

A BRIEF COMPARISON OF SEVEN SPATIAL PLANNING SYSTEMS IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

Author: Peter Schmitt
Stockholm University
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1 Introduction

The main purpose of this short comparative report is to facilitate cross-country dialogue on national spatial planning systems in the Baltic Sea region. In other words, the report will facilitate an understanding of four key features of the spatial planning systems of seven countries in the Baltic Sea Region. As such, the report is part of the “Land-based Planners’ Forum” project, which is an inclusive network bringing together spatial planners from various policy levels to engage in dialogue and mutual learning. The project is co-funded by the Baltic Sea Neighbourhood Programme of the Swedish Institute (more information can be found at: <https://vasab.org/project/land-based-planners-forum/>).

This report does not provide an exhaustive overview of the national spatial planning systems of each of the seven countries. Instead, its focus is to highlight similarities and differences, thereby triggering discussions between spatial planners around the Baltic Sea. The selection and comparative analysis of four key features of spatial planning systems is inspired by the ESPON Compass project (for more information see <https://archive.espon.eu/planning-systems> for more information). The analysed material stems from three sources: updated ESPON Compass project data (see Nadin et al., 2024a); the country profiles on the ARL International website; and the VASAB country fiches on terrestrial spatial planning (hereafter VASAB country fiches; see: <https://vasab.org/home/about/country-fiches/>).

VASAB (Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea) is an intergovernmental, multilateral cooperation initiative focusing on spatial planning and development in the Baltic Sea Region. It prepares policy options for the territorial development of the Baltic Sea Region (VASAB Vision 2040) and provides a forum for the exchange of knowledge on spatial planning and development between Baltic Sea countries. The initiative is guided by the Conference of Ministers responsible for spatial planning and development and is steered by the VASAB Committee on Spatial Planning and Development of the Baltic Sea Region (VASAB CSPD/BSR; hereafter, the VASAB Committee). The VASAB Committee comprises representatives from the relevant ministries and regional authorities of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, and Sweden (for more information, see <https://vasab.org/>).

ARL International is an international knowledge platform which, at the time of writing (August 2025), offers access to 40 country profiles providing fairly comprehensive introductions to national spatial planning systems, written by country experts (more information can be found at: <https://www.arl-international.com/knowledge/country-profiles>). The country profiles considered for this comparative paper were produced between 2021 and 2023. An update is underway. VASAB country fiches, which are



comparatively shorter, focus on different aspects of spatial planning. The regular updating of these documents is coordinated and carried out by the VASAB Committee members.

Please note that the comparative analysis and information presented below is based on the author's interpretation of the available material, which may be inaccurate in one or two cases. However, the report has been reviewed by the VASAB Committee members and project partners of the "Land-based Planners' Forum" project, including Nordregio, Stockholm University, the Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association (ARL), the Estonian Association for Spatial Planners and the VASAB Secretariat. It is also important to emphasise that spatial planning systems are constantly reviewed and adapted. Consequently, information on planning instruments or the distribution of planning competencies can quickly become outdated.

In this paper, we compare the following four key features of national spatial planning systems.

- Legal definitions or explanations of spatial planning (see Section 2)
- Territories relevant for statutory spatial planning (see Section 3)
- Distribution of formal competences for spatial planning among policy levels (see Section 4)
- Character of statutory spatial planning instruments at different policy levels (see Section 5)

It is important to note that 'spatial planning' is a generic term commonly used across Europe for both land-based and maritime planning. The term has various more specific meanings and definitions rooted in different national traditions and established at different policy levels. Regarding land-based spatial planning, spatial planning refers to the formal arrangements for regulating changes in land use, the instruments used to design and manage urban and rural development, and the coordination or cross-fertilisation of the spatial impacts of sectoral policies. It also involves processes for reconciling competing interests, incorporating elements of informal strategic planning and territorial governance (Nadin et al., 2018a, p. 8).

A spatial planning system can be described as a collection of formal and informal institutions, typically associated with different levels of policy, that enable public authorities to direct and regulate spatial changes by allocating land use and spatial development rights (Nadin et al., 2024b, p. 7). When we compare spatial planning systems in different countries, we can see that their main features differ, such as how power and responsibilities are distributed among different policy levels and actors, and the nature and scope of planning instruments. There are numerous reasons for this. One reason is that spatial planning systems are related to national legal frameworks, such as planning acts and environmental laws, which reflect different legal traditions and values, despite the growing influence of the EU, particularly with regard to sectoral issues such as the environment, energy and transport (Cotella and Rivolin, 2024).



