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EUROPEAN RESEARCH PROJECT //

Collecting and analysing data for the post-27 INTERREG (Core-IB)

Finland-Estonia-Latvia-Sweden (Central Baltic)

Border profile

March 2026

This European Research Project is conducted within the framework of the ESPON 2030 Cooperation Programme, partly financed by the European Regional Development Fund.

The ESPON EGTC is the Single Beneficiary of the ESPON 2030 Cooperation Programme. The Single Operation within the programme is implemented by the ESPON EGTC and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the EU Member States and the Partner States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

This delivery does not necessarily reflect the opinions of members of the ESPON 2030 Monitoring Committee.

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Acknowledgements
We gratefully acknowledge the support and constructive feedback received during the project implementation, from the ESPON Monitoring Committee members, INTERREG programme Managing Authorities/Joint Secretariats, Ministries and DG Regio desk officers. The insightful comments and recommendations provided have been instrumental in enhancing the quality, coherence, and robustness of the analysis.

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ISBN: 978-2-919816-91-0

Layout and graphic design by BGRAPHIC, Denmark

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1 Introduction

1.1 Context and objective of the border profile

The ESPON Core-IB project (Collecting and analysing data for the post-27 INTERREG) provides evidence-based, non-binding analytical work to support the next generation of Interreg programmes post-2027. By collecting and analysing harmonised territorial data, the project highlights key socio-economic characteristics, cross-border interactions, and governance structures. Its spatial focus covers 48 cross-border cooperation areas (40 land and 8 maritime), including all EU internal border regions and those bordering Liechtenstein, Switzerland, and Norway. The findings are analytical and informative; they do not create regulatory or policy obligations for Member States, the European Commission, or programme authorities. Each border profile serves as a comparable knowledge base for policymakers at EU, national, and regional levels, supporting dialogue and reflection rather than prescribing policy choices. The profiles aim to provide consistent, data-driven territorial evidence that can inform strategic discussions about future cross-border cooperation and contribute to the preparation of Interreg programmes post-2027.

The Core-IB border profiles are designed to support the upcoming steps in the Interreg programming process with analyses based on data that is available at the European scale, including ESPON, Eurostat, DG REGIO, JRC, and Interreg databases. Their main purpose is to ensure comparability of data analyses and to provide programme areas with access to recent harmonised data at high geographical resolution (NUTS3 level or finer). Member States may hold additional or more detailed data which can further enrich or contextualise the findings beyond the Core-IB project. These national sources are essential for refining and validating territorial evidence in policymaking processes, including additional regional, fine-scale information and insights from political processes related to prioritisation and objective setting. All border profiles follow a systematic and methodologically robust approach. They provide territorial evidence, structured along 6 thematic dimensions, offering insights into the geographic, economic, environmental, socio-economic, border security and governance characteristics of the border region. Quantitative data and qualitative analyses are combined to ensure meaningful insights into all 48 border areas. Due to methodological constraints and limited resources, local studies and national datasets falling outside the European data framework could not be included. Visualisations, such as maps and charts based on descriptive statistics, facilitate understanding and support evidence-based policymaking. The profiles analyse the border region as a whole at NUTS3 (2021) level (corresponding to the current Interreg VI-A programme area)[1] and position it within a broader European context. For comparative purposes, several reference categories are applied:

- European averages (EU27 + Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, depending on data availability)
- National averages
- National border region averages
- Aggregated border region averages

To complement the quantitative evidence, the profiles also draw on strategic and qualitative sources, including:

- Strategic documents from the Interreg Programme 2021-2027
- Border Orientation Papers from the 2021-2027 programming period
- Information from the keep.eu database on cross-border cooperation activities
- Information from the Cohesion Open Data platform
- Information from the b-solutions initiative
- Information from recent ESPON Projects (i.e., CROSSGOV, House4All, PROFECY Update, CPS 2.0)

[1] As defined by Annex 1, Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/74 of 17 January 2022, as amended by Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2023/1638 of 14 August 2023 (OJ L204, 17.8.2023, p. 9): https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec_impl/2022/75/oj/eng

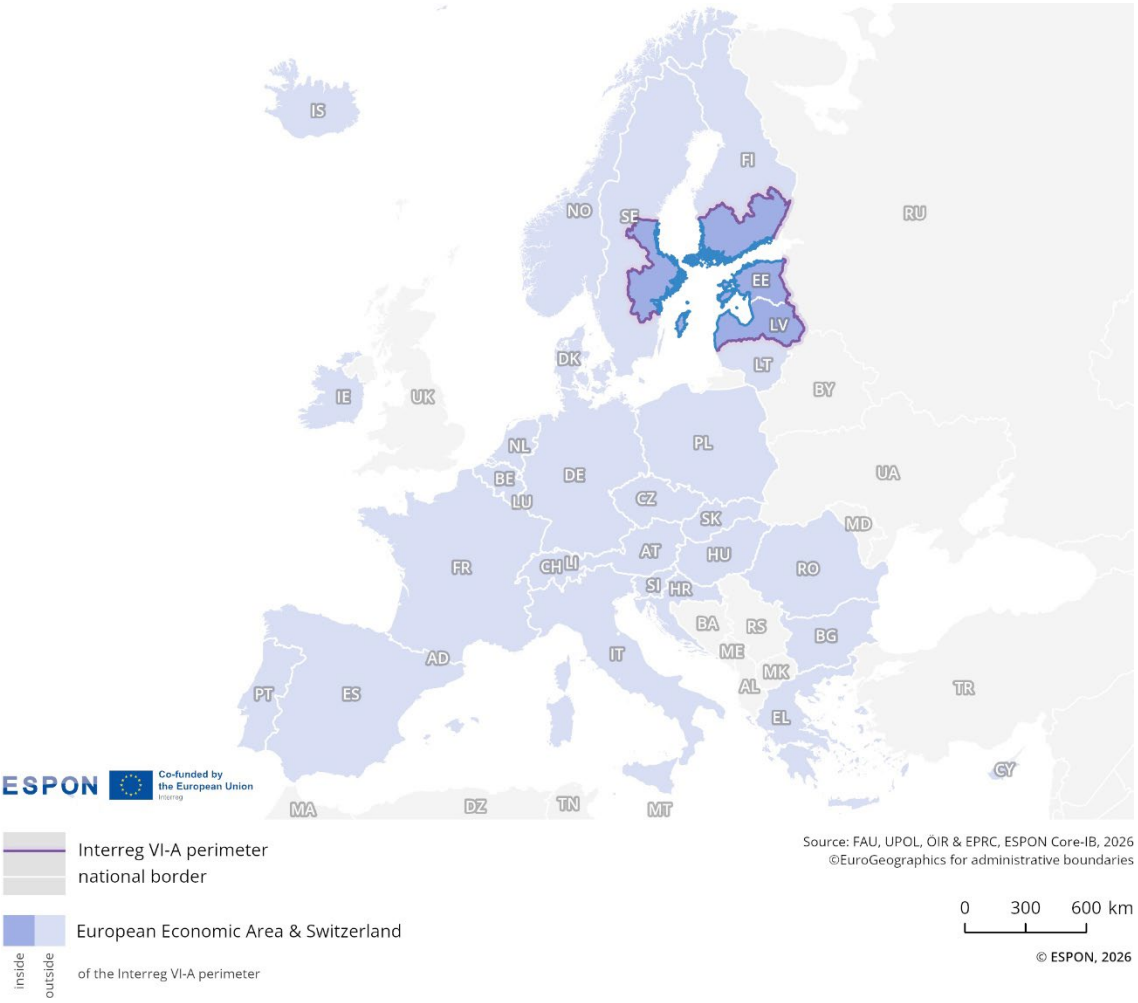
Within the ESPON framework, the CROSSGOV project (Governance mechanisms for cross-border functional areas) has been implemented in parallel to Core-IB. The CROSSGOV hub[2] provides a comprehensive platform for interactive data exploration, and selected data have been incorporated into this study.

Additional project-related information can be explored separately in the Core-IB **Final Report**. Further technical information on this border profile can be found in a separate **Technical Annex** providing an overview of data and methods.

1.2 Presentation of the border area

The Interreg VI-A border region 'Finland–Estonia–Latvia–Sweden (Central Baltic)' covers an area stretching from southern Finland to eastern Sweden, including Estonia and Latvia (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Overview map

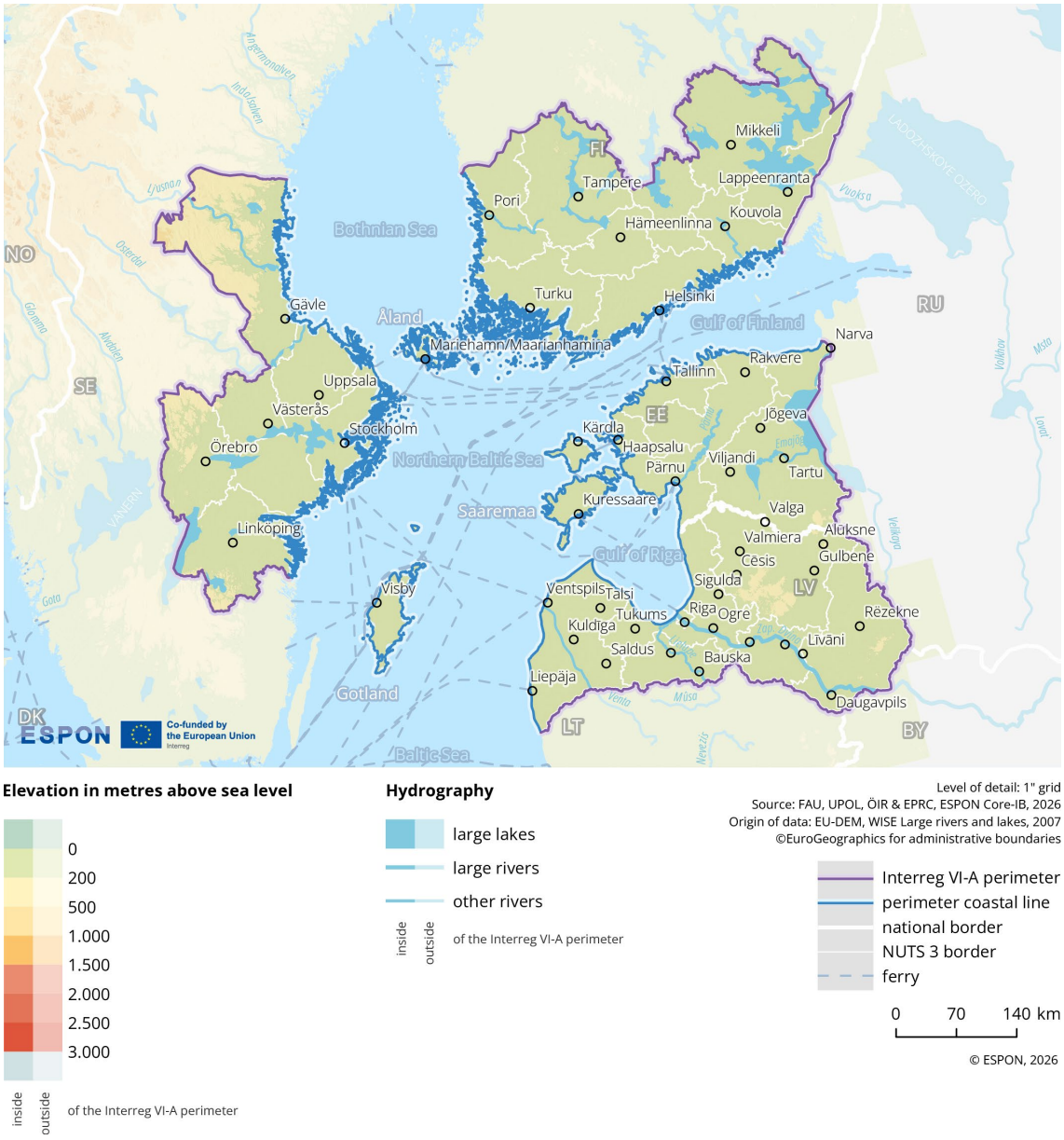


In Finland, the programme area includes the regions of Åland, South Finland, North and East Finland, West Finland, and Helsinki-Uusimaa, covering both Mainland Finland and Åland, and comprising a total of 10 NUTS3 regions. In Estonia and Latvia, the programme area encompasses the entire countries, comprising a total of 5 and 6 NUTS3 regions respectively. In Sweden, the programme area includes the regions of East Central Sweden, North Central Sweden, Småland with Islands, and Stockholm in Eastern Sweden, comprising 8 NUTS3 regions in total.

[2] ESPON CROSSGOV Hub: https://gis-portal.espon.eu/arcgis/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=27e3b86ef44441b08793a2239c370607

Figure 1.2 shows the geomorphological features and the perimeter of the Central Baltic programme area. Located along the Baltic Sea coastline and along other important waterways such as the Gulf of Bothnia, the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Riga, the Central Baltic programme area comprises numerous islands, including the Åland Islands between Finland and Sweden and the West and North Estonian archipelagos. The Central Baltic programme area lies between the metropolitan areas of Stockholm, Helsinki, Tallinn and Riga. The landscape is predominantly flat to gently hilly and was shaped by the last glacial period and features extensive post-glacial landforms such as eskers, drumlins, and moraines.

Figure 1.2: Geographical features and characteristics[3]



The terrain is interspersed with numerous lakes, rivers, and wetlands, forming a rich hydrological network. The highly indented coastal zone features bays, peninsulas, and archipelagos that support diverse marine and coastal ecosystems. Due to its proximity to the Baltic Sea, the Central Baltic programme area has a temperate climate, with cold winters and mild summers.

[3] The selection of displayed settlements is based on factors such as size, administrative or cultural importance, transport links, regional coverage and cartographic clarity. This is part of a standard cartographic generalisation process with no pre-set thresholds, and the main aim is to provide orientation.

Forests, primarily consisting of boreal mixed and coniferous species, cover a significant portion of the Central Baltic programme area, particularly the inland regions of Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Latvia. Soil composition varies from fertile mineral soils in the lowlands to peatlands and less fertile soils in coastal and forested areas.

These topographical and geomorphological characteristics strongly influence land use patterns, settlement distribution and economic activities such as forestry, agriculture and the maritime industry within the Central Baltic programme area.

2 Cross-border analysis

2.1 Territorial dimension

The territorial dimension refers to the spatial characteristics and dynamics of a border region. It specifically depicts how factors such as population density, demographic trends, changes in settlement areas and accessibility influence and reflect cross-border integration.

2.1.1 Population and settlements

This sub-dimension illustrates the population characteristics and land use dynamics of the border region, based on analysed indicators. It examines population density, population development by age groups, and changes in settlement areas. The analysis highlights whether the border functions as a catalyst for integration or as a barrier. Comparisons with the respective countries and the EU average provide context for understanding the region's dynamics.

2.1.1.1 Population density

Indicator description

Population density refers to the number of residents per km². This indicator shows the number of inhabitants per square kilometre in a 1x1 km grid. It therefore provides information on the distribution and concentration of population across the region and allows to identify agglomerations of high density. In particular agglomerations at or close to the border area of key interest.

- **Source**: Eurostat
- **Temporal coverage**: 2021
- **Unit**: Inhabitants/km^2

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

The Central Baltic region comprises 32 urban centres with populations of over 30,000. All 4 countries exhibit a similar settlement pattern, characterised by several larger settlements and numerous smaller ones, with the population distributed fairly evenly around them. The capitals and large cities, such as Stockholm, Uppsala, Gävle, Linköping, Örebro and Västerås in Sweden, and Helsinki, Tampere, Turku, Hämeenlinna, Pori, Kouvola, Mikkeli and Lappeenranta in Finland have a higher population density. The situation is similar in Estonia and Latvia, where the larger cities include Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu in Estonia, and Riga, Liepāja, Daugavpils and Jelgava in Latvia.

The population density of the entire Central Baltic region is 41 inhabitants/km², which is lower than both the EU average of 109 inhabitants/km² (according to EUROSTAT) and the aggregated average of all EU evaluated border regions, which is 125 inhabitants/km².

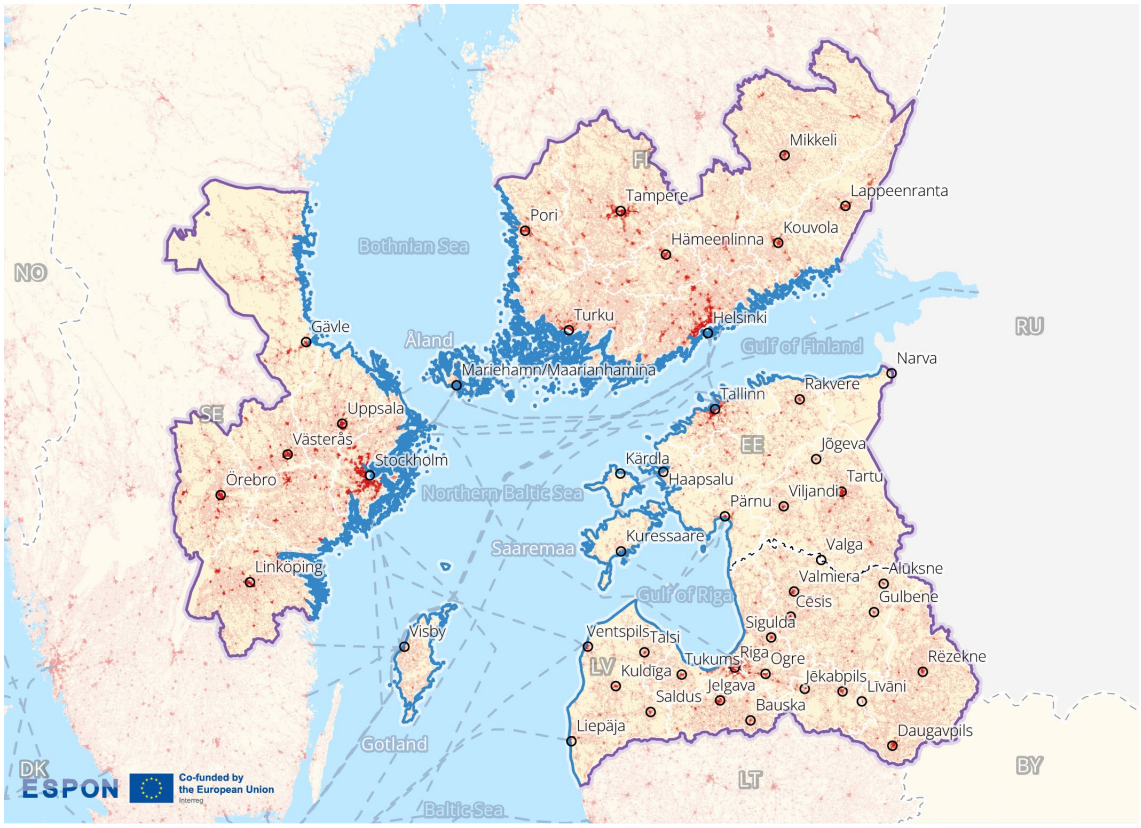
The Finnish part of the border region has an average population density of around 40 inhabitants/km². It exceeds the national average population density in Finland (16 inhabitants/km²).

In Estonia, the entire country is part of the Central Baltic programme area. Consequently, the border regions have the same average population density as the national average in Estonia, at around 28 inhabitants/km².

In Latvia, the entire country is also part of the Central Baltic programme area. Consequently, the border regions have an average population density of around 29 inhabitants/km², which is equal to the national average in Latvia.

The Swedish part of the border region has an average population density of around 60 inhabitants/km². It exceeds the national average population density in Sweden (23 inhabitants/km²).

Figure 2.1: Spatial patterns of population distribution



Number of inhabitants/km² (2021)

- 1–50
- 51–100
- 101–200
- 201–500
- 501–1,000
- 1,001–5,000
- 5,001–56,158
- no population

inside / outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Twin cities (2025)

cities/towns with 10,000+ inhabitants not further than 5km from another one accross a country border

Border cities (2025)

other cities/towns with 10,000+ inhabitants not further than 10km from another one accross a country border

Level of detail: 1km grid
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: GISCO Population Grid (version 1.3), 2021
OpenStreetMap, 2025
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- perimeter coastal line
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

2.1.1.2 Population development (by age groups)

Indicator description

Population development refers to the percentage change in population at regional level between 2014 and 2024. The data reflects on the total population, as well as on the age groups 0-14, 15-64 and 65+.

- **Source**: Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO)
- **Temporal coverage**: 2014-2024
- **Unit**: Change in %

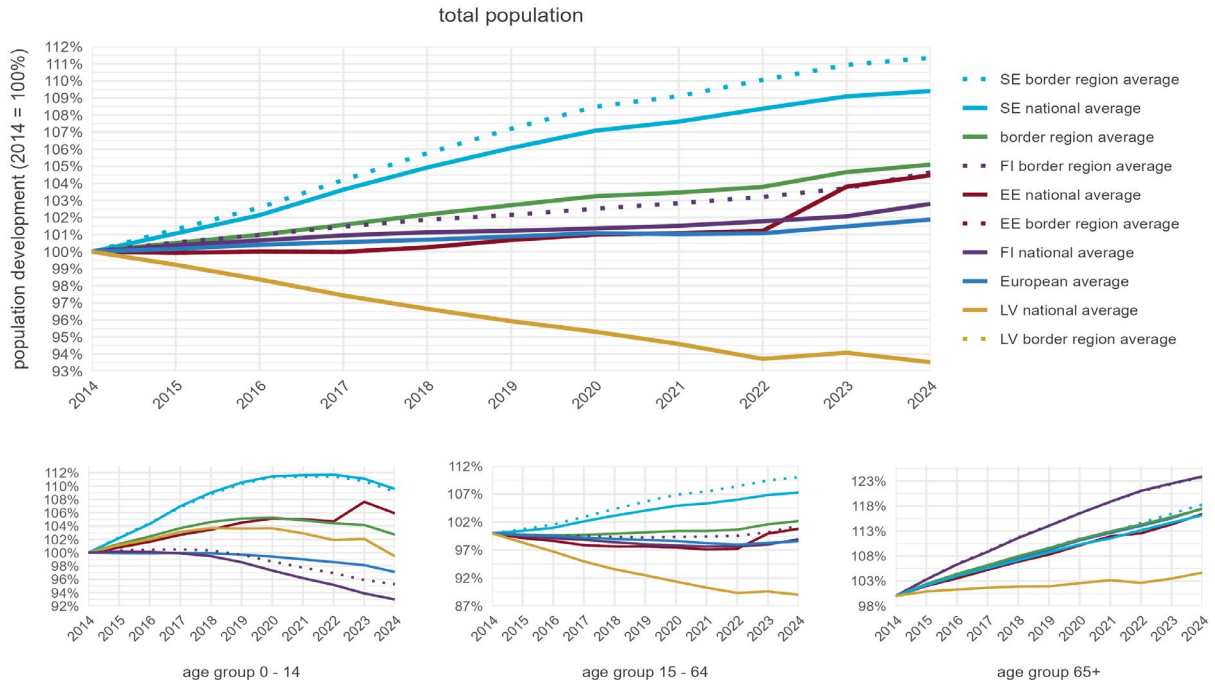
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Population in the Central Baltic programme area in 2024 (Eurostat): 11.6 million inhabitants, of which:

- 16.1% in the Latvian territory (1.87 million inhabitants)
- 11.8% in the Estonian territory (1.37 million inhabitants)
- 32.8% in the Finnish territory (3.82 million inhabitants)
- 39.3% in the Swedish territory (4.57 million inhabitants)
- Region within the border region with the highest population increase since 2014: Uppsala län (SE121) at 17.2%

Figure 2.2 shows the population growth in the Central Baltic programme area between 2014 and 2024. During this period, the border region has experienced moderate growth of 5.1%, with the highest growth rate observed in Sweden.

Figure 2.2: Population development (2014=100)



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Population growth across the entire programme area is noticeably above the European average (5.1% vs. 1.9%) and also above the average development in all cross-border regions (5.1% vs 1.5%). In national

comparison, in Latvia and Estonia, population developments are on par with the national averages as the programme area covers the entire countries (population decline of -6.5% in Latvia and population growth of 4.5% in Estonia). In Finland and Sweden, the border regions show higher growth than the national averages (4.6% vs. 2.8% in Finland and 11.3% vs. 9.4% in Sweden).

In terms of the development of individual age groups in the programme area, the population aged 0–14 experienced a slight increase of 2.7%, while the working-age population (15–64) showed a slight increase of 2.2%. The population aged 65 and over underwent a substantial increase of 17.4%.

2.1.1.3 Change in settlement areas

Indicator description

The indicator shows the relative change in settlement areas per LAU in the border region. It considers changes in land cover, from non-artificial areas (such as agricultural, forest and seminatural areas, wetlands and water bodies) to artificial areas (such as urban, industrial, construction sites) between 2012 and 2018. This indicator has to be viewed alongside population development in particular.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: The indicator is retrieved via processing of raster data from CORINE Land cover. The raster information is crossed with Local Administrative Units (LAU) to calculate a change in %.
- **Temporal coverage**: 2012-2018
- **Unit**: Change in %

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.3 illustrates the change in settlement areas at municipal level between 2012 and 2018. Overall, similar patterns of change in settlement areas are evident across the Central Baltic programme area. Changes are evident around the urban centres of Tampere, Mikkeli, Hämeenlinna, Turku and Helsinki in Finland; in Tallinn, Kuressaare and Tartu in Estonia; in Riga, Ogre, Jelgava, Liepāja, Daugavpils, Jēkabpils, Ventspils and Rēzekne in Latvia; and in Uppsala, Linköping and Stockholm in Sweden. However, changes are also evident across the wider region. Haapsalu and Pärnu in Estonia, and Valmiera and Jēkabpils in Latvia are exceptions, with no significant changes observed during the time period shown. High growth in settlement areas is particularly evident around the capitals Helsinki and Tallinn.

Figure 2.3: Settlement area dynamics

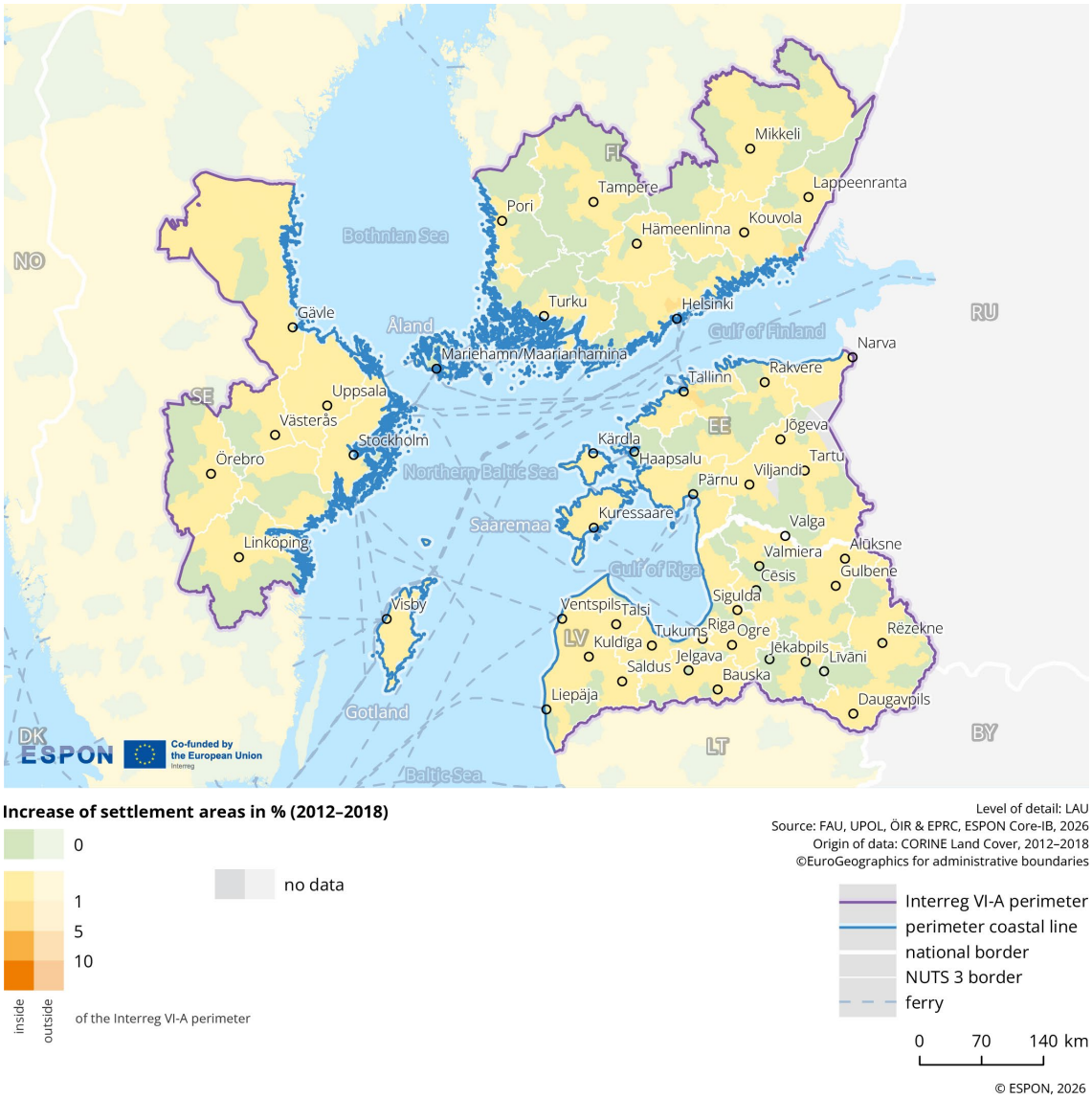
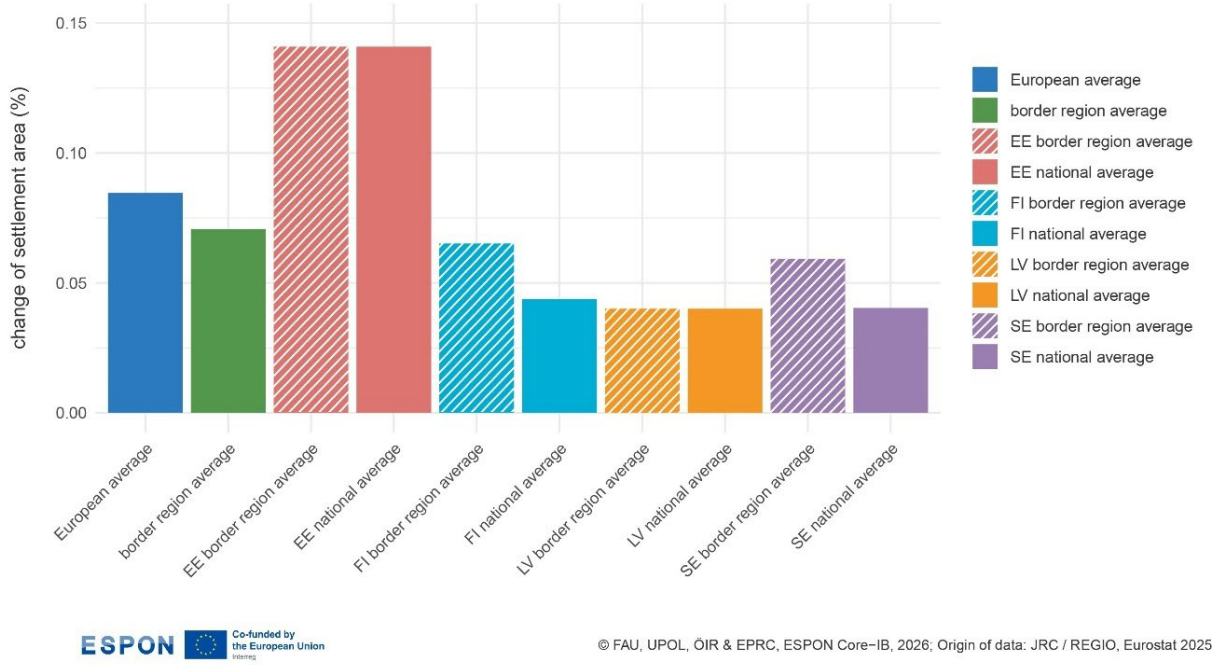


Figure 2.4 shows the change in settlement areas in a comparative context. The average for the Central Baltic programme area is similar to the overall European average, which includes EU member states as well as the EFTA countries of Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Norway. The Estonian national average is higher than the national averages in Sweden, Finland and Latvia. The Swedish, Finnish and Latvian national averages are similar. The Finnish and Swedish border-regional averages are higher than their respective national averages, while in Estonia and Latvia these are the same as their respective national averages (as the programme covers all regions in Estonia and Latvia). In general, the programme area exhibits low dynamic settlement development, with the notable exceptions of Helsinki and Tallinn.

