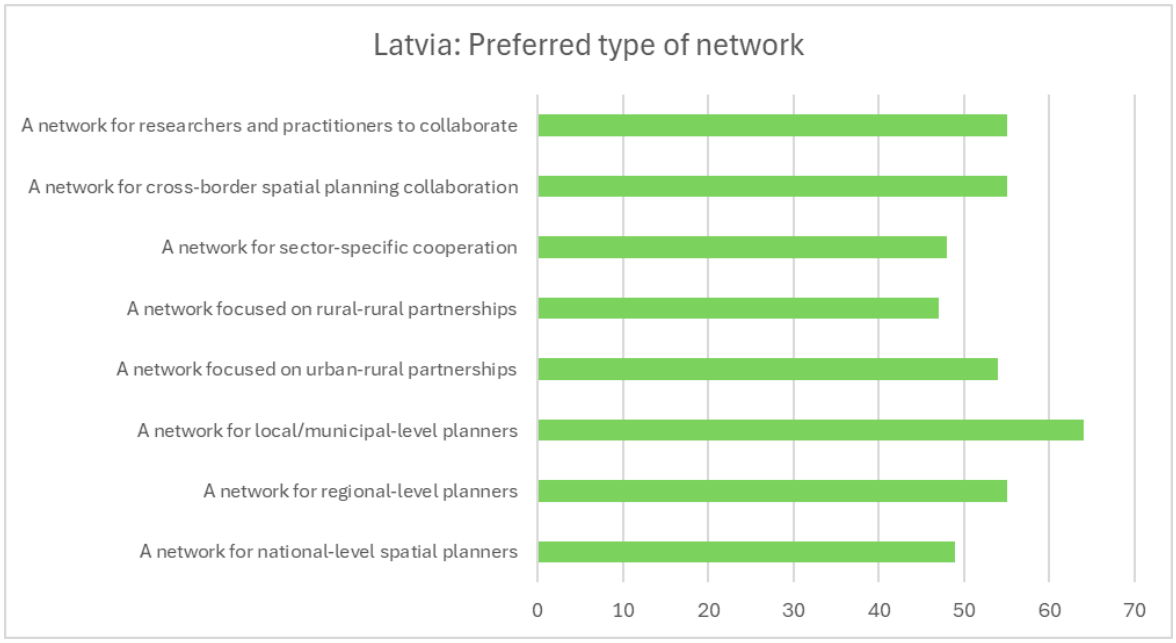
Latvia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A network for regional-level planners
A network for national-level spatial planners
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