

## THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN GROUPINGS OF TERRITORIAL COOPERATION IN TRANSPORT DEVELOPMENT IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

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**Purpose:** The purpose of the paper is to assess the role of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) in the development of transport in the Baltic Sea Region and to identify differences in the scope and character of their involvement in transport-related activities. The study seeks to determine whether EGTCs constitute an effective instrument for supporting territorial cooperation in transport at the macro-regional level and to indicate examples of more advanced engagement in this field

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research is based on a qualitative approach combining a review of the scientific literature with an analysis of European Union strategic, policy and programme documents. The study examines the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, selected European Territorial Cooperation programmes and statutory, organisational and project-related documents of EGTCs operating in the Baltic Sea Region. The analysis is complemented by a comparative review of selected EGTC case studies with a particular focus on transport-related objectives and activities.

**Findings:** The analysis shows that, despite the importance of transport within the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the overall role of EGTCs in transport development remains limited. Only a small number of EGTCs operating in the Baltic Sea Region involve partners from more than one regional state, which constrains their capacity to support cooperation at the macro-regional scale. At the same time, the study identifies clear differentiation among EGTCs in terms of transport-related engagement. In this context, the Kvarken Council EGTC stands out as an example of a grouping that has implemented numerous cross-border transport projects and addressed not only accessibility and connectivity issues but also challenges related to the security and resilience of transport infrastructure in the current geopolitical context.

**Research limitations/implications:** A key limitation of the study is the lack of an in-depth analysis of the internal operating conditions of individual EGTCs and their formal and operational links with the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Future research could focus on longitudinal analyses of EGTC activities, comparative studies across different macro-regions and a more detailed assessment of institutional and governance-related factors shaping EGTC performance in the transport sector.

**Practical implications:** The findings suggest that EGTCs may serve as a useful coordination framework for transport-related cooperation, particularly in cross-border contexts, provided that their activities are more strongly aligned with territorial cooperation programmes and macro-regional policy objectives. Strengthening the institutional role of EGTCs could enhance the effectiveness of transport initiatives in peripheral and border regions.

**Social implications:** Transport-related activities undertaken by EGTCs may contribute to improved accessibility of peripheral areas, enhanced territorial cohesion and greater resilience of transport systems, thereby positively affecting quality of life and regional development in the Baltic Sea Region.

**Originality/value:** The originality of the paper lies in its focused analysis of EGTCs as actors in transport development within a macro-regional framework and in highlighting the differentiated roles of individual groupings, with particular attention to the Kvarken Council EGTC as an example linking transport development with broader issues of cross-border cooperation and regional security.

**Keywords:** EGTC, Baltic Sea Region, territorial cooperation, transport.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Since its inception, the European Union has supported processes of international territorial cooperation (Toczyski, 1998; Svenson, 2015; Studzieniecki, Mazurek, 2018). Such cooperation, through the removal of border barriers, contributes to the democratisation of Europe, brings people closer together, creates platforms for mutual understanding, and helps to solve economic and social problems that transcend national borders (Kulesza, 2003). For many years, European legislation neither resolved nor defined the legal forms of territorial cooperation, recognising that these matters fell within the exclusive competence of the authorities of the Member States and lay beyond the law-making powers of the Community institutions (Studzieniecki, 2015).

The idea of territorial cooperation developed in Western Europe in the 1960s, alongside the activation of decentralisation processes that led to the growing autonomy of cross-border regions (Lechwar, 2008). Due to their peripheral location, such regions were often characterised by a low level of socio-economic development (Kasprzyk, 2004; Toczyski et al., 1998). They usually possessed less developed transport infrastructure, which stemmed from their position at the ends of communication routes (Gałuszka, 2010).

The developmental problems of border areas encouraged local and regional authorities to seek more effective systemic solutions and contributed to the growth of bottom-up international initiatives (Studzieniecki, 2015). There emerged a need to introduce new institutions and instruments that would improve the functioning of the existing Euroregions, which lacked sufficient legal status and could not directly access European Union funds (Lewkowicz, 2013; Kusiak-Winter, 2016; Perkowski, Zoń, 2017). The emergence of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) fundamentally changed this situation, creating new opportunities for the development of territorial cooperation, including cooperation in the field of transport. As the EGTC is still a relatively new instrument, the issue of its use in transport development remains underexplored. This also applies to the Baltic Sea Region (BSR),

where transport is one of the key factors of integration and development (Böhme et al., 1998; Friman et al., 2019; Studzieniecki, Palmowski, 2019). Although this is reflected in a rich body of academic literature, only a few studies address territorial cooperation in the field of transport within the BSR. Therefore, there is a need to fill this research gap by examining the use of EGTCs in territorial cooperation across the region.

