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The Spatial and Governance Dilemma of Small and Medium-Sized Italian Ports (SMPs): Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) as a Potential Response

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Abstract: The Italian coast has about 700 ports, which are different in typology, dimension, role, and ownership. Historically, this has led to the significant fragmentation of governance and space and a lack of cooperation that ports and cities still experience today. Among all ports, small and medium-sized ports (SMPs), such as marinas, small touristic harbors, and moorings, are the most affected. Unlike the main ports, where spatial and strategic regulation planning fall under the port authority's responsibilities, SMPs are a combination of public and private management and are, therefore, excluded from national and regional planning and larger strategies. Improving SMPs' cooperation at the regional level can drive more effective sustainable management among related activities (tourism and the fishing sector) and reduce pressures on the land–sea interaction (LSI). In filling the gaps, this article challenges the existing legal framework, planning tools, approaches, and initiatives and may pave the way to establishing a better-integrated national governance for SMPs. In conclusion, this paper identifies two main opportunities that can support the steady establishment of governance and the systematic harmonized development of these SMPs. The first one is offered by maritime spatial planning (MSP) as a strategic and legal tool whereby SMPs are recognized and, if financially supported, could find incentives and measures for their development. The second one is through European projects, programs, and initiatives such as Framesport as drivers in establishing a common ground among public and private interests and as a cooperation engine at a local scale.

Keywords: maritime spatial planning; governance; small and medium-sized ports; land–sea interaction; common-ground strategy

Citation: Carella, F.; De Martino, P.; Soffietti, F.; Negretto, V.; Musco, F. The Spatial and Governance Dilemma of Small and Medium-Sized Italian Ports (SMPs): Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) as a Potential Response. *Water* **2024**, *16*, 251. https://doi.org/10.3390/w16020251

Academic Editors: Camilo M. Botero, Celene B. Milanes and Daniel O. Suman

Received: 22 November 2023
Revised: 22 December 2023
Accepted: 28 December 2023
Published: 11 January 2024

1. The Premise: Small Ports' Challenges

Worldwide, ports are under pressure due to challenges related to infrastructure, global trade, production capacity, financing, regulation compliance, safety and security, sustainability, digitalization, and a lack of community support [1–4]. Ports are fascinating transitional landscapes, gateways through which people and cultures move [5–7]. The largest part of the world economy travels through ports, making them key players in the global production and supply chains that we today depend on. They connect people and provide opportunities for them to thrive [8]. On the one hand, a port, by definition, is a contact area with liminal space that provides a safe environment for ships. On the other, it is a space of conflict, especially when it comes to designing the relationship between coastal and sea uses [9–11]. They are threshold spaces where solid and liquid mix, where large-scale economies meet urban palimpsest, and where the city takes on a landscape connotation [12,13]. However, ports are also controversial by nature, as they are the epicenters of contemporary challenges, from extreme weather conditions to demographic and social pressures [5].

These global challenges do not only concern large ports. SMPs are also affected by global events. Massive tourism is putting pressure on ports and cities, triggering new strategies on both local and regional scales that aim to generate new services and attractions for people and companies [14].

These maritime challenges, however, can be used as opportunities as long as the ports and communities around them remain open to change, stemming from the green and digital transformation taking place in the maritime and shipping industry. In large ports, it seems difficult to achieve a sustainable transition due to the strong path dependencies between energy and global economies [15–17]. Meanwhile, SMPs are interesting laboratories that promote economic, social, cultural, and environmental innovations with the potential to lead a sustainable transition [18,19].

All scales are interrelated, and strategies at the regional and local levels must also take into consideration the broader macro-objectives and strategies established by the European Union, such as the European Green Deal, the Circular Economy, and the recent Repower EU plan, to rapidly reduce the impacts on the coast and in the marine environment [20–22].