Figure 2.4: Change in settlement areas (2012-2018) (comparison)



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2.1.2 Accessibility of the border area

This sub-dimension illustrates the functional travel connections that already exist in the border region. It examines average cross-border travel times for different modes of transport and cross-border catchment areas based on mobility flows. It also considers travel times to and from the border crossings. The analysis shows whether mobility flows are integrated between border regions or if the border hampers mobility.

2.1.2.1 Comparative quality of selected cross-border connections

Indicator description

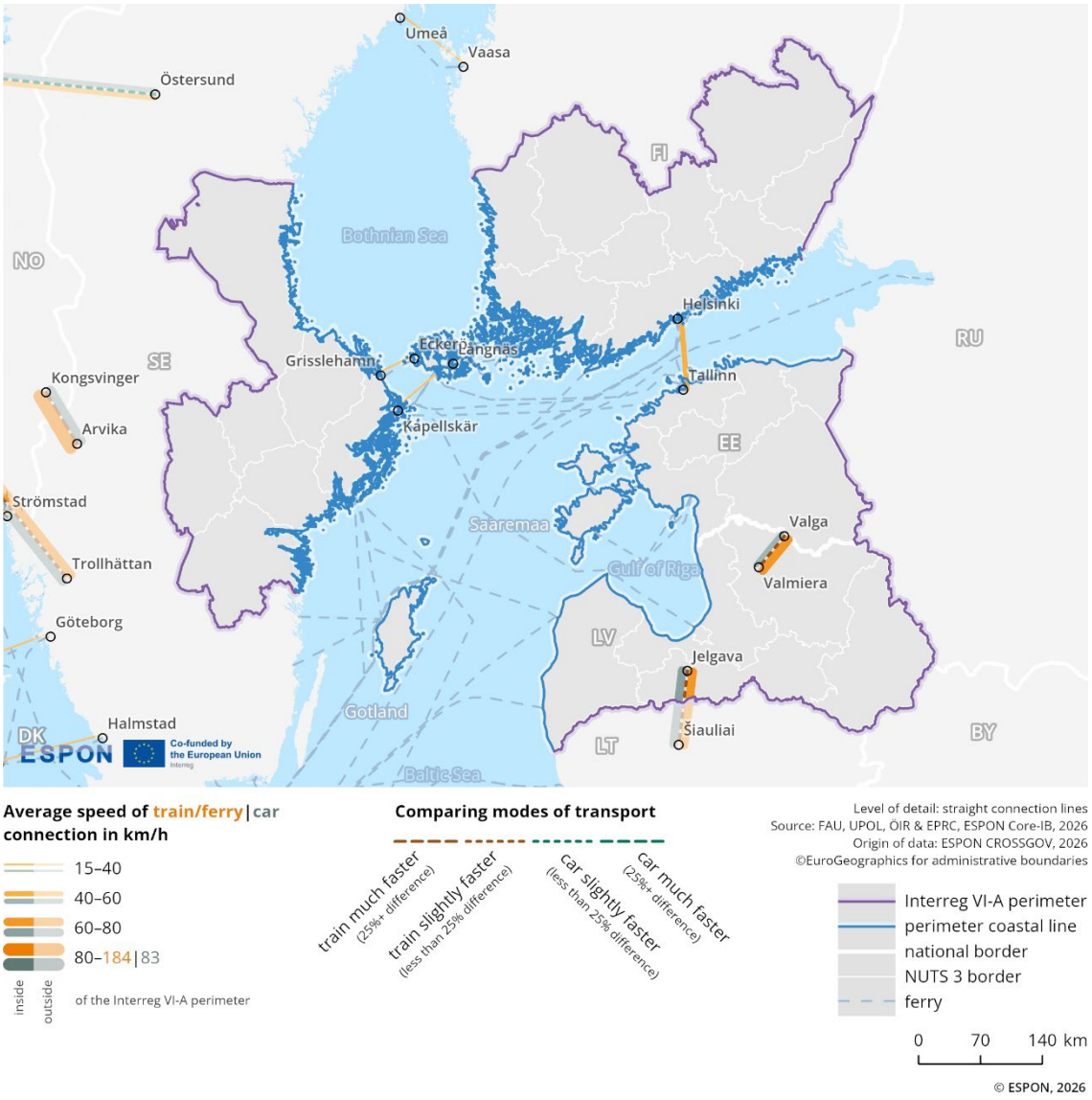
The indicator presents a comparative perspective for different modes of transport (public and private) and their average travel speed (so-called space-time-lines). As such it helps to understand and interpret accessibility patterns along the border and highlights the comparative quality of selected cross-border connections.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Average number and speed of rail connections/ferries, average speed of car connections between selected cities and towns in border regions using Rail Travel Sites, Google Maps, luftlinie.org, Direct Ferries, local ferry companies
- **Temporal coverage**: 2025 (first quarter)
- **Unit**: km/h

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Cross-border accessibility shapes cross-border interactions. Figure 2.5 illustrates this using a "space-time-line" map, which shows parts of a European overview of car, train and ferry travel times in the Central Baltic region. This visualisation enables an assessment of transport quality by highlighting differences between public (train, ferry) and private (car) transport modes.

Figure 2.5: Comparative quality of selected cross-border connections



The selection of cities and connections covered is based on a set of criteria applied throughout Europe within the ESPON CROSSGOV project.[4] These criteria include the presence of a railway station, population size, distance to the border, node hub and functionality. The thickness of the lines (orange for trains and ferries, grey for cars) indicates the average speed of connections in km/h, with thicker lines representing faster connections. Dotted lines in-between reflect the indexed ratio between train and car speeds. A brown colour scale (values below 100) denotes that trains are faster than cars along the specific route, while a green scale (values above 100) indicates the opposite.

The selected connections within the Central Baltic programme area include Valga–Valmiera and the ferry lines Helsinki–Tallinn, Grisslehamn–Eckerö, and Kapellskär–Långnäs. For the Valga–Valmiera route, the train connection outperforms car travel in terms of speed. The Helsinki–Tallinn ferry offers a fast connection. In contrast, the Grisslehamn–Eckerö and Kapellskär–Långnäs ferries are characterised by slow travel times[5].

[4] ESPON CROSSGOV Atlas, see Storymap on 'Space-time-lines': https://gis-portal.espon.eu/arcgis/apps/storymaps/collections/345c978adf784adfac30c16b90219d35?item=4

[5] For more information on European ferry routes see this online map: https://maritime-forum.ec.europa.eu/contents/map-week-ferry-routes_en

2.1.2.2 Cross-border catchment area based on mobility flows

Indicator description

This indicator measures the movement of people across borders. The density of cross-border movements by Twitter/X users is displayed on a grid cell covering an area of 20x20 km. The indicator does not differentiate between reasons for movement.

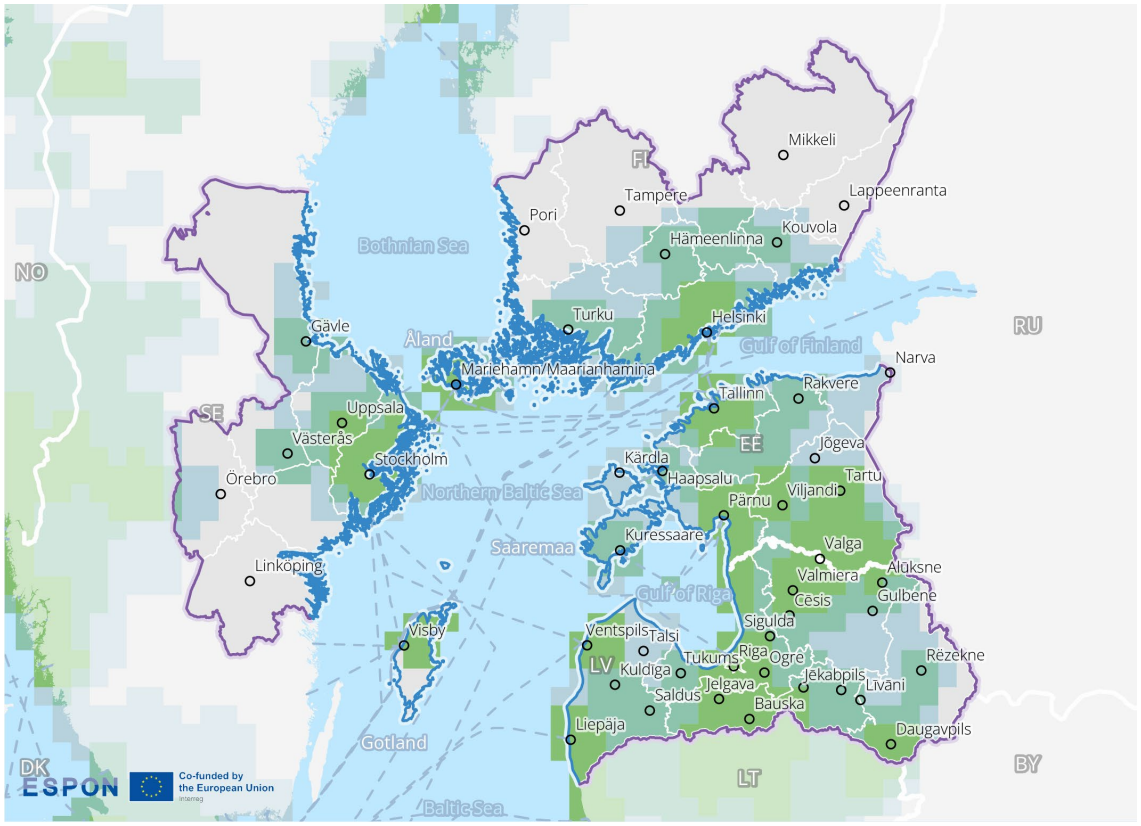
- **Source/method of retrieval**: The indicator is calculated based on Twitter (currently X) data. The digital footprint of individual users provides information about physical mobility flows and is used to calculate cross-border catchment areas of different intensity.
- **Temporal coverage**: 2013-2023
- **Unit**: n/a

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.6 shows the cross-border catchment area in the Central Baltic programme area based on mobility flows from 2013 to 2023, highlighting estimated cross-border mobility intensity across 3 different quartiles. The first quartile represents the 25% highest mobility intensity shown in dark green, the second quartile represents 25-50% coloured in green-blue, and the third quartile represents 50-75% in light blue.

The intensity of cross-border mobility of people within this Central Baltic programme area varies considerably. High levels of mobility intensity are observed around the cities of Uppsala, Stockholm, Helsinki, Tallinn, Pärnu, Tartu, Valmiera, Ventspils, Liepāja, Riga, Jelgava, and Daugavpils. In the remaining areas of southern Finland, Latvia, and Estonia, the intensity is generally moderate, decreasing to low levels further from the cities and the border. No mobility intensity is recorded in the western part of the Swedish and the northern part of the Finnish areas of the Central Baltic programme area.

Figure 2.6: Cross-border mobility intensity



Estimated cross-border mobility intensity (2013-2023)

high
moderate
low

inside / outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: 20km aggregated grid
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON CROSSGOV, 2026
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Interreg VI-A perimeter
perimeter coastal line
national border
NUTS 3 border
ferry

0 70 140 km

2.1.2.3 Cross-border travel-time accessibility

Indicator description

The indicator shows the time it takes to travel from any location within a region to the next border crossing, using grid data and subsequent categorisations into accessibility groups of 30, 60 and 90 minutes. It reflects the accessibility in cross-border areas, considering road transport. The indicator can describe the quality and speed of road connections and thus spatial reach of the cross-border services.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Based on the OpenStreetMap road network, the travel time to the border is calculated for a grid of the border are. Based on this, areas are calculated within which border crossings can be reached below thresholds of 30, 60 and 90 minutes. As additional visual element, key services pharmacies, doctors, hospitals and shops (retrieved from the ESPON PROFECY project) are displayed and categorised into the accessibility groups.
- **Temporal coverage**: 2025 (first quarter, for accessibility data), 2021 (for service facility data)
- **Unit**: Minutes

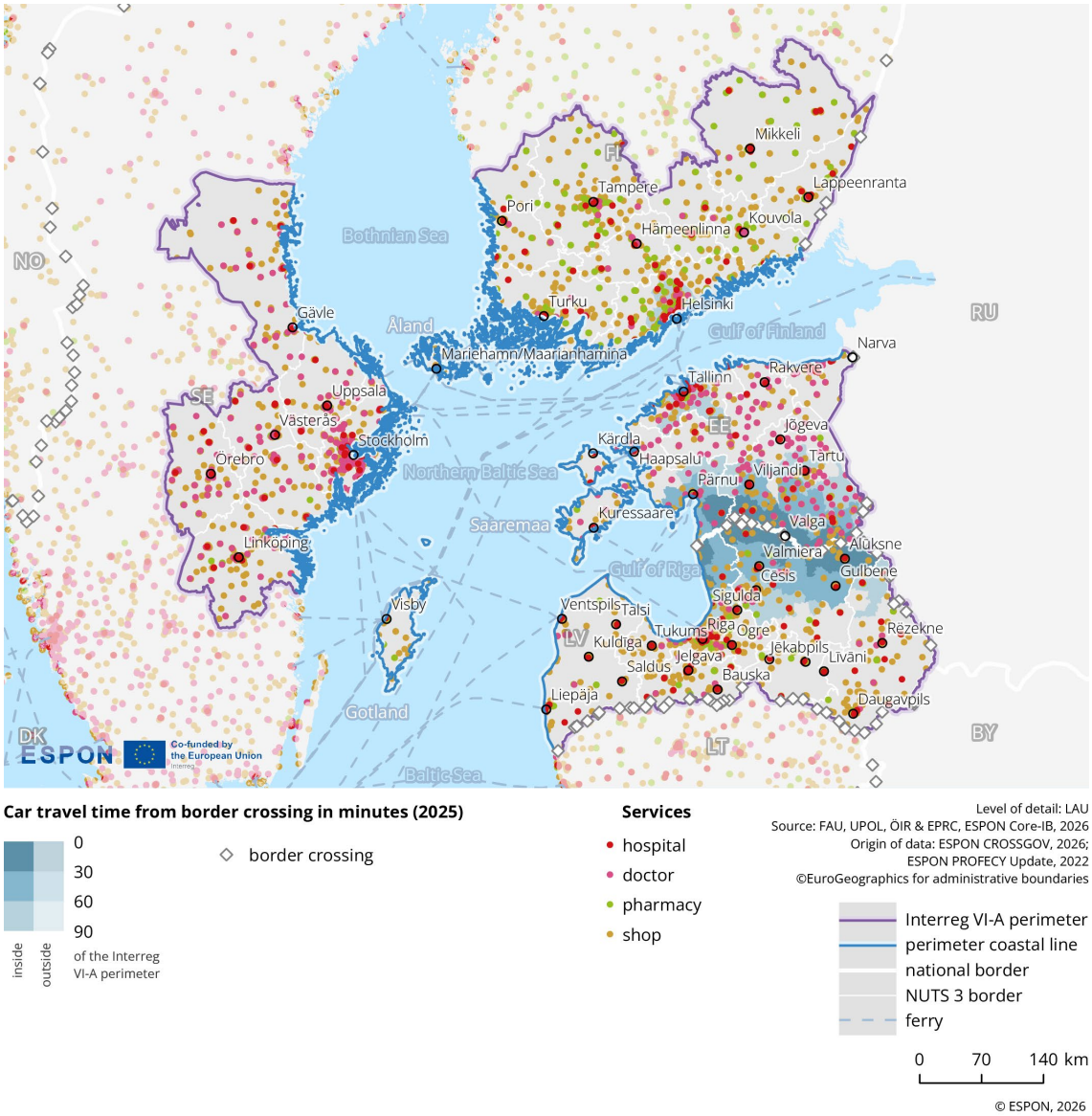
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.7 illustrates cross-border travel time accessibility in the Interreg area, showing the time distance from the national border in 2025. The legend indicates 3 travel time categories in minutes (30, 60, 90) represented by different shades of blue. In addition, it marks the location of services, including hospitals, doctors (general practitioners), pharmacies, and shops (supermarkets and conventient stores), with distinct coloured symbols.

Figure 2.7 shows the mainland border on the east (between Estonia and Latvia) and the coastal border on the north. The mainland is surrounded on both sides by a zone with the shortest travel time accessibility category, up to 30 minutes. This zone is followed by zones with travel times of up to 60 and 90 minutes, which vary in width. Locations further away from the mainland border have travel times of over 90 minutes. The mainland border has good road connections.

Services such as shops, hospitals, doctors, and pharmacies are located around large towns. The distribution of services is partly even. Services are quite numerous, even in the vicinity of the border within a 30-minute zone.

Figure 2.7: Travel-time accessibility from border crossings



Car travel time from border crossing in minutes (2025)

0
30
60
90

inside / outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

◇ border crossing

Services

- hospital
- doctor
- pharmacy
- shop

Level of detail: LAU
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON CROSSGOV, 2026; ESPON PROFECY Update, 2022
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Interreg VI-A perimeter
perimeter coastal line
national border
NUTS 3 border
ferry

0 70 140 km

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2.1.3 Key messages on the territorial dimension

The Finland–Estonia–Latvia–Sweden Central Baltic programme area stretches along the Baltic Sea coastline and other major waterways and is positioned between the metropolitan regions of Stockholm, Helsinki, Tallinn, and Riga. The landscape is largely flat to gently hilly and features numerous lakes, rivers, and wetlands. Forests cover a substantial share of the inland territory. These topographical and geomorphological features strongly shape land-use patterns, settlement distribution, and economic activities across the programme area. They also create shared environmental responsibilities in relation to areas such as climate change adaptation.

The 4 countries of the Central Baltic programme area have similar settlement patterns, featuring a combination of larger urban centres, including 4 capital cities, and numerous small and medium-sized towns. Around 32 urban centres have populations exceeding 30,000, forming an important functional backbone for labour markets, services, and economic activity. Settlement change is generally characterised by low dynamism, except for Helsinki and Tallinn where high growth has taken place. These highlight the importance of cross-border commuting, labour mobility, and coordinated spatial development.

Between 2014-2020, all Central Baltic border regions, except for Latvia recorded population growth. In Sweden and Finland, the growth levels in the border regions were above the national averages, while Finland, Sweden, and Estonia all outperformed the European average. Population growth has occurred across the different age groups, particularly among those aged 65 and over (a rise of 17.4%). These demographic developments highlight the need for coordinated actions addressing the requirements of an ageing population, while also responding to persistent depopulation challenges in Latvia and their implications for labour markets and service provision.

Accessibility across the programme area is supported by several key transport connections. Ferry routes, such as the fast Helsinki–Tallinn connection, play a vital role in enabling cross-border mobility trade and tourism. Road and rail links support mobility on the mainland, particularly in the Estonia-Latvia border area. For example, the Valga–Valmiera train connection provides faster travel times than car transport.

Essential services, including shops, hospitals, medical practitioners, and pharmacies, are typically concentrated in larger towns but remain relatively evenly distributed across the programme area. Cross-border cooperation on digitalisation can help ensure the continuity and accessibility of services.

The intensity of cross-border mobility of people within the Central Baltic programme area by Twitter/X users varies significantly across the programme area. High levels of mobility intensity are observed around the capital and larger cities, while it is more moderate elsewhere and decreases to low levels further from the cities and the border areas.

Overall, the programme area's shared geographical characteristics, demographic trends, and mobility patterns create strong incentives for cross-border cooperation in areas such as spatial planning, environmental protection, transport solutions, labour-market development, and accessible public services.

2.2 Economic dimension

The economic dimension includes analyses of gross domestic product, labour market conditions, competitiveness, and key infrastructure and housing indicators. The aim is to illustrate the impact of the border on economic performance, whether it acts as a barrier or a bridge, and the extent to which integration is supported by labour mobility, remote working, and infrastructure connectivity.

2.2.1 Gross Domestic Product

This sub-dimension illustrates the economic situation of the border region by analysing gross domestic product (GDP). It shows economic development within the border region and how this has changed over time. Comparisons with the respective countries and the EU average provide important context for understanding the region's dynamics.

2.2.1.1 Gross domestic product per capita at current market prices

Indicator description

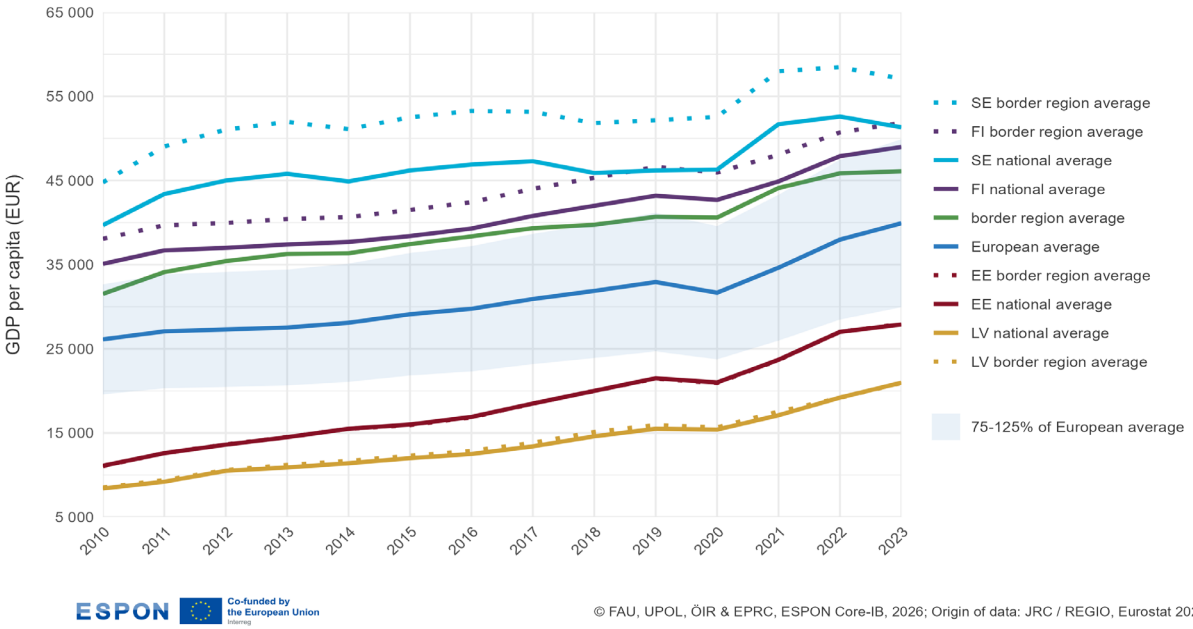
The indicator shows the regional GDP/capita in current prices and its development over the past years. It highlights structural differences and similarities between the border region and the respective national figures as well as the European average. Furthermore, it highlights patterns within the border region, although has to be interpreted with care in the case of a strong presence of commuters.

- **Source**: Eurostat, Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO)
- **Temporal coverage**: 2010-2023
- **Unit**: Euro per capita

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

In 2022, the Central Baltic region shows a GDP/capita value of 127.2% of the EU average and 129.2% of that of other European border regions. The region saw a 23.2% increase of GDP per capita between 2014 and 2022.[6] This equates to an increase in GDP per capita that is 12.5 percentage points lower than the EU average, and 12 percentage points lower than the average of European border regions. All border regions are equal to or slightly above the national average in terms of GDP per capita. The Swedish and Finnish border regions are significantly above the EU average but have only experienced moderate growth in GDP per capita. The Estonian and Latvian border regions have below-average GDP per capita but growth rates that exceed the EU average.

Figure 2.8: Gross domestic product at current market prices (per capita)



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[6] Percentage changes are calculated using Eurostat data to ensure harmonised statistics from official sources. The latest year for which full coverage of all European regions is available on Eurostat is 2022. For visualisation purposes, ARDECO data has been used to enable longer time series to be visualised by filling the official dataset's existing gaps with model-based estimates. Therefore, slight deviations between the calculation and visualisation are possible.

2.2.2 Labour market and commuting

This sub-dimension highlights the existing and potential functional links within the labour market of the border region. It examines the employment situation and commuting patterns, as well as the role of telework agreements, and considers developments over time based on analysed indicators. The analysis identifies factors that facilitate or hamper cross-border labour market integration.[7]

2.2.2.1 Share of employment

Indicator description

This indicator shows the share of employees in the population aged 15 to 64. Although it does not fully capture entrepreneurs, marginal employees, or civil servants, this is an important statistic for understanding general labour market patterns. It covers 2 aspects: first, high values can result from a high proportion of the resident population being employed. Second, high values can result from a high number of incoming commuters (from other NUTS3 regions within the country or from neighbouring countries). The same arguments apply to low values: they may indicate low levels of employment, or they may result from high shares of outgoing commuters. Values of more than 100% are possible, since the number of incoming commuters can exceed the number of inhabitants aged 15 to 64 (including both domestic and cross-border commuters).

