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TOURISM IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

GEOGRAPHY OF INBOUND TOURISM AND TRANSBOUNDARY TOURISM-AND-RECREATION REGION BUILDING IN SWEDEN

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Sweden's tourism industry stands out for its large contribution to the development of the national economy. The vast size of the country makes it possible to trace differences in incoming tourist flows from neighbouring countries. This circumstance accounts for the novelty of this study, which lies in viewing national tourism geography from the perspective of the theory of transboundary tourism-and-recreation region building. Interregional differences in the structure of incoming tourist flows help identify the country's cross-border tourism-and-recreation regions and delineate their borders. This research employs statistical and cartographic methods. The incoming tourist flow to Sweden grew steadily until 2020. However, the Covid-19 crisis has led to a drastic reduction in the number of incoming tourists. Based on the 2019 statistics, the findings confirm the existence of a developed transboundary tourism-and-recreation mesoregion that brings together Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. The formation boasts strong tourist links. There are another five cross-border tourism-and-recreation mesoregions: Sweden-Norway-Denmark, Middle Sweden-Norway, Sweden-Norway-Finland, Middle Sweden-Finland, and South Sweden-Finland. The number of tourists visiting cross-border mesoregions indicates the degree of development of the latter.

Keywords:

tourism industry, international tourism, tourist flow, Covid-19, cross-border region

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Introduction

Sweden ranks third in the Baltic region in terms of the contribution of the tourism industry to the country's economy (8.2% of GDP in 2019) behind Estonia and Germany (11.7 and 9.1% respectively)¹. In turn, the development of the country's tourism sector greatly depends on international tourism. This is also facilitated by the fact that Sweden has a small number of inhabitants compared to other European countries (10.2 million people at the beginning of 2021) while the total population of its main sources of tourists is several times higher.

The relatively large territory of the state (the fourth place in Europe, about 450 thousand square kilometres) leads to the fact that inbound tourism is regionally-specific. A wide variety of cultural and historical heritage and natural landscapes contributes to the development of tourism and recreation in its different regions across the country. Major tourist centres are located both in the southern part of Sweden, which is adjacent to the two main sources of international tourists, Germany and Denmark, and in the northern part, which is no less attractive for foreign visitors due to its picturesque landscapes. In this context, studying the geography of tourist flows in Sweden from the perspective of the theory of cross-border tourist and recreational region-building is of particular interest.

The study aims to determine regional differences in the structure of the international tourist flow to Sweden, which serves as a basis for identifying and assessing the level of development of meso-level cross-border tourist and recreational regions.

Objectives of the study are to review the dynamics and structure of the flows of inbound visitors to Sweden from 2008 to the present; to identify the features of the distribution of the flow of inbound visitors to Sweden, and to identify meso-level cross-border tourist and recreational regions in the territories adjacent to the neighbouring countries; to determine the rate of international tourist exchange within the cross-border tourist and recreational mesoregions to use it as the basis for assessing their development level.

The information base of the study is the publicly available Eurostat data on the number of tourists arriving in Sweden², the data of the Statistical Office of Sweden on overnight stays of tourists both for the whole country and for its

¹ Economic Impact Reports, 2020, *WTTC*, available at: <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact> (accessed 12.01.2021).

² *Statistics Eurostat*, 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TOUR_OCC_ARNAT__custom_159133/default/table?lang=en (accessed 20.10.2020).

lens (administrative-territorial units of the country of the first level)³, as well as similar data provided by the statistical services of Norway⁴, Finland⁵, Germany⁶, and Denmark⁷.

Literature review

There is a large number of publications on the development of tourism in Sweden. The first large group of international publications on this topic allows assessing the current state and prospects for the development of certain types of tourism in this Scandinavian country. For instance, Carson and D.B. [1], Almsted, Lundmark and Pettersson [2], Rytönen and Tunón [3] discuss the experience of rural tourism development in Sweden. Demiroglu, Lundmark, Saarinen and Müller [4] examine opportunities for the development of ski tourism in Arctic Sweden; Pashkevich [5] studies mountain and industrial tourism in the area of Bergslagen. There are numerous Swedish studies on the development of eco-tourism and recreation closely related to the issues of environmental protection. These include the works by Lundmark, Fredman and Sandel [6], Fredman, Romild, Yuan, Wolf-Watz [7], Margaryan and Fredman [8], Petersson-Forsberg [9].