Consequently, spatial planning systems also reflect a specific, nationally oriented understanding of spatial planning and the interaction between different administrative and policy institutions.

The remainder of the paper will discuss each of the four aforementioned key features in turn, concluding with some final remarks. Bearing in mind the paper's main focus, which is to facilitate cross-country dialogue through brief comparisons, the emphasis is on describing and comparing the current status quo regarding each key feature rather than discussing historical accounts or specifics, which would require more detailed explanations. Nor is it the intention to assess the functioning or performance of the system as a whole or of any of its elements (e.g. specific planning instruments), as this would require its own in-depth study.

The comparative focus here is on the seven Baltic Sea Region countries (see Map 1) that currently provide a forum for the exchange of knowledge and expertise on spatial planning and development within VASAB. These countries are Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden.



Map 1: A map of the Baltic Sea Region with the VASAB member countries



2 Legal definitions or explanations of spatial planning

As mentioned in the introduction, 'spatial planning' is a generic term commonly used across Europe for both land-based and maritime planning. It includes various more specific meanings and definitions that are rooted in different national traditions and have been established and cultivated at various policy levels. As Nadin et al. (2024b) explain, there is not just one notion of spatial planning; there are many, and these notions change over time due to shifting societal and political conditions. However, as Piskorek and Nadin (2024, pp. 63–64) point out, 'some prevailing social norms on planning become codified in law. The law, in turn, becomes the bedrock for the operation of planning, and provides a measure of continuity and coherence where there are competing ideas about planning. This is not to say that the law provides the definitive understanding of planning in any place, but that we should consider the legal definition alongside professional views and empirical observation of how planning operates in practice.' Therefore, examining the formal definitions and terms used in legal planning provides 'an essential reference point for comparing the meaning of planning' (Piskorek and Nadin 2024, 65).

The following presents the legal definitions of spatial planning, or the prevailing explanations where spatial planning is not legally defined, for the seven Baltic Sea Region countries. The table below is an updated version based on Piskorek and Nadin (2024, pp. 74–80), comprising a list of 31 countries derived from the ESPON COMPASS study (see Piskorek and Nadin, 2024, pp. 68–71, for methodological considerations). The definitions reveal both similarities and peculiarities. In principle, all the definitions refer to the material or substantial objectives of planning, such as environmental quality and land use. Some emphasise the procedural dimension of planning, characterised by the interplay (and reconciliation) of different types of actors and interests (e.g. Estonia and Lithuania). Several definitions also refer to the principles, purposes and values of spatial planning, as well as the policy norms to which it is related, such as aesthetic quality, democratic development and equal opportunities (e.g. Finland, Latvia and Poland). Some definitions also address the varying spatial scope of planning (local, regional or national) (e.g. Germany and Sweden).



Table 1: Legal definitions or prevailing explanations of spatial planning in seven Baltic Region countries