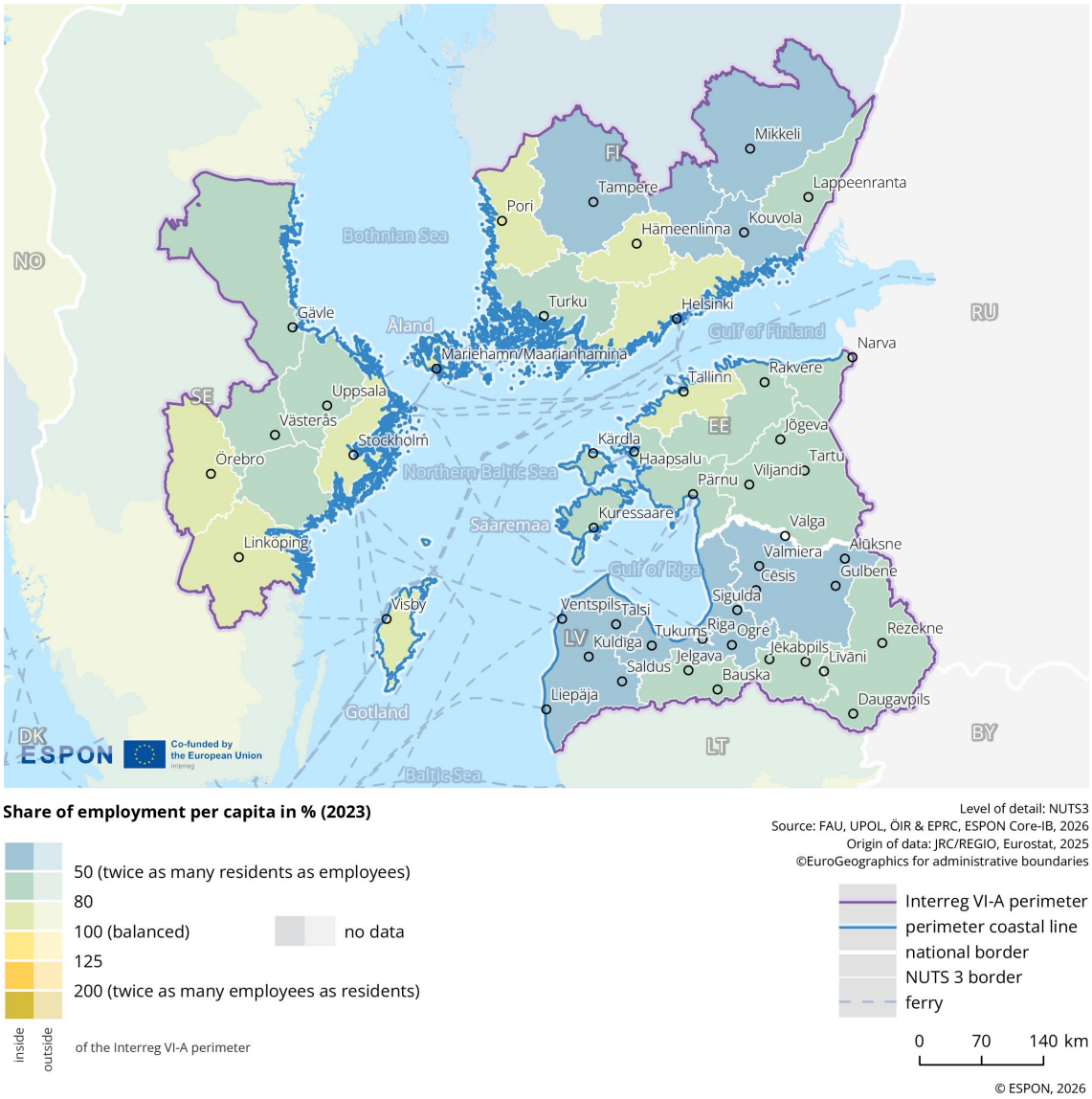
- **Source**: Eurostat, Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO)
- **Temporal coverage**: 2014-2023
- **Unit**: Share in %

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.9 illustrates the share of employment per capita in the population aged 15 to 64 in 2023. The data are categorised into ranges from below 50% (twice as many residents aged 15 to 64 as employees) to above 200% (twice as many employees as residents aged 15 to 64), with 100% representing a balanced ratio. Blue or green-coloured regions indicate more residents aged 15 to 64 than employees, while yellow regions indicate more employees than residents aged 15 to 64.

[7] See also: European Commission 2024: Cross-Border Regional Labour Market Analysis, https://op.europa.eu/s/AazM

Figure 2.9: Employment share[8]



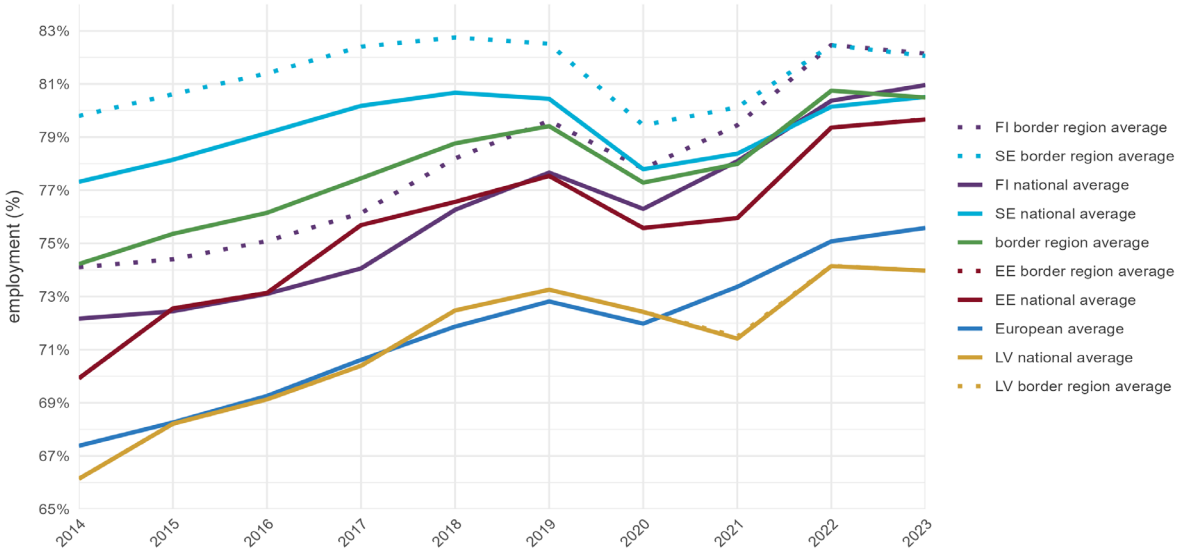
The share of employment in this border region is highly variable, with the regional average reaching 80.5% in 2023, representing an increase of 6.3 percentage points since 2014. There are significant differences between Estonia and Latvia due to variations in values. Values for the share of employment range from 80% to 100% in areas around the Estonian city of Tallinn, the Finnish cities of Helsinki and Hämeenlinna, the north-western part of the Finnish border region, and the Swedish cities of Stockholm and Linköping. Values between 50% and 80% are found in the remaining areas of the Swedish and Estonian parts of the region, as well as around Turku in Finland, and in south-eastern Latvia. In other areas of Estonia and Latvia, the share of employment values falls below 50%. When comparing the share of employment in this border region with different averages, the following can be observed (see Figure 2.10):

- Compared to the European average, values in the cross-border region are 4.9 percentage points higher; in 2014, the difference was 6.8 percentage points.
- Compared to Sweden, values in the cross-border region are at the same level; in 2014, they were 3.1 percentage points lower.

[8] Note: In this map, 'residents' refers to the population aged 15 to 64.

- Compared to Latvia, values in the cross-border region are 6.5 percentage points higher; in 2014, they were 8.1 percentage points higher.
- Compared to Finland, values in the cross-border region are 0.5 percentage points lower; in contrast, in 2014 they were 2 percentage points higher.
- Compared to Estonia, values in the cross-border region are 0.8 percentage points higher, whereas in 2014 they were 4.3 percentage points higher.
- The Swedish border area records values 1.5 percentage points above the Swedish national average. The Finnish border area records values 1.2 percentage points above the Finnish national average. The Estonian and Latvian border areas record the same values as their respective national averages.
- Compared to the average of all cross-border regions, values in this region are 6.4 percentage points higher; in 2014, the difference was 7.9 percentage points.

Figure 2.10: Employment share over time (comparison)



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2.2.2.2 Share of working-age population

Indicator description

This indicator shows the share of people aged 15 to 64 in the total population, reflecting the potential working-age population. The population counted includes all residents who live in the country permanently, excluding foreign students and military personnel. Using the 15–64 age range is a standard European statistical proxy, since differences in retirement age or labour participation across countries cannot be captured systematically. It allows for regional differentiation of potential workforce throughout the border region.

- **Source**: Eurostat, Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO)
- **Temporal coverage**: 2014-2023
- **Unit**: Share in %

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

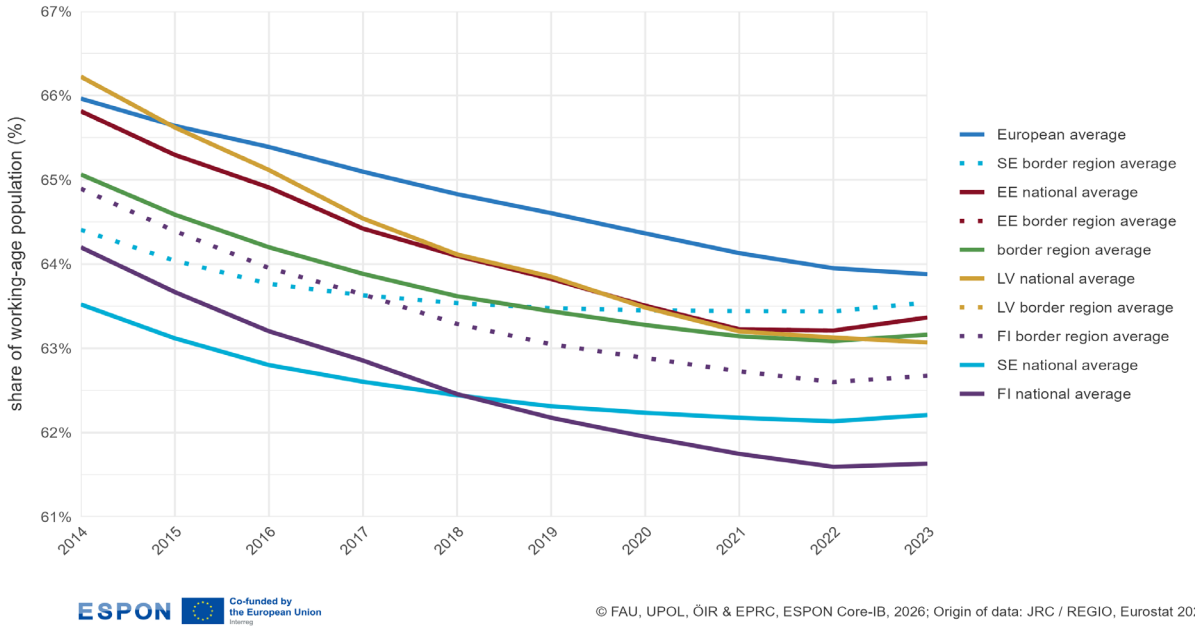
Figure 2.11 shows how the share of the working-age population in the Central Baltic cross-border region has changed between 2014 and 2023. In 2023, the region had an average working-age population share of 63.2%, compared to the European average of 63.9% and to the average of all cross-border regions of 63.7%.

The share of the working-age population in the entire cross-border region is almost equal to the border averages in Estonia (63.4%), Latvia (63.1%) and Sweden (63.5%). Compared to national averages, the regional value is very similar to those of Latvia (63.1%) and Estonia (63.4%), slightly higher than the Swedish national average (62.2%), and moderately higher than the Finnish national average (61.6%).

The region experienced a moderate decrease of 1.9 percentage points in the share of working-age population between 2014 (65.1%) and 2023 (63.2%). This decline is somewhat slower than the European average, which dropped by 2.1 percentage points over the same period. All countries of the Central Baltic programme recorded a decline, with the decrease being moderate on the Finnish side (-2.2 percentage points at the border and -2.6 percentage points nationally), moderate also in Estonia (-2.4 percentage points both regionally and nationally), and moderate in Latvia (-3.1 percentage points both regionally and nationally). In Sweden, the decline was smaller, at 0.9 percentage points in the border regions and 1.3 percentage points nationally.

The Central Baltic cross-border region experienced a moderate overall decline in the share of working-age population between 2014 and 2023. In 2023, the region remained just below both the EU and cross-border averages. A somewhat more favourable demographic trend was observed on the Swedish side.

Figure 2.11: Share of working-age population over time (comparison)



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2.2.2.3 Employment by sector

Indicator description

The indicator differentiates the number of jobs in a region by sector. This indicator focuses on workplace-based employment, providing insight into the employment landscape of a region. The dataset can be disaggregated according to "10-sector" NACE (Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne) classifications, allowing for detailed analysis of employment distribution across various industries.

- **Source**: Eurostat, Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO)
- **Temporal coverage**: 2014-2023
- **Unit**: Share in %

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

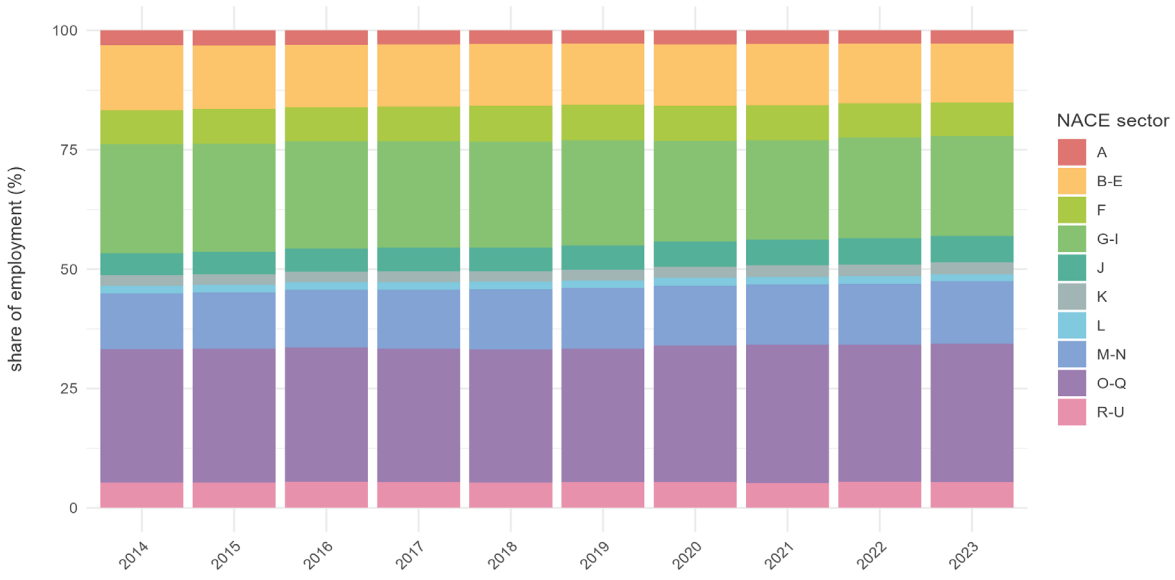
Figure 2.12 illustrates the relative number of jobs in the border area differentiated by sectors. It shows where jobs are located (not where employed persons live). This workplace-based indicator offers insight into the employment structure of a region.

The dataset uses a '10-sector' classification based on NACE categories. The sectoral breakdown is as follows:

- A: Agriculture, forestry and fishing
- B-E: Mining and quarrying (B), Manufacturing (C), Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply (D), Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities (E)
- F: Construction
- G-I: Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (G), Transportation and storage (H), Accommodation and food service activities (I)

- J: Information and communication
- K: Financial and insurance activities
- L: Real estate activities
- M-N: Professional, scientific and technical activities (M), Administrative and support service activities (N)
- O-Q: Education (O), Human health and social work activities (Q)
- R-U: Arts, entertainment and recreation R), Other service activities (S), Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods- and services-producing activities of households for own use (T), Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies (U)

Figure 2.12: Employment by sector (comparison)



A: Agriculture, forestry and fishing
B-E: Mining and quarrying (B), Manufacturing (C), Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply (D), Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities (E)
F: Construction
G-I: Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (G), Transportation and storage (H), Accommodation and food service activities (I)
J: Information and communication
K: Financial and insurance activities
L: Real estate activities
M-N: Professional, scientific and technical activities (M), Administrative and support service activities (N)
O-Q: Education (O), Human health and social work activities (Q)
R-U: Arts, entertainment and recreation (R), Other service activities (S), Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods- and services-producing activities of households for own use (T), Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies (U)

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Between 2014 and 2023, the relative number of jobs in the different sectors remained fairly stable. However, there was a slight decline in the share of employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing (A), wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (G), Transportation and storage (H) and Accommodation and food service activities (I). Conversely, there was a modest increase in the number of jobs in Professional, scientific and technical activities (M), Administrative and support service activities (N) and Information and communication (J).

Throughout this period, the sectors with the highest share of jobs were 'G-I' (wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, transportation and storage, accommodation and food service activities) and 'O-Q' (education, human health and social work activities).

2.2.2.4 Outgoing cross-border commuters

Indicator description

The indicator shows outgoing cross-border commuting dynamics at NUTS3 level. Even though no origin-destination information can be provided, it is assumed that commuters primarily travel across the nearest border. Spatial, economic and population arguments are combined to calculate the number of outgoing cross-border commuters.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Eurostat/LFS data on outgoing commuters currently available on NUTS2 level has been regionalised for NUTS3 by means of weighting by border length, NUTS3 population-weighted centroid distance to border, population per NUTS3 region (15–64 years old) and real compensation per employee
- **Temporal coverage**: 2015-2023
- **Unit**: Share in %

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Commuting is one of the most relevant cross-border flows for identifying functional linkages. Figure 2.13 shows the share of outgoing commuters per capita for each NUTS3 region (more concretely speaking the share of outgoing commuters among the residential population of the age group 15-64 years old, resembling the potential labour force). Although origin-destination information cannot be provided, the share of outgoing commuters in regions close to the border indicates the relevance of commuting. This highlights functional relations in the labour market within the cross-border region.

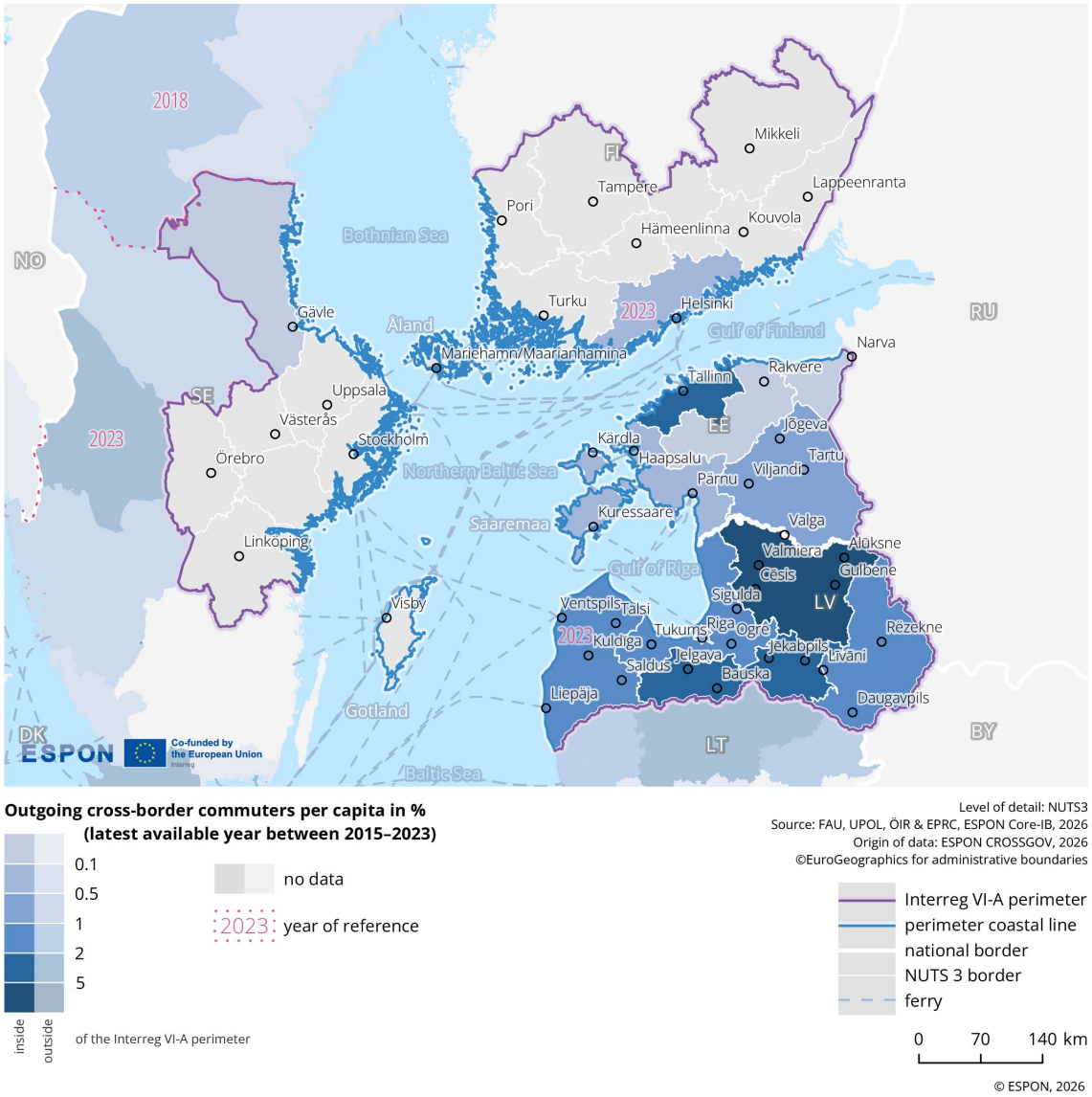
The Figure 2.13 shows the share of cross-border commuters, based on data from the most recent year available. It shows relatively strong cross-border commuting activity in areas mainly in Latvia and Estonia.

The Vidzeme region in Latvia stands out, with its high number of outgoing commuters, which highlights the important role of this area in cross-border mobility. Other 'hotspots' include the Latvian region of Zemgale and the Estonian region of Põhja-Eesti, though with slightly lower levels.[9]

Notably, there are also outgoing commuters in the regions of Helsinki-Uusimaa (Finland), suggesting a level of maritime cross-border commuting with Põhja-Eesti.

[9] See Eurostat Statistical Atlas for NUTS3 (2021) regions: https://ec.europa.eu/statistical-atlas/viewer/?config=typologies.json&ch=NUTS&mids=BKGCNT,NUTS2021L3,CNTOVL&o=1,1,0.7&center=49.69576,14.3332,4&lcis=NUTS2021L3&

Figure 2.13: Outgoing cross-border commuting patterns



2.2.2.5 Cross-border telework agreements

Indicator description

The indicator shows what kind of legal framework for cross-border telework is enacted.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: The indicator is based on information about the legal framework for social security regarding cross-border teleworking, categorised by border pair.
- **Temporal coverage**: Status as of March 2025
- **Unit**: n/a

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Finland and Sweden have signed the 2023 Framework Agreement on Cross-Border Telework, and Estonia is committed to signing it. This agreement allows cross-border workers to telework from their country of residence for up to 50% of their total working time without affecting their social security affiliation. The agreement applies if both the employee's country of residence and employer's country have signed it. As Latvia has not signed the Framework Agreement, the standard rules under Article 13 of Regulation (EC) No. 883/2004 apply instead. This generally limits cross-border telework to 25% of the total working time; beyond this limit, social security affiliation may shift to the country of residence.

2.2.3 Competitiveness

This sub-dimension illustrates the competitiveness of the border region by analysing the main industry sectors that contribute to its economic development. It assesses gross value added (GVA) at basic prices by sector, as well as nominal compensation per hour worked, in order to understand productivity levels and sectoral strengths.

2.2.3.1 Gross value added at basic prices by sector

Indicator description

The indicator shows the gross value added (GVA), which is a measure of the contribution of a country or region to the economy. Regional GVA represents the value generated by all units involved in the production of goods and services within a specific area. This indicator can be disaggregated by industry and service sector, allowing for a detailed analysis of economic contributions across different fields. Additionally, the sum of GVA across all industries or sectors, combined with taxes on products and minus subsidies on products, yields the gross domestic product (GDP) of the region. The dataset is available in "10-sector" NACE classifications, facilitating comprehensive evaluations of the regional economy.

- **Source**: Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO)
- **Temporal coverage**: 2014-2023
- **Unit**: Million purchasing power standards (PPS)

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.14 visualises gross value added (GVA), which is an important indicator of economic activity. GVA measures the value created by all economic activities involved in producing goods and services in a specific area. It is differentiated by sectors to provide detailed insights into the economic contributions of different fields.

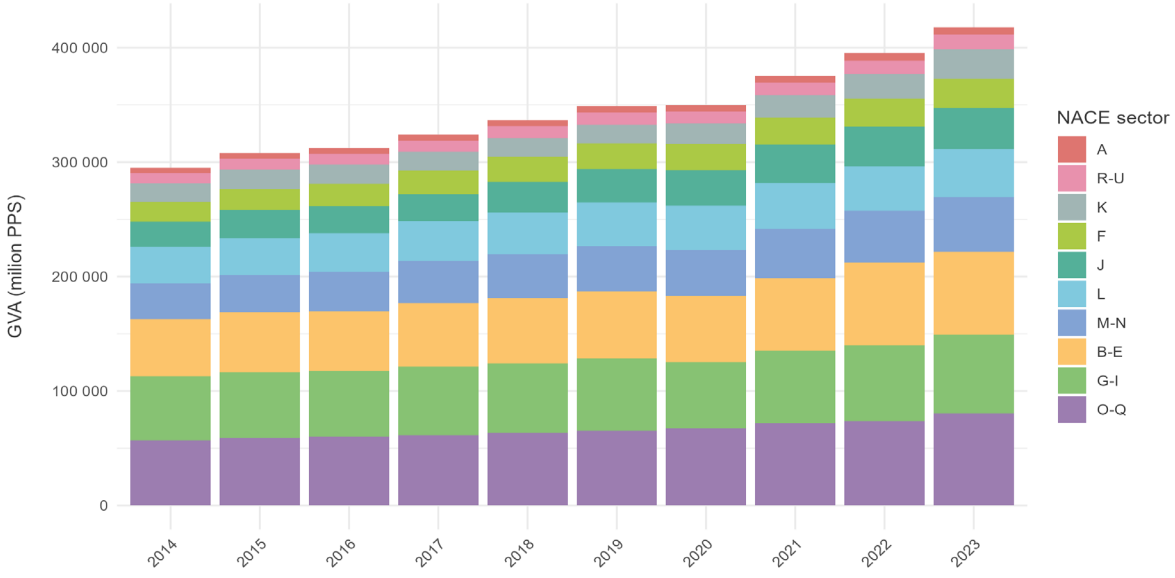
The dataset uses a '10-sector' classification based on NACE categories. The sectoral breakdown is as follows:

- A: Agriculture, forestry and fishing
- B-E: Mining and quarrying (B), Manufacturing (C), Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply (D), Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities (E)
- F: Construction
- G-I: Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (G), Transportation and storage (H), Accommodation and food service activities (I)
- J: Information and communication
- K: Financial and insurance activities
- L: Real estate activities
- M-N: Professional, scientific and technical activities (M), Administrative and support service activities (N)

- O-Q: Education (O), Human health and social work activities (Q)
- R-U: Arts, entertainment and recreation R), Other service activities (S), Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods- and services-producing activities of households for own use (T), Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies (U)

Between 2014 and 2023, the GVA in the Central Baltic programme area increased from 295,139 million purchasing power standards (PPS) to 417,690 million PPS — a growth of 42%. Sector groups B–E (such as manufacturing, electricity, gas), G–I (such as wholesale, transportation and storage), and O–Q (such as education, human health) together accounted for over half of the total GVA, highlighting their significant contribution to the regional economy, including the blue economy, within the cross-border region. The sector groups O–Q contributed the largest share, with a total of 80,424 million PPS in 2023. This underlines the importance of sectors such as Education (O), Human health and social work activities (Q) in the Central Baltic programme area.

Figure 2.14: Gross value added at basic prices by sector (comparison)



A: Agriculture, forestry and fishing
B-E: Mining and quarrying (B), Manufacturing (C), Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply (D), Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities (E)
F: Construction
G-I: Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (G), Transportation and storage (H), Accommodation and food service activities (I)
J: Information and communication
K: Financial and insurance activities
L: Real estate activities
M-N: Professional, scientific and technical activities (M), Administrative and support service activities (N)
O-Q: Education (O), Human health and social work activities (Q)
R-U: Arts, entertainment and recreation (R), Other service activities (S), Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods- and services-producing activities of households for own use (T), Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies (U)

2.2.3.2 Nominal compensation per hour worked

Indicator description

The indicator shows the average income paid for each hour worked, known as compensation per hour worked. This measure is calculated by dividing the "compensation of employees at current prices" by the total number of "hours worked (employees)." Employees, in this context, are defined as individuals engaged by contract in productive activities for a resident unit, receiving remuneration irrespective of their place of residence. The total hours worked is considered the most appropriate measure of labour input, representing the aggregate number of hours actually worked by employees. This indicator provides valuable insights into labour productivity and wage dynamics within the economy.