## **2. Aims and methods**

The main objective of this article is to determine whether European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation support the development of transport in the Baltic Sea Region, and if so, to what extent.

The completion of this main task required achieving two additional objectives:

1. To identify the attributes of the EGTC as an instrument of territorial cooperation capable of supporting transport development,
2. To identify the conditions of territorial cooperation in the field of transport in the BSR, with particular consideration of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR).

For the purpose of the article, literature studies and analyses of secondary sources were carried out, including 15 programmes and 200 projects of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) covering the EU programming period 2014-2020. Detailed analyses were conducted of documents and online resources of the EUSBSR and of existing European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation. The study also utilised the results of a statistical analysis of multidimensional territorial cooperation within the INTERREG Baltic Sea Region Programme 2014-2020, as well as information obtained from interviews conducted in 2023 with coordinators of the Thematic Areas “Transport” and “Shipping” operating within the EUSBSR framework.

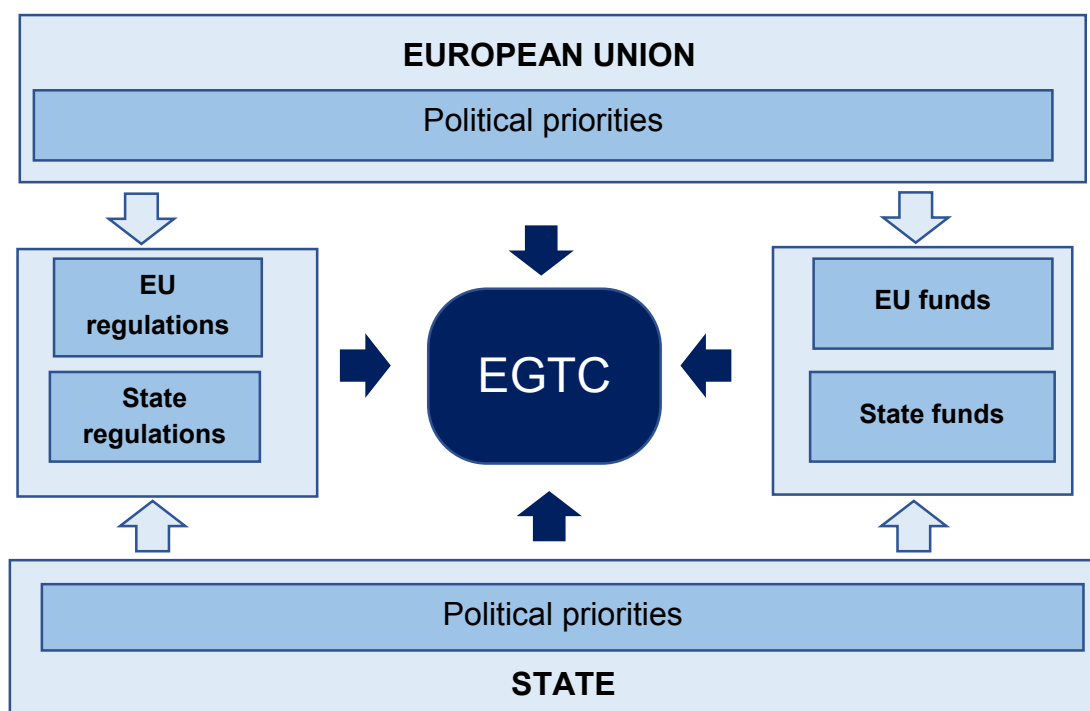
## **3. Concept and development of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation**

The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) is a multifaceted and multidimensional concept (Dołzblasz, Raczyk, 2010; Kusiak-Winter, 2011; Kentnowska, 2012; Buczkowski, Żukowski, 2014; Adamczuk, 2014; Ruskowski, 2010; Lewkowicz, 2013; Jóskowiak, 2013). It is interpreted as an area of cooperation, an instrument of cooperation, a legal entity, and a participant in international relations. The regulations establishing the EGTC were introduced in 2006 (Regulation (EC) No 1082/2006). They revolutionised cross-border

cooperation (Kuligowski, 2012; Pancer-Cybulska, 2015) and accelerated the development of transnational and interregional cooperation (Salbach, 2022). The EGTC became a new actor in international relations, supporting European integration at regional and local levels (Studzieniecki, 2015).