One of the popular research topics is the study of the impact of tourism on local communities. The Swedish research on this topic includes publications by Lindström and Larson [10], Farsari [11], Lundberg [12], Hultman and Michael [13], Van Reijnders [14] and others.

Russian researchers, as well as some international ones, pay attention to the development of various types of tourism in Sweden, for example, educational [15], cruise [16], as well as consider general issues and prospects for the development of tourism in Sweden compared with other Nordic countries [17–19]. Particularly noteworthy are the works that focus on the development of tourism in certain areas of Sweden (for example, [20; 21]) as they give an idea of the

³ Statistics Sweden, 2020, *Statistical database*, available at: <http://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/en/ssd/> (accessed 20.10.2020).

⁴ Accommodation establishments total. Guest nights, by guests' country of residence, 2020, *Statistisk sentralbyrå. Statistics Norway*, available at: <https://www.ssb.no/en/statbank/table/08401/> (accessed 15.08.2020).

⁵ 116t — Yearly nights spent and arrivals by country of residence, 1995–2020. Visit Finland, 2020, *Statistics Service Rudolf*, available at: <http://visitfinland.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/en/VisitFinla> (accessed 12.01.2021).

⁶ Ankünfte und Übernachtungen in Beherbergungsbetrieben: Bundesländer, Jahre, 2020, *Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland GENESIS-Online*, available at: <https://www-genesis.destatis.de/genesis/online> (accessed 12.01.2021).

⁷ Overnight stay by type of overnight accommodations, region, nationality of the guest and period, 2020, *StatBank Denmark*, available at: <https://www.statbank.dk/statbank5a/SelectVarVal/Define.aspx?Maintable=TURIST&PLanguage=1> (accessed 12.01.2021).

actual geography of tourism in the country. However, in our opinion, it is still not fully studied, the cartographic methods are underused while they allow observing regional differences in the spatial structure of tourist flows.

The processes of cross-border tourism and recreation regionalization in Sweden cannot be considered fully studied either. The only publications on this issue that we can mention are those by Prokkola devoted to the cross-border regionalization in the “Tornio Valley” Council, i.e. on the Swedish-Finnish border [22; 23]. Drawing on the example of the “Arctic Circle Destination”, these works consider the influence of tourism on the border regions from different points of view, primarily through the prism of social and cultural international cooperation, as well as from the perspective of the transformation of border landscapes.

Earlier studies by Russian authors on the geography of tourism in the countries of the Baltic region (Estonia [24], Finland [25], and Norway [26]) assess the role of cross-border tourist and recreational regions ([27–31], etc.) in generating and receiving tourist flows. This article presents the results of a similar study conducted at the level of administrative units in Sweden.

Research results and discussion

Sweden publishes only general statistics on overnight stays, thus unfortunately it is not possible to assess the number of overnight stays of tourists by country of origin or len. However, the data on the tourist flow to the country are available from the European Statistics. Figure 1 shows the dynamics of the inbound tourism flows to Sweden in 2008–2019 based on Eurostat data on the number of visitors arriving in the country and using its accommodation facilities.