- **Source**: Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO)
- **Temporal coverage**: 2023 (missing data from 2023 in Switzerland were supplemented by values from 2022)
- **Unit**: Euro

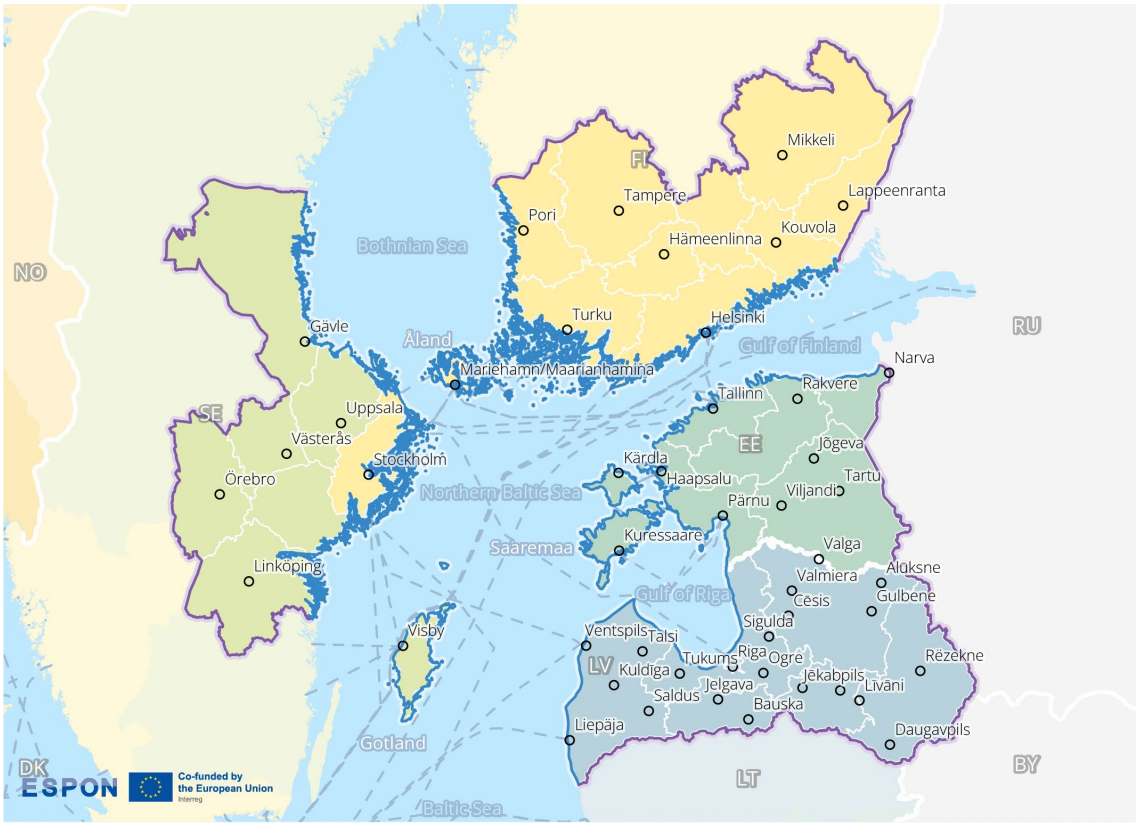
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.15 shows the average values for the 'compensation per hour worked'. This indicator is calculated by dividing the total compensation of employees (at current prices) by the total number of hours worked by those employees. In this context, 'employees' are defined as individuals engaged by contract in productive activities. The data is available for the place of work, regardless of the place of residence. Total hours worked represent the actual number of hours worked by employees and are considered the most accurate measure of labour input.

In 2023, the nominal compensation per hour worked in the Central Baltic programme area appears to be somewhat unevenly distributed. In most Swedish regions, the average hourly income ranges between €20 and €30, which is in line with the Swedish national average of €31.20 per hour worked (based on 2023 data). Only the county of Stockholm (€37.30) reports a slightly higher value. In the Finnish regions, the average hourly income ranges between €30 and €40, which is also in line with the Finnish national average of €32.50 per hour worked (data for 2023). No region reports values significantly above the general range. In the Estonian part of this cross-border region, the average hourly income ranges between €15 and €20, which is in line with the Estonian national average of €18.30 per hour worked (data for 2023). No region reports a value above the general range. In the Latvian regions, the average hourly income ranges between €10 and €15 (national average of €13.70), with Riga showing the highest value (€14.90).

Cross-border wage differences can encourage labour migration from lower-wage areas to more economically prosperous neighbouring regions, creating both opportunities and challenges for local labour markets and social systems.

Figure 2.15: Average income per hour



Average income per hour worked in euros (2023)

5
10
15
20
30
40
50
60
inside
outside
of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

no data

Level of detail: NUTS3
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ARDECO database, JRC / REGIO, 2006–2023
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Interreg VI-A perimeter
perimeter coastal line
national border
NUTS 3 border
ferry

0 70 140 km

2.2.4 Infrastructure and housing

This sub-dimension shows the impact of the border on infrastructure and housing in the region. It assesses housing prices and average internet speed in order to identify cross-border effects, including potential price spillovers and disparities. The analysis reveals whether infrastructure and housing markets facilitate integration or expose structural challenges that are specific to the border area.

2.2.4.1 Advertised sales prices

Indicator description

The indicator shows the advertised sales price per square meter for houses/appartements as retrieved from commercial real estate websites at national level. In the cross-border region, local differences between average sales prices are highlighted and the "cutting" effect of the border and its influence on price levels is visualised.

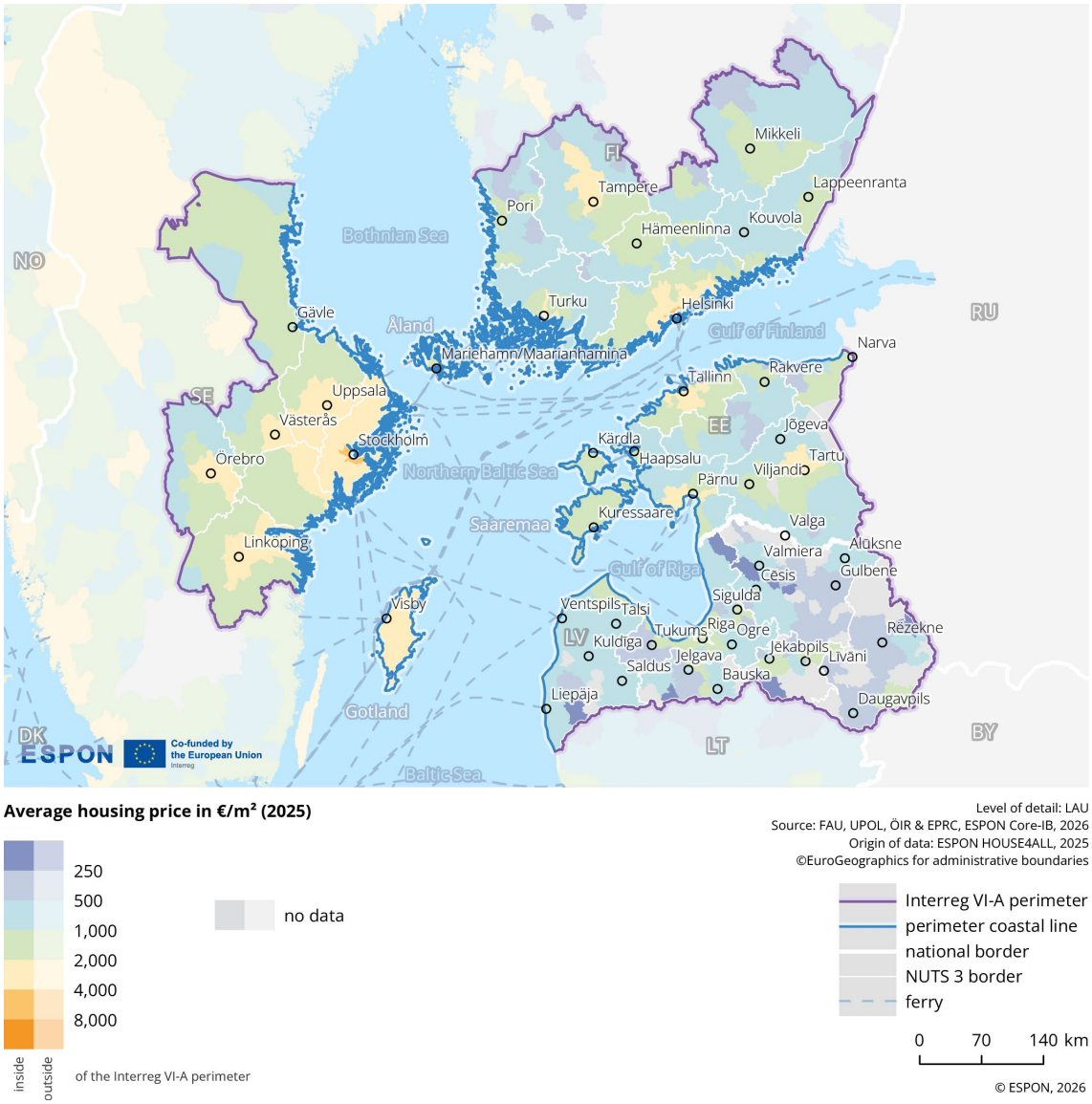
- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processed ESPON House4all data. The original data is collected via web-scraping of national listing websites over a one-year period.
- **Temporal coverage**: 2024/2025
- **Unit**: Average price per square meter (€/m^2)

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.16 illustrates the advertised sales price of housing in 2025 across the border region. The data are categorised into ranges of average housing price per square metre, from below 250 €/m² up to more than 8,000 €/m², shown in colours ranging from purple and blue to green, yellow and orange.

The Figure 2.16 shows that the highest prices are in Sweden, with a large area around the cities of Uppsala and Linköping falling into the up to €4,000/m² category. Prices in the capital city of Stockholm are even higher, in the category up to €8,000/m². In the northern part of the Swedish cross-border region, prices range from €500/m² to €2,000/m². The other 2 countries, Finland and Estonia, exhibit a mixed pattern, with prices in the lower 3 categories ranging from €250/m² to €2,000/m². Higher prices are found around Finnish cities such as Tampere and Turku, while the small area of Helsinki fails into the next category up (up to €8,000/m²). In Estonia, land in the price category up to €4,000/m² is also found in the cities of Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu. The lowest prices are in Latvia, where there are also areas with prices below €250/m². The border forms a clear divide in terms of prices, particularly between Estonia and Latvia.

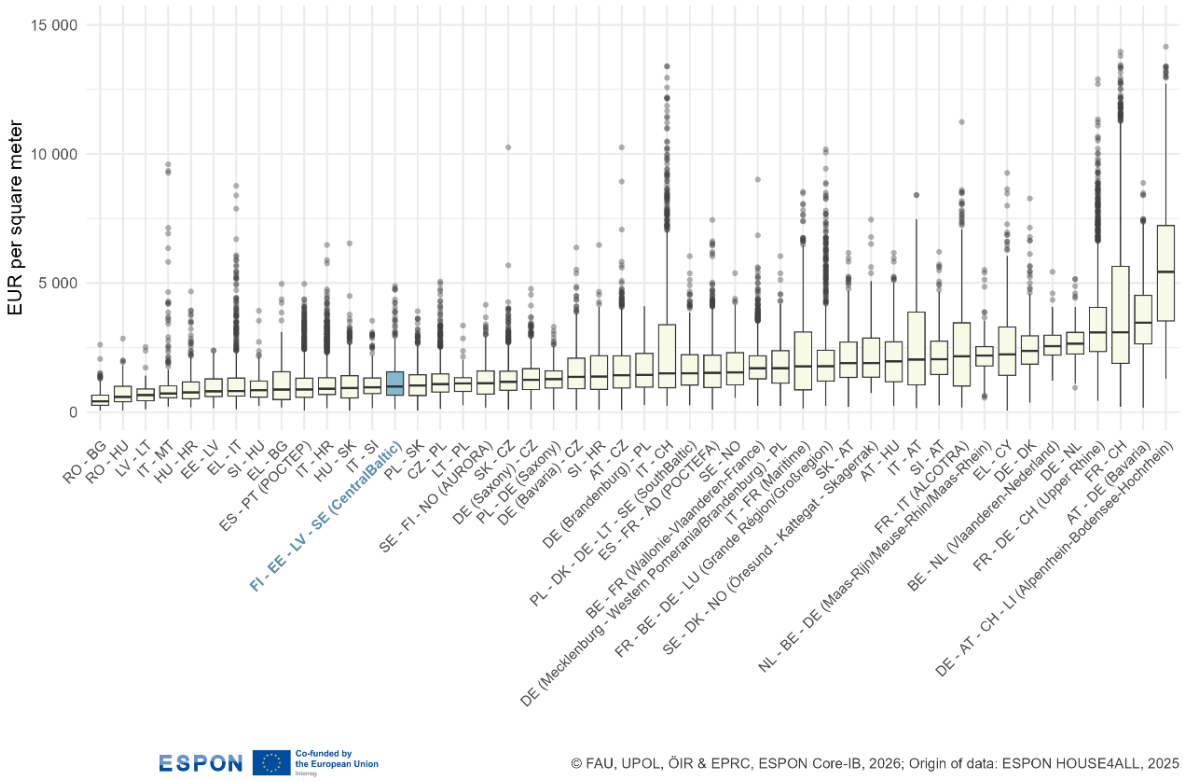
Figure 2.16: Advertised housing prices



The Finnish part of the cross-border programme area records an average advertised residential sales price of approximately €1,147 per square metre. Higher prices are observed in the Swedish part, with an average of about €2,022 per square metre, while the Estonian and Latvian parts report average prices of approximately €1,208 and €759 per square metre, respectively. Overall, the average advertised sales price across the entire cross-border programme area is estimated at €1,266 per square metre. This value is below the average for all EU-evaluated border regions (€1,900 per square metre) and remains well below the European average of approximately €5,600 per square metre.

The average advertised sales price in this entire programme area is €1,266/m², it is below the average of all EU evaluated border regions, which is €1,900/m². The prices are below European average of €5,600/m².

Figure 2.17: Advertised housing prices (comparison)



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2.2.4.2 Average internet speed

Indicator description

The indicator shows the population weighted average internet speed available at municipal level. It highlights differences in the "digital preparedness". In border regions, this indicator is particularly relevant for identifying digital infrastructure gaps that may hamper balanced development and cross-border integration.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing of data provided by Speedtest by Ookla Global Fixed and Mobile Network Performance Maps, based on Ookla's analysis of Speedtest Intelligence data.
- **Temporal coverage**: 2022
- **Unit**: Download speed in Mbps

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

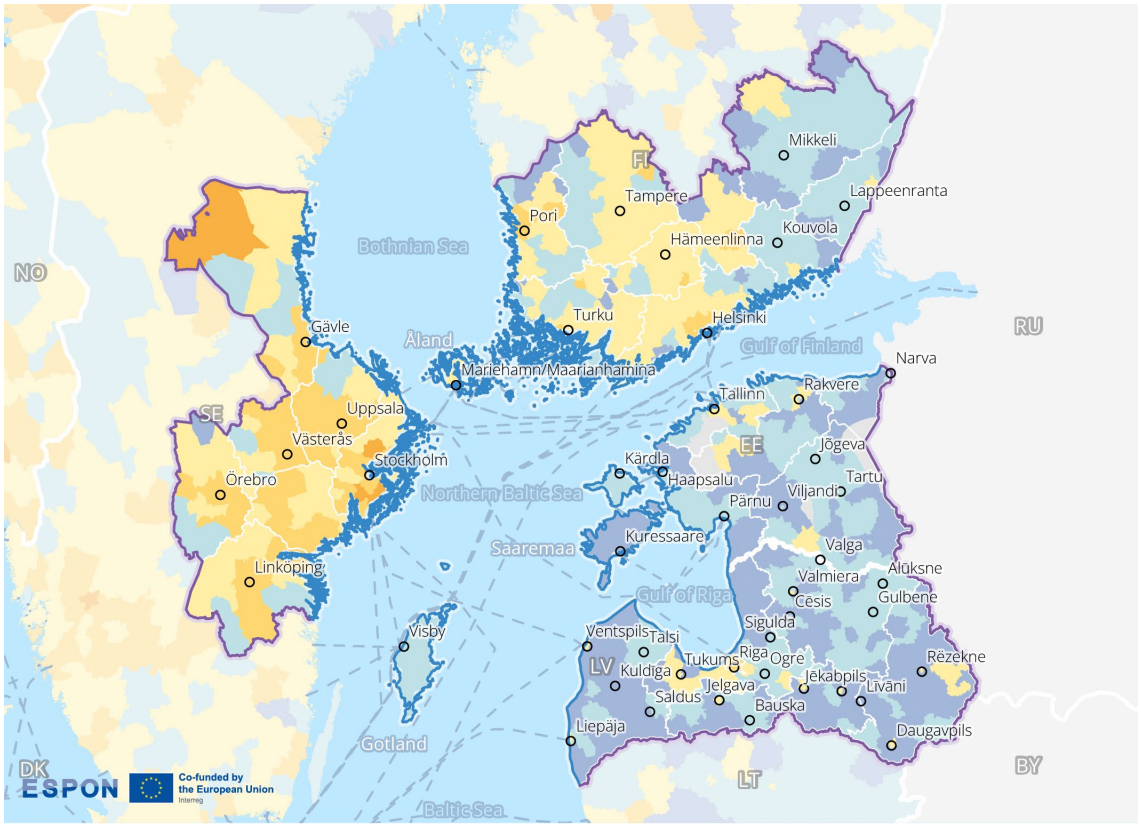
Digitalisation is a highly relevant issue in the European border regions, with the overarching objective of ensuring appropriate digital access. It is widely recognised as a key precondition for successful regional and economic development. A major challenge in this process is preventing 'digital divides'—i.e., avoiding significant disparities in economic, social, and spatial terms.

Average internet speed is an important indicator of such disparities, highlighting differences in 'digital preparedness' at a local level. Figure 2.18 illustrates the average download speed at the municipality

level. The colour scheme ranges from dark blue (very slow speeds) to orange (very fast speeds). Average download speeds are expressed in megabits per second (Mbps), not to be confused with megabytes per second (MBps). The data, prepared by OBC Transeuropa for EDJNet, is based on Speedtest Intelligence data from Speedtest/Ookla's Global Fixed and Mobile Network Performance Maps for the first quarter of 2022. The average download speeds are expressed in megabits per second (Mbps), not to be confused with megabytes per second (MBps).

The Figure 2.18 reveals significant differences between urban and rural areas. Values range from under 50 Mbps to over 200 Mbps. Cities such as Tampere, Hämeenlinna, Turku, Helsinki, Tallinn, Riga, Jelgava, Rēzekne, Ventspils, Jēkabpils, Uppsala, Linköping, and Stockholm report relatively high average speeds, whereas the surrounding areas tend to have significantly lower values. This may be due to the greater return on investment typically associated with digital infrastructure projects in urban areas compared to rural ones. However, not all urban areas in this cross-border programme area have high download speeds. For example, Mikkeli, Narva, Haapsalu, Kuressaare, Tartu, Pärnu, Valmiera, Ogre, and Liepāja do not stand out in this regard. In the case of islands and remote coastal areas, digital disparities must be understood in the specific context of maritime geography. These territories often face structural disadvantages in connectivity compared to the mainland due to their physical isolation, limited infrastructure, and the higher costs of network deployment and maintenance.

Figure 2.18: Average internet download speed



Average internet speed in Mbps (2022)

50
100
150
200
inside
outside
of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

no data

Level of detail: LAU
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: Ornaldo Gjergji, European Data Journalism Network, 2022
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Interreg VI-A perimeter
perimeter coastal line
national border
NUTS 3 border
ferry

0 70 140 km

© ESPON, 2026

2.2.5 Key messages on the economic dimension

The Central Baltic cross-border programme area is relatively wealthy, with a GDP per capita reaching 127.2% of the EU average in 2022. Nonetheless, notable regional disparities persist, reflected in uneven levels of GDP per capita and differing growth trajectories. The Swedish and Finnish border regions record GDP per capita rates significantly above the EU average, yet their growth in recent years has been moderate. In contrast, in Estonia and Latvia growth has been above the EU average, but their GDP per capita levels remain below the EU average. This highlights the potential for cross-border knowledge transfer, innovation diffusion, and coordination in economic development.

The share of employment is also highly variable. Areas around major cities, such as Tallinn, Helsinki, Hämeenlinna, Stockholm, and Linköping, along with north-western Finland, exhibit high employment shares, reflecting strong labour markets and diversified economies. In contrast, many areas in Estonia and Latvia record lower employment rates, pointing to more limited job opportunities, slower economic development, and the risk of continued out-migration. This underscores persistent urban–rural divides, reinforcing migration pressures from rural areas toward urban hubs.

Between 2014 and 2023, the relative number of jobs available in the different sectors remained fairly stable. The highest share of jobs was recorded in the categories of 'G-I' (e.g., wholesale, transportation and storage) and 'O-Q' (e.g., education, human health, social activities), with the latter contributing the largest share of the GVA in the programme area. This underlines the importance of skills and workers in education, human health and social activities, a sector that is also directly affected by demographic ageing.

In terms of cross-border commuting, the available data shows that there is relatively strong cross-border commuting activity in Latvia and Estonia. Cross-border mobility is shown to be particularly high in the Vidzeme region in Latvia, making it a central hub for outgoing commuters. There are also other examples with slightly lower levels of outgoing commuters, including the Latvian region of Zemgale and the Estonian region of Lääne-Eesti. Cross-border commuting patterns are also noted in the case of Estonia and Finland. The higher wage levels and the shortage of workforce in Finland have contributed to the labour mobility from Estonia (ESPON CROSSGOV).

There are substantial differences in wage levels in the cross-border programme area, with higher levels found in the Finnish and Swedish border regions. Various telework agreements can facilitate labour mobility, such as the 2023 Framework Agreement on Cross-Border Telework, which Finland and Sweden have signed. This allows workers from these countries to telework from their country of residence for up to 50% of their total working time without affecting their social security affiliation.

House prices also vary significantly across the programme area. The highest housing prices are in Sweden and Finland (especially in Stockholm and Helsinki), although prices are also high in many Estonian cities. In contrast, the lowest prices are found in Latvia. House prices therefore form a clear divide, especially between Estonia and Latvia, but also between the urban and rural areas.

There are significant differences in internet accessibility especially between urban and rural and island areas in the programme area, with higher speeds largely recorded in urban areas (although not all urban areas benefit from higher speeds). This digital divide affects economic inclusion, access to services, and the potential for telework or digital entrepreneurship.

2.3 Green dimension

The green dimension highlights the environmental characteristics, vulnerabilities and sustainability-related interactions within the border region. The analysis provides insight into the environmental interdependence of border regions. Additionally, the spatial distribution of renewable and conventional energy infrastructure, alongside indicators of resources and the circular economy, reveals whether the border facilitates collaborative transitions towards sustainability.

2.3.1 Nature protection and pollution

This sub-dimension investigates cross-border functional links in protected areas and areas affected by air and water pollution. It analyses the presence of protected areas in order to identify cross-border ecological links and conservation efforts. It also highlights the extent to which air and water pollution affects people living in border regions.

2.3.1.1 Protected areas

Indicator description

The indicator shows the presence and territorial coverage of protected areas based on the combination of 3 data sources, i.e., Nationally designated areas, Natura 2000 Network and Emerald Network.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: The indicator represents a combination of nationally designated areas, Natura 2000 and Emerald network provided by EEA (European Environment Agency) Geospatial data catalogue.
- **Temporal coverage**: 2024
- **Unit**: n/a

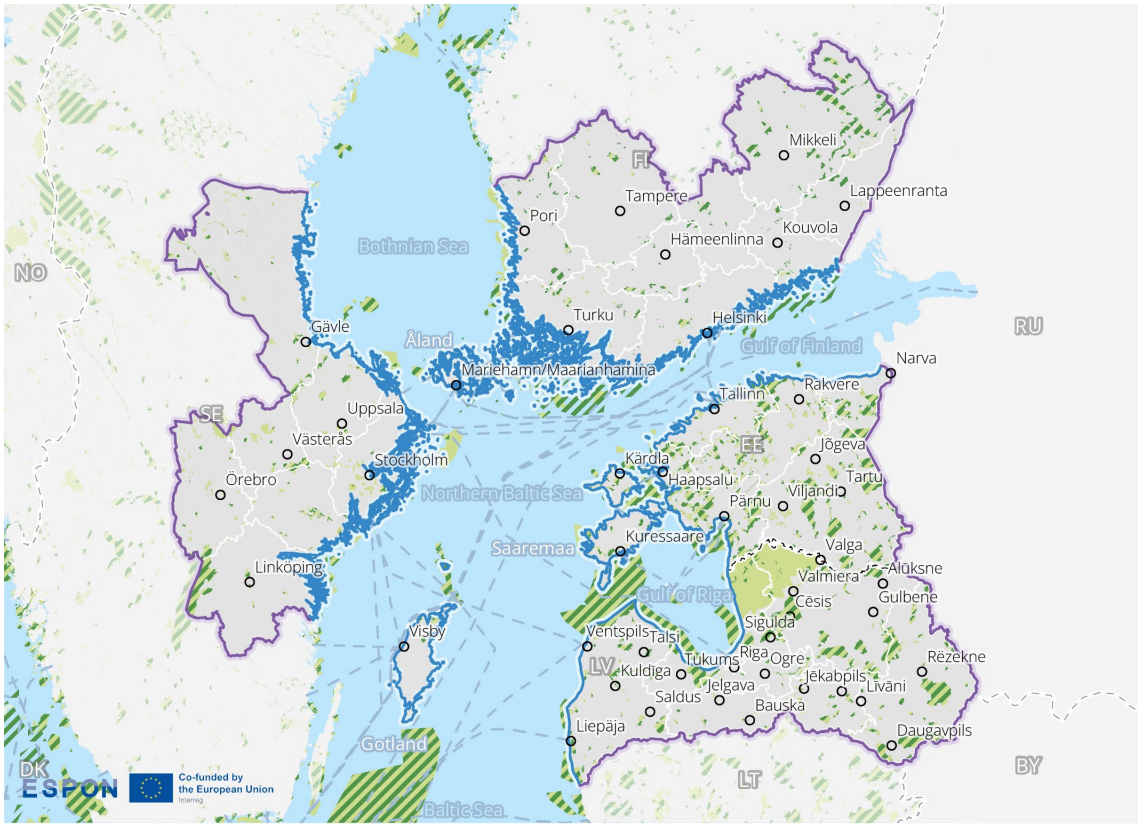
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.19 illustrates the distribution of protected areas in 2024 across the border region. The data differentiate between Natura 2000 sites, the Emerald Network, and nationally designated protected areas, with only protected areas larger than 4 km² displayed.

Protected areas within the Central Baltic programme area are heavily concentrated along the Baltic Sea coast and archipelagos, especially around Åland, Turku, and the Estonian western islands, where marine and coastal Natura 2000 sites dominate. Inland areas in Latvia and Estonia include smaller and more dispersed protected zones, while regions around Linköping, Tampere, and Riga have relatively sparse coverage.

Numerous marine protected areas form dense cross-border networks across the Baltic Sea, particularly between Estonia and Latvia. The coastal and marine areas are highly interconnected, while inland protected zones remain more fragmented and lack extensive cross-border continuity with very few exceptions at the Estonian-Latvian border.

Figure 2.19: Nature protected areas



European protected areas (2024)

- Natura2000
- Emerald Network
- national designated protected area

inside / outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Only protected areas larger than 4km² were visualised on the map.

Level of detail: geolocalised areas greater then 4 km²
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON CROSSGOV, 2026
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- perimeter coastal line
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

2.3.1.2 Air pollution

Indicator description

The indicator shows the air pollution from fine particulates (PM2.5) at NUTS3 level. The data shows the population-weighted average air pollution level (µg/m³), providing an indication of the extent to which the regional population is affected by air pollution.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing and analysis of European Environment Agency data
- **Temporal coverage**: 2022
- **Unit**: Population weighted average of µg/m³

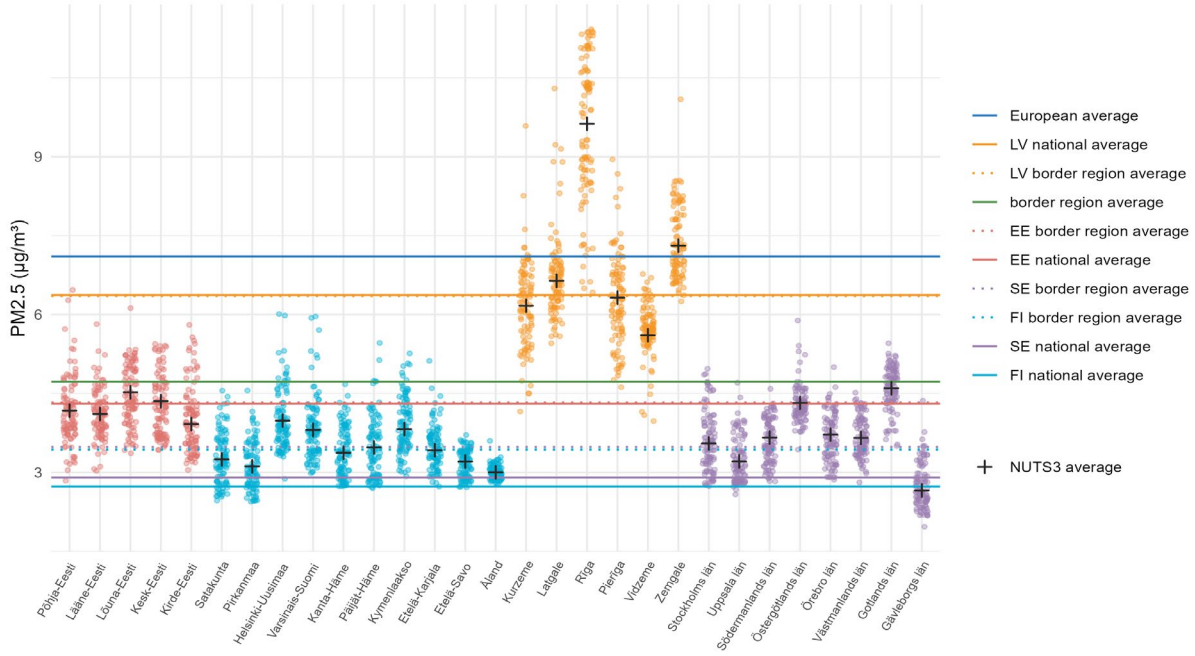
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

This graph illustrates PM2.5 concentrations (in µg/m³) across NUTS3 regions in Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Sweden in the Central Baltic cross-border programme area. Each small dot represents an individual measurement, while the black crosses indicate the average PM2.5 concentration for each NUTS3 region.[10] The regions are aligned along the x-axis, with Estonian regions on the left (in red), Finnish regions in blue, Latvian regions in orange and Swedish regions on the right (in purple).