COUNTRY	MAIN LEGAL TERM IN NATIONAL LANGUAGE	DEFINITION OR EXPLANATION
ESTONIA	Ruumililine planeerimine	The Planning Act aims to create, through spatial planning, environmentally sound and economically, culturally and socially sustainable development, the preconditions that are necessary for democratic and long-term and balanced spatial development that considers the needs and interests of all members of the Estonian society.
FINLAND	Alueiden käytön suunnittelu	According to the Land Use and Building Act, the aim of spatial planning is to create the conditions for a good living environment and to promote ecologically, economically, socially and culturally sustainable development. The specific objectives of spatial planning are among others to create a safe, healthy, pleasant and socially functional living and working environment that meets the needs of different population groups. Other objectives address the land-use structure, the appropriate organisation of transport, the conditions for sufficient housing production; the beauty of the built environment and the preservation of cultural values and biodiversity, for instance.
GERMANY	Raumordnung	Refers to the comprehensive, supra-local and superordinate tier of planning the structure and development of space (Raumordnungsgesetz). It is an umbrella legal term addressing spatial planning at all spatial levels above the local level, which is complemented by specific terms for the federal level, Bundesraumordnung, the state level, Landesplanung, and the regional level, Regionalplanung. The Act refers to Raumentwicklung, the guiding vision of spatial planning (in legal terms) and defines a number of principles for sustainable spatial development, and the mandate to dynamically develop, and not only statically order space.
LATVIA	Teritorijas plānošana	The law aims to ensure that the development of the territory raises the quality of the living environment; the sustainable, efficient and rational use of the territory and other resources; and promotes targeted and balanced development of the economy. The principles of territorial planning are sustainability, succession, equal opportunities, continuity, openness, integration, diversity and mutual coherence.
LITHUANIA	Teritorijų planavimas	Territorial planning aims at sustainable territorial development and includes the establishment of land use priorities; measures of environmental protection, public health, heritage protection; creation of residential areas and manufacturing, engineering and social infrastructure systems, creating conditions for regulation of employment and development of activities of the resident population and reconciliation of public and private interests. Law makes provision for two forms of planning: complex planning of territories defining development locations and priorities for use and protection, involving national, municipal and detailed plans; and special territorial planning involving measures for the use, management and/or protection of territories and protected areas.
POLAND	Rozwój zrównoważony	Spatial planning and land development should be understood as any process that determines the shape of space, that is, in particular, the processes and principles of spatial planning by regional or local authorities and governmental bodies, and the scope and manner of dealing with land allocation for specific purposes, rules of their land use and development. The purpose of planning is to achieve spatial order, a configuration of space which creates a harmonious unity and considers in a structured relation all the conditions and functional requirements, socio-economic, environmental, cultural, as well as compositional and aesthetic, and in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.
SWEDEN	Planläggning	Defined in the law as the activity to develop a regional plan, a comprehensive municipal plan, a detailed plan or area regulations. It is further noted in the law that planning must consider natural and cultural values, environmental and climate aspects, as well as inter-municipal and regional conditions. It shall further promote an appropriate structure and an aesthetically pleasing design of buildings, green areas and communication infrastructures; a good living environment that is accessible and useful for all social groups; a long-term management of land, water, energy and raw materials; economic growth and effective competition; and finally, housing construction and development of the housing stock.

Source: Adapted from Piskorek & Nadin (2024, 74-80)



3 Territories relevant for statutory spatial planning

To gain a mutual understanding of spatial planning systems in the Baltic Sea Region, it is crucial to have an overview of the relevant multi-level administrative structure for spatial planning in each country. By this, we mean a general idea of which public institutions operate at which administrative levels and the territories they cover. In this section, we focus on the latter. Figure 1 shows the territories relevant to spatial planning instruments produced under the given legal frameworks (see Section 5). We will then focus on the territories relevant for statutory spatial planning. Further insightful figures and explanations can be found in the various country profiles on the ARL International website, as well as in the VASAB country fiches (please see the list of references for more information).

Figure 1 distinguishes three broad policy levels: The national level, the sub-national level (including the regional or county level) and the local level. At the national level, the state governments often work with other national institutions, such as national parliaments, heads of state, state or county governors, and national public agencies. These institutions have different responsibilities (see Section 4). These institutions are usually concerned with spatial planning for the entire country, either by developing and adopting planning legislation or by being in charge of specific national planning instruments, such as visions, concepts or guidelines for lower planning levels. However, there are a few exceptions when considering specific planning instruments, such as the national long-term thematic plan for the development of public infrastructure in the coastal area of the Baltic Sea in Latvia, or the scope of territory covered by areas of national interest for conservation and development in Sweden (see Section 5).

At the sub-national level, there are a number of distinct differences among the seven countries. Finland and Germany have two layers that are relevant for statutory spatial planning, whereas the other countries only have one. One exception is Lithuania, where county administrations were dissolved in 2010. The ten counties still exist as territorial units, but they no longer have spatial planning documents and are not subject to separate spatial planning processes. Similarly, the tasks and responsibilities of Estonia's 15 county governments were significantly reduced following an administrative-territorial reform in late 2017. These have essentially been divided between public national agencies in the administrative areas of the ministries and local governments. Consequently, county planning is now coordinated at the national level (Martin and Väli, 2021). In Latvia, five planning regions have been established according to the Regional Development Law. Each planning region is led by a Development Council, whose members are elected from among local government councillors (Akmentina, 2023). In Poland, regional planning takes place in the 16 self-



governing regions. The 314 counties and 66 cities with county status have no spatial planning powers whatsoever (Mironowicz, 2022).