The regulation establishing the EGTC was intended to be a legal act directly effective in all Member States, leaving them no discretion in the method of implementing the objectives of Community law (Grosse, 2011; Durand, Decoville, 2020). Nevertheless, due to the specific and sensitive nature of this form of international cooperation, a number of national provisions were adopted to complement the EU regulation. As a result, in many countries the establishment of an EGTC was made dependent on decisions of the central authorities (Studzieniecki, Mazurek, 2018).

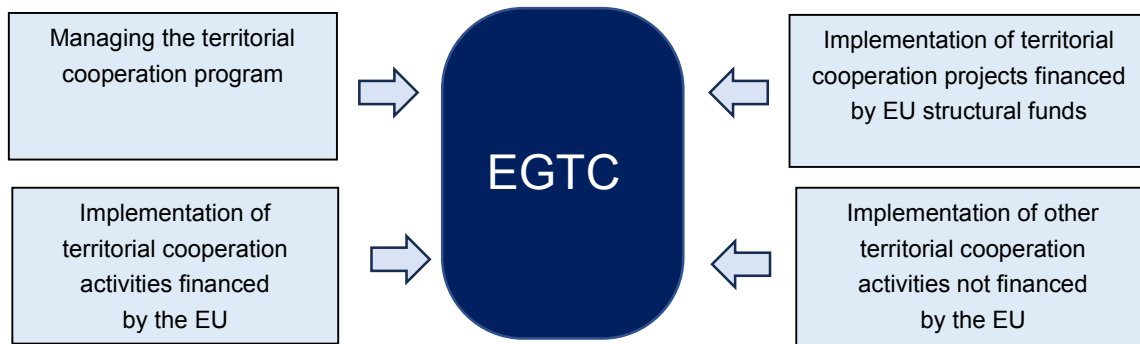
The functioning of EGTCs is determined by a variety of factors, among which political, legal, and economic conditions at both EU and national levels play a crucial role (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Determinants of the functioning of European Groups of Territorial Cooperation.

Source: own work.

The real conditions for the development, operation, and financing of EGTCs depend largely on the countries in which they operate (Studzieniecki, 2015). An EGTC operates within the scope of its assigned tasks, which involve facilitating and promoting territorial cooperation to enhance economic, social, and territorial cohesion and to overcome barriers within the internal market (Regulation (EU) No 1302/2013). The tasks of EGTCs primarily concern the implementation of cooperation programmes and operations supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), or the Cohesion Fund (Fig. 2).

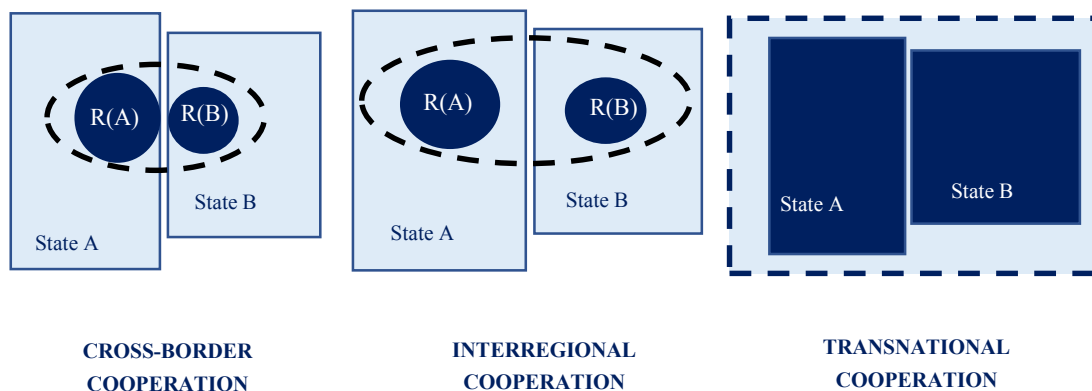


**Figure 2.** Tasks of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation.

Source: own elaboration based on Regulation (EU) No 1302/2013.