As pointed out by several scholars, while larger ports can profit from a plurality of initiatives related to sustainability, smaller ports' systematic sustainability management is still lacking or very rare [4,18]. Looking at the economic dimension of ports, the current fragmented situation linked to the volatile economic demands can offer new opportunities for small and medium-sized ports [18]. Although these are often very responsive in dealing with supply chain dynamics and related logistics systems, SMPs' lack of governance makes their responsiveness not as effective [18].

Therefore, this contribution argues that while major ports are hard to change due to their dependencies on global-scale phenomena, small ports can be catalysts for more sustainable development at local-scale interventions, but there is a need to establish a new governance model [19].

Among the various critical issues affecting ports, the governance modality is particularly relevant in small Italian ports. Unlike the main ports, there is a lower capacity for integrated management and a lack of coordination. Moreover, these issues reflect the territorial planning dimension, especially in the urban regulatory plans and policies ranging between different administrative levels [19]. The port authorities are responsible for the main ports' regulation and spatial and strategic planning and are consequently also in charge of Maritime State Property, the drafting of port plans, and the implementation of inter-port coordination strategies. On the other hand, minor ports have very different characteristics [23]. A mixture of public and private management often coexists in adjacent spaces, generating a set of conflicts and criticalities for which management responsibility is not clear. Furthermore, the definition of a strategic coordination framework can also interfere with local governance issues typical of many small ports. While major ports are on public property and entrusted to public actors' management (or in consortia with the public), the smaller realities, although also on public property, are entrusted (or rather granted) to private actors. The substantial difference between these management models is that the first seeks growth and collective economic stability, while the second, instead, is based on the principle of entrepreneurship and business and is, therefore, oriented to the maximum profit achievement at the expense—often—of the collective interest [11,18,19].

In framing the meaning of SMPs, this article investigates the following questions: where and how are SMPs considered or included in the legal framework at the European and national levels? What role could minor ports play in response to spatial and institutional fragmentation? Are there any tools or approaches that may facilitate the establishment of a common governance practice?

The thesis that this article outlines, and begins to explore, lies in investigating the opportunities offered by MSP (maritime spatial planning) and European projects as possible integrative and multi-disciplinary tools for designing land–sea interactions in SMPs and promoting cooperation.

2. The Regulatory Framework: Gaps and Opportunities

2.1. European Level

The European Commission regulation, specifically the one establishing a framework on market access to port services and the financial transparency of ports, shows a clear effort directed mainly toward the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) ports. These ports are "by definition essential for the international and intra-European trade exchanges, and therefore for the European internal market, and/or the cohesion within the EU" [24].

This sectoral approach responds efficiently to economic needs and aspects related to the movement of goods and people on a large scale. Yet, it completely ignores the heterogeneity of the European port territory, which is made up of approximately 70,000 km of coasts characterized by a wide diversity in the type and organization of ports. However, this richness and diversity of the European port city territories do not seem to be recognized as an added value by the EU, which, therefore, does not impose a defined regulatory framework on SMPs since they "do not have a significant role for the European transport system" [24].

Addressing the size of a port is always a bit of a problematic question. The European Port Governance report [14] already raised some epistemological questions, such as, "is the size determined by the surface of the port area, the volume of goods handled, the number of passengers that pass through the port, the financial turnover, the staff employed or a combination of these and other factors?" Specifically, the European Port Governance report frames SMPs "as the ones with an annual volume of goods handled in all the ports managed by the port authority as less than or equals 10 million tonnes" [14].

The fact that there is no common definition of what SMPs mean is highlighted by several studies, including a recent article by Gerlitz that questions the role of medium-sized ports as drivers of regional innovation and development in Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3) in the Baltic Sea Area [18].

