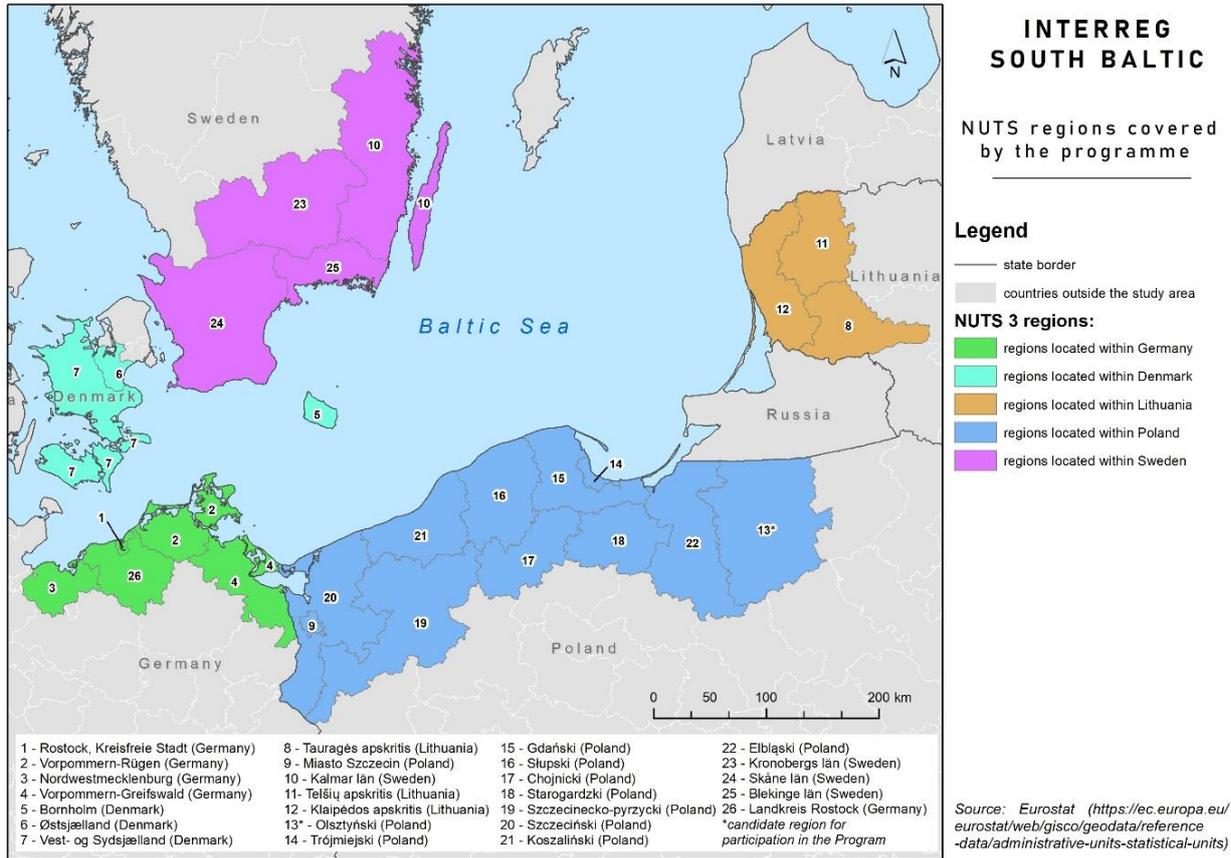


Non-technical summary

The Interreg South Baltic Programme 2021-2027 in question is being developed by five countries of the South Baltic area: Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, Sweden and Poland, the latter coordinating and managing the ongoing work. The Programme currently covers 25 coastal areas of the region with an area of approx. 118,000 km², inhabited by approx. 8.9 million people. The Olsztyn area is also a candidate for inclusion in the Programme.



The main objective of the document is to develop cross-border cooperation in order to achieve the vision outlined in the Programme, which is: 'United by the Sea into action for a blue and green future. Innovative, Sustainable, Attractive and Active South Baltic. The Programme provides for support for international projects within the defined area, which will be in line with the priorities and activities described below. It does not therefore define specific investment projects that may have a direct impact on the environment, but it does set out a framework of possible support for such projects.