Territorial cooperation is implemented in three dimensions (Fig. 3):

1. Cross-border cooperation, where entities from neighbouring border areas cooperate (e.g. Euroregions).
2. Interregional cooperation, where entities from different regions collaborate (e.g. associations of cities or regions).
3. Transnational cooperation, where cooperation covers larger areas, including entire countries (e.g. the Baltic Sea Region).



**Figure 3.** Dimensions of territorial cooperation.

Source: own elaboration.

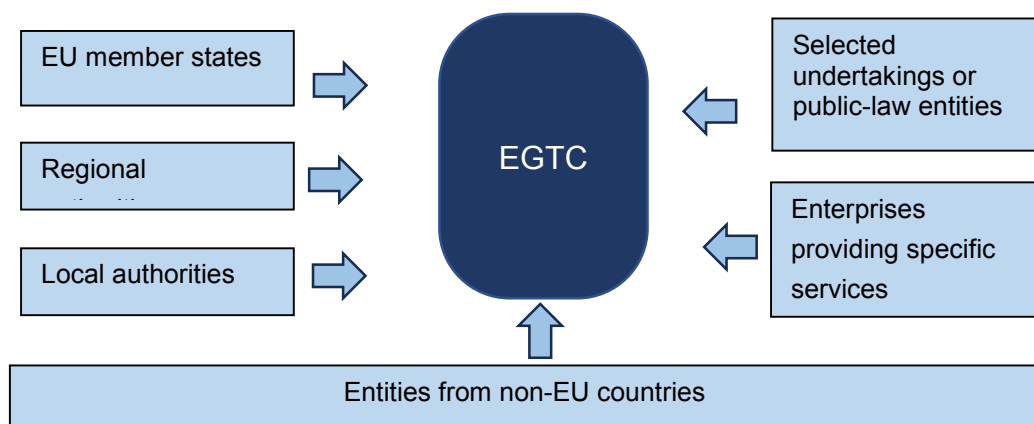
Each form of cooperation is supported by dedicated European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes (Table 1). During the 2014-2020 programming period, the EU allocated almost EUR 9 billion to ETC (Studzeniecki, Mazurek, 2018). The largest share (EUR 6.6 billion) was assigned to cross-border cooperation, while the smallest (EUR 0.5 billion) went to interregional cooperation. The objectives of ETC programmes proved to be highly diverse.

**Table 1.**  
*The objectives of ETC programmes*

Types of cooperation	Objectives of cooperation
Cross-border cooperation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Solving common problems identified in border regions, such as poor accessibility (particularly concerning information and communication technologies – ICT – and transport infrastructure), declining local industries, inadequate business environments, lack of links between local and regional administrative levels, low levels of research and innovation and ICT use, environmental pollution, risk prevention, and negative attitudes towards neighbouring states' citizens.</li> <li>2. Unlocking untapped growth potential in border areas (development of cross-border research infrastructure, innovation centres and clusters, integration of cross-border labour markets, cooperation between educational institutions including universities, or between healthcare institutions), while strengthening cooperation processes for the harmonious overall development of the Union.</li> </ol>
Interregional cooperation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Interregional cooperation. Improving the effectiveness of cohesion policy by encouraging the exchange of experience between regions concerning thematic objectives and urban area development, including urban–rural linkages, in order to enhance the implementation of territorial cooperation programmes and related initiatives, and by supporting analyses of territorial cohesion trends through research, data collection, and other actions.</li> <li>2. Exchanging experience concerning thematic objectives to improve the planning and implementation of operational programmes within the goal “Investment for Growth and Jobs” and, where appropriate, within the goal “European Territorial Cooperation”, while promoting mutually beneficial cooperation between innovative clusters with a high share of research institutions, as well as exchanges among researchers and research institutions in both developed and less developed regions, taking into account experiences from the “Regions of Knowledge” and “Research Potential” initiatives under the Seventh Framework Programme for Research.</li> </ol>
Transnational cooperation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthening cooperation through initiatives promoting integrated territorial development linked to the priorities of EU cohesion policy.</li> <li>2. Developing maritime cross-border cooperation not covered by cross-border cooperation programmes.</li> </ol>

Source: own elaboration based on Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013.