PM2.5 measurements in the Finnish, Swedish, and Estonian regions are relatively tightly clustered, with most values ranging between 2 and 6 µg/m³. Latvia exhibits higher and more variable PM2.5 levels, with some regions reaching values close to or above 7 µg/m³. The broader vertical spread suggests significant regional variation. Overall, at the national level, Latvia records a higher average PM2.5 level than the other 3 countries.

The European average is around 7 µg/m³, which is significantly higher than both the national and border region averages of all 4 countries. It also exceeds the cross-border average. The cross-border average is closely aligned with the Estonian national average, at a PM2.5 level of around 4.5 µg/m³ and reflects a combination of the higher Latvian values and the lower PM2.5 levels observed in the Swedish and Finnish border regions.

Figure 2.20: Air pollution



ESPON Co-funded by the European Union Interreg

[10] See Eurostat Statistical Atlas for NUTS3 (2021) regions: https://ec.europa.eu/statistical-atlas/viewer/?config=typologies.json&ch=NUTS&mids=BKGCNT,NUTS2021L3,CNTOVL&o=1,1,0.7&center=49.69576,14.3332,4&lcis=NUTS2021L3&

2.3.1.3 Water pollution

Indicator description

The indicator shows the ecological status or potential for coastal and river water bodies. It is based on an assessment of biological, hydro-morphological, chemical and physico-chemical quality elements.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing and analysis of European Environment Agency data
- **Temporal coverage**: 2022 (supplemented by 2016 data)
- **Unit**: n/a

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.21 illustrates the levels of water pollution in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Sweden within the Central Baltic programme area in 2022. For Finland, however, data is only available for 2016. Water quality is represented using 6 colour-coded categories, ranging from "bad" to "high", including an "unknown" category.[11]

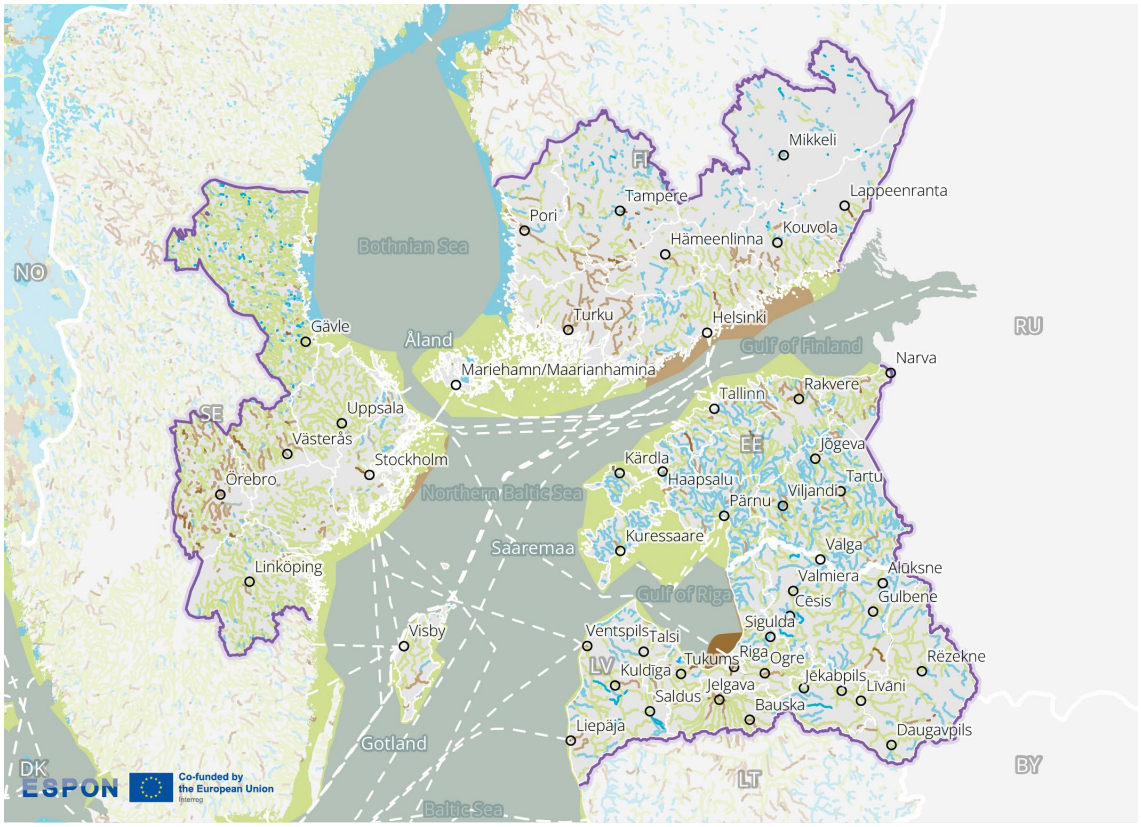
The Finnish part of the Central Baltic programme area shows clear spatial differences. While inland areas exhibit rather mixed water quality, the coastal areas are more distinctly divided: the north-western coast is rated as having "high" water quality, the southern coast is mostly "moderate", and the south-eastern coast around the city of Helsinki is rated as "poor".

The Swedish part of the Central Baltic programme area is predominantly characterised by "moderate" water quality. However, some areas in the central eastern region and parts of the central western coastline are rated as "bad", whereas the northern coastal area is rated as "high".

Estonia and Latvia predominantly show "moderate" to "good"/"high" water quality, with a few exceptions of rivers classified as "poor" or "bad". The overall Estonian coastal area is rated as "moderate", while the Latvian coast is also mostly "moderate" — except for the area around the city of Riga, where the water quality is rated as "bad".

[11] For more information see the Water Framework Directive Reporting Guidance (2022): https://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/WFD/WFD_715_2022

Figure 2.21: Water quality patterns



Water quality (2022*)

- high
- good
- moderate
- poor
- bad
- unknown

inside outside inside outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

* for Finland, year 2016 was visualised due to missing data from 2022

Level of detail: geolocalised lines and areas
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: © European Environment Agency, 2025
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

2.3.2 Climate risks and resilience

This sub-dimension examines cross-border functional links relating to climate risks and resilience. It analyses exposure to natural hazards such as landslides, earthquakes, droughts and floods in order to identify vulnerabilities and risks.

2.3.2.1 Natural hazard risks

Indicator description

The indicator shows the risk the border region is facing in relation to natural hazards (floods, droughts, landslides and earthquakes). The map highlights potential cross-border affectedness and allows to judge the relative relevance of each risk for the cross-border region.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: The indicator is based on geodata from the Disaster Management Risk Knowledge Centre/JRC. It provides the likelihood of specific natural hazard events at grid level.
- **Temporal coverage**: 2024
- **Unit**: n/a

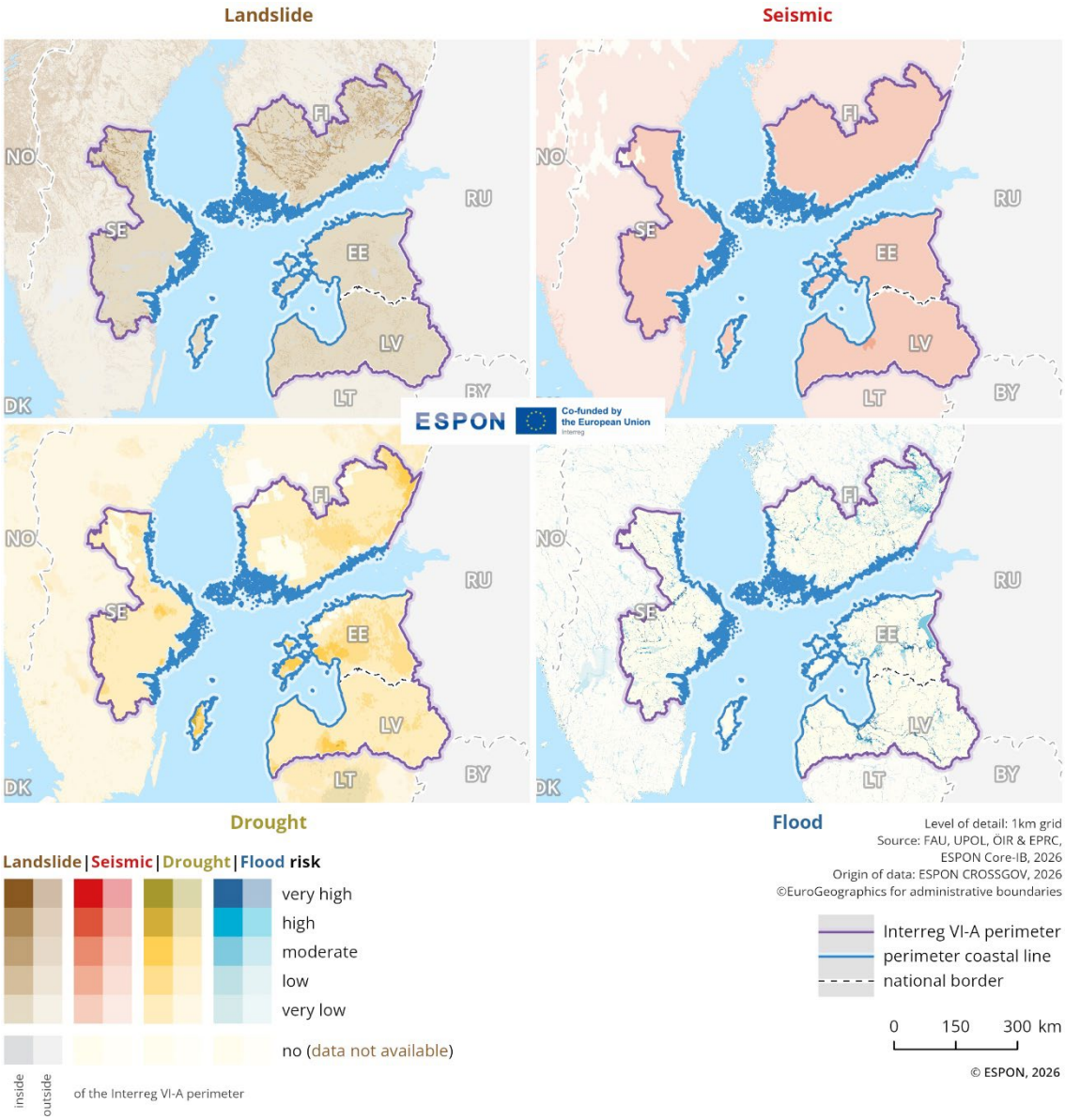
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.22 illustrate the spatial distribution of natural hazards in the Central Baltic programme area, highlighting areas where risks are shared across national boundaries and where risks are not necessarily cross-border relevant.

The Central Baltic programme area has a very low risk of landslides, earthquakes and floodings that is shared across all sides of the border. The risk of droughts, albeit still largely very low or low, vary somewhat more within the Central Baltic programme area. However, with the impact of climate change the region is expected to face an increased risk of natural disasters in the future.[12]

[12] European Commission (2024) Strengthening the Resilience of EU Border Regions, Mapping Risks & Crisis Management Tools and Identifying Gaps, March 2024

Figure 2.22: Natural hazard risks



2.3.3 (Renewable) Energy and energy infrastructure

This sub-dimension assesses cross-border functional links in energy supply and infrastructure, focusing on existing connections and missing links. The distribution of power lines, energy infrastructure and power stations is analysed to identify supply patterns and potential integration gaps. The analysis reveals whether the border facilitates energy cooperation and connectivity, or if infrastructural differences create barriers.[13]

2.3.3.1 Power lines and energy infrastructure

Indicator description

The indicator shows the distribution of power lines and energy infrastructures in the cross-border region. The geodata highlights the existing links and gaps in the cross-border interconnections of the energy transmission network.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Geodata on high-voltage energy infrastructure (100 kV and above) has been collected and processed from OpenStreetMap.
- **Temporal coverage**: 2025
- **Unit**: kV

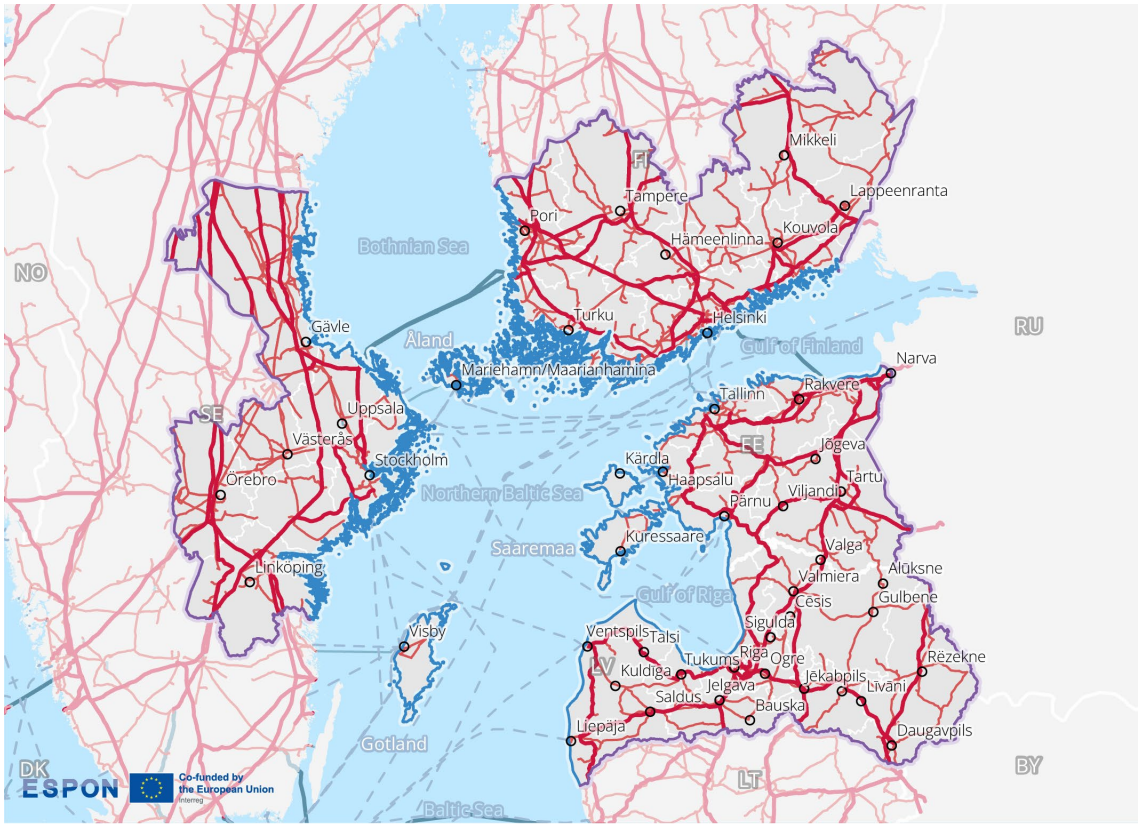
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.23 illustrates the distribution of power lines and cables in 2025 across the border region. The data distinguish between overhead and underground power lies, further classified into high-voltage (100-230 kV), extra high-voltage (230-1,000 kV), and ultra-high voltage (above 1,000 kV).

The Central Baltic programme area has extensive and dense high- and extra-high-voltage transmission infrastructure. The extra high-voltage networks primarily connect the main and significant populated areas in each country. Sweden and Finland are connected by submarine cables, as are Finland and Estonia. Estonia and Latvia are connected at 3 points along their shared border (twice with extra high-voltage lines) at regular intervals.

[13] See also: European Commission 2025: Handbook on Cross-border Energy Communities, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/studies/2025/Handbook_on_Cross-border_Energy_Communities.pdf

Figure 2.23: High-voltage transmission infrastructure



Overhead power lines (2025)

- High Voltage (100–230 kV)
- Extra High Voltage (230–1.000 kV)
- Ultra High Voltage (1.000 kV+)

Underground power cables (2025)

- High Voltage (100–230 kV)
- Extra High Voltage (230–1.000 kV)
- Ultra High Voltage (1.000 kV+)

inside / outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

ANSI Standard C84.1 was used for classification of power lines.

Level of detail: geolocated lines
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON CROSSGOV, 2026
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- perimeter coastal line
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

2.3.3.2 Power stations

Indicator description

The indicator shows the location of power stations by type and energy production levels (coal, gas and oil, nuclear, hydro). It can indicate differences and complementarities in the national energy supply systems as well as highlight potential supply-demand links when viewed in conjunction with power lines infrastructure.

- **Source**: OpenStreetMap, Global Energy Monitor, JRC Hydro-power plants database
- **Temporal coverage**: 2025
- **Unit**: MW

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

In the Central Baltic programme area, there are 60 power station/plant locations. These are primarily gas and oil power stations (25 in total, however, there are more than 40 operations in total) (see Table 1).

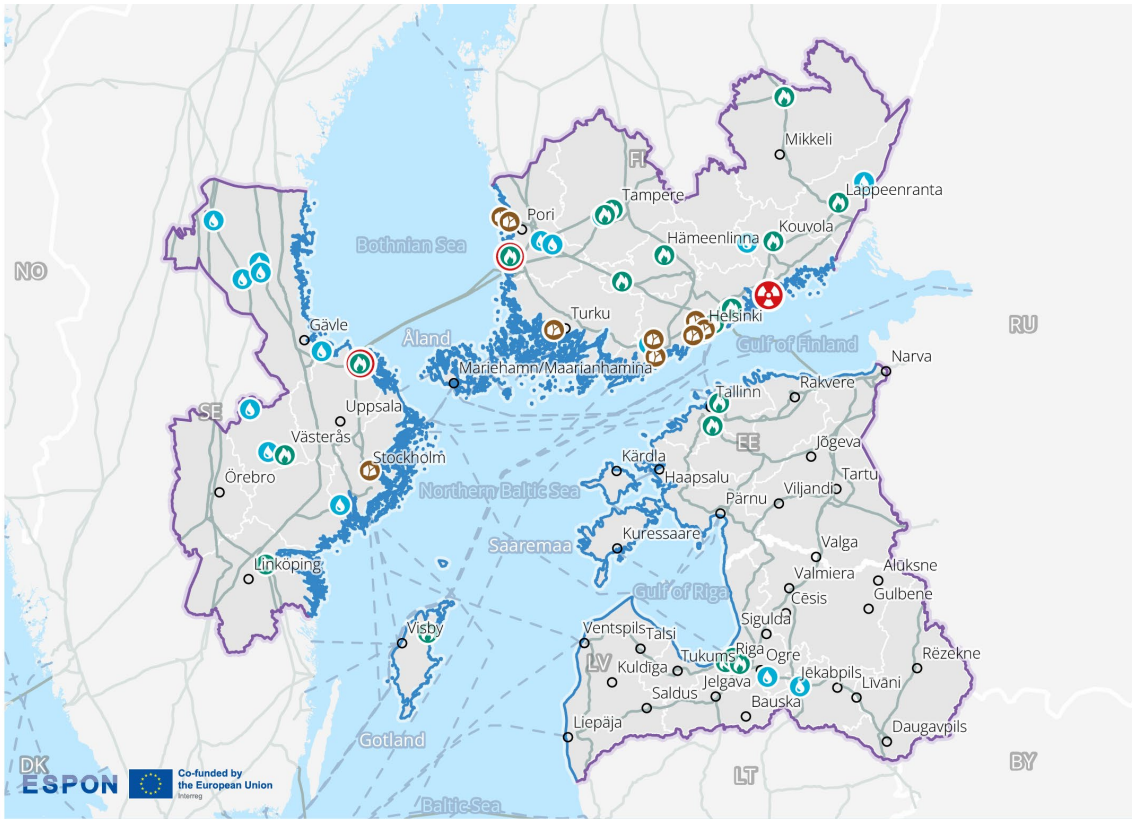
Table 1: Number and type of power stations

Power stations/plants	Less than 1GW	1GW and up
Nuclear	/	3
Coal	9	/
Gas and oil	25	/
Hydro	23	/

Finland has 16 gas and oil power stations, Sweden has 4, Latvia has 3, and Estonia has 2 (see Figure 2.24). The second largest category is hydroelectric power stations, with 10 located in Finland and 10 in Sweden and 3 in Latvia. 9 coal-fired power plants are located in the Central Baltic programme area, 8 of which are in Finland (almost exclusively on the southern coast of the country) and one in Sweden. Finally, all 3 nuclear power plants are high-performance plants, 2 of which are located in Finland (north-west of Turku and east of Helsinki) and one is located in Sweden (north of Stockholm). Near Narva, in the Estonian part of the border region, a large-scale gas-fired power plant is planned, with a capacity of around 100 MW.[14]

[14] Narva peaking power plant - Global Energy Monitor

Figure 2.24: Power stations infrastructure



Power stations (2025)

- nuclear
- coal
- gas and oil (greater than 20MW)
- hydro (greater than 20MW)

≥ 1GW < 1GW

Power lines and cables (2025)

inside outside ≥ 230kV of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: geolocalised point and linear features
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON CROSSGOV, 2026
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- perimeter coastal line
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

2.3.4 Resources and circular economy

This sub-dimension focuses on resource use patterns in the border region and their implications for circular economy practices. It analyses resource productivity and waste generation in order to evaluate the efficiency and sustainability of resource utilisation across the border.

2.3.4.1 Resource productivity

Indicator description

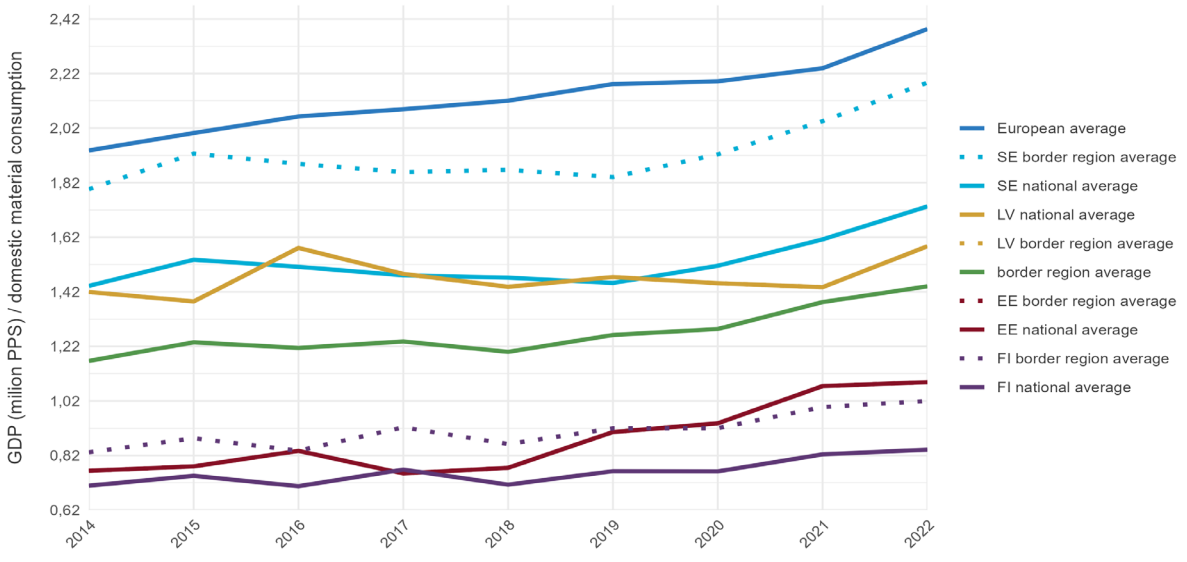
The indicator shows the economic value generated per unit of material consumed for each region within the cross-border area. Developments over time provide insights if the decoupling of productivity from resource use is progressing on regional level.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing of Eurostat and ESPON CIRCTER (Circular Economy and Territorial Consequences) Update data
- **Temporal coverage**: 2014-2022
- **Unit**: PPS/tons

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.25 illustrates the development of GDP per unit of domestic material consumption in million PPS/DMC (purchasing power standards per domestic material consumption) between 2014 and 2022. The data compare the national averages, the averages of their respective border regions, and the overall border regional average with the European average.

Figure 2.25: Resource productivity



ESPON Co-funded by the European Union

With an average of around 0.83 million PPS/DMC in 2022, Finland has the lowest national average among the 4 countries. The average for the Finnish border region is slightly higher than the national average.

The Estonian national average starts at a similar level, but increases more sharply from 2018 onwards, reaching around 1.02 million PPS/DMC in 2022.

The Latvian national average shows an upward trend with some fluctuations, particularly in 2018, 2021 and 2025.

The Swedish national average also shows an upward trend, reaching around 1.72 million PPS / DMC in 2022. Its border region average follows a similar pattern but at a higher level. The Latvian national average is at a comparable level, reaching around 1.62 million in 2022.

The European average lies significantly above the national averages of all 4 countries throughout the entire observed period. The cross-border programme average reflects a combination of the higher Swedish and Latvian values and the lower Estonian and Finnish values, reaching approximately 1.42 million PPS / DMC in 2022.

2.3.4.2 Generation of waste per GDP

Indicator description

The indicator shows the regional distribution of waste creation in relation to the GDP development. Comparing waste generated to GDP reflects the waste intensity of the economy and provides a measure of "eco-efficiency". Observation of its change from year to year permits to assess whether the economy is able to produce more wealth while at same time generating less waste.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing of Eurostat and ESPON CIRCTER Update data
- **Temporal coverage**: 2014-2022
- **Unit**: Tons/PPS

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

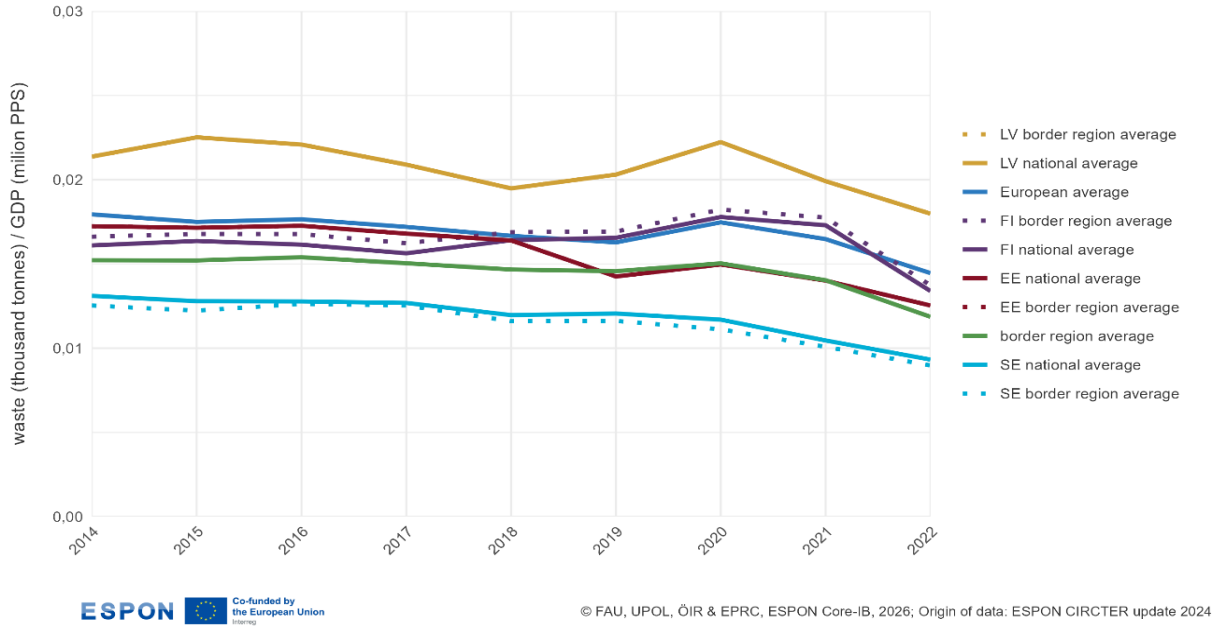
The graph illustrates the trend in waste generation relative to economic output, measured in tonnes of waste per million PPS (Purchasing Power Standard) of GDP from 2014 to 2022 in the Central Baltic programme area.

Sweden's national average shows a slow but steady decline over the observed period. A similar trend is observed for the Swedish border region, which remains slightly lower but closely aligned with the national average for Sweden. In 2022, the national average for Sweden was approximately 0.010 tonnes of waste per million PPS. Finnish values show a slight increase over time, with the average for the Finnish border region being slightly lower than the national average until 2018 and slightly higher afterwards. Additionally, Finnish values are nearly aligned with the European average. In 2021, both national and border region averages declined sharply, reaching approximately 0.016 tonnes of waste per million PPS in 2022. The Estonian national average closely follows the European average until 2018, after which it falls below it. The Latvian national average is the highest line in the graph, exceeding all other national averages, the European average, and the cross-border average.

The European average gradually declines from around 0.018 tonnes in 2014 to approximately 0.015 tonnes per million PPS in 2022 and is closely aligned with the Finnish values. Throughout this period, it remains higher than the Swedish values and the cross-border regional average, but significantly lower than the Latvian national average.

The cross-border programme average shows a slow but steady decline and lies between the higher values of Finland's border region and the lower values of Sweden's border region. In 2022, the cross-border average reached approximately 0.016 tonnes of waste per million PPS.

Figure 2.26: Waste generation per GDP



2.3.5 Key messages on the green dimension

Protected areas in the Central Baltic programme area are heavily concentrated (and interconnected) along the Baltic Sea coast and archipelagos, particularly around Åland, Turku, and the western Estonian islands, where marine and coastal Natura 2000 sites dominate. Smaller and more dispersed protected zones can be found in inland areas, especially in Latvia and Estonia. These aspects underline the natural assets and the importance of enhancing and preserving nature in the programme area.