Figure 1: Sub-national and local territories relevant for statutory spatial planning in seven Baltic Sea Region countries

ESTONIA	FINLAND	GERMANY	LATVIA	LITHUANIA	POLAND	SWEDEN
National Governments (in concert with other national institutions, such as national parliaments, the Head of the State, County or States' governors and/or national public agencies) covering the territory of the entire country.						
15 counties (<i>maakond</i>) that also function as planning regions	15 Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (<i>Elinkeino-, liikenne- ja ympäristökeskus/ELY-keskus</i>) 18 Regional Councils (<i>Maakunnan liitto</i>), that also function as planning regions	16 States (<i>Länder</i>), thereof three city-states (<i>Stadtstaaten</i>) 104 planning regions administrated by different organisations	Five planning regions		16 Regions (<i>voivodship</i>) that also function as planning regions	21 Regions (<i>regioner</i>) thereof three functions as planning regions
79 municipalities (<i>kohalik omavalitlus</i>), thereof 15 urban municipalities (<i>linn</i>) and 64 rural municipalities (<i>vald</i>)	308 municipalities (<i>Kunta</i>); thereof 16 belong to the autonomous Åland islands ca. 11,000 municipalities that belong to a district (<i>kreisangehörige Gemeinden</i>)	294 rural districts (<i>Landkreise</i>) 107 urban districts (<i>kreisfreie Städte</i>)	42 municipalities, thereof seven local governments of state cities (<i>valstpilsētas</i>) and 35 municipality governments (<i>novadi</i>)	60 municipalities (<i>savivaldybēs</i>)	2,479 municipalities (<i>gmīna</i>) thereof 302 urban municipalities, 642 urban-rural municipalities and 1533 rural municipalities	290 municipalities (<i>kommuner</i>)

Source: Adapted with the help of the VASAB Committee members and various country profiles from ARL international (here: Martin and Väli 2021; Purkarhofer and Mattila 2023; Münter and Reimer 2021; Akmentiņa 2023; Burinskienė 2022; Mironowicz 2022; Schmitt 2023)

At the sub-national level, Finland has two institutional layers that are relevant for spatial planning. Both cover the entire country, but they have different tasks and functions. The country is divided into 18 regions, each led by a regional council consisting of municipal representatives responsible for drafting and adopting regional land-use plans. The 15 Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY Centres) represent the central state. Another institutional layer could be added at the sub-national level in Finland: the seven Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs). These are responsible for enforcing the central state's tasks relating to due process, constitutional rights, safety, and environmental standards (Purkarthofer & Mattila, 2023). Both ELY centres and AVIs supervise and guide sub-national and local planning. In Sweden, only three out of the 21 regions actually work with regional planning under the law, meaning that the rest of the country is not entirely covered by valid statutory regional plans. The other 18 regions engage in various forms of informal regional planning on a voluntary basis. However, as in Finland, the national state is also represented at the regional level through national county administrative boards, which control national interests in regional and municipal spatial planning, among other things (Schmitt, 2023).





Germany has two relevant spatial planning layers at the sub-national level. The first of these is the 16 state or 'Land' levels, which have comparatively far-reaching spatial planning competences (see Section 4). The second relevant sub-national level for spatial planning covers the 104 planning regions. Germany stands out in this respect, since the 16 states have a comparatively high degree of political power, particularly in relation to spatial planning. Federalism is a key characteristic of the German administrative structure and system of governance, meaning that both the central government and each of the sixteen federal states have their own constitution, elected parliament, and government. Consequently, the organisation of state and regional planning varies significantly from state to state (Münter and Reimer, 2021).

The lowest level, which we will refer to as the 'local level' here, is usually made up of municipalities. As can be seen in Figure 1, there are a number of variations in how they are characterised and divided into different types. It is also striking that the numbers differ considerably, for example between Poland (2,479 municipalities) and Sweden (290 municipalities), or between Poland and Latvia (42 municipalities). Following the administrative-territorial reform in Estonia in 2017, the number of local government units was reduced to 15 urban municipalities and 64 rural municipalities. However, their legal status and responsibilities regarding local services remain unchanged regardless of their designation or size. As will be discussed further in sections 4 and 5, municipalities are a relevant institutional layer for local spatial planning in all seven countries.