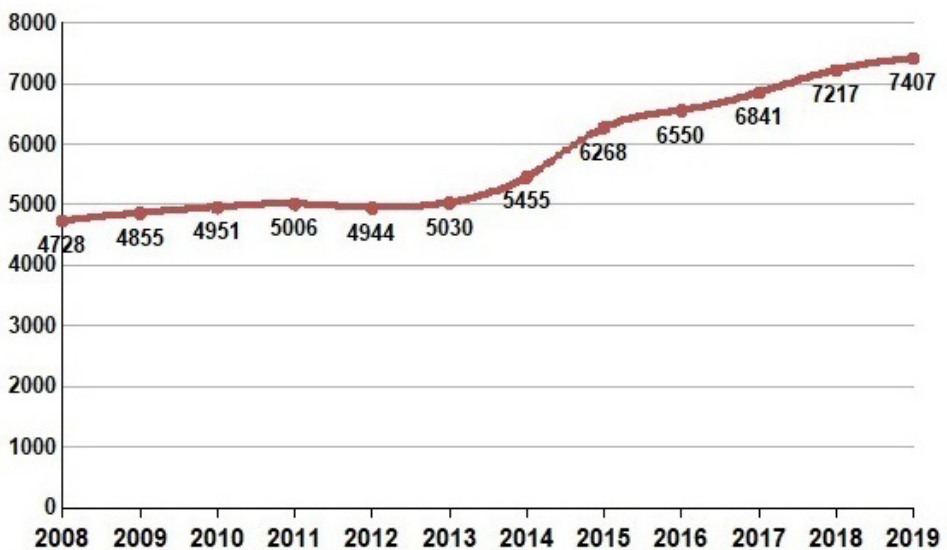


Fig. 1. Dynamics of the flow of inbound visitors to Sweden in 2008–2019, thousand people

During this period, the inbound tourism flow increased more than 1.5-fold. Its slight reduction was observed only in 2012 (-1.3% compared to the previous year). Figure 2 shows the distribution of tourist traffic by country of origin based on overnight stay statistics.

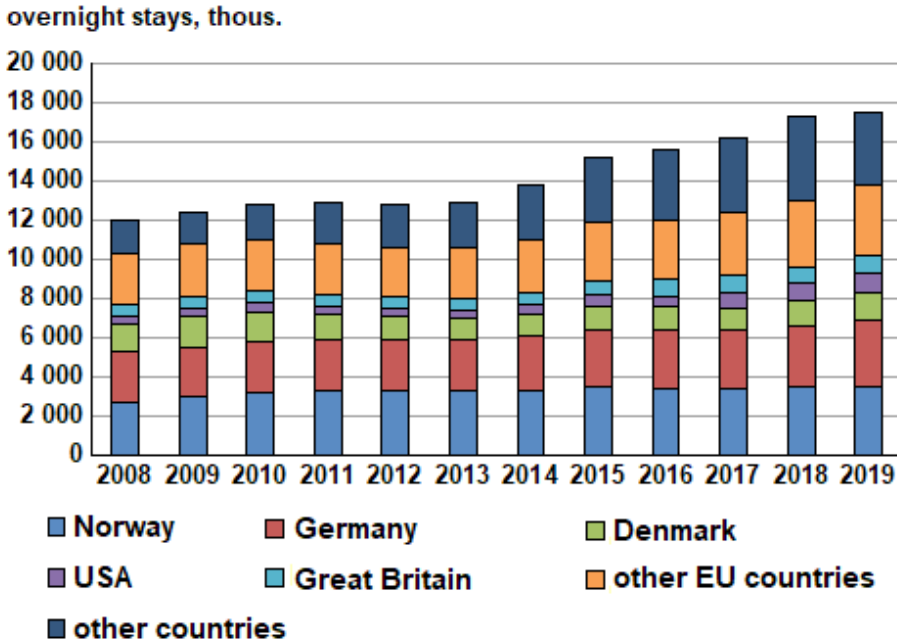


Fig. 2. Dynamics of the number of overnight stays of inbound tourists in Sweden

Throughout the study period, tourists from Norway held the lead in the number of overnight stays in Sweden (3.5 million in 2019). While in absolute terms, this number has slightly increased compared to 2008, the share of tourists from Norway in the overseas visitors has decreased from 25.3 to 19.9% since 2013. There are three main reasons for their: the neighbouring position, cultural and linguistic proximity, and visa-free regime (both countries are part of the Schengen area). One of the incentives for Norwegians to travel to Sweden is the price difference, as in Sweden, goods and services are noticeably cheaper, and cross-border trade is well developed. The method used to count tourists by the number of overnight stays allows excluding same-day visitors.

The second-largest number of overnight stays in Sweden is that of tourists from Germany (3.4 million in 2019), which is also part of the Schengen area.

The tourist flow from Germany, as well as from Norway, grew, but its share in the total flow of overseas visitors decreased by almost 3%. In 2019, it comprised 19.3% of the total inbound visits to Sweden. Such a large number of tourists is attributed to both the developed sea and air communication, and the presence of bridges connecting continental Europe and the Scandinavian Peninsula through the islands of the Danish archipelago, which allows car-owners to get to Sweden without changing to a ferry.

The tourist flow from Denmark ranks third in terms of the number of overnight stays: in 2019, Danish tourists made 1.4 million overnight stays, and this number did not change significantly during the study period. In general, this tourist flow repeats the pattern of tourist flow from Germany.