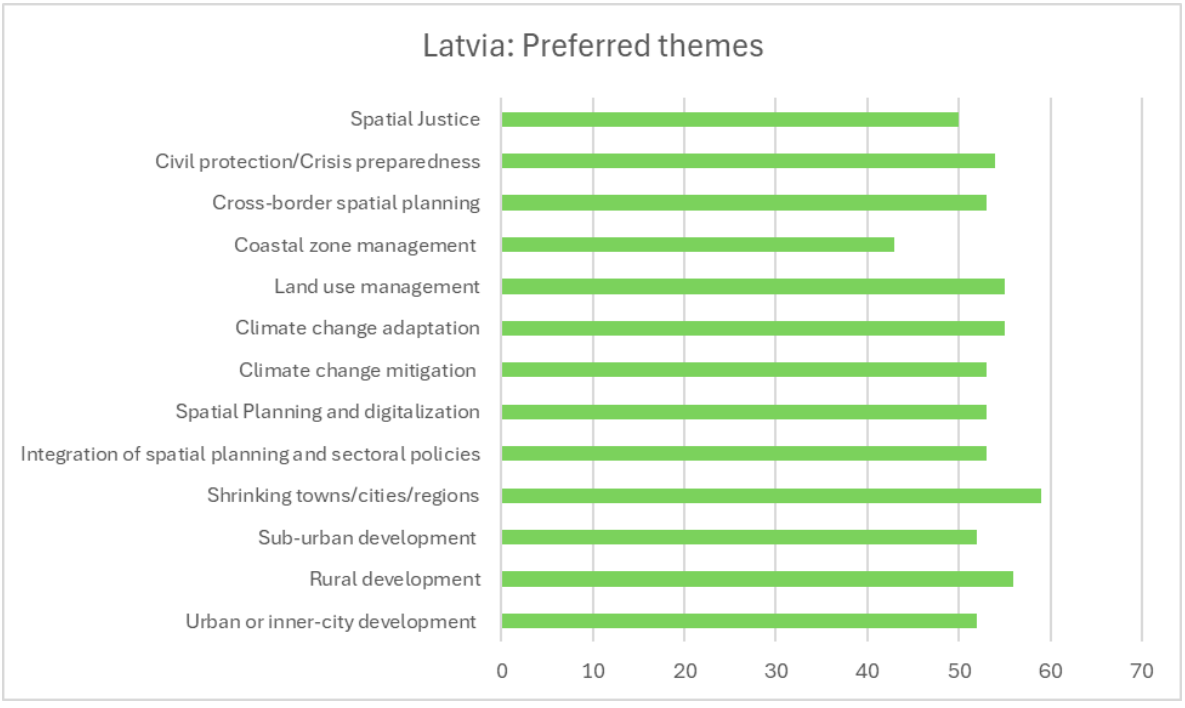
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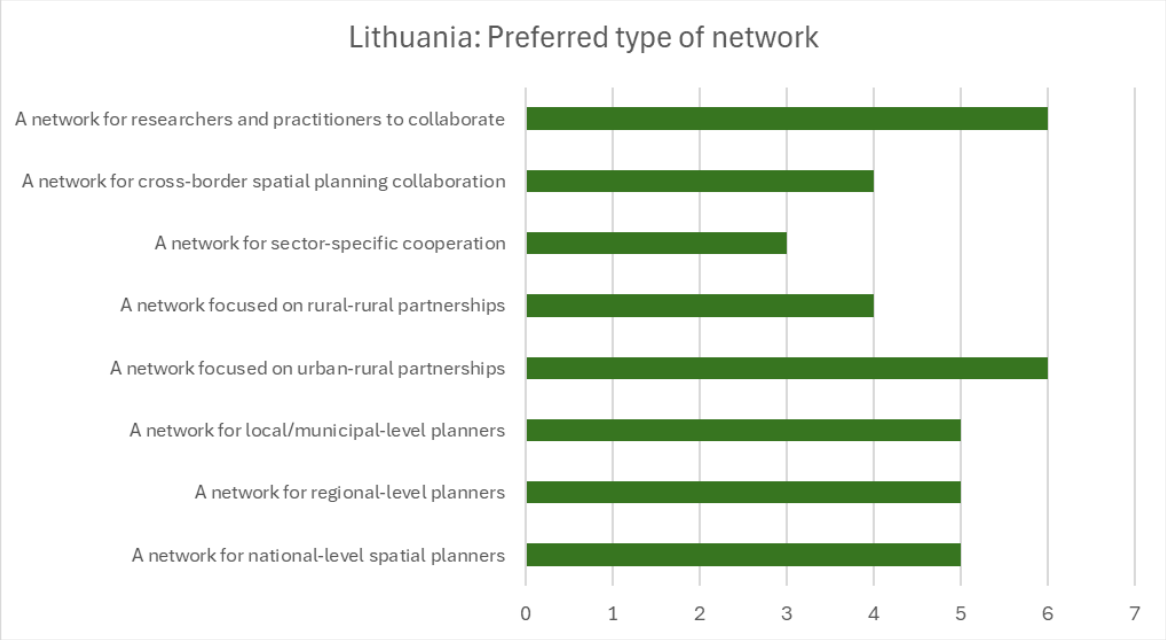
Lithuania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A network