Air quality levels are generally high, but more variable in Latvia, with some regions reaching values close to or above 7 µg/m³. Water quality levels are mixed. While some coastal areas in Finland and Sweden have high water quality, areas around major cities and more central areas and parts of the Estonian and Latvian coast are rated moderate or bad. The Central Baltic programme area has a very low risk of landslides, earthquakes and floodings. The risk of droughts is also largely low but varies somewhat more within the cross-border programme area. The risk of natural disasters is expected to increase in the future. Efforts to further reduce pollution and preparations for resilience planning are therefore relevant to the programme area.

The cross-border area has extensive and dense high- and extra high-voltage transmission infrastructure. Direct connection between countries in the programme area is provided by subsea cables in the case of Sweden and Finland, and Finland and Estonia. Estonia and Latvia are connected at 3 points along their shared border at regular intervals. In total, there are 60 power station/plant locations, most commonly gas and oil but also involving hydroelectric power. The coal-fired power plants and nuclear power plants are located in Finland and one in Sweden. Strong infrastructure supports cross-border electricity flows, and while there is a strong reliance on fossil fuels in the programme area, renewable energy is increasingly important.

Resource productivity in PPS shows a mixed picture. The European average is significantly above the national averages of all 4 countries throughout the entire observed period. The cross-border programme average reflects a combination of the higher Swedish and Latvian values and the lower Estonian and Finnish values, reaching approximately 1.42 million PPS/DMC in 2022. There is a slow decline in waste production levels and levels are generally in line with EU averages, except for Latvia which exceeds EU averages. There is therefore scope for continued work on the transition to a circular and resource efficient cross-border area.

2.4 Socio-economic dimension

The socio-economic dimension examines patterns of social integration, tourism, and access to public services in the border region. It identifies how socio-cultural links, visitor flows and essential services influence development in the cross-border area. By examining interpersonal connectivity via social media, language similarities, tourism intensity, and the accessibility of facilities such as secondary schools, grocery shops, hospitals, doctors, pharmacies and cinemas this dimension highlights both functional integration and potential socio-spatial differences.

2.4.1 Social integration

This sub-dimension evaluates the level of social integration in the border region by identifying areas with low or high cross-border interactions. It analyses cross-border connectivity in social media and language similarities across and along national borders to evaluate the potential for cultural and social integration.

2.4.1.1 Cross-border connectivity in social media

Indicator description

The indicator refers to the existing connections between users of META social media (in particular Facebook) across the border. It aims at giving an overview of the degree of personal connectivity between inhabitants of the border area. Even though not all these internet connections will relate to real communication exchanges but sometimes just "following" content from other users, they give an overview of interpersonal and cultural knowledge of the social media landscape from across the border.

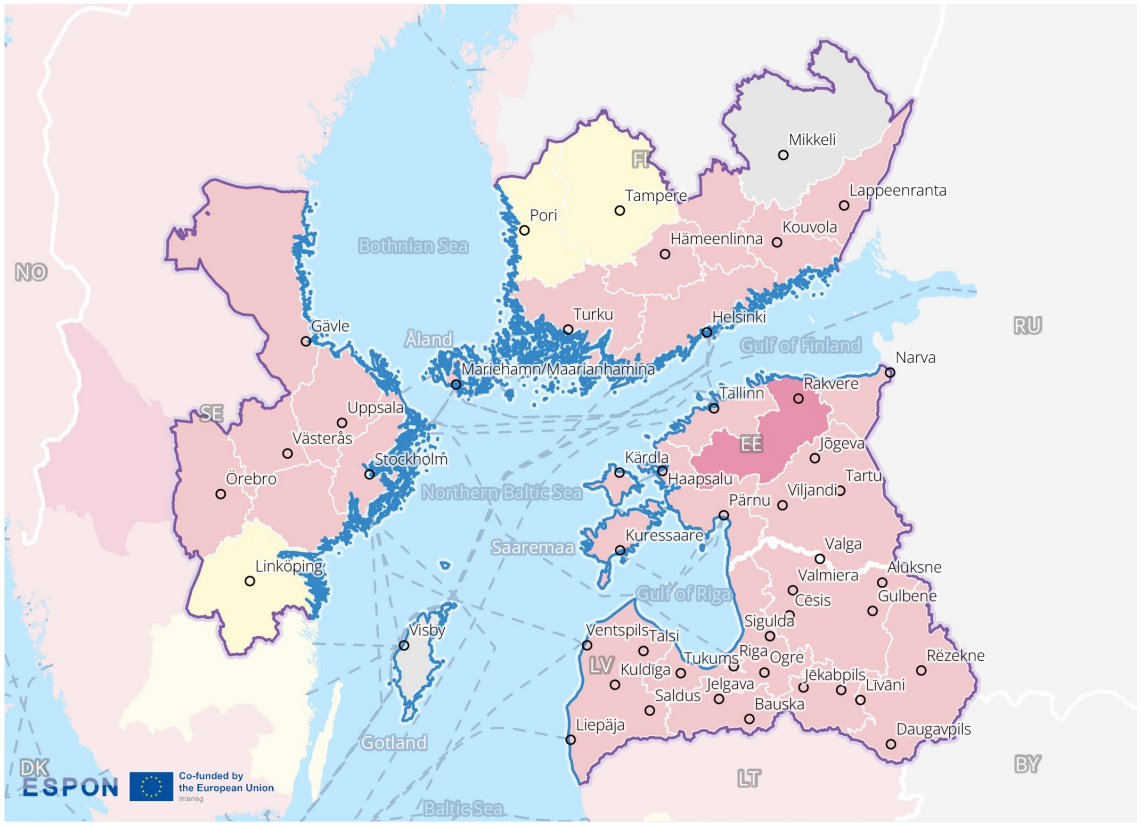
- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing Facebook data on existing connections across the border (data for Good Meta)
- **Temporal coverage**: 2021
- **Unit**: n/a

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.27 illustrates the spatial distribution of cross-border connectivity based on Facebook information in the border area. The different shades of pink indicate varying intensities of connectivity, ranging form low to high, with darker tones representing stronger intensity of cross-border connectivity in social media.

The intensity of cross-border connectivity among residents of the Central Baltic programme area is relatively uniform; thus, no cross-border differences are evident between the countries. Cross-border connectivity is generally low in most areas of the Central Baltic programme area, including cities such as Uppsala, Stockholm, Turku, Helsinki, Tallinn, Narva, Tartu, Valmiera, Riga, Jelgava, Liepāja, and Daugavpils. Moderate intensity is observed in the Estonian NUTS 3 regions located between Tallinn and Tartu. By contrast, no cross-border connectivity is recorded around the Swedish city of Linköping and in 2 NUTS 3 regions near Tampere. Data are unavailable for the island area of the Swedish part of the programme area and for the area around Mikkeli.

Figure 2.27: Cross-border connectivity in social media



2.4.1.2 Language similarities along national borders

Indicator description

The indicator specifies whether the language is the same across the border, whether the respective national languages have commonalities, whether while different, there are local linguistic commonalities, and whether the language is different.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: ESPON cross-border public services (CPS) 2.0 database along border segments
- **Temporal coverage**: 2022
- **Unit**: n/a

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

The programme area is characterised by multiple languages, with little similarity between them, and there is generally limited knowledge of neighbouring regions' languages on a large scale. However, Finnish and Estonian belong to the same language group, and Finland has two official languages: Finnish and Swedish. In addition, at the regional level, there are some minority populations of the respective neighbouring countries.

2.4.2 Tourism

This sub-dimension identifies key tourism hotspots in the border region to highlight tourism dynamics. It analyses the number of nights spent in tourist accommodation establishments in order to evaluate the attractiveness of, and developments in, the tourism sector. Comparisons with the respective countries and the EU average provide context for understanding the region's dynamics.

2.4.2.1 Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments

Indicator description

The indicator shows the number of nights a guest or tourist actually spends in a tourist accommodation establishment or non-rented accommodation (overnight stays). This may reveal the tourism attractiveness of a region and shed light on the role of tourism in the local economy, i.e., tourists/guests staying overnight may spend more in the region than one-day visitors.

- **Source**: Eurostat
- **Temporal coverage**: 2020-2023
- **Unit**: Nights per capita

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

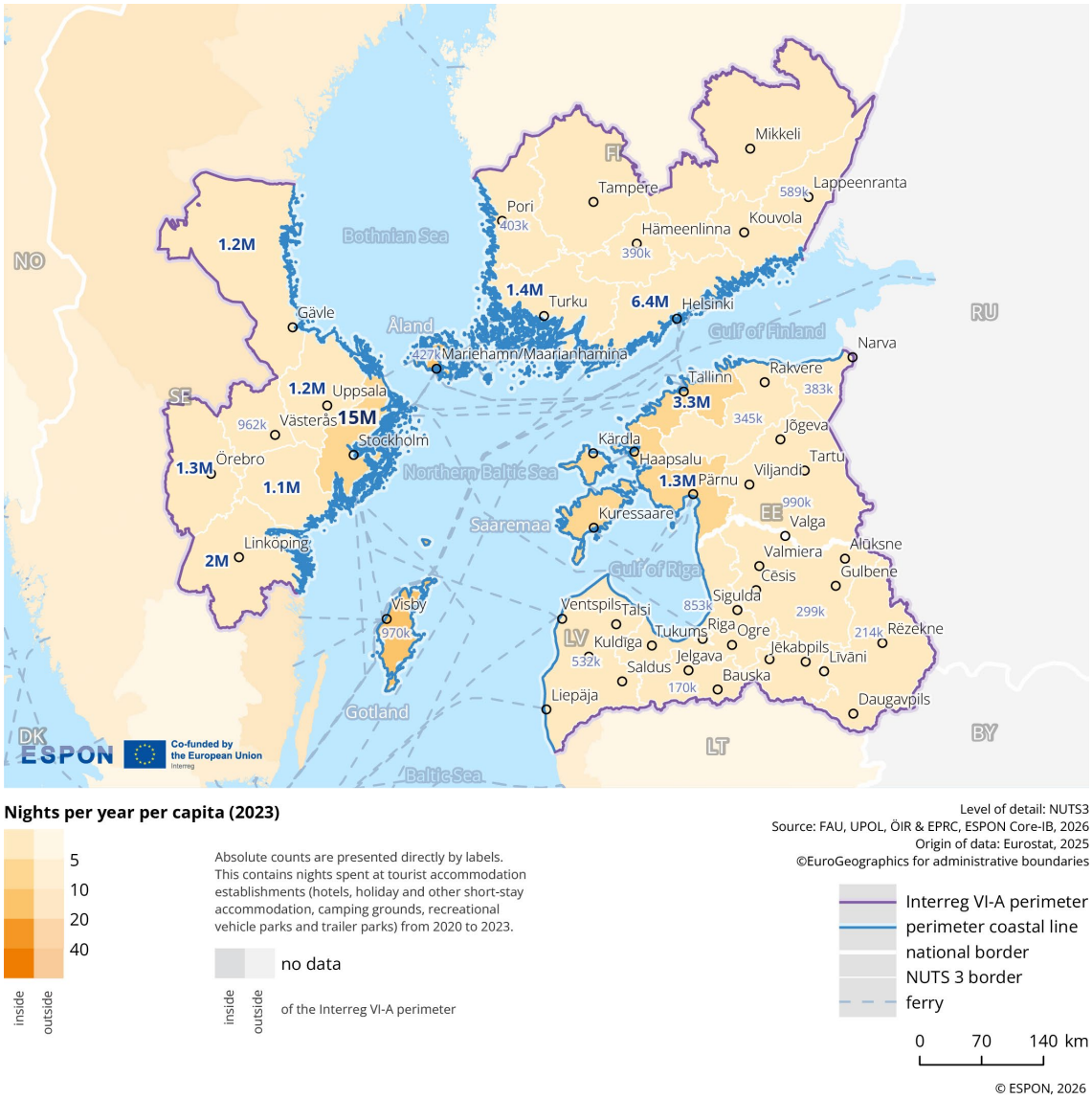
The spatial distribution of overnight stays highlights the importance of key tourist destinations in border regions. Tourism contributes significantly to regional income, infrastructure development and employment, and thereby supports regional prosperity. However, it also affects environmental and living conditions, which may reduce local acceptance despite the economic benefits. This is particularly the case in places of overtourism, seasonal pressures, and increasing land-use conflicts.

Figure 2.28 shows the number of overnight stays per capita at tourist accommodation establishments in 2023. It includes hotels, holiday and other short-stay accommodation, as well as campsites, caravan and trailer parks. The map uses a colour gradient, with darker shades indicating a higher number of nights spent per capita in 2023. It also shows the cumulative number of overnight stays from 2020 to 2023.

In 2023, a few NUTS3 regions had more than 5 to 20 nights per capita, including the county of Gotland, county of Stockholm, Åland, Lääne-Eesti and Põhja-Eesti.[15] In terms of total overnight stays over the 3-year period, the leading tourism regions are located in: the county of Stockholm (approx. 15 million), Helsinki-Uusimaa (approx. 6.4 million), Põhja-Eesti (approx. 3.3 million) and Rīga (approx. 2.3 million).

[15] See Eurostat Statistical Atlas for NUTS3 (2021) regions: https://ec.europa.eu/statistical-atlas/viewer/?config=typologies.json&ch=NUTS&mids=BKGCNT,NUTS2021L3,CNTOVL&o=1,1,0.7&center=49.69576,14.3332,4&lcis=NUTS2021L3&

Figure 2.28: Overnight stays in tourism



Nights per year per capita (2023)

5
10
20
40

inside
outside

Absolute counts are presented directly by labels. This contains nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments (hotels, holiday and other short-stay accommodation, camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks) from 2020 to 2023.

no data

inside
outside
of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: NUTS3
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: Eurostat, 2025
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Interreg VI-A perimeter
perimeter coastal line
national border
NUTS 3 border
ferry

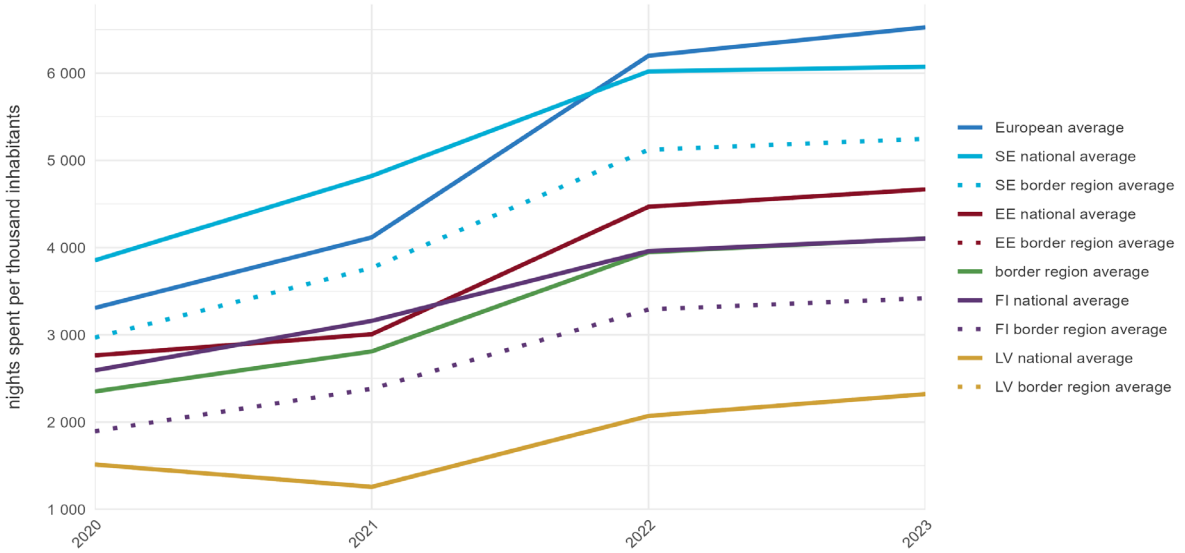
0 70 140 km

© ESPON, 2026

Figure 2.29 shows how nights spent at tourist establishments per thousand inhabitants have developed from 2020 to 2023. Throughout this period, the average for the Central Baltic programme area is lower than the overall European average, which includes EU member states and the EFTA countries of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and Norway. The border regional averages in Sweden and Finland are lower than the national average during this period, and in the case of Estonia and Latvia (as the entire countries are covered by the programme), these are equal to the national averages. Additionally, the regional averages for the Swedish, Estonian and Finnish border areas are somewhat higher than in Latvia throughout the given period.

Tourist patterns have a series of implications for spatial development on both sides of the border. Transport infrastructure must consider peak volumes, and balancing recreational activities with socio-cultural and environmental heritage can present challenges.

Figure 2.29: Overnight stays in tourism (comparison)



ESPON Co-funded by the European Union Interreg

2.4.3 Services of general interest

This sub-dimension looks at how accessible services of general interest (SGIs) are in the border region, identifying areas that are well-served and those that are more difficult to access. It analyses access to essential services such as secondary schools, grocery shops, hospitals, doctors, pharmacies and cinemas.

2.4.3.1 Accessibility to services of general interest

Indicator description

The indicator shows, for the below listed facilities and services, the average driving time to the nearest facility of a series of services of general interest.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing and analysis of standardised travel-time accessibility to secondary schools, grocery shops, hospitals, doctors, pharmacies and cinemas available in the ESPON PROFECY Update (2022)
- **Temporal coverage**: 2021
- **Unit**: Minutes (in 2.5 x 2.5 km grid)

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figures 2.30 to 2.35 visualise average car travel times to services of general interest within the programme area. The maps display accessibility to:

- Secondary schools (Figure 2.30)
- Grocery shops (Figure 2.31)
- Hospitals (Figure 2.32)
- Doctors (Figure 2.33)
- Pharmacies (Figure 2.34)
- Cinemas (Figure 2.35)

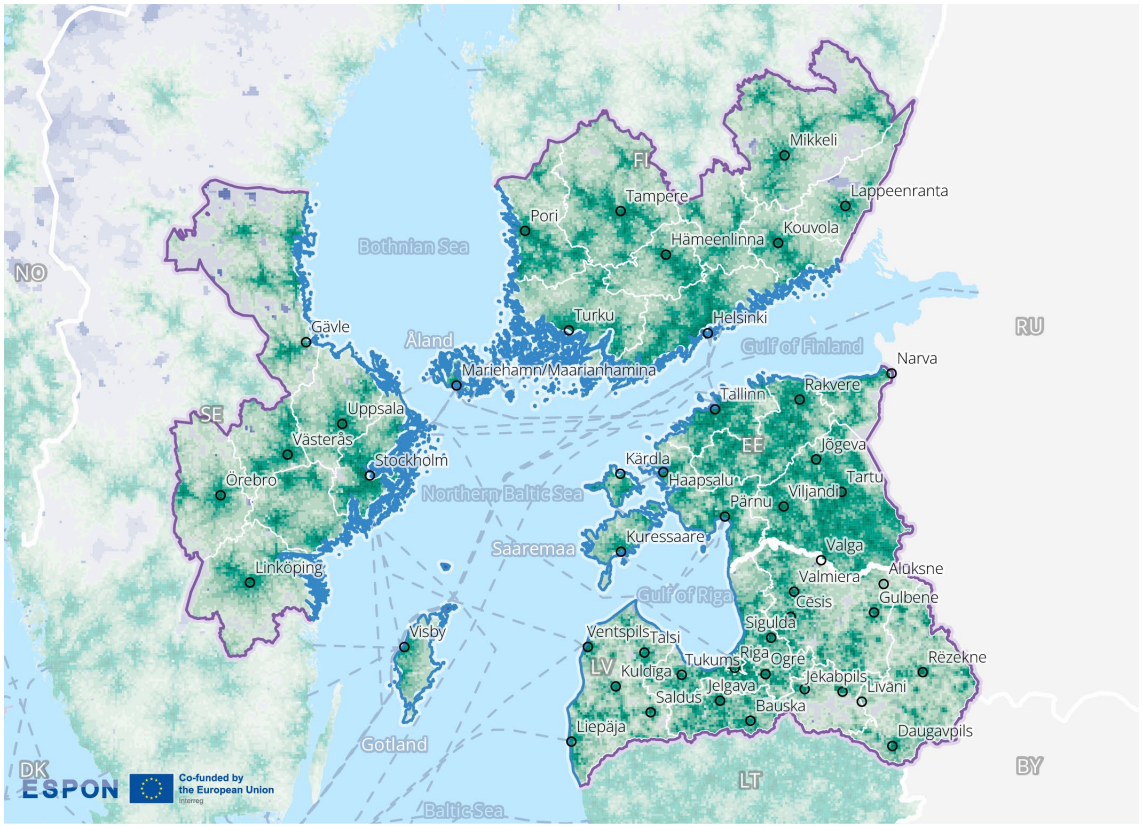
These indicators show how long, on average, it takes to reach the nearest facility by car. The data comes from the ESPON PROFECY Update project (2022) and is visualised based on a 2.5-kilometer grid.

In the Central Baltic programme area, essential services such as doctors, schools, and grocery shops are evenly located across Estonia. This results in travel times of less than one hour in most parts, except for the easternmost regions. In Latvia, travel times are generally longer, with better accessibility in the central regions. This results in travel times of more than one hour in some areas. In Finland, services are mostly concentrated around cities and more densely populated areas, with better accessibility in the southern parts. This results in travel times of more than one hour in some of the more northern regions of the cross-border programme area. The same distribution is observed in Sweden.

Near the national border between Estonia and Latvia, travel times are shorter on the Estonian side. The biggest differences are in the eastern regions, particularly for accessibility to doctors, secondary schools, and grocery shops.

Hospitals, as a medical service, are mainly located in cities and more densely populated areas. This common challenge in Finnish, Estonian, Latvian and Swedish border areas creates an urban–rural gradient, with shorter travel times in and near urban centres and longer travel times in rural or remote regions. The same applies to cinemas as a cultural service.

Figure 2.30: Travel time to secondary schools



Car travel time to the nearest secondary school (2021)

5min
10min
15min
20min
30min
45min
1h
2h
3h
4h
6h
12h

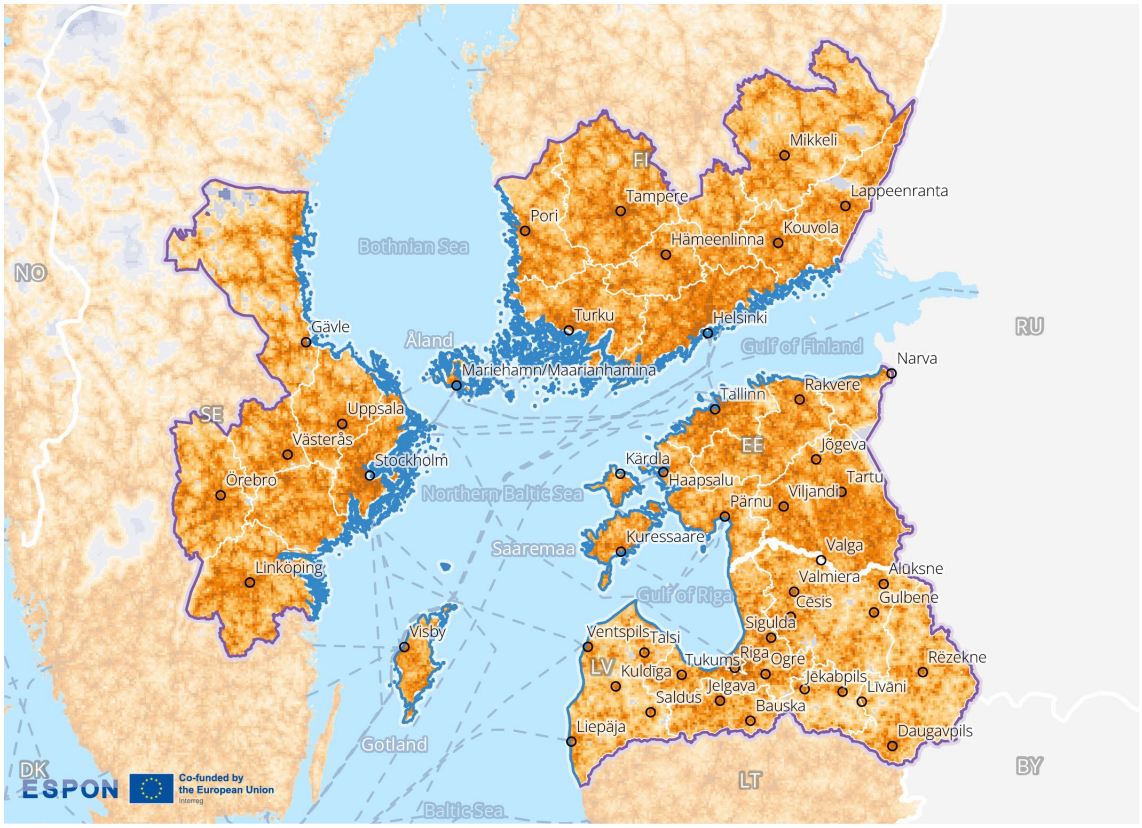
inside outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: 2.5km grid
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON PROFECY Update, 2022
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Interreg VI-A perimeter
perimeter coastal line
national border
NUTS 3 border
ferry

0 70 140 km

Figure 2.31: Travel time to grocery shops



Car travel time to the nearest shop (2021)

- 5min
- 10min
- 15min
- 20min
- 30min
- 45min
- 1h
- 2h
- 3h
- 4h
- 6h
- 12h

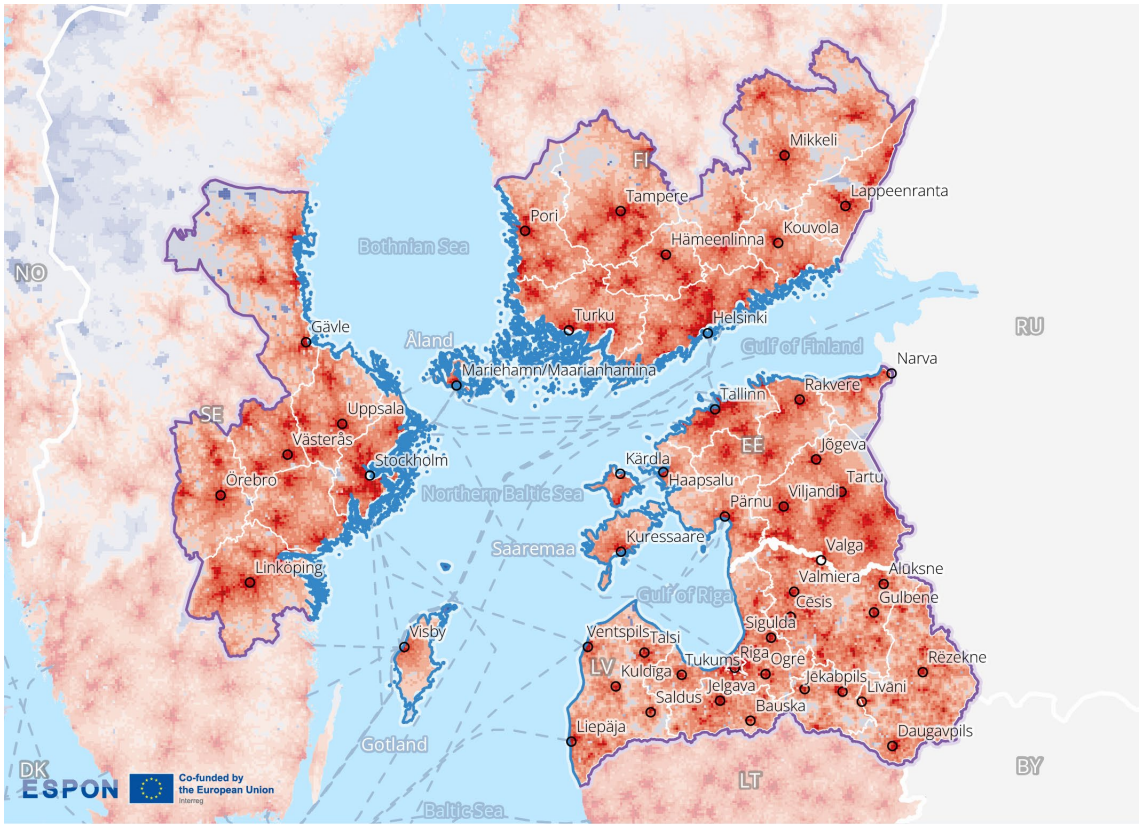
inside / outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: 2.5km grid
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON PROFECY Update, 2022
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- perimeter coastal line
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

Figure 2.32: Travel time to hospitals



Car travel time to the nearest hospital (2021)