In line with the European 2020 strategy and in response to the gaps in policies and definitions, RIS3 is configured as a regional-scale strategy for SMPs' regional development and as an advancement of the policy. It represents a tool that aims at improving the efficiency of funds' distribution between European regions and contributing to the European objectives on smart growth, the UN's sustainable development goals, and the recently launched European Green Deal [20]. RIS3 recognizes that small (and medium-sized) ports can play a leading role in identifying functions such as (i) enhancing blue economy competitiveness, (ii) contributing to regionalization processes, and/or (iii) facilitating the setup of multiport gateways. However, based on the analysis of 37 regions, Meyer's article highlights a very low recognition of SMPs as drivers of regional innovation in the Baltic Sea Area under the RIS3 policy, and, thus, it remains a rather sectoral reading of small ports. It provides a very technical and functional approach to SMPs, instead of addressing challenging topics like sustainability, smart specialization, and blue growth as driving forces for socio-cultural development [18].

Ports are, in fact, functional machines that respond, among other objectives, to creating network connections. This is clearly pointed out by the European regulations on mobility and the Trans-European Transport Network [25]. According to this regulation, the Trans-European Transport Network should "allow the seamless, safe and sustainable mobility of persons and goods, ensuring accessibility and connectivity for all regions of the Union, and contributing to further economic growth and competitiveness in a global perspective. Those specific objectives should be achieved by establishing interconnections and interoperability between national transport networks in a resource-efficient and sustainable way. For example, rail interoperability could be enhanced by innovative solutions". It continues, "the core network has been identified on the basis of an objective planning methodology. That methodology has identified the most important urban nodes, ports and airports, as well as border crossing points. Wherever possible, those nodes are connected with multimodal links as long as they are economically viable, environmentally sustainable and feasible until 2030. The methodology has ensured the interconnection of all Member States

and the integration of the main islands into the core network". This regulation mainly focuses on large connections and major ports while ignoring "small" or "minor" ports, two words that are missing from the regulation [25].

Within the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy document [26], mobility is recognized as one of the most relevant sectors at the European level, whether it is mobility related to tourism or the handling of goods and industrial production. Free movement within European borders has offered many opportunities for economic but also social and cultural growth, but at the expense of the environment and the loss of biodiversity. Putting mobility on track for the future, therefore, means working on reducing these impacts in the short and medium term (2030/2035) and on achieving zero-emission goals in the long run (2050) [26].

As far as ports are concerned in "creating zero-emission airports and ports", the document underlines that "inland and sea ports have a great potential to become new clean energy hubs for integrated electricity systems, hydrogen and other low-carbon fuels, and testbeds for waste reuse and the circular economy". In addition, coastal areas and ports should be a priority "in all EU waters ultimately aiming at zero pollution to air and water from shipping for the benefits of sea basins" [26]. However, the document remains vague in defining concrete development actions, and once again, it ignores the theme of SMPs and the role that they could play as engines of sustainable and more resilient spatial and socio-cultural developments.

Many steps are still to be made in achieving climate neutrality in the short and long run. For this reason, in 2019, the European Commission released the European Green Deal, committing to climate neutrality by 2050 [20]. This requires a radical transformation that involves some key themes, including making transport sustainable for all, leading the third industrial revolution, cleaning our energy system, renovating buildings for greener lifestyles, and ultimately working with nature to protect our planet and health [20].

Among the different pillars, two are related to water: "environment and ocean" and "blue economy" [27]. In fact, to fully embed the blue economy into the Green Deal and the recovery strategy, the Commission has adopted a new approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU, stating it can contribute to climate change mitigation by developing offshore renewable energy, decarbonizing maritime transport, and greening ports. It will make the economy more circular by renewing the standards for fishing gear design, ship recycling, and the decommissioning of offshore platforms. In addition, developing green infrastructure in coastal areas will help preserve biodiversity and landscapes while benefiting tourism and the coastal economy. Even though all of these issues are connected to each other, and despite ports being a transversal theme, the Green Deal mainly considers large ports, and "to ensure a fair contribution from the maritime sector to the effort to decarbonize our economy, the Commission proposes to extend carbon pricing to this sector" [20].