for national-level spatial planners
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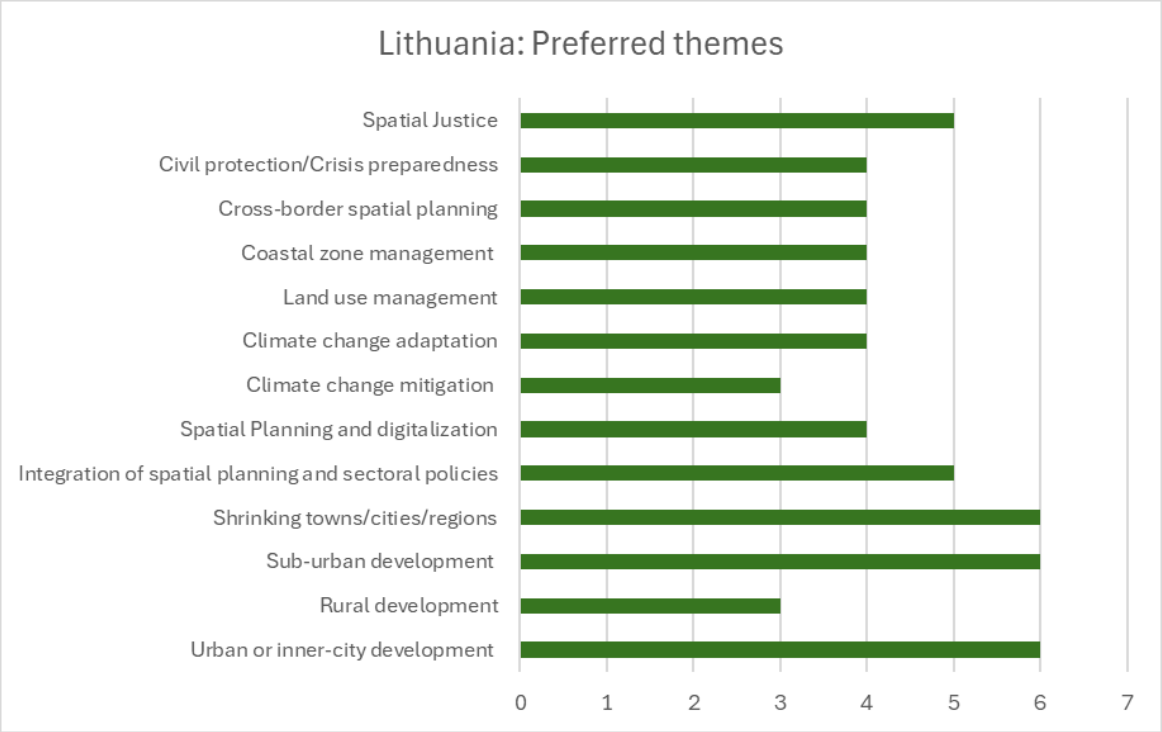
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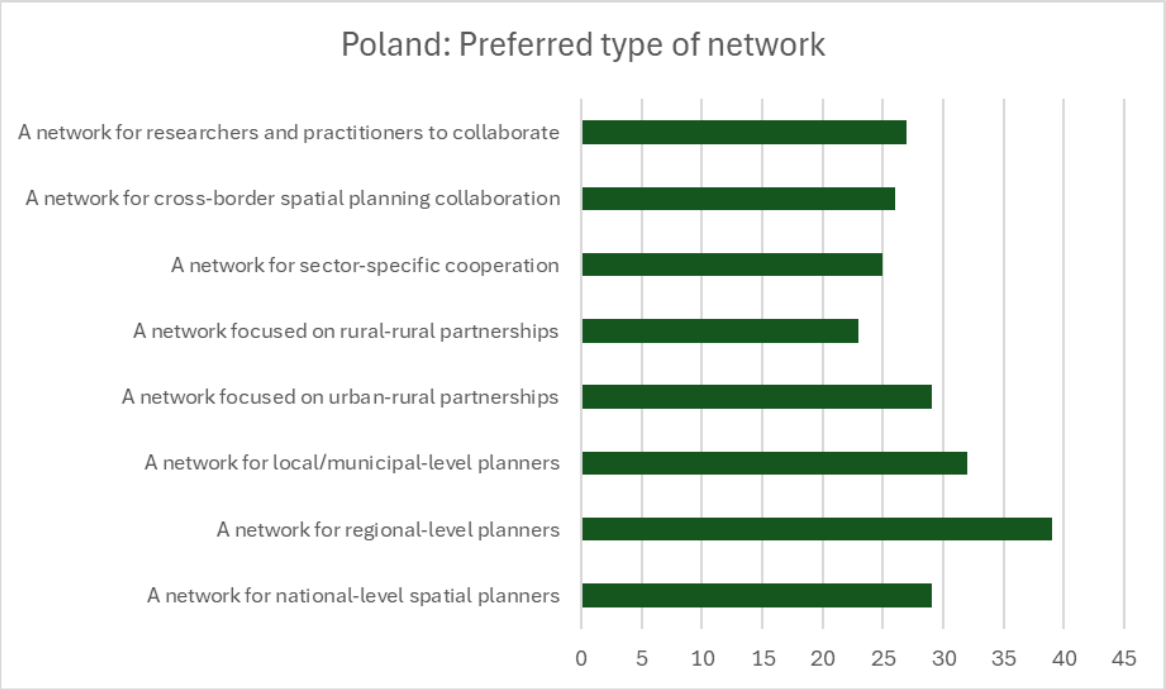