4 Distribution of formal competences for spatial planning among policy levels

The next important characteristic to consider is how formal competences for spatial planning are distributed among national, sub-national, and local policy levels. To this end, we drew inspiration from Nadin et al. (2018a) to distinguish four categories of competence: law-making, policy-making, plan-making and supervision of plans/spatial planning documents. The analysis presented in Table 2 therefore allows us to compare the competences vested in different policy levels. As the final report of the ESPON Compass project argues, '[i]t is important to recognise that the competences for spatial planning are generally shared at various levels in most countries, and that this situation remains in many cases, despite shifts in powers and responsibilities. In other words, spatial planning is an activity which involves different levels of government and which is subject to multi-level governance.' (Nadin et al. 2018a, 18).

First, it is interesting to note that in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the national level encompasses all four competencies. In Estonia, this even means that, in addition to national plans (see Section 5), regional (or county) plans are also produced and supervised at the national level. However, this is a relatively recent development, as prior to 2018, it was the responsibility of regional governments to produce county plans. Similar to Latvia and Poland, in Finland we see that plan-making competences are allocated at all three policy levels. In Germany, it is clear that the sub-national level is very powerful in principle, since each state even has law-making competences. The sub-national level is also important for supervising regional (state-level) and local plans, which are mainly handled by planning regions. Consequently, Germany has four policy levels that are relevant for spatial planning. Unsurprisingly, 'plan-making' and 'policy-making' competences coincide at various policy levels in most of the countries analysed. The two exceptions are Poland and Sweden, as neither country produces spatial plans, guidelines, frameworks or visions at a national level. Another exception is Latvia, where planning regions are not granted policy-making powers and can only make recommendations.

In Poland, the sub-national level is not only vested with policy and plan-making competences, but also with supervising local plans. In Sweden, supervision of local and regional plans is handled by national public agencies operating in all 21 regions (known as county administrative boards). As mentioned earlier, only three of Sweden's 21 regions work with statutory regional planning.





Table 2: Distribution of formal competences for spatial planning among the national, sub-national and local policy levels

Country	Level	Law-making	Policy-making	Plan-making	Supervision
ESTONIA	National	+	+	+	+
	Sub-national				
	Local		+	+	
FINLAND	National	+	+	+	
	Sub-national		+	+	+
	Local		+	+	+
GERMANY	National	+	+	+	
	Sub-national	+	+	+	+
	Local		+	+	
LATVIA	National	+	+	+	+
	Sub-national			+	+
	Local		+	+	+
LITHUANIA	National	+	+	+	+
	Sub-national				
	Local		+	+	+
POLAND	National	+	+		
	Sub-national		+	+	+
	Local		+	+	
SWEDEN	National	+	+		+
	Sub-national		+	+	
	Local		+	+	

Source: Categories adapted from Nadin et al. (2018a, 19–26), but reviewed with the help of the VASAB Committee members and various country profiles from ARL international (here: Martin and Väli 2021; Purkarthofer and Mattila 2023; Münter and Reimer 2021; Akmentiņa 2023; Burinskienė 2022; Mironowicz 2022; Schmitt 2023)

Overall, Table 2 provides an overview of the distribution of competences. However, it does not clearly define the scope of these competences or explain how the different policy levels interact. Nor does it provide insight into the extent of local autonomy in spatial planning, for instance. To gain a deeper understanding of these issues, it is recommended that the reader consults the aforementioned ARL International country profiles, as well as the VASAB country fiches, which provide more detailed descriptions of each of the seven national spatial planning systems (see references below).



5 Character of statutory spatial planning instruments at different policy levels

Spatial planning instruments are fundamental to the operation of spatial planning systems because they are the main tools used to achieve spatial planning objectives. They are used to mediate competition over land use, allocate development rights, regulate land use change, and promote preferred spatial forms. They are an integral part of spatial planning systems and territorial governance practices, and exist at all levels of policy, from national to local (Smas and Schmitt, 2024, p. 107).

In what follows, we draw inspiration once more from the ESPON Compass project, focusing on four characteristics to illustrate the general nature of formal spatial planning instruments at national, subnational, and local levels in the seven countries of the Baltic Sea Region. In other words, we applied the following definitions (see Nadin et al., 2018a, p. 22):

- Visionary: setting out a normative agenda of principles or goals for a desirable future.
- Strategic: providing an evidence-based integrated and long-term frame of reference for coordinated action and decision-making across jurisdictions and sectors.
- Framework-setting: establishing policies, proposals and other criteria for a territory that provide a non-binding reference for other plans and decision-making.
- Regulative: makes legally binding commitments or decisions concerning land use change and development.