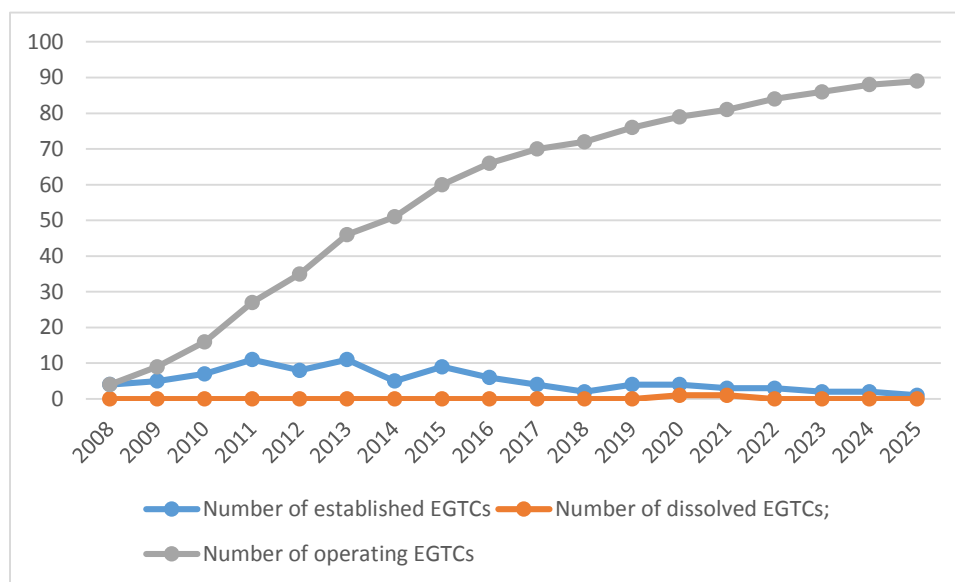
The members of EGTCs (Figure 4) are primarily national, regional, and local authorities. The legal framework also permits the participation of selected undertakings or public-law entities, as well as enterprises entrusted with the provision of specific services.



**Figure 4.** Types of EGTC members.

Source: own elaboration.

Since 2014, following an amendment to EU regulations, entities from non-EU countries have been allowed to join European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). By 2025, total of 93 EGTCs had been established (European Committee of the Regions, 2023). However, two of them were dissolved; therefore, 91 EGTCs are currently in operation (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Development of EGTCs in Europe.

Source: own elaboration based on the European Committee of the Regions, 2025.

An analysis of EGTC statutes and conventions (Studzieniecki, 2015) indicates that tourism environmental protection, and transport are among the most frequent objectives of these institutions, with transport widely perceived as a key factor of socio-economic development. In this context, EGTC activities in the field of transport include infrastructure development, financing of transport projects, Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS), logistics and road maintenance services, rail transport, and integrated ticketing systems (Carvalho et al., 2018).

#### 4. Transport within territorial cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region

Transport development in the Baltic Sea Region is financially supported by the European Structural and Investment Funds, in particular by the European Regional Development Fund, within the framework of European Territorial Cooperation implemented in three dimensions: cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation (Studzieniecki, 2015). During the 2014-2020 programming period, 15 ETC programmes operated in the region, including one interregional programme, one transnational programme, and thirteen cross-border programmes.

The interregional cooperation programme INTERREG Europe, although not directly focused on transport, indirectly supported the development of sustainable mobility through the exchange of good practices in transport policy, mobility planning, and the implementation of low-emission transport solutions (Interreg Europe, 2015).

A particularly important role in achieving transport-related objectives was played by the INTERREG Baltic Sea Region Programme, which was oriented towards the development of sustainable transport, improving the connectivity of secondary and tertiary networks with the TEN-T system, increasing the interoperability of transport systems, and enhancing the accessibility of peripheral areas affected by adverse demographic changes (Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2014-2020, 2014). The specific objectives and corresponding actions of the programme are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