Poland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A network for national-level spatial planners
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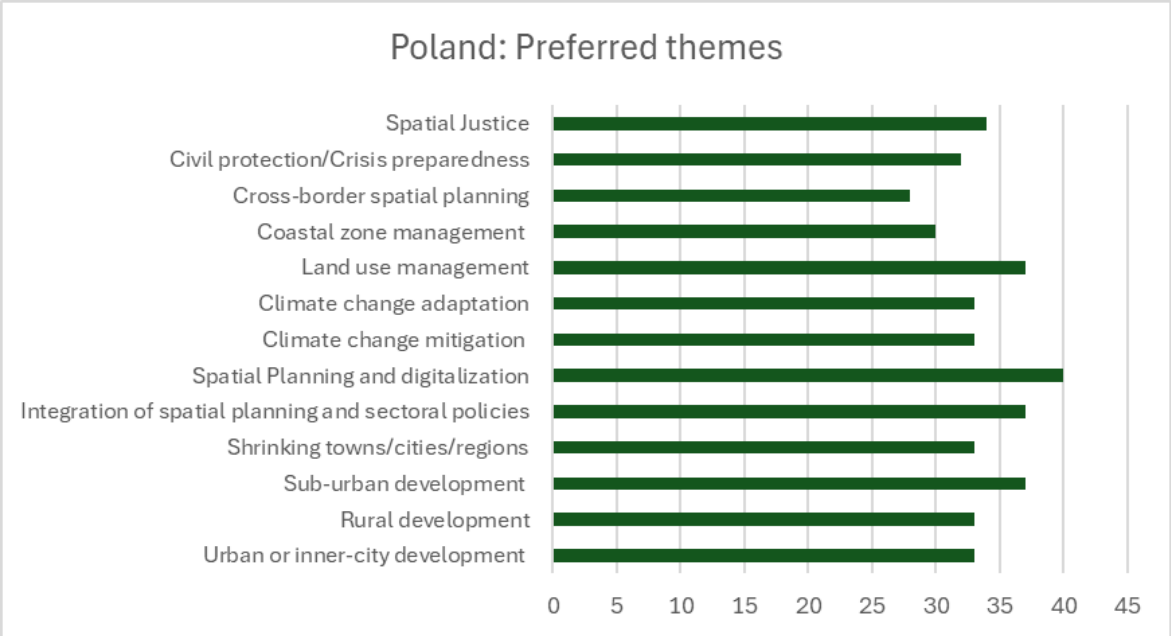