We applied these definitions to the most important statutory spatial planning instruments that form integral elements of the formal spatial planning systems in the seven countries under consideration when creating the following figure. Focusing on spatial planning instruments created under the law, as well as those that match a generic understanding of spatial planning, as introduced in Section 1, helped us devise a useful, comparable list (see Figure 2). This means that we have deliberately excluded sectoral plans (e.g. for transport or water management), building permits, planning acts (or parts thereof), national, regional or urban (sustainable) development strategies and instruments concerned with guiding EU Cohesion Policy spending or regulating building construction quality (Nadin et al., 2018a; Smas & Schmitt, 2024). Regarding the former, focusing on statutory spatial planning instruments implies that many voluntarily produced plans (often at the local or city-regional level) with a high degree of informality were not included either. This is not to say that these planning instruments are unimportant; quite the contrary, given their important complementary





role in strategic spatial planning today. However, categorising and comparing these would require a comprehensive study of its own, as there are currently no useful databases available.

Figure 2: *Statutory spatial planning instruments that are integral elements of the formal spatial planning system in the Baltic Sea Region*

COUNTRY	SCALE	NAME OF SPATIAL PLANNING INSTRUMENT	VISIONARY	STRATEGIC	FRAMEWORK	REGULATORY
ESTONIA	National	National spatial plan (Üleriigiline planeering)				
	National	County-wide spatial plan (Maakonnaplaneering)				
	Local	Comprehensive plan (Uldplaneering)				
	Local	Detailed spatial plan (Detailplaneering)				
FINLAND	National	National land-use guidelines (Valtakunnalliset alueidenkäytölavointeet)				
	Sub-national	Regional land-use plan (Maakuntakava)				
	Local	Local master plan (Yleiskaava)				
	Local	Local detailed plan (Asemakaava)				
GERMANY	National	Concepts and Strategies for spatial development (Leitbilder und Handlungsstrategien für die Raumentwicklung)				
	Sub-national	State development plan (Landesraumordnungsplan)				
	Sub-national	Regional plan (Regionalplan)				
	Local	Preparatory land-use plan (Flächennutzungsplan)				
LATVIA	National	National Development Plan of Latvia 2021–2027 (Latvijas Nacionālais attīstības plāns)				
	Sub-national	Sustainable Development Strategy of Planning Region (Plānošanas reģiona ilgtspējīgas attīstības stratēģija)				
	Sub-national	Development Programme of Planning Region (Plānošanas reģiona attīstības programma)				
	Local	Sustainable Development Strategy of Local Government (Pašvaldības ilgtspējīgas attīstības stratēģija)				
LITHUANIA	Local	Development Programme of Local Government (Pašvaldības attīstības programma)				
	Local	Spatial Plan of Local Government (Pašvaldības teritorijas plānojums)				
	Local	Local Plan of Local Government (Pašvaldības lokāplānojums)				
	Local	Detailed Plan of Local Government (Detālāplānojums)				
POLAND	National	General Plan of the territory of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos teritorijos bendrasis planas)				
	National	General Plan of parts of the territory of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos teritorijos dalies bendrasis planas)				
	Local	General plan of the municipal territory (Savivaldybės teritorijos bendrasis planas)				
	Local	General plan of part of the municipal territory (Savivaldybės teritorijos dalies bendrasis planas)				
SWEDEN	National	Medium-term country development strategy (Koncepcja rozwoju kraju)				
	Sub-national	Regional spatial development plan (plan zagospodarowania przestrzennego województwa)				
	Local	Study of conditions and direction of spatial development of the municipality (studium uwarunkowań i kierunków zagospodarowania przestrzennego gminy)				
	Local	General spatial development plan (plan ogólny gminy)				
SWEDEN	Local	Local spatial development plan (miejscowy plan zagospodarowania przestrzennego)				
	Local	if a "Local spatial development plan" does not exist, an "Integrated investment plan" (zintegrowany plan inwestycyjny) is required				
	Sub-national	Regional plan (regionplan)				
	Local	Comprehensive municipal plan (översiktsplan)				
SWEDEN	Local	Detailed development plan (detaljplan)				

Source: Categories adapted from Nadin et al. (2018a, 22 but reviewed with the help of the VASAB Committee members and various country profiles from ARL international (here: Martin and Väli 2021; Purkarhofer and Mattila 2023; Münter and Reimer 2021; Akmentiņa 2023; Burinskienė 2022; Mironowicz 2022; Schmitt 2023)

It should be noted that the assignment to different categories is based on the authors' interpretation of the ARL country profiles and comments from the members of VASAB Committee. Consequently, there are some deviations compared to the analysis presented in the ESPON Compass project (Nadin et al., 2018b, pp. 27–32). The names of the spatial planning instruments in the figure below are given in English, with the original language names in parentheses (based on information from the ARL country profiles and some VASAB Committee members).