I. Innovative South Baltic

- 1.1: Digitizing the region
- 1.2: Building connectivity in the region through internationalization

II. Sustainable South Baltic

- 2.1: Supporting transition towards green energy
- 2.2: Promoting sustainable use of water
- 2.3: Supporting a circular and more resource efficient development

III. Attractive South Baltic

- 3.1 Development of sustainable, resilient and innovative tourism

IV. Active South Baltic

- 4.1: Strengthening the cooperation capacity of actors based within the South Baltic Area (including civil society)

The overall Programme budget allocation will remain at a level similar to the 2014-2020 amount, i.e. approx. EUR 83 million from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

In the course of preliminary agreements between the countries it was assumed that the Programme would be developed on the basis of Polish regulations and administrative procedures, taking into account EU requirements. According to them, the Programme qualifies for a Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment (SEA). It has been assumed that the assessment will be carried out on the basis of Polish regulations, the so-called The EIA [Environmental Impact Assessment] Act, which takes into account the provisions of the so-called of the SEA Directive, which guarantees full compliance with EU regulations and requirements.

The overarching aim of strategic assessment is to support sustainable development by analyzing and assessing potential environmental impacts at the earliest possible stage of designing activities within programme documents at each level of strategic planning.

The Environmental Impact Forecast prepared under the requirements of the EIA Act is the equivalent of the environmental report referred to in the EIA Directive. The Forecast was carried out for the June 2021 version of the Programme. In the course of the analysis, a model of assessment was adopted in which the most important role is played by the identification of the objectives of the document itself and the effects of its implementation, as well as the assessment whether the environmental issues have been appropriately covered therein, and whether they are consistent with the principles of sustainable development and the environmental objectives set out in higher ranked documents. In this model, more emphasis is placed on the decision-making process resulting from the implementation of the evaluated document, and recommendations are addressed primarily to the institutions responsible for programme implementation. These are the Managing Authority and National Coordinators of other Member States. Moreover, the team of authors focused on those elements of the environment on which both the assessed document and the resulting project support may have an actual impact (either negative or positive). Such an element in the case of the analyzed Programme, apart from the land area, is undoubtedly the Baltic Sea, which requires a specific approach and highlighting the issues related to it. The result of this approach was the identification of key environmental problems of the South Baltic Area and the differentiation of their severity within particular States and the Baltic Sea.

The assessment carried out in the context of the first of the mentioned aspects, i.e. compliance with the principles of sustainable development, indicates that the Programme does not provide for interventions which could be contrary to any of the 17 main objectives of sustainable development, which are defined in the UN document "Agenda 2030". Furthermore, a more or less positive contribution to the achievement of the objectives set out in the renewed European Sustainable Development Strategy, especially on the regional scale, is expected in the case of all priorities and measures proposed within the Programme.

The analyses of the next aspect, i.e. compliance with the environmental protection objectives set at the EU and national level, showed that the planning of the assessed document was carried out taking into account all the key policies and strategies in this field with particular emphasis on the environmental protection objectives. There were no inconsistencies between the evaluated Programme and the documents defining the objectives of environmental protection. Nevertheless, the positive contribution of the Programme to their realization may be increased at the stage of its implementation through an appropriate selection of criteria for support project selection.

The assessment of the Programme objectives from the perspective of impacts on particular elements of the environment is presented in the summary table below. The scale of assessments takes into account both positive and negative impacts differentiated in terms of intensity, ranging from 0 (no impact), through 1 (impacts of insignificant scale, whose possible effects on the environment will be insignificant), then 2 (impacts of moderately significant scale, whose possible effects on the environment may be significant), to 3 (impacts of significant scale, whose possible effects on the environment will be significant). The scale also makes it possible to assess these impacts:

PRIORITY	MEASURE	Biodiversity (marine areas)	Biodiversity (costal areas)	People and material goods	Inland waters	Marine waters	Air quality	Landscape	Monuments	Adaptation to climate change	Land area and natural resources
I	1.1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
	1.2	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	
II	2.1	-1	-1	2	-1	0	2	-1	1	2	1
	2.2	1	1	2	3	1	0	1	1	1	1
	2.3	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	0	1	2
III	3.1	-1	-1	2	1	-1	1	-1	1	1	0
IV	4.1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0

The most important conclusion of the assessment is that no significantly negative impacts have been identified, including significant impacts on the status and integrity of the protected areas network, including Natura 2000.

In the assessments of nature and significance, positive impacts predominate, with varying degrees of intensity, while the identified impacts of potentially negative nature are limited to threats of insignificant, local and most often potential scale, which may be eliminated or significantly mitigated by means of clarification and explanation of the Programme provisions and appropriate formulation of criteria being the basis for the assessment of the applications for the calls for proposals for the project co-financing.

The balance of impacts carried out at the individual (component) level indicates that only positive effects of the Programme are to be expected, while the most significant of them should be experienced by the region's inhabitants, which is in line with the objectives adopted during the strategic planning process.