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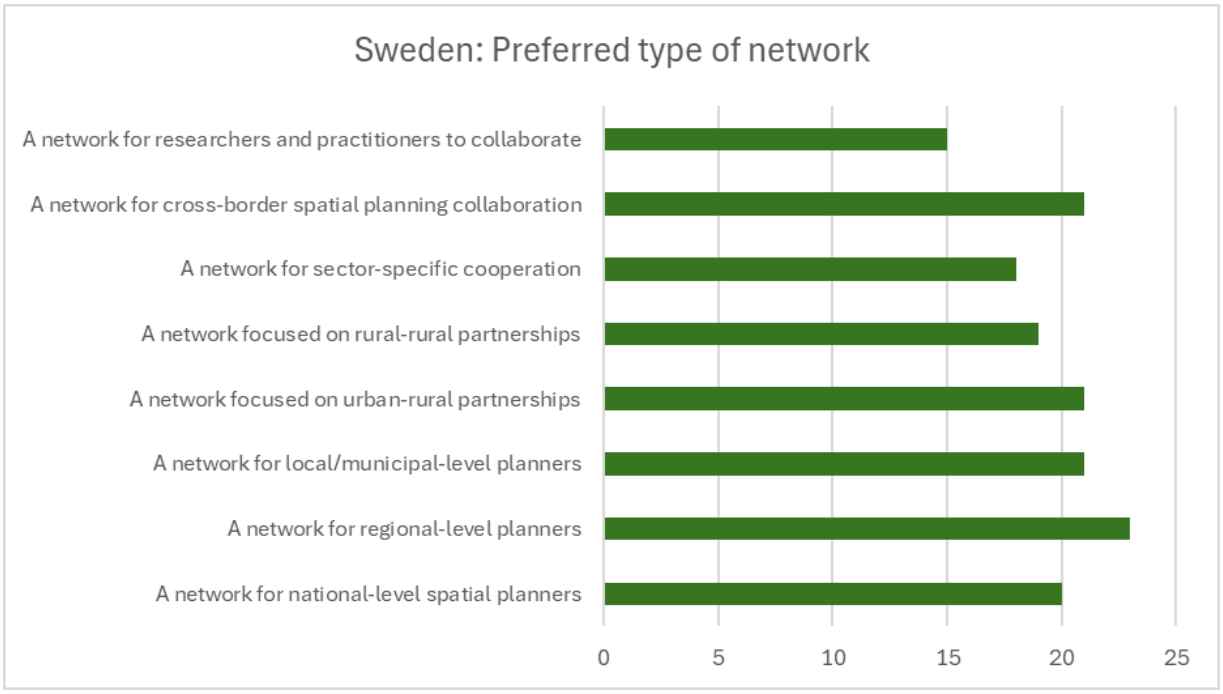
Sweden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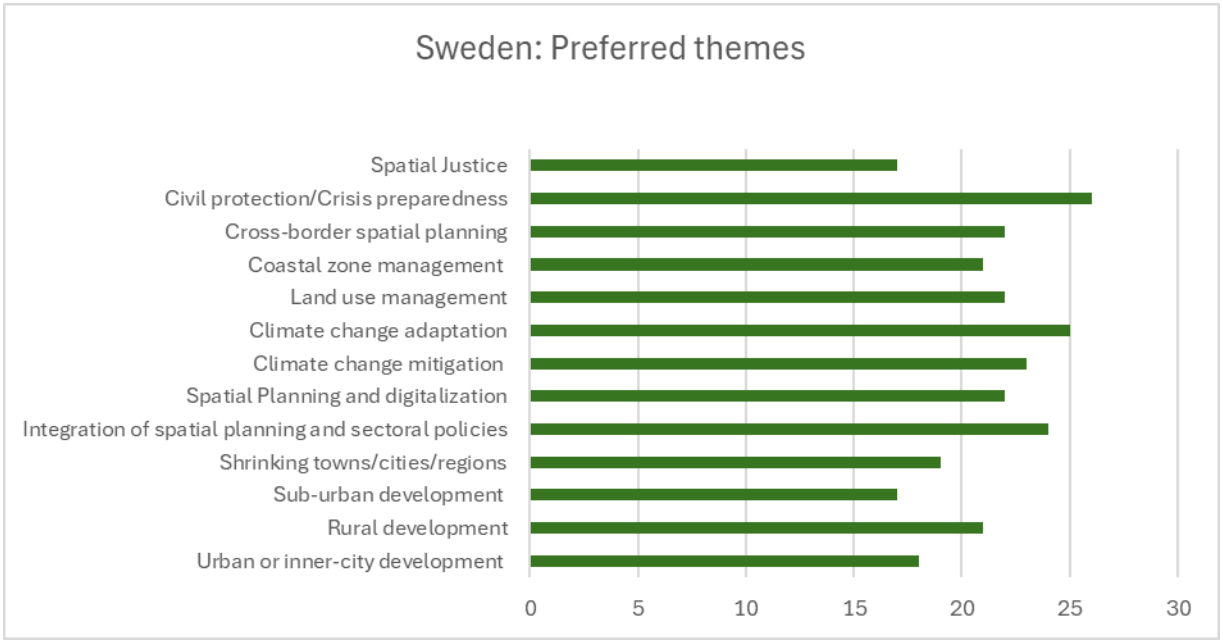
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