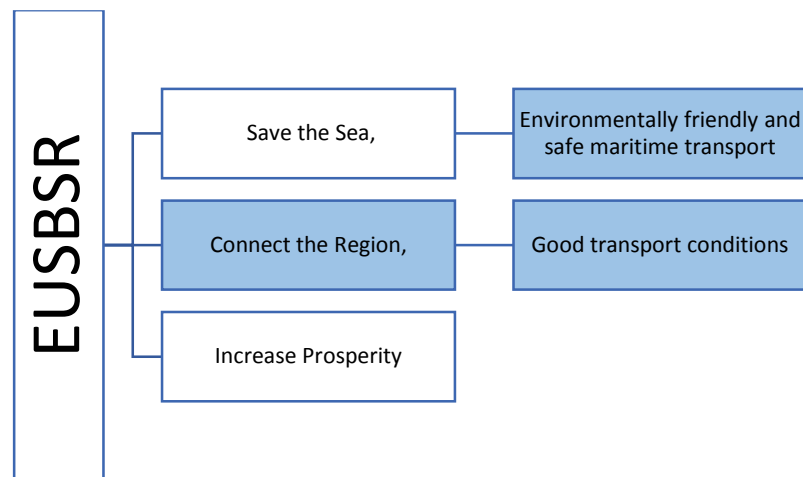
*Specific objectives of the main objective “Sustainable Transport” and the resulting actions in the Baltic Sea Region Programme 2014-2020*

No.	Specific objective	Actions
1	Interoperability of transport modes	Increasing interoperability in freight and passenger transport along north–south and east–west connections through enhanced capacity of transport operators.
2	Accessibility of remote and demographically challenged areas	Improving accessibility of the most remote areas and regions affected by demographic change through increased capacity of transport operators.
3	Maritime safety	Enhancing safety and security at sea through advanced capacities of maritime operators.
4	Environmentally friendly shipping	Improving environmentally friendly shipping through increased capacity of entities operating in the maritime sector.
5	Environmentally friendly urban mobility	Strengthening environmentally friendly transport systems in urban areas through increased capacity of entities operating in urban transport.

Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2014-2020 (2014).

Transport-related issues were also addressed within cross-border cooperation programmes in the Baltic Sea Region; however, their inclusion was selective. Among the thirteen cross-border programmes implemented in the period 2014-2020, transport-related objectives and actions were included in nine programmes, with their scope varying depending on the characteristics of the area and the priorities of individual programmes (Studzieniecki, 2017). These programmes focused, inter alia, on the development of environmentally friendly mobility, the removal of infrastructure bottlenecks, and the improvement of cross-border accessibility.

As a result, territorial cooperation has become an important instrument for the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, in which transport is treated as a priority area (Studzieniecki, Przybyłowski, 2017). Transport-related issues are also reflected in the operational documents of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (SWD, 2013; SWD, 2021), which are presented in a synthetic and illustrative manner in Figure 6.



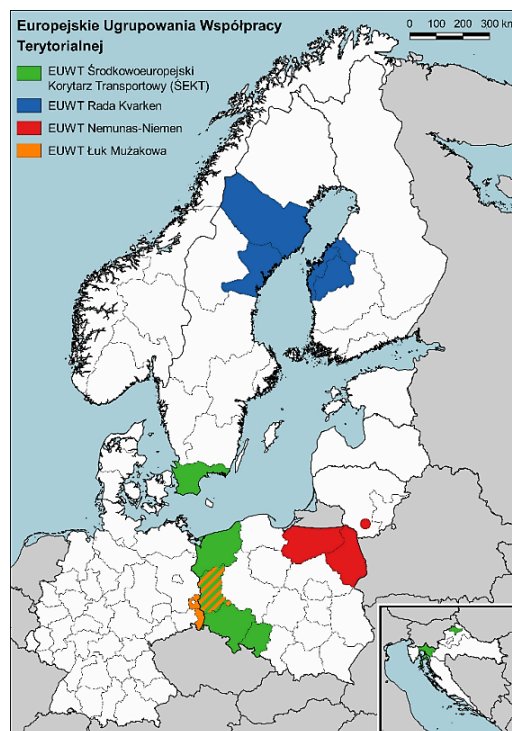
**Figure 6.** Transport in EUSBSR.

Source: own elaboration based on SWD (2013).

An important complement to these activities was the opportunity to disseminate good practices in transport planning and management through the INTERACT programme, which facilitated the exchange of experience among programmes and institutions involved in the implementation of macro-regional strategies (Ots, 2023).

## 5. Transport in the activities of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region

In the Baltic Sea Region, 21 European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation operate out of more than 90 EGTCs registered in the European Union. Their spatial distribution is uneven, with the largest number of groupings located in Germany, while only single EGTCs operate in Finland and Lithuania. No EGTCs currently function in Denmark, Estonia or Latvia. The spatial distribution of EGTCs in the Baltic Sea Region is illustrated in Figure 7, while their basic institutional characteristics are summarised in Table 3. From the perspective of macro-regional cooperation, only four EGTCs bring together members from at least two Baltic Sea Region countries, which determines their capacity to support cooperation beyond the local scale.