Other European countries significant in terms of volume and growth of tourist traffic to Sweden include the UK (fourth place until 2018, a 1.5-fold increase, 900 thousand overnight stays in 2019), Switzerland (a twofold increase, 420 thousand overnight stays in 2019) and Poland (a 1.8-fold increase, 323 thousand overnight stays in 2019).

The non-European countries with a fast-growing tourist flow to Sweden include the United States (just over 1 million overnight stays in 2019, over 2.5 times more than in 2008), China (a four-fold increase, 400 thousand overnight stays in 2019) and India (a five-fold increase, almost 250 thousand overnight stays in 2019).

In general, inbound tourism is noticeably dominated by geographically close European countries, although in recent years there has been an increase in inbound tourist traffic from more distant countries (especially from the above-mentioned USA, China and India). There is also a growing flow of tourists from other countries for which Sweden does not keep separate statistical records (about 730 thousand overnight stays in 2019, a threefold increase). These are mainly developing countries.

In 2020, the tourism sector in Sweden, like in other countries around the globe, suffered from the crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 3 shows the dynamics of inbound tourism in Sweden for some months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

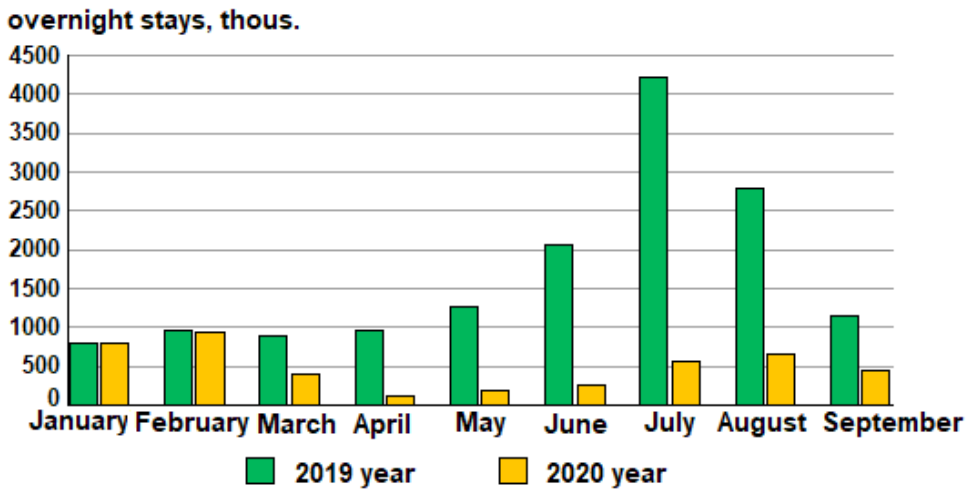


Fig. 3. Dynamics of the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists in Sweden by month in 2020 compared to 2019

In March 2020, a global pandemic was declared and the first serious restrictions on movement (mandatory quarantine, cancellation, or significant reduction of international traffic) were introduced. They had an immediate effect on the tourism business. Sweden is one of the few countries in the world that did not adopt strict restrictive measures in the spring of 2020, but the inbound tourism still plunged as the main sources of tourists to Sweden imposed exit restrictions. The incoming tourist flow in July 2020 was 87% less than the previous year's value for that month, in August 2020—77% less, in September 2020—61% less. Thus, the tourism sector in Sweden in 2020 experienced a deep crisis, even though the country had no tough COVID-19 restrictions.

To analyse regional differences in inbound tourism to Sweden, we use statistics for 2019, the year preceding the crisis and characterized by the largest inbound tourist traffic during the study period. Figure 4 shows the overall scale of inbound tourism in 2019 by Sweden's administrative units (lens) and broken down by the share of overseas visitors in the total number of tourists.