5min
10min
15min
20min
30min
45min
1h
2h
3h
4h
6h
12h

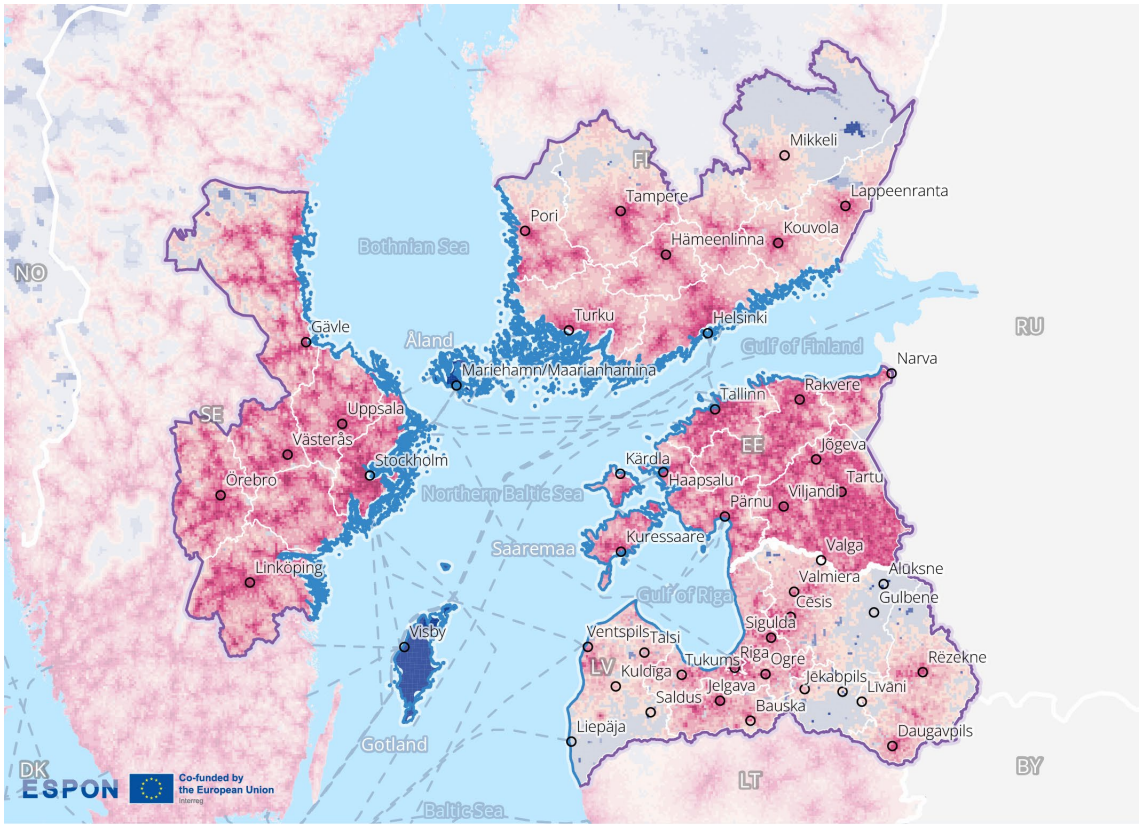
inside outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: 2.5km grid
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON PROFECY Update, 2022
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Interreg VI-A perimeter
perimeter coastal line
national border
NUTS 3 border
ferry

0 70 140 km

Figure 2.33: Travel time to doctors



Car travel time to the nearest doctor (2021)

- 5min
- 10min
- 15min
- 20min
- 30min
- 45min
- 1h
- 2h
- 3h
- 4h
- 6h
- 12h

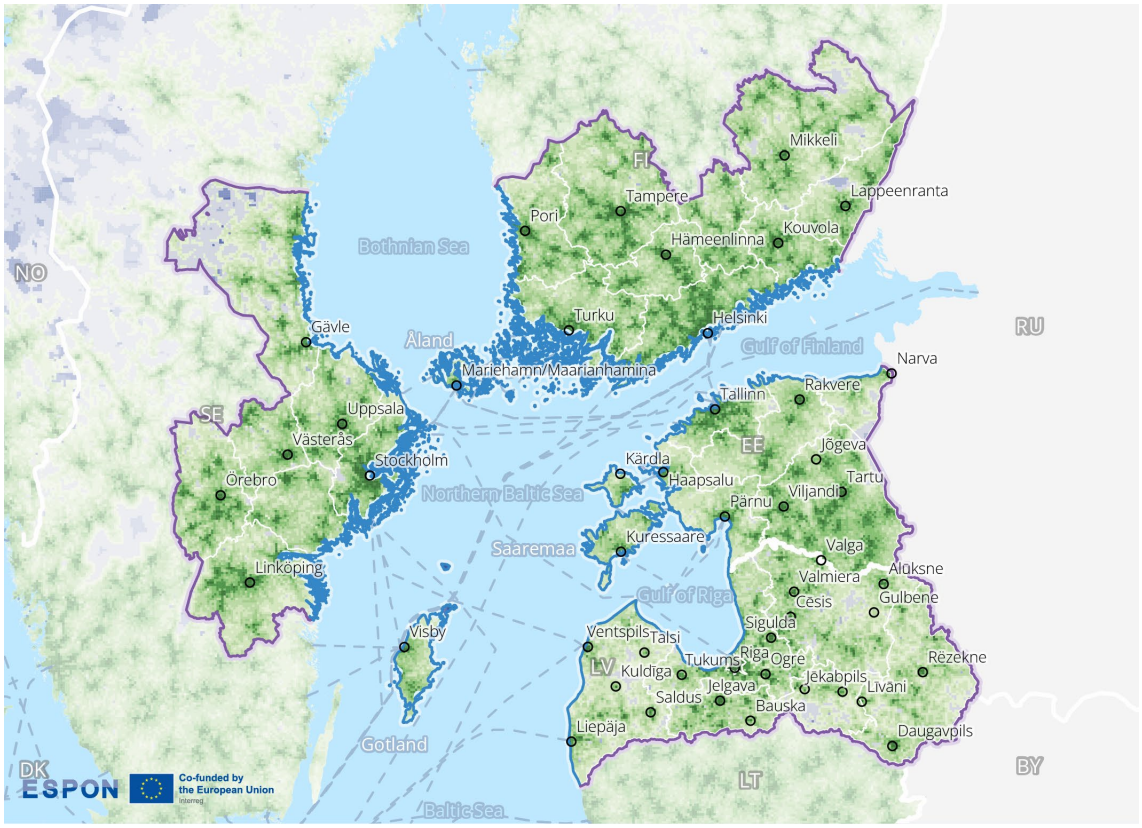
inside / outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: 2.5km grid
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON PROFECY Update, 2022
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- perimeter coastal line
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

Figure 2.34: Travel time to pharmacies



Car travel time to the nearest pharmacy (2021)

- 5min
- 10min
- 15min
- 20min
- 30min
- 45min
- 1h
- 2h
- 3h
- 4h
- 6h
- 12h

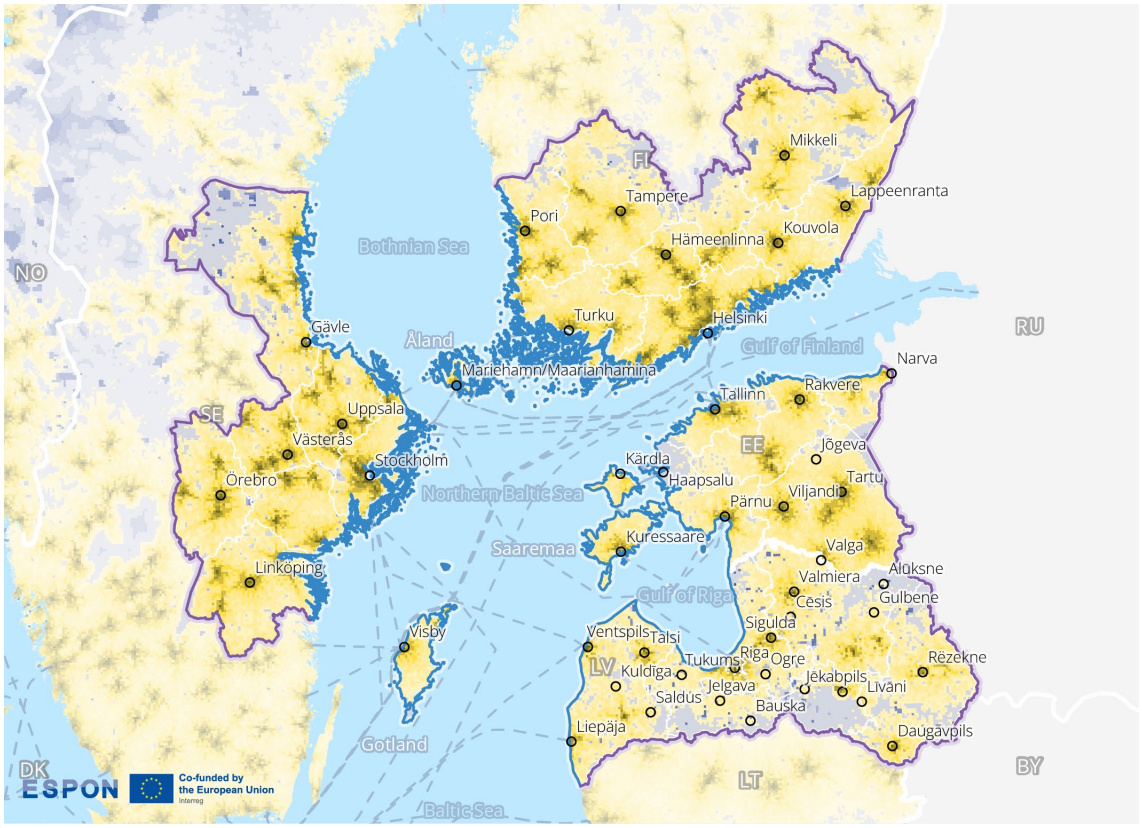
inside / outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: 2.5km grid
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON PROFECY Update, 2022
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- perimeter coastal line
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

Figure 2.35: Travel time to cinemas



Car travel time to the nearest cinema (2021)

5min
10min
15min
20min
30min
45min
1h
2h
3h
4h
6h
12h

inside outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: 2.5km grid
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON PROFECY Update, 2022
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Interreg VI-A perimeter
perimeter coastal line
national border
NUTS 3 border
ferry

0 70 140 km

© ESPON, 2026

2.4.4 Key messages on the socio-economic dimension

The intensity of cross-border connectivity, measured through META social media user interactions, among the inhabitants of the Central Baltic cross-border programme area is relatively homogeneous and is generally low to moderate, resulting in no noticeable border differences between the individual countries within this programme area. However, because the dataset reflects only META platform interactions, it provides a limited perspective on the wider social landscape. While the results should therefore be interpreted with caution, the available data may indicate that deeper cross-border social integration remains limited across the programme area.

The area has multiple different languages, with no similarities and or widespread knowledge of the neighbouring regions' language recorded on a large scale. At a regional level, there are some minority

populations from the neighbouring countries. The differences in languages can entail communication challenges which hinder deeper social and economic exchanges across the programme area.

In terms of tourism, the leading tourism regions are located in: Stockholm, Helsinki-Uusimaa, Põhja-Eesti and Rīga. However, the average for the programme area is lower than the overall European average. The programme area has strong tourism centres but there is scope for diversifying activities, especially in the less visited areas.

In the programme area, essential services such as doctors, schools, and grocery shops have a mixed pattern of distribution. Estonia shows a relatively even distribution of such services (except for the easternmost regions), while Latvia, Finland and Sweden exhibit longer travel times to reach them, especially in rural and peripheral areas. This indicates scope for improving service accessibility and exploring innovative delivery models.

2.5 Border security and safety

This dimension shows the security and safety conditions in border regions. It analyses the number of days on which border control is temporarily reintroduced at internal borders, using this as an indicator of security concerns and restrictions on cross-border movement.

2.5.1 Temporary reintroduction of border controls at internal borders

Indicator description

The indicator shows the number of days of temporary reintroduction of border control at internal borders, including the official reasons behind. The reintroduction of border control at the internal borders must be applied as a last resort measure, in exceptional situations, and must respect the principle of proportionality. The scope and duration of reintroduced border control should be restricted to the bare minimum needed to respond to the threat in question.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing and analysis data of European Commission information pursuant to Article 25 and 28 et seq. of the Schengen Borders Code
- **Temporal coverage**: 2006-2025 (cut-off: 08 May 2025, in order to allow data treatment before work package completion)
- **Unit**: Days per year

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.36 illustrates the number of days during which temporary border controls were reintroduced at internal borders within the Schengen Area. Each bubble represents a specific year with bubble sizes indicating the number of days the respective border was under control. The categories of reasons for reintroducing controls include:

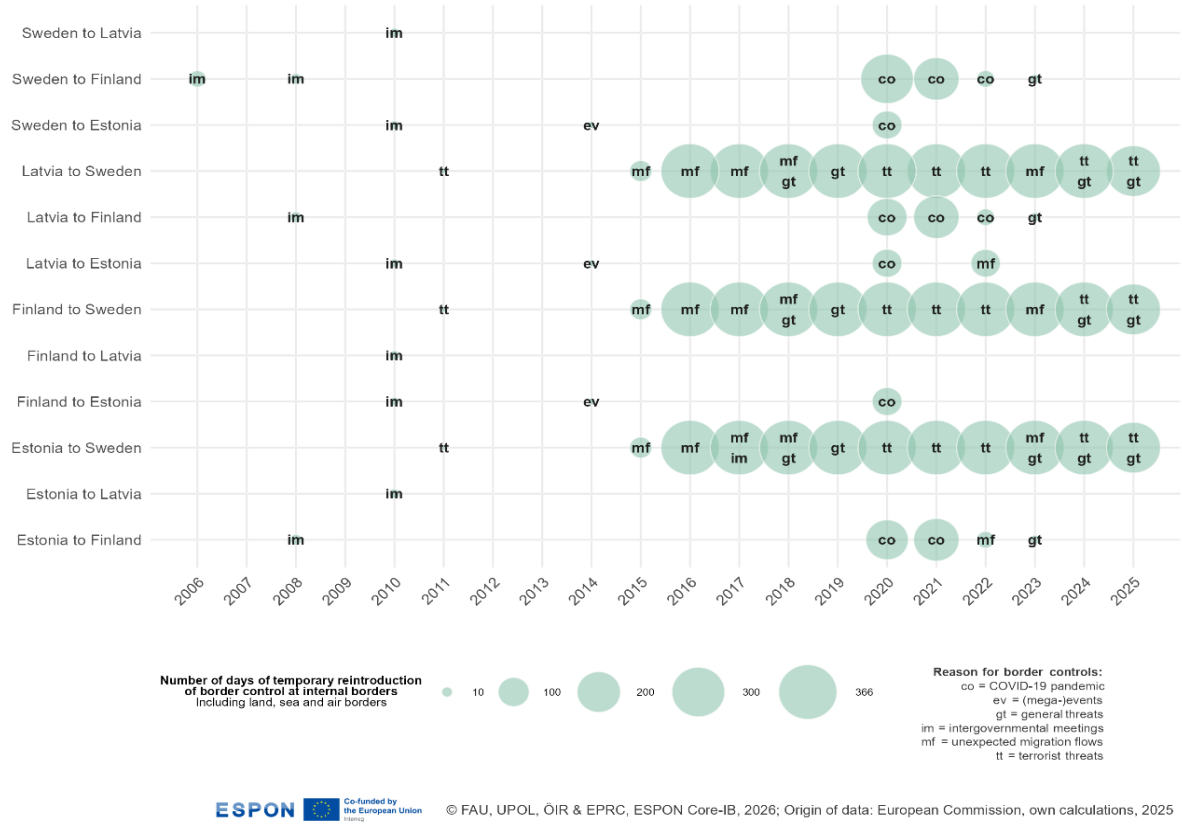
- co – COVID-19 pandemic
- ev – (Mega-)events
- gt – General threats
- im – Intergovernmental meetings
- mf – Unexpected migration flows
- tt – Terrorist threats

The data spans from 2006 to 2025 (with a cut-off date of 8 May 2025) and is based on notifications from the European Commission information pursuant to Articles 25 and 28 et seq. of the Schengen Borders Code. In line with Schengen rules, the reintroduction of controls should only be used only as

a last resort, for exceptional circumstances, and with strict adherence to the principle of proportionality in terms of both duration and scope.

Finland and Sweden were already part of the Schengen Area by 2006, while Estonia and Latvia joined in 2007.

Figure 2.36: Temporary reintroduction of border controls



The Central Baltic programme area is characterised by an asymmetric pattern:

- Crossing the border from Sweden to Latvia: Temporary border control occurred in 1 out of 20 years, driven by a NATO meeting (2010)
- Crossing the border from Sweden to Finland: Temporary border controls occurred in 6 out of 20 years, mainly driven by COVID-19 (2020-2022) and intergovernmental meetings such as a meeting of Ministers of OSCE (2008).
- Crossing the border from Sweden to Estonia: Temporary border controls occurred in 3 out of 20 years due to an informal NATO meeting (2010), the visit of the US President (2014) and COVID-19 (2020)
- Crossing the border from Latvia to Sweden: Temporary border controls in 12 out of 20 years due to terrorist threats after a bomb explosion in Oslo (2011) and unexpected migration flows (2015). Since 2016 the border has been permanently controlled, mainly due to migration issues and terrorist threats (2016-2015).
- Crossing the border from Latvia to Finland: Similar to the patterns of temporary border controls when travelling from Sweden to Finland.
- Crossing the border from Latvia to Estonia: Similar to the patterns of temporary border controls when travelling from Sweden to Estonia, except for the additional temporary closure in 2022 due to unexpected migration caused by the war in Ukraine.
- Crossing the border from Finland to Latvia: Similar to the patterns of temporary border controls when travelling from Sweden to Latvia.

- Crossing the border from Finland to Estonia: Similar to the patterns of temporary border controls when travelling from Sweden to Estonia.
- Crossing the border from Estonia to Sweden: Similar to the patterns of temporary border controls when travelling from Latvia to Sweden.
- Crossing the border from Estonia to Latvia: Similar to the patterns of temporary border controls when travelling from Sweden to Latvia and travelling from Finland to Latvia.
- Crossing the border from Estonia to Finland: Similar to the patterns of temporary border controls when travelling from Latvia to Finland.

From a comparative perspective, Sweden controlled the border on significantly more days than the other countries, indicating an unequal impact on cross-border movements.

These controls tend to have a tangible effect on the smooth functioning of cross-border flows, especially commuting and logistics, as they introduce delays and unpredictability.

2.5.2 Key messages on the border security dimension

Borders within the Central Baltic programme area have been subject to controls at various points, linked to specific events, including terrorist threats, migration and COVID. Sweden has controlled the borders more days than the other countries.

The proximity of the border with Russia is a particular concern and underlines the importance of maintaining strong links with the external border areas of the Central Baltic programme area. Actions related to preparedness and resilience building are therefore very relevant.

2.6 Governance dimension

This section provides an overview of the cross-border governance of the Central Baltic programme area. The coastal regions of these countries, which form the programme area, are connected by the Baltic Sea, which has played an important role in the economic and cultural relations between the countries over centuries. In addition to these historical connections, the programme has existed in its current form since 2007, and the region has well-established and developed cooperation links. Particular focus is given to 2 functional cross-border cooperation areas within the Central Baltic programme, namely to 1) South Finland and Estonia which share a long history of cross-border cooperation in trade, labour market, people and institutions; and 2) the archipelago and island areas which share many geographical, cultural and natural similarities. The programme has also paid increased attention to the eastern border regions, having included 2 new regions, Etelä-Savo in Finland and Latgale in Latvia, since December 2023, following the suspension of the Interreg NEXT programmes. The area is also covered by the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, which was the first European macro-regional strategy stemming from the long tradition of cross-border cooperation in the region. There are also various collaborative efforts among the countries of the programme area concerning risks and disasters (e.g. Estonia's collaboration with Latvia and Finland), civil protection (e.g. via the Nordred Framework Agreement involving Finland, Sweden, as well as Norway and Denmark and Iceland), public health (e.g. the Nordic public health preparedness agreement, Nordhel, which has been complementary to the existing EU and other Nordic legal frameworks), energy security and electricity supply (e.g. Nordic Contingency Planning and Crisis Management Forum and Nordic Preparedness Forum, NordBER), and emergency communication networks (e.g. between Finland, Sweden and Norway).[16]

[16] European Commission (2024) Strengthening the Resilience of EU Border Regions, Mapping Risks & Crisis Management Tools and Identifying Gaps, March 2024

2.6.1 Cross-border cooperation

This sub-dimension identifies the extent of cross-border cooperation in the border region. It illustrates areas of high cooperation intensity and identifies functional links in governance structures across borders. It also identifies areas with high awareness of obstacles and the willingness and support services to overcome them, as well as areas where Interreg cooperation intensity is already strong.

2.6.1.1 Cross-border governance structures

Indicator description

The indicator shows active institutionalised cooperation that act as cross-border entities. It includes cooperation formats such as Eurocities, Euroregions, EGTC, cross-border associations, cross-border councils, etc.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Localisation and categorising of cross-border cooperation formats (Eurocities, Euroregions, EGTC, cross-border associations, cross-border councils, conferences, working communities), based on desktop research.
- **Temporal coverage**: Status as of October 2025
- **Unit**: n/a

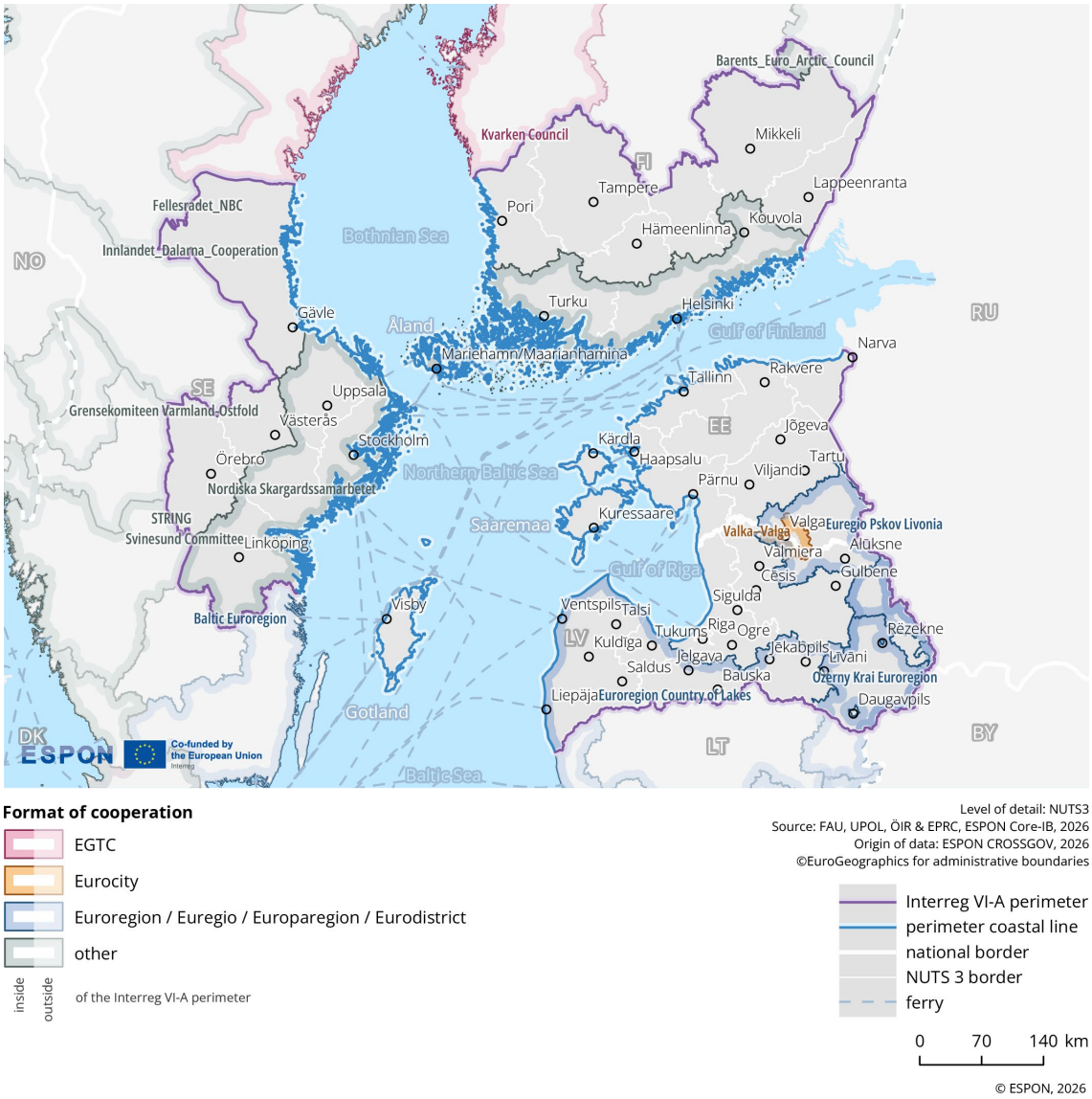
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.37 shows the different types of institutionalised cooperation. These governance structures either function as cross-border entities or bring together stakeholders from the cross-border region around shared topics. The governance structures covered include Eurocities, Euroregions, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), cross-border associations and councils. Project-based cooperation is not included.

The coloured markings on the Figure 2.37 indicate different types of institutionalisations: EGTCs are shown in red, Eurocities in yellow, Euroregions/Euregios/Europaregions/Eurodistricts in blue, and other formats in grey.

The multi-level governance structure along the borders of this programme area shows broad spatial coverage. Overall, the programme area exhibits high levels of cooperation across its national borders. The most prevalent formats are councils, committees and conferences and formats at the Euroregional level.

Figure 2.37: Cross-border governance structures



Format of cooperation

- EGTC
- Eurocity
- Euroregion / Euregio / Europaregion / Eurodistrict
- other

inside / outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Level of detail: NUTS3
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON CROSSGOV, 2026
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- perimeter coastal line
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

2.6.1.2 Cross-border public services

Indicator description

The indicator shows different services specialised on cross-border challenges and development potential, including their domain of operation. As a specific form of services of general interest, cross-border public services (CPS) address joint problems or development potentials of border regions that are located on different sides of one or more national borders.

- **Source**: ESPON cross-border public services (CPS) 2.0 database
- **Temporal coverage**: 2022
- **Unit**: n/a

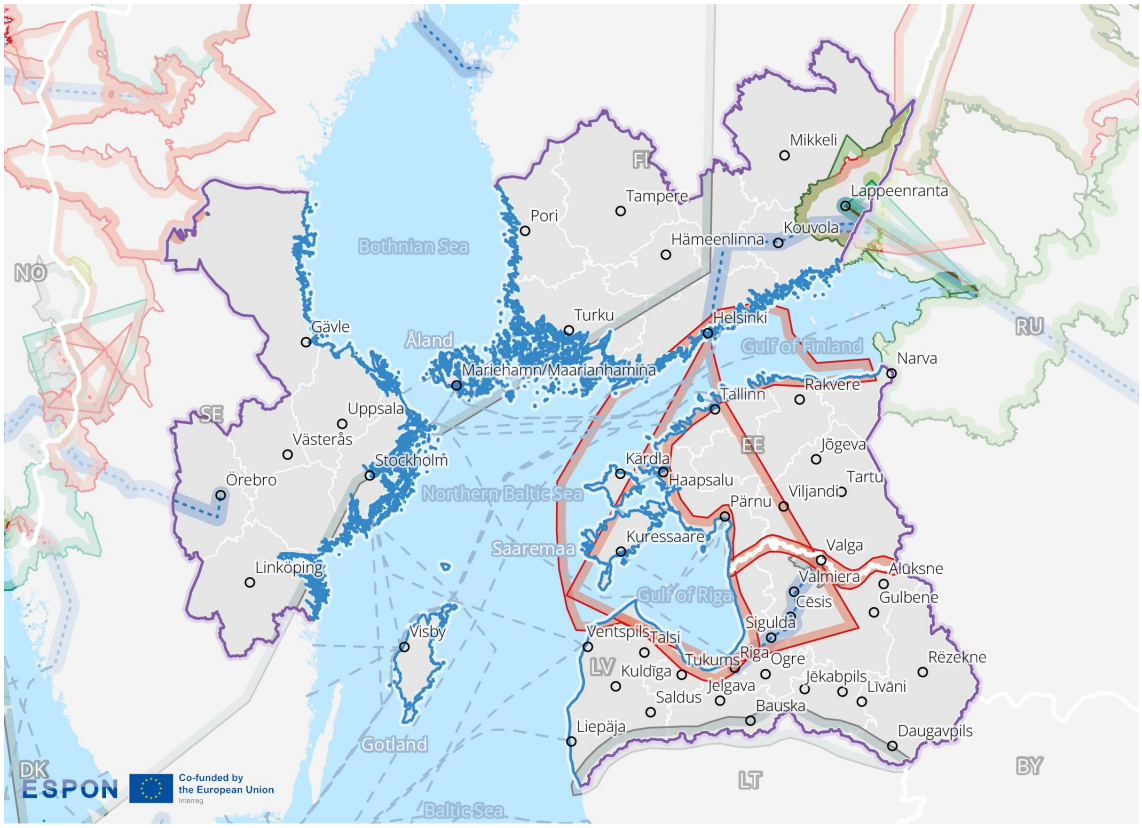
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Figure 2.38 depicts the geographical extent of cross-border public services in the border area in 2022. Different thematic areas are represented by distinct symbols and colours, indicating services such as disaster management, health care, transportation, education, environment, energy, job placement, and culture. The visualisation highlights where these services operate across the national boundary.

Cross-border public services across the Gulf of Finland and surrounding Baltic area focus primarily on disaster management, forming a dense polygon expanding through the whole programme area, into the coastal area, Helsinki in the north and Riga in the south. This corridor extends over sea and land, covering large parts of Estonia and Latvia and reaching southern Finland. A smaller disaster management, environment & water, tourism & information service zone exists near Mikkeli and the Russian border. 2 transportation links are found in the region (based on the ESPON dataset of 2022): Valmiera-Riga, which supports the mobility of people and goods, and Helsinki-Russia, where the border crossing has been closed until further notice since late 2023/early 2024[17]. Another 2 large corridors of "other" services are located on the coastal line of Sweden-Finland border region and the border of Latvia-Lithuania.