It should be noted again that this is a snapshot of the current situation in August 2025. Adaptations and the introduction of new planning instruments (and perhaps the phasing out of others) are underway, as is the case in Poland, for example. The National Spatial Development Concept expired in Poland in 2020, meaning that the country's medium-term development strategy is now the only spatial plan at the national level. The statutory spatial planning instrument at the local level, the 'Study of the conditions and directions of spatial development of the municipality', remains



legally valid until 30 June 2026 and will be gradually replaced by 'General Spatial Development Plans' (see Figure 2).

When we compare the seven countries, it is striking that Latvia has the highest number of spatial planning instruments according to our selection criteria (see above). Estonia, for example, stands out as it appears to have no spatial planning instruments at the sub-national level. However, this is incorrect, as such plans do exist for the 15 planning regions. These so-called county-wide spatial plans are produced by national planning institutions. Other specificities regarding the production of spatial planning instruments at different policy levels have already been mentioned in sections 3 and 4.

One striking feature is the multi-purpose nature of many spatial planning instruments, which often include two or even three of these features. This means that the four characteristics defined above are not mutually exclusive. With a few exceptions at the local level and one at the national level (Poland), all spatial planning instruments include multiple characteristics. Overall, it can be said that the visionary and, to some extent, strategic features of these spatial planning instruments are mostly found at the national and sub-national levels. As might be expected, the regulatory feature is mainly found at the local level. However, Germany, Finland and Lithuania are exceptions, as their statutory spatial planning instruments also demonstrate this feature at sub-national and/or national levels.

In Sweden, there are no statutory spatial planning instruments at the national level that match our definition. However, one regulatory planning instrument does exist: Areas of National Interest for Conservation and Development (Riksintresse av nationellt betydelsefulla områden). These dedicated areas are principally mono-sectoral plans and therefore are not listed in Figure 2. Similarly, the interstate spatial plan for flood protection in Germany (Länderübergreifender Raumordnungsplan für den Hochwasserschutz), introduced in 2021, is a national-level planning instrument. However, it has also been excluded as it is mainly a thematic plan.

There is certainly a form of labour division between these spatial planning instruments within one country and across policy levels. This means they complement each other with regard to their four characteristics (visionary, strategic, framework and regulatory) and other features and issues they address with regard to different spatial scales. To explore this further, we would need to examine the specifics of these instruments. In any case, the feature 'framework-setting' often provides an indication of the role of the spatial planning instrument under consideration in relation to other planning instruments, which are often found at lower policy levels. Another observation is that the greatest differences are found at sub-national and national levels. These levels have very different roles and competencies, which are also related to their administrative structures, political systems, and cultures.





6 Some final remarks

As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of this paper is to encourage cross-national dialogue between spatial planners in the Baltic Sea Region by providing comparative information on four key features of national spatial planning systems. Readers seeking more in-depth information on a specific country's spatial planning system or other types of comparison are advised to follow the links in the list of references at the end of the paper.

It is also important to note that these spatial planning systems are not set in stone; many of them are constantly being revised or adapted. In some countries, such as Sweden, the changes mainly concern procedural aspects of planning instruments. In other countries, however, we can observe greater dynamism, such as the introduction of new planning instruments (e.g. in Poland), changes to the distribution of competences (e.g. in Finland) or fundamental changes due to administrative and territorial reforms (e.g. in Estonia and Lithuania). Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to keep track of these changes and the particularities of these spatial planning systems, which further underlines the need for a forum for land-based spatial planners around the Baltic Sea Region, to facilitate mutual understanding and learning.





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VASAB Country fiche on terrestrial spatial planning

Short country fiches with partly complementary and more actual information are available at: <https://vasab.org/home/about/country-fiches/>

Analysed ARL Country Profiles:

Akmentiņa, L. (2023): *Country Profile of Latvia*. Hannover. = ARL Country Profiles.
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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/>