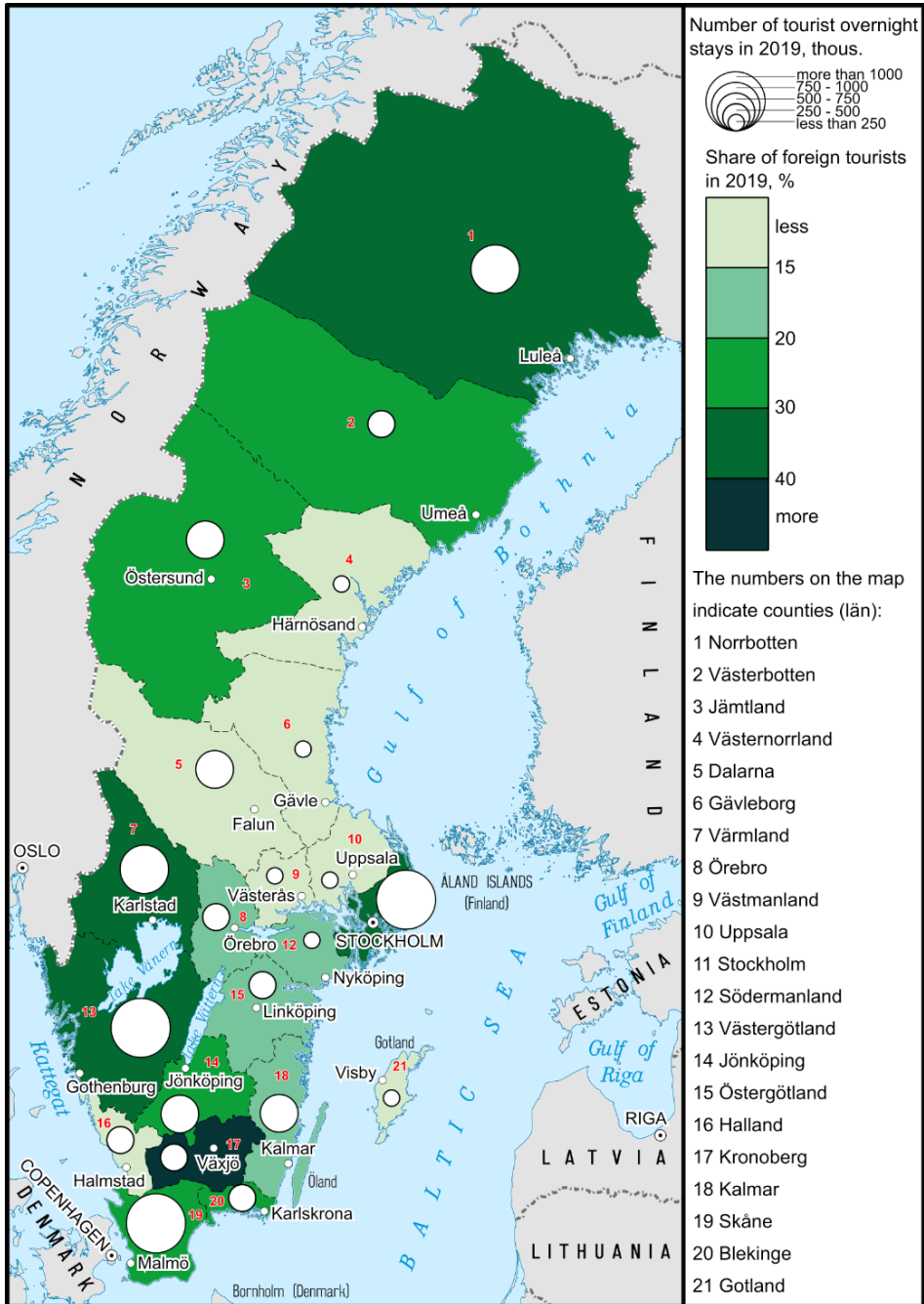


Fig. 4. Incoming tourist flow in 2019 and the share of foreign tourists in the total number of tourists in the lens of Sweden

Half of the total flow of inbound tourists falls on two lens: Stockholm (with the capital located there) and Västra Götaland situated in the south-west of the country. Västra Götaland is home to several castles, the resort village of Smögen,

and other attractions. The largest number of tourists falls on the western lens located along the border with Norway and the southern lens. The central lens located to the northwest and southwest of Stockholm account for the minimum tourist flow.

The share of foreign tourists is highest in the southern len of Krunuberg (43%). The most visited places include the city of Växjö, with the Teleborg Castle and the ruins of the Krunuberg castle, the museum of the glass industry and the cathedral of the XIV century, as well as the village of Almhult, where the museum and the first store of the famous international company IKEA are located. The share of foreign tourists is also high in the lens of Stockholm, Västra Götaland, Värmland, and the northernmost len, Norrbotten, where the ice hotel in Jukkasjärvi is located.