[17] Situation at Finland's eastern border - Finnish Government

Figure 2.38: Cross-border public services



Geographical extent of cross-border public service themes (2022)

areal | linear | character of the service

- Disaster management
- Health care
- Transportation
- Tourism & information
- Education & research
- Environment & water
- Heating & energy
- Job placement
- Culture

inside | outside | inside | outside of the Interreg VI-A perimeter

Cross-border public services covering more than one theme have been assigned only to one. Furthermore, some polygons have been excluded because they were only approximately and not accurately spatially defined.

Level of detail: geolocalised lines and areas
Source: FAU, UPOL, ÖIR & EPRC, ESPON Core-IB, 2026
Origin of data: ESPON CPS, 2022
©EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

- Interreg VI-A perimeter
- perimeter coastal line
- national border
- NUTS 3 border
- ferry

0 70 140 km

2.6.1.3 Perceived cross-border obstacles in b-solutions

Indicator description

The indicator shows cases of legal or administrative obstacles selected in the framework of the b-solutions initiative. This indicator lists the number, location and nature of suggested solution of cases in the b-solutions initiative, including the topic and parties involved.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing and analysis of the b-solutions initiative data
- **Temporal coverage**: 2018-2025 (first quarter)
- **Unit**: n/a

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

The b-solutions initiative is a European Union project that supports the resolution of legal, operational and administrative cross-border obstacles. It offers funding for pilot actions and legal expert advice in border regions. A high level of cross-border integration often reveals strong barriers of cross-border functioning. In order to exploit the cross-border potentials, these obstacles have to be overcome or at least addressed. Both the number of reported obstacles and the general interest in solutions serve as important indicators of cross-border interaction.

As part of the ESPON CROSSGOV project, all b-solutions initiatives were analysed to deepen the understanding of the thematic focus of the perceived cross-border obstacles across different border regions and the suggested solution. For the particular case of the Finland-Estonia-Latvia-Sweden programme area, no participation in b-solutions projects has been reported yet.

2.6.1.4 Institutionalised advice centres for cross-border issues

Indicator description

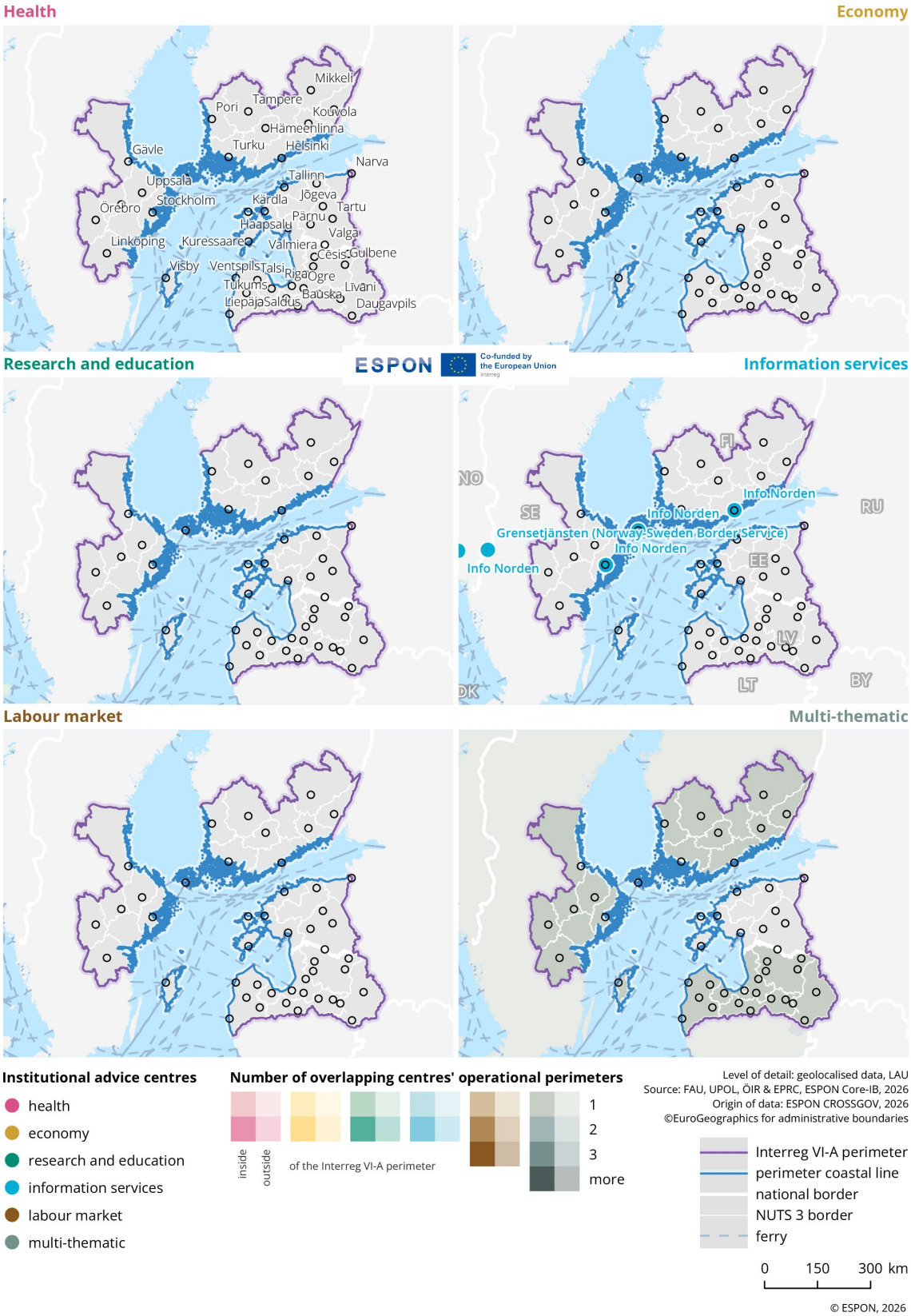
The indicator shows where institutionalised advice centres on cross-border issues are located, including their thematic focus and geographical perimeter.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Localisation and thematic focus of advice centres for cross-border issues are identified via desktop research.
- **Temporal coverage**: Status as of February 2025
- **Unit**: n/a

Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

The Figure 2.39 shows the locations and types of institutionalised advice centres, along with their operational domains, in the Central Baltic programme area between Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Sweden. These centres throughout Europe provide support in various fields such as health, economy, research & education, information services, the labour market, and multi-thematic issues. The operational domains of these centres are also indicated by coloured shading on the map. The more intense the colour, the stronger the influence of that specific domain in the corresponding area.

Figure 2.39: Institutionalised cross-border advice centres



Withing the Central Baltic programme area, there are 3 information service-related institutionalised advice centres, all of them part of Info Norden (information service of the Nordic Council of Ministers).

One is located in Stockholm in Sweden, and another in Helsinki in Finland. There are no institutionalised advice centres in Estonia or Latvia.

Centres with multi-thematic operational domains are represented in Sweden, Finland and Latvia, but only to a lesser degree. No additional operational domains are present.

2.6.2 Outline of Interreg activities

The following section outlines the key Interreg activities in the 2021-2027 programming period. The aspects included concern the development opportunities and challenges identified (see Table 2, the budget available and split of allocation (Figure 2.40), overlapping Interreg programmes and the key aspects drawn from the programme.

Table 2: Interreg VI (2021-2027): Opportunities and challenges

Topic	Key development opportunities and challenges identified for Interreg 2021-27
Economy	▪ Potential for business development and new market access in many sectors, especially by increased cooperation between businesses.
Environment	▪ Poor state of the Baltic Sea; strong focus on the circular economy.
Transport	▪ Area has important cross-border transport routes & hubs, and potential for low-emission mobility solutions.
Labour market	▪ More focus on employment opportunities particularly for the more vulnerable groups and ensuring that education meets future labour market needs and skills.
Governance	▪ Need for capacity building of the public sector and stakeholders to address administrative, regulatory, language and cultural barriers.

Total Budget: EUR 203,123,805.01

Figure 2.40: Split of Interreg allocation

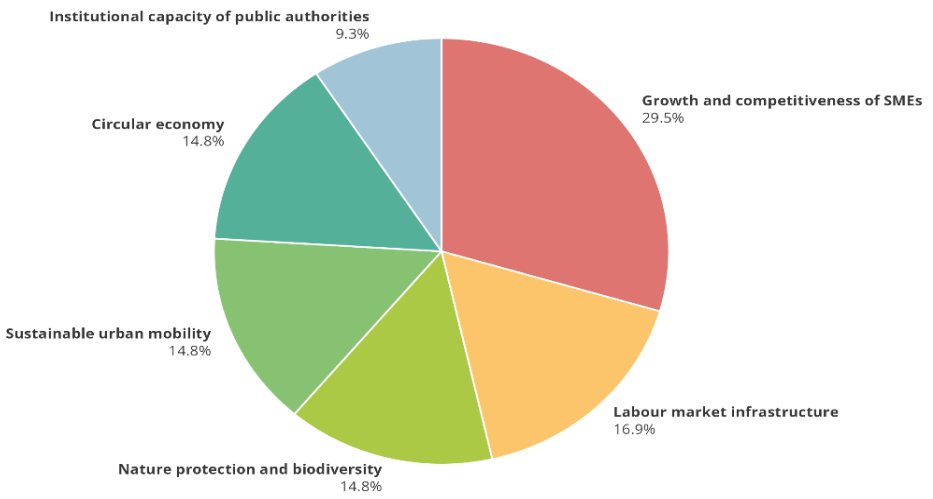


Table 3 shows the number of Interreg 2021-2027 cross-border and transnational programmes which share at least one NUTS3 region with the border area. Each programme has its own distinct rationale, value and territorial focus. However, for the purposes of, for example, planning and capitalisation activities it is potentially helpful for programmes and programme stakeholders to be aware of and connected to other Interreg programmes with which they share a direct territorial link.[18] The 4 Interreg C programmes Interreg ESPON, Interact, Interreg Europe and URBACT cover the whole EU territory and provide a range of joint services and initiatives.

Table 3: Shared geographies with other cross-border and transnational programmes

Interreg A (cross-border)	Interreg B (transnational)
2	2

Key aspects

- Cooperation is well developed in the programme area supported by long-standing historical ties, connection to the Baltic Sea, and decades of formalised cross-border collaboration.
- Given the cross-border programme area's above-average GDP and the potential highlighted in the analysis, there is strong potential for innovation and business development, especially amongst the SMEs and micro-businesses across a number of sectors.
- The programme area has a number of environmental considerations, including a strong focus on the circular economy; the poor state of the Baltic Sea; and, reduction of CO2 emissions in the urban areas through sustainable urban mobility solutions.

[18] It is noted that synergies and links with a wide range of other territorial cooperation and sectoral programmes and initiatives are also valuable and this is reflected in the wider analyses presented in this border profile, but not specifically covered in this table.

- Capacity building remains crucial to address administrative, regulatory, language and cultural barriers in the public administration to improve public services and solutions for the citizens of the programme area.
- The programme directly contributes to macro-regional strategy (EUSBSR) sub-objectives.
- The programme area includes territories that are also part of the Interreg A programmes Estonia-Latvia and Latvia-Lithuania, as well as the Interreg B programmes Baltic Sea Region and the Northern Periphery and the Arctic.

2.6.2.1 Interreg cooperation

Indicator description

Based on the keep.eu database, this indicator illustrates the network density of Interreg V-A (2014–2020). It is derived from the geographical location of all partners within a project consortium and reflects the intensity of cooperation between them. For the analysis, project networks were visualised by drawing lines between the locations of partners within a consortium. These connections were subsequently aggregated and spatially abstracted by calculating line density using GIS software. Dark red areas indicate a high density of connections between project partners, while yellow areas represent a lower density of cooperation links.

An additional element in this section is the development of project partner numbers between Interreg IV-A (2007–2013) and Interreg V-A (2014–2020), based on data from the keep.eu database. The datasets were cleaned to remove duplicates, using the partner names as reported in keep.eu. For both programming periods, keep.eu indicates a high level of data completeness.[19] Nevertheless, this development should be interpreted as indicative, as variations in partner name reporting and general limitations regarding the representativeness of the dataset affect the robustness of the results.

- **Source/method of retrieval**: Processing and analysis of the keep.eu database
- **Temporal coverage**: 2007-2013 (Interreg IV-A), 2014-2020 (Interreg V-A)
- **Unit**: n/a

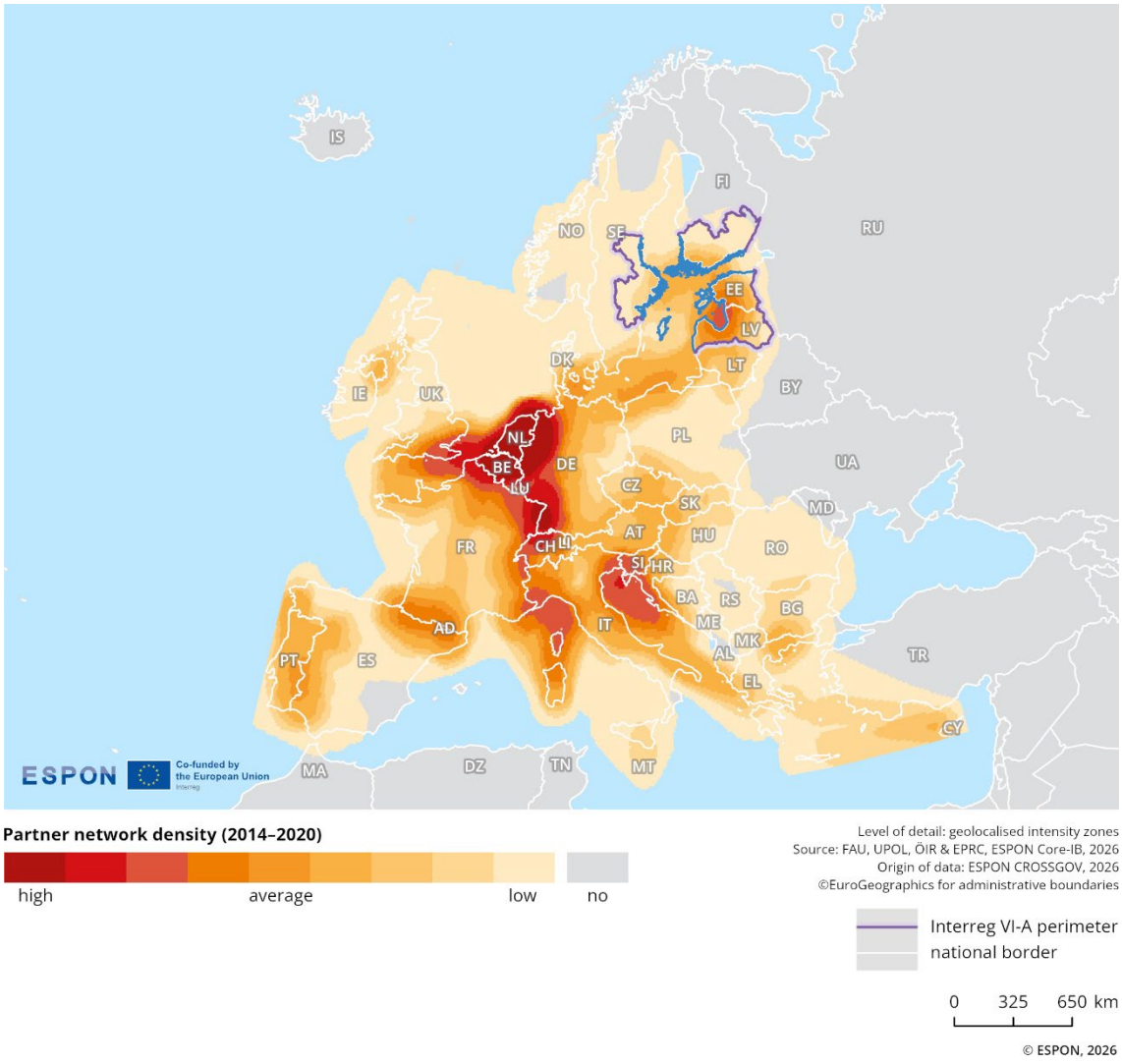
Please refer to the technical annex for more information.

Cooperation activities and networks are among the most meaningful types of information for delineating cross-border functional areas. As such, the indicator on cooperation through Interreg can help to identify networks among cross-border actors and highlight the density of cooperation in specific border segments.

Figure 2.41 shows the density of Interreg V-A (2014–2020) partner networks. The indicator includes the location of, and links between, Interreg project partners within a project consortium. From a European perspective, partner network density in the Central Baltic programme area appears to be somewhat spatially concentrated. In particular, the south-east areas show a high level of partner network density. Overall, the partner network density in this border area is about the European average. Based on the keep.eu database and excluding duplicates, the number of project partners decreased from 486 in Interreg IV-A (2007–2013) to 408 in Interreg V-A (2014–2020), an decrease of about 16%. It is important that these changes are considered in the context of factors such as change in programme budgets between 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, emphasis on targeting impact, and numbers of strategic projects.

[19] see Keep.eu representativeness: Interreg, Interreg-IPA and ENI cross-border

Figure 2.41: Interreg V-A partner network density



2.6.3 Key messages on the governance dimension

The coastal regions of the Central Baltic programme countries are closely connected by the Baltic Sea, which has shaped economic and cultural relations across the area for centuries. Beyond these long-standing ties, the programme has existed in its current form since 2007, and the area benefits from well-established and mature cooperation structures. Within the programme geography, 2 functional cross-border cooperation areas stand out: 1) South Finland-Estonia and 2) The archipelago and island areas. In addition, in recent years, the programme has paid increasing attention to the eastern border areas. Following the suspension of Interreg NEXT programmes, 2 border regions, Etelä Savo in Finland and Latgale in Lavia, became part of the Central Baltic programme area in December 2023.

The Central Baltic area is also covered by the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), the EU's first macro-regional strategy, which itself emerged from the area's long tradition of cooperation. In addition to EU-level coordination, there are numerous multilateral and bilateral collaborative efforts related to different themes, such as risks and disasters, animal and plant disease monitoring, civil protection, public health preparedness, energy security and emergency communication networks. These frameworks illustrate the broad spatial coverage and multi-level governance characterising cooperation within the programme area.

Cross-border public services across the Gulf of Finland and surrounding Baltic area focus primarily on disaster management but cover also themes such as environment and water, and tourism and information services. These themes reflect the programme area's vulnerability to environmental and geopolitical risks and underline the focus on resilience building. As yet, there is not involvement in b-solutions, although there are 3 information service-related institutionalised advice centres, all of them part of Info Norden.

Interreg partner network density is around the European average, with high levels of partner network density around the south-east areas of the programme geography. Interreg supports business development, especially amongst the SMEs and micro-businesses across several sectors, with a strong focus on the circular economy; the Baltic Sea; and, reduction of CO2 emissions in the urban areas through sustainable urban mobility solutions. Addressing these priorities requires coordinated, multi-level governance, sustained capacity building, and integrated approaches to economic development, sustainable mobility, and CO_2 reduction, all aligned with broader EU strategic objectives, including the EUSBSR.

3 Summary and key observations

To support the strategic dialogue on cross-border cooperation beyond 2027, this territorial analysis provides harmonised and comparable information. Its data-driven evidence helps to inform the future direction of cross-border cooperation by facilitating alignment with EU priorities and the evolving regulatory framework. The Core-IB border profiles adopt a harmonised methodology and provide programme areas with access to recent European data. As this approach comes along with limitations, member states may hold additional or more detailed data which can further enrich or contextualise the findings beyond the Core-IB project (see final report and technical annex of this project). These national sources are essential for refining and validating territorial evidence in policymaking processes, including: a) regional, fine-scale data and b) insights from political processes related to prioritisation and objective setting. The study's findings are analytical and are intended to support reflection and discussion. They do not create regulatory or policy obligations for Member States, the European Commission, or programme authorities.

Table 4 provides 2 types of information. Firstly, it summarises the key analytical findings for the border region, as discussed earlier in this profile. Secondly, it suggests policy options based on the analytical findings. These options are intended to provide a practical and informative basis for the strategic dialogue among programme bodies, managing authorities and the European Commission.

Generally speaking, the aim of cohesion policy is to promote harmonious territorial development (also) across borders. The objective is to mitigate the impact of borders and achieve 360° functionality, thereby enhancing the quality of life and fostering prosperous development on both sides of the border. The upcoming Interreg period offers an opportunity to address these objectives and potentials through targeted cooperation projects.

Table 4: Evidence-based conclusions

Territorial dimension	
Key analytical findings	• The programme area consists of a mix of larger and smaller settlements. Population is distributed fairly evenly around the settlements, with concentrations around the capitals and larger cities. The programme area has low dynamic settlement development, except for Helsinki and Tallinn; • The programme area has experienced a moderate, above EU-level, population growth across different age groups, particularly among those aged 65 and over. However, in Latvia, depopulation remains a significant challenge in most regions; • In terms of accessibility, ferry lines are key for the programme area, but these vary in travel times (e.g., Helsinki-Tallinn route offers a fast connection). For the land borders between Estonia and Latvia, road and rail are important, with the train connection outperforming car travel in terms of speed e.g., on the Valga–Valmiera route; • Services in the programme area are located around large towns.

Territorial dimension	
Policy options	**Population and settlement related aspects** • Targeted cooperation to address demographic trends. Cross-border initiatives can help address ageing, service concentration, and uneven demographic patterns across the programme area. These could include various actions related to e.g., digital healthcare, mobile service facilities, elderly care solutions, and development of joint strategies; • Labour mobility and educational solutions are relevant for addressing the depopulation challenge in the Latvian part of the cross-border programme area (targeted at specific groups, e.g., youth); • Knowledge exchange and innovative approaches to integrated territorial development could support settlement systems characterised by a mix of larger and smaller towns, strengthening the functional role of small towns and improving their connectivity with key centres of development. **Accessibility related aspect** • Consideration of strengthening East–West connectivity across the programme area, in response to uneven patterns of accessibility and functional linkages. In a cross-border context, this could entail digital connectivity initiatives. **Cross-cutting aspect** • Improved alignment between service provision and spatial planning can contribute to better responses to ongoing and projected demographic developments across the territory. This could entail cross-border service mapping and coordination, joint demographic scenario planning etc.

Economic dimension	
Key analytical findings	• The programme area is relatively prosperous with a above EU average GDP per capita. However, regional disparities exist in terms of GDP per capita and growth with higher GDP per capita in Finland and Sweden, but higher growth in Estonia and Latvia; • Employment levels vary considerably with higher values especially around the capital cities of Finland, Sweden and Estonia, with lower levels found in various other areas, including many parts of Estonia and Latvia. This suggests robust labour markets and economic activity in the urban centres, and more limited job opportunities and weaker economic development in other areas. This underlines the urban-rural divide of the programme area, and potential migration pressures toward the urban centres; • The economic structure has remained fairly stable, with the highest share of jobs and GVA in the service-oriented sectors. Sectors such as education, human health and social work have an important role in the programme area; • In terms of cross-border commuting, there is relatively strong cross-border commuting activity, especially in Latvia and Estonia, but also between Estonia and Finland. Differences in wage levels and labour needs are key driver for cross-border commuting, while social security agreements are also important for facilitating teleworking; • House price differences are also significant in the programme area, with higher prices especially around larger cities. There is a clear house price divide between urban and rural areas and between Latvia and Estonia; • Internet accessibility shows significant differences and divide between urban and rural and island areas in the programme area.

Economic dimension	
Policy options	**Competitiveness related aspects** • Cooperation could more directly target uneven development by addressing both the economic gap between the Nordic and Baltic areas and the persistent digital divides between urban and rural territories. Actions may include joint analyses, coordinated planning, and shared pilot initiatives that help lagging regions adopt new technologies and strengthen their economic base; • The transition towards knowledge-intensive services and higher levels of digitalisation can be supported through targeted programme actions and coordinated investment priorities. While digital infrastructure investments generally fall outside Interreg's remit, focus could be on complementary measures such as coordination, knowledge exchange and joint planning that help regions prepare for, or support, such investments; • Given the programme area's above-average GDP and the potential identified in the analysis, innovation and business development are key priorities. Cooperation projects could support cross-border clusters, testbeds, SME internationalisation, and green and digital transitions to reinforce the area's competitiveness. **Cross-cutting aspect** • Balanced labour mobility can be supported through coordinated approaches that take account of differences in housing costs, wage levels and employment opportunities. Joint measures, such as shared labour market information systems, or solutions to facilitate teleworking can help ensure that benefits are distributed fairly across the territories.

Green dimension	
Key analytical findings	• The programme area has important, interconnected, protected areas, especially along the Baltic Sea coast and archipelagos, and more dispersed protected zones in the inland areas; • The relatively high air quality (albeit more variable in Latvia), but more mixed water quality levels highlight the importance of addressing pollution levels, especially in selected coastal areas and central/urban areas. While the programme area has relatively low risk of natural disasters, these are expected to increase in the future. These aspects underline activities that enhance and preserve nature, reduce pollution and prepare for resilience planning; • The cross-border area shows extensive and dense high- and extra high-voltage transmission infrastructure which supports cross-border electricity flows. Although there is strong reliance on fossil fuels, renewable energy is important, and there is potential and need for green transition that cross-border cooperation could help foster; • The below EU levels in resource productivity in PPS in the 4 countries and the higher EU levels in waste production levels in Latvia underline the importance of continued work on the transition to a circular and resource efficient programme area.
Policy options	**Climate risks and resilience related aspects** • The programme area's strong tradition of cooperation in environmental protection can be further leveraged by linking successful Baltic Sea initiatives with the protection and management of relevant inland and coastal areas. This could include coordinated monitoring, shared restoration projects and harmonised approaches to managing pressures on marine and terrestrial habitats; • Cooperation projects could focus on integrated climate change adaptation and risk management strategies. This could entail joint vulnerability assessments, shared data platforms, and coordinated planning that reflect cross-border climate dynamic and future risk scenarios; • As the programme area undergoes significant shifts in energy systems and infrastructure, coordinated territorial cooperation can help strengthen adaptation and resilience. Projects could support joint planning for renewable energy integration, cross-border scenario modelling and shared approaches to safeguarding critical infrastructure from climate-related risks. **Cross-cutting aspect** • Enhanced coordination and strategic planning across regions can support responses to interconnected challenges, including water pollution, rising risks of natural hazards and pressures on resource productivity. Joint frameworks, shared monitoring systems, and coordinated investment planning can support more coherent and resilient territorial development.

Socio-economic dimension	
Key analytical findings	• The intensity of cross-border connectivity is relatively homogeneous and is generally low to moderate; • The area has multiple different languages, which can entail communication challenges which hinder deeper social and economic exchanges; • Tourism is focussed on the areas around Stockholm, Helsinki-Uusimaa, Põhja-Eesti and Rīga, with scope for diversifying and extending tourism activities in the less visited areas; • Access to essential services varies, with more even distribution in Estonia and longer times in Latvia, Finland and Sweden. There is therefore scope for improving service delivery.
Policy options	**Cross-cutting aspects** • Cooperation projects could also address the linguistic and cultural richness of the area, by supporting joint language initiatives and intercultural training to foster deeper social and economic exchanges; • Cooperation projects could address tourism development that encourages innovation in sustainable and domestic tourism, helping regions diversity their offer and strengthen resilience to external shocks; • A focus on innovative cross-border approaches to service provision can help achieve more consistent delivery of services across the programme area. This could include coordinated planning and digital solutions that reduce disparities.

Border security and safety dimension	
Key analytical findings	• Borders within the area have been subject to controls at various points, linked to specific events, with most controlling done in Sweden; • Especially for the eastern parts of the programme area the proximity of the border with Russia is a particular concern and has underlined the importance of good links to neighbouring territories to the west. In addition, the security concerns underline the need to focus on actions related to preparedness and resilience building.

Border security and safety dimension	
Policy options	**Cross-cutting aspects** • The impacts of border controls on cross-border commuting and logistics can be mitigated through coordinated and institutionalised cross-border policy dialogue; • The mitigation of border control effects can form part of cross-border cooperation projects in various sectors. Economic networks, transport infrastructure initiatives and tourism-related actions can incorporate considerations related to the impacts of border controls; • Strengthening North–South and East–West linkages within the programme area could help manage challenges associated with proximity to the border with Russia, while reinforcing beneficial connections with neighbouring regions inside the programme area.

Governance dimension	
Key analytical findings	• The Baltic Sea has played an important role in the economic and cultural relations between the countries over centuries, and overall, the area exhibits high levels of cooperation; • Interreg cooperation is well developed with years of formal cooperation covering a range of themes which entail actions on innovative business development, improved environment and resource use (e.g., circular economy solutions, coastal and marine environment improvements, reductions in CO_2 emissions), improved employment opportunities, and public services; • The programme is also well embedded in other broader EU strategies, such as the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, ensuring coherence and access to wider resources; • Cross-border public services focus primarily on disaster management and also include environment & water, tourism & information services. This reflects the programme area's vulnerability to environmental and geopolitical risks and underlines the need for continued resilience building; • Capacity building plays a pivotal role in ensuring that all actors can effectively engage in cooperation and deliver on the prioritised themes.

Governance dimension	
Policy options	**Cross-cutting aspects** • Building on long-established Interreg cooperation and the wider EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, cooperation projects could be scaled up with a stronger focus on integrated economic development, sustainable mobility solutions and CO_2 reduction. This would align the programme with wider EU strategic priorities; • To overcome administrative, regulatory, linguistic and cultural barriers, cooperation could invest in capacity building within public administrations. This would support more effective cross-border actions in areas such as disaster risk management, environmental protection and water governance, and information services.

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Co-funded by the European Union
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The ESPON EGTC is the Single Beneficiary of the ESPON 2030 Cooperation Programme. The Single Operation within the programme is implemented by the ESPON EGTC and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the EU Member States and the Partner States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.