Among the remaining components, positive impacts are to be expected in the field of inland water quality, air quality and adaptation to climate change.

The balance of impacts carried out at the level of measures also identifies only positive impacts, with the most favorable being in the case of the following measures:

- 1.1: Digitizing the region
- 2.2: Promoting sustainable use of water
- 2.3: Supporting a circular and more resource efficient development

In case of two measures:

- 2.1: Supporting transition towards green energy
- 3.1 Development of sustainable, resilient and innovative tourism

the risk of occurrence of negligible local negative impacts was identified.

For measure 2.1 this is the risk of impact of investments related to renewable energy sources, notably offshore wind farms and hydropower facilities, which may be directly supported by the Programme, or result from the development of joint energy programmes or strategies within it, on the marine environment or surface waters and associated ecosystems and landscape.

On the other hand, in the case of measure 3.1 focused on the development of tourism, a threat of the emergence or intensification of pressure on local ecosystems and landscape as a result of excessive tourist traffic and the development of tourist infrastructure was identified.

For this reason, as a result of the conducted assessments and analyses, recommendations were presented that will allow the minimization or complete elimination of the indicated threats.

Within the framework of the prepared recommendations, on the one hand it was proposed to modify some provisions of the Programme document clarifying or specifying the introduced terms and definitions in order to avoid discrepancies in their understanding by the Programme recipients. On the other hand, the introduction of additional rules and criteria to ensure the safeguarding of environmental interests and to reinforce the positive effects of project implementation, particularly in the context of the environmental and climate objectives of the European Union.

In the first case, it was suggested to:

- modifying the description of the exemplary measure in point 2.3.2. in a way that would exclude the implementation of energy projects, which may have a negative impact on the environment, within protected areas and their protection zones as well as within ecological corridors;
- clarify the meaning of the introduced term "sustainable tourism" as taking into account the principles and objectives defined by UNEP and WTO in the a Guide for Policy Makers titled "MAKING TOURISM MORE SUSTAINABLE and which will exclude support for projects

- that contradict the principles of sustainable tourism, and thus potentially reinforce the negative impact of tourism on the environment;
- clarify the rules and method of including protected areas in networks and chains of tourist offers in the description of the exemplary measure under point 2.6.2, aiming at avoiding the risk of negative impacts related to the introduction of tourist pressure within the network of protected areas, where it has not occurred so far.

In the second case, the most important recommendation is the proposal to introduce the horizontal principle of financing only projects that do not cause serious harm, i.e. those complying with the so-called DNSH or "*Do No Significant Harm*" principle. Furthermore, it is proposed to give preference to projects having a positive impact on environmental and climate issues, i.e. making a significant contribution to the achievement of environmental objectives set out at the EU level and projects which will result in minimizing identified pressures in the area of tourism.

This approach will ensure that environmental objectives are consistently met within the Programme and that the projects funded do not pose a threat to any of them. This can be achieved by requiring beneficiaries to declare during the application process that the proposed project complies with the DNS principle within the meaning of Article 17 of the so-called the Taxonomy Regulation (EU Regulation 2020/852). The requirement to submit a declaration should be verified at the stage of formal assessment and apply to all investments financed by the Programme.

Furthermore, as part of the application process, it is additionally suggested to reward projects that make a significant contribution to one of the six environmental objectives set out in the aforementioned regulation. The idea of a bonus at the stage of project evaluation refers to the introduction of additional points for projects that significantly contribute to the achievement of environmental goals important for the community or minimize the existing pressure on the environment. Additional points may be awarded for projects that meet the conditions set out in Articles 10-15 of the Regulation. These may be additional criteria for the evaluation of projects submitted for financing included in the rules of calls for proposals. The assessment of a significant contribution to the environmental objectives may also apply to non-investment projects if they make it possible to achieve the environmental objectives in other areas of activity (e.g. in areas directly linked to the implementation of the project).

Due to the threats related to tourist pressure identified in the diagnosis and the impact assessment of Priority III, it was also suggested to include criteria specific to Priority III of the Programme, i.e. to award projects which minimize the identified pressures in the area of tourism. It is suggested that the regulations of project calls for proposals provide for bonuses for applications aimed at reducing the negative impact of travel and tourism on the environment.

The introduction of the above recommendations to the final version of the document and the construction of the criteria for project selection at the stage of its implementation on the basis of the proposed principles will, in the opinion of the authors, make it possible to avoid the risk of negative environmental impacts, while maximizing the positive contribution of the Programme to the achievement of the EU environmental and climate objectives.