Figure 5 shows the main sources of foreign tourists in 2019 by Swedish lens. The spatial structure of incoming tourist flows in Swedish lens is also of interest from the cross-border region formation point of view.

The map shows the share of tourists from four countries (Norway, Germany, Denmark, and the United States), which provide the majority of the foreign tourist flow. Finland has been added to the list as it is a significant source in several lens. At the same time, the map does not show the countries whose share in the incoming tourist flow is less than 5%.

Tourists from Germany make up the majority of the inbound flow in 13 of the 21 lens, with the largest share in the southern and eastern lens of Sweden.

In the rest of the lens, located mainly along the Norwegian border, most of the tourists come from Norway. The exception is the Dalarna Valley with the highest proportion of Danish tourists.

The share of tourists from the United States is noticeable in Stockholm (it accounts for more than half of the overnight stays of American tourists — 575 thousand) and in regions with a small tourist flow not popular among other overseas visitors, thus it most probably is the low base effect.

It is particularly necessary to pay attention to the increased share of German and Danish tourists in the southern lens of Sweden. This fact confirms the correctness of the inclusion of the southern part of Sweden in the German-Danish-Swedish-Polish cross-border tourist and recreational region (CTRR) by Kropinova. It is also the best-developed one in the entire Baltic region [27, p. 119—120]. In the Swedish part of this CTRR, only the Polish component is not well-pronounced since the flow of tourists from Poland is quite insignificant.