**Figure 7.** EGTCs involving at least two Baltic Sea Region countries.

Source: own elaboration.

The EGTCs operating in the Baltic Sea Region were established relatively recently, between 2014 and 2023, and are composed mainly of local and regional authorities or institutions established by them. The number of members ranges from two to sixteen, indicating significant differences in organisational scale and capacity. Their involvement in transport-related activities varies depending on territorial context, institutional objectives and links with European Territorial Cooperation programmes.

**Table 3.**

*Characteristics of EGTCs operating in the Baltic Sea Region*

EGTC	Year of establishment	Seat	Number of countries	Number of members	Member status	ETC programme management	Implementation of ETC projects
Kvarken Council	2020	Vaasa, Finland	2	16	Local and regional authorities	No	Yes
Polish–German Geopark Muskau Arch	2021	Klein Kötzig, Germany	2	14	Local and regional authorities	No	No
Central European Transport Corridor	2014	Szczecin, Poland	3	6	Regional authorities	No	Yes
Nemunas–Niemen	2023	Suwałki, Poland	2	2	Local authorities; association of local government units	No	No

Source: own elaboration based on EGTCs statutes.

It may be seen that the scope and nature of transport-related activities undertaken by individual groupings vary.

### **5.1. Polish–German Geopark Muskau Arch EGTC**

The Polish–German Geopark Muskau Arch EGTC was established in 2021 to coordinate cross-border cooperation within the UNESCO Global Geopark Muskauer Faltenbogen / Łuk Mużakowa. Transport is not defined as a statutory objective of the grouping; however, due to the touristic character of the area, the EGTC is indirectly involved in transport-related activities. These include cooperation with regional public transport operators and local providers of tourist and recreational transport services, contributing to sustainable tourism development in the Polish–German border region.

### **5.2. Nemunas–Niemen EGTC**

The Nemunas–Niemen EGTC, registered in 2023, builds on long-standing cross-border cooperation within the Euroregion Niemen. One of its declared objectives is the improvement of access to transport networks and services. The experience of its founding members includes transport-related projects concerning inland waterways and cross-border accessibility, particularly in the Polish–Lithuanian border area. These activities may provide a basis for future engagement in transport infrastructure development in a region characterised by limited accessibility.

### **5.3. Central European Transport Corridor EGTC**

The Central European Transport Corridor EGTC was established in 2014 as an institutional framework supporting the development of an international north–south transport corridor in Central Europe. Its activities focus primarily on coordination, strategic planning and analytical work related to transport infrastructure, including the identification of missing links and bottlenecks within the corridor. The EGTC has been involved in projects promoting sustainable and rail-based transport solutions, reflecting its sectoral focus on transport and its relevance beyond the Baltic Sea Region.

### **5.4. Kvarken Council EGTC**

A particularly prominent role among EGTCs operating in the Baltic Sea Region is played by the Kvarken Council EGTC, which institutionalised long-standing Finnish–Swedish cross-border cooperation in the Kvarken region. Transport constitutes a central element of its activities, reflecting the geographical conditions of the region and the importance of maritime connections across the Gulf of Bothnia. Ferry services between Vaasa and Umeå represent a key component of regional accessibility for both passenger and freight transport.



Overall, the diversity of transport-related activities undertaken by EGTCs in the Baltic Sea Region highlights the differentiated role of this instrument in cross-border cooperation, shaped by territorial context, institutional objectives and functional scope.

## 6. Summary

Transport constitutes an important area of territorial cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region, and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) treats it as a key element of cohesion and macro-regional integration, implemented primarily through European Territorial Cooperation programmes.

The analysis indicates that the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation instrument functions mainly within a cross-border cooperation framework, while no EGTC of a transnational character has yet been established in the Baltic Sea Region that could directly support the objectives of the EUSBSR. At the same time, EGTCs remain a relatively young instrument that is still evolving in the region and has not yet reached full institutional maturity.

Clear differentiation can be observed among individual groupings. The Kvarken Council EGTC stands out due to the implementation of numerous cross-border transport projects addressing both accessibility and issues related to infrastructure resilience and supply security. In the longer term, the establishment of a transnational EGTC could facilitate fuller use of the potential of this instrument in achieving the objectives of the macro-regional strategy in the Baltic Sea Region, particularly in the field of transport

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