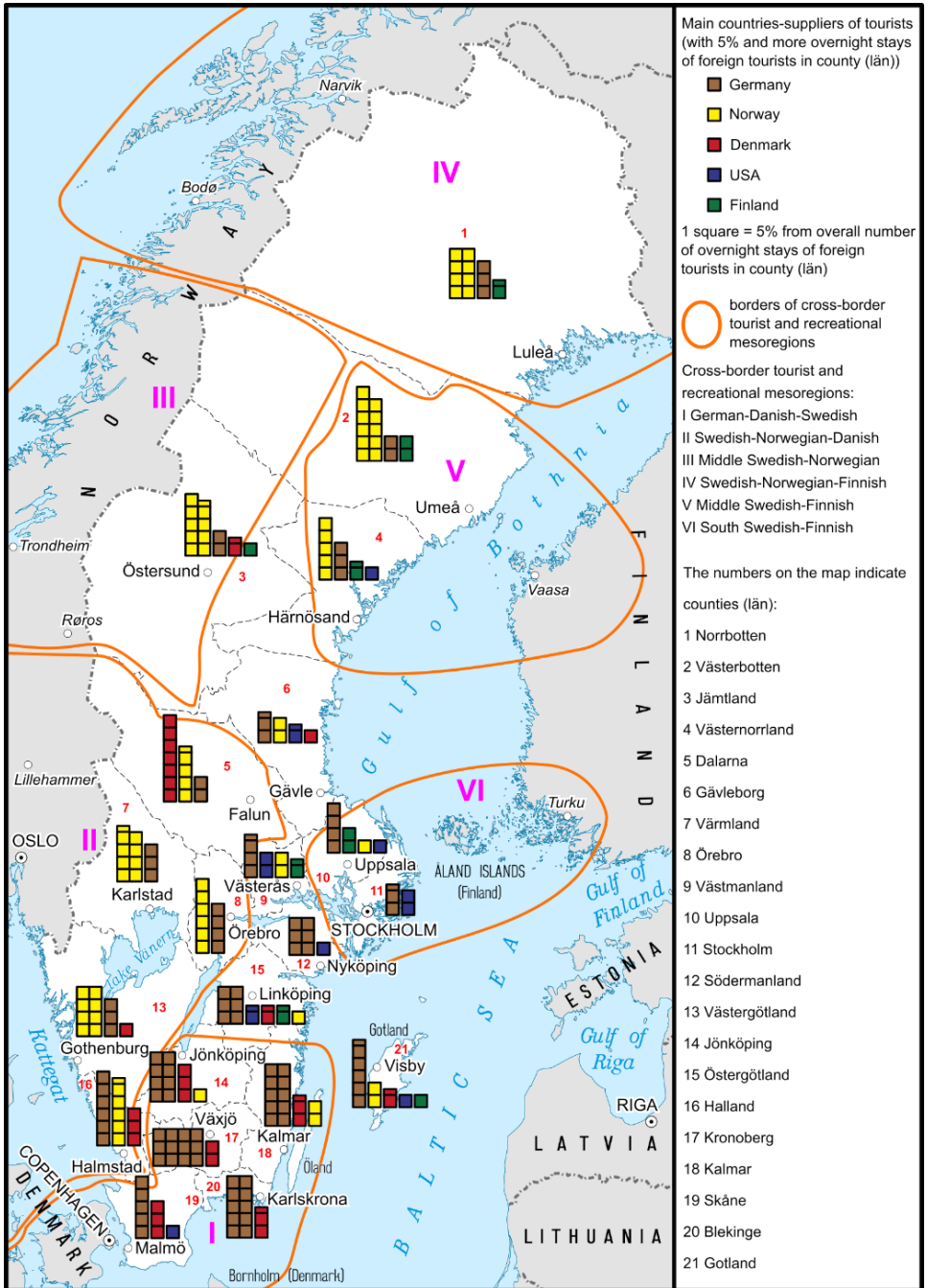


Fig. 5. Structure of the flow of inbound tourists in Swedish lens in 2019 (by major countries of origin) and the boundaries of cross-border tourist and recreational mesoregions

Kropinova [27] identifies cross-border tourist and recreational mesoregions mainly in the eastern part of the Baltic macroregion. These meso-level CTRRs

are clearly linked to the Euroregions created on the borders with Russia. Similarly, we can identify the meso-level CTRRs in the western part of the Baltic region, in particular, on the borders of Sweden with Finland and Norway. Here, cross-border regions similar to the Euroregions are institutionalized and identified as “new spatial forms of international economic integration” (NSFIEI) [32]. They usually have all six main features of cross-border tourist and recreational regions (continuity of the territory; the complementarity of natural and cultural tourist resources; common transport infrastructure, cross-border tourist routes, close ties between tourism entities, management structures that organise and coordinate tourist flows [27, p. 89]). However, many new spatial forms of international economic integration are small and some of them are integrated into larger ones. The latter may well claim the status of cross-border mesoregions. Allocating the meso-level CTRR, we also have taken into account the rate of cross-border tourist exchange as it is the most important quantitative indicator of the level of development of a CTRR [24].

In previous studies of the geography of international tourist flows in Finland, we noted a high proportion of Swedish tourists in the Åland Islands and the southwest of the country. We proposed to assign the status of a mesoregion to this CTRR [25]. In Sweden, the share of tourists from Finland is increased on the entire western coast of the Gulf of Bothnia. In total, there are six NSFIEIs on the Swedish-Finnish border [32]. They either overlap or even fit into one another, but there are clear gaps between three pairs of them: to the north of the Gulf of Bothnia (Nordkalotten Committee and Tornio Valley Council), in its middle part (Kvarken Council and Mittnorden Committee) and on its southern border (Archipelago Co-operation and the Baltic Sea Islands B7). According to the theory of cross-border tourism and recreation region development, these three pairs of NSFIEIs can be considered mesoregions identified as northern, middle and southern Swedish-Finnish meso-level CTRRs.

We can assume that there are several Swedish-Norwegian meso-level CTRRs that cover a significant part of the territory of these states. A similar assumption was made in our study of the structure and geography of the distribution of the flow of inbound tourists in Norway [26]. In total, there are eight NSFIEIs on the Swedish-Norwegian border [32]. In most cases, they are parts of larger areas, and therefore it is possible to clearly distinguish three arrays of them. The first two NSFIEIs (Nordkallotten Committee and Tornio Valley Council) cover the northern section of the Swedish-Norwegian border. Moreover, they both adjoin Finland, and therefore we can identify a trilateral meso-level CTRR — Swedish-Norwegian-Finnish. The second meso-level CTRR is in the middle section of the Swedish-Norwegian border, which corresponds to two NSFIEIs, Mittnorden Committee and Mittskandia Committee. In the southern part of the Swedish-Norwegian border, there are four NSFIEIs — Co-operation Arco, Committee Est-

fall-Bohus, Kattegat-Skagerrak and Vermland-Hedmark-Akershus-Etfall, forming a single array (including the north of Denmark), which can also be considered as one meso-level CTRR.

Thus, on the Swedish-Norwegian border, we can identify three meso-level CTRRs: Norwegian-Finnish, Middle Swedish-Norwegian, and Swedish-Norwegian-Danish. These CTRRs differ both quantitatively and in their composition from the cross-border mesoregions in the Baltic macroregion identified by Korneevets [32, p. 19].

In total, there are six meso-level CTRRs identified in the adjacent territories of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark (see Figure 5). We delineated their boundaries both in Sweden and in the territories of neighbouring states. Further, using the national statistics of these countries for 2019, we calculated the number of overnight stays of tourists in the lowest administrative units that are part of the meso-level CTRRs (table).

**Number of overnight stays of tourists (including from neighbouring countries)
in 2019 within the meso-level CTRRs in the adjacent territories of Sweden,
Denmark, Norway and Finland**

CTRR	Total overnight stays, thousand	Overnight stays of tourists from neighbouring countries, thousand	Share of adjacent countries, %
German-Danish-Swedish	82,938.3	6,373.7	7.7
Swedish-Norwegian-Danish	18,922.1	3,111.7	16.4
Middle Swedish-Norwegian	1,119.6	376.1	33.6
Swedish-Norwegian -Finnish	4,118.4	786.5	19.1
Middle Swedish-Finnish	748.7	93.5	12.5
Southern Swedish-Finnish	6,126.2	454.8	7.4

Kropinova proposes a simple scale for assessing the development of a CTRR, which includes three levels: high, intermediate and low (at the initial stages of development) [27, p. 119]. The reference CTRR of the meso-level with a high level of development is the German-Danish-Swedish-Polish one. An example of a meso-level CTRR with an intermediate level of development is the Russian-Estonian-Latvian one [28]. Earlier, we proposed to use the rate of tourist exchange between the national parts of a CTRR as a quantitative indicator of the level of its development, [24] and to add one more level of development — “higher than intermediate”. The study of cross-border exchange in meso-level CTRRs located on the border of Russia with Estonia and Finland [24; 25] allowed introducing quantitative criteria for distinguishing between these levels of development: over 500 thousand border crossings within the CTRR per year — “high”, from 100 to 500 thousand — “higher than intermediate”, from 20 to 100 thousand — “intermediate” (less than 20 thousand is found only in the micro-level CTRRs).

As noted above, Sweden and the adjacent countries publish statistics on the number of overnight stays of tourists. But knowing that in Sweden and its neighbouring countries, the duration of trips is on average 3–5 days (with 2–4 overnight stays), we can give the following assessment of the level of development of the six meso-level CTRRs identified (see Table 1). In addition to the German-Danish-Swedish mesoregion, the Swedish-Norwegian-Danish mesoregion is also characterized by a high level of development. The level of development of the three mesoregions (Middle Swedish-Norwegian, Swedish-Norwegian-Finnish, and Southern Swedish-Finnish) is higher than intermediate, the Middle Swedish-Finnish CTRR receiving significantly fewer tourists from adjacent countries shows an “intermediate” level of development.

Conclusions

The flow of inbound tourists to Sweden demonstrated steady growth until 2020. In 2008–2019 it increased more than 1.5-fold. However, the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a sharp decline in the number of overseas visitors in 2020. For example, in July 2020, it was only 13% of the same month’s value in the previous year, and in August – 23%.

The study of the geography of the flows of inbound tourists to Sweden, which allowed us to assess some parameters of cross-border tourist and recreational regions, was based on 2019 statistics. The study confirmed the existence of the highly-developed German-Danish-Swedish meso-level CTRR (which includes the southern part of Sweden, mainly the Gothland region) showing a significant rate of interstate tourist exchange.

There are also five other meso-level CTRRs identified on the border of Sweden with neighbouring countries: Swedish-Norwegian-Danish, Middle Swedish-Norwegian, Swedish-Norwegian-Finnish, Middle Swedish-Finnish, and Southern Swedish-Finnish. One of them (Swedish-Norwegian-Danish) can be considered a highly-developed CTRR. Only one mesoregion (the middle Swedish-Finnish) is found to be the CTRR with an intermediate level of development, the other three are the CTRRs with the “higher than intermediate” level of development.

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