In the last 10 years, given the above-mentioned challenges, there has been a strong pressure on marine planning to try to coordinate a quite complex set of activities at sea while also preserving the landscape, ecosystem, and cultural heritage [28–30]. As such, in 2014, the European Commission implemented legislation on maritime spatial planning (MSP) with the main objective of reducing conflicts among sea uses; creating synergies between different activities; increasing cross-border cooperation between EU countries to develop shared plans on renewable energy, shipping routes, and the protection of the environment by assigning protected areas; calculating impacts on ecosystems; and identifying opportunities for multiple space uses [31].

MSP proposes a significant step forward by looking at the sea not as an empty space but as a possible extension of the city onto the water. MSP is a relatively new planning approach aimed at analyzing and organizing human activities in the sea space to achieve ecological, economic, and social objectives [28–31]. The European Directive 2014/89/EU has also made MSP mandatory in the planning policies of all coastal Member States. The Directive requires the EU Member States to have developed a national maritime spatial

plan by 31 March 2021, with a minimum review period of 10 years. The plans are aimed at establishing a reference framework for the planning of maritime spaces (contained within 12 nautical miles from the coast) in order to promote maritime economies' sustainable growth, marine areas' sustainable development, and the sustainable use of marine resources through an ecosystemic approach [31].

In Italy, the MSP Directive was implemented via the Italian Legislative Decree 17 October 2016, n. 201 [32], together with the recommendations adopted by the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers of 1 December 2017 [33]. However, the Italian maritime plans have not yet been adopted, and they are still in the public consultation phase [11].

Sustainability aspects are central in the European agenda, and this is why, in 2020, the European Commission launched the New European Bauhaus to also better connect the European Green Deal to the lives of people. This calls on all Europeans to imagine collectively building a sustainable and inclusive future by focusing on three main aspects: sustainability, requiring the identification of solutions toward circularity to better face climate change; aesthetics, requiring the identification of solutions that are beautiful to our eyes beyond pure technicality; and inclusion, from valuing diversity to securing accessibility and affordability. In response, Portugal proposed the Bauhaus of the Seas Sails (BOSS) as a continental mobilization around the first and most decisive global natural space: the sea. The manifesto, among its various objectives, focuses on "reconciling with the sea as a territory of trans-geographic continuity through site-specific ecosystems and entanglements of humans and non-humans. This reconciliation opens new possibilities to the strategic needs of the New European Bauhaus" [34].

Even in this case, aspects related to ports and the role that SMPs can play in creating a more integrated and sustainable future are missing. This gap is also considered as an opportunity to further explore.

So far, previous analyses have provided an overview of European policy documents dealing with water and sustainability. Although, on the one hand, they have highlighted enormous opportunities in recognizing the value of the sea and its economies, on the other, they have encountered a significant gap in acknowledging SMPs and their value as drivers of sustainable and resilient development in any of the initiatives mentioned above.

Today, rethinking the coastline means rethinking the future of a port (large or small) in relation to its surroundings. The theme of water is mainly addressed as a space for the movement of goods and people, but it would be interesting to understand its socio-cultural values and how to imagine new forms of livability with/on water, starting from the contributions that SMPs can make.

2.2. National Level

The Italian coast has about 700 ports, which are different in typology, dimension, role, and ownership, making the relationship between small and large ports and territories a controversial one throughout history (Figure 1) [19]. As pointed out by several scholars, the reasons behind the conflict are diverse.

Firstly, there has been an absence of processes for the decentralization of port activities that are no longer compatible with urban dynamics. As a result, except for very few cases, such as Genoa, in many Italian cities, functional ports are within cities and very close to residential areas. Secondly, conflicts also result from the presence of several different non-aligned planning tools (port plans and municipal plans, as well as national and regional planning). For instance, the lack of dialogue among authorities has historically resulted in separate regulations, disputes on competencies, and inefficient plans for the land–sea interaction. Finally, friction can be identified in the presence of different temporalities of ports' and cities' transformation. This refers to the different economic models that ports and cities are subject to, as well as the governance period of port city authorities [12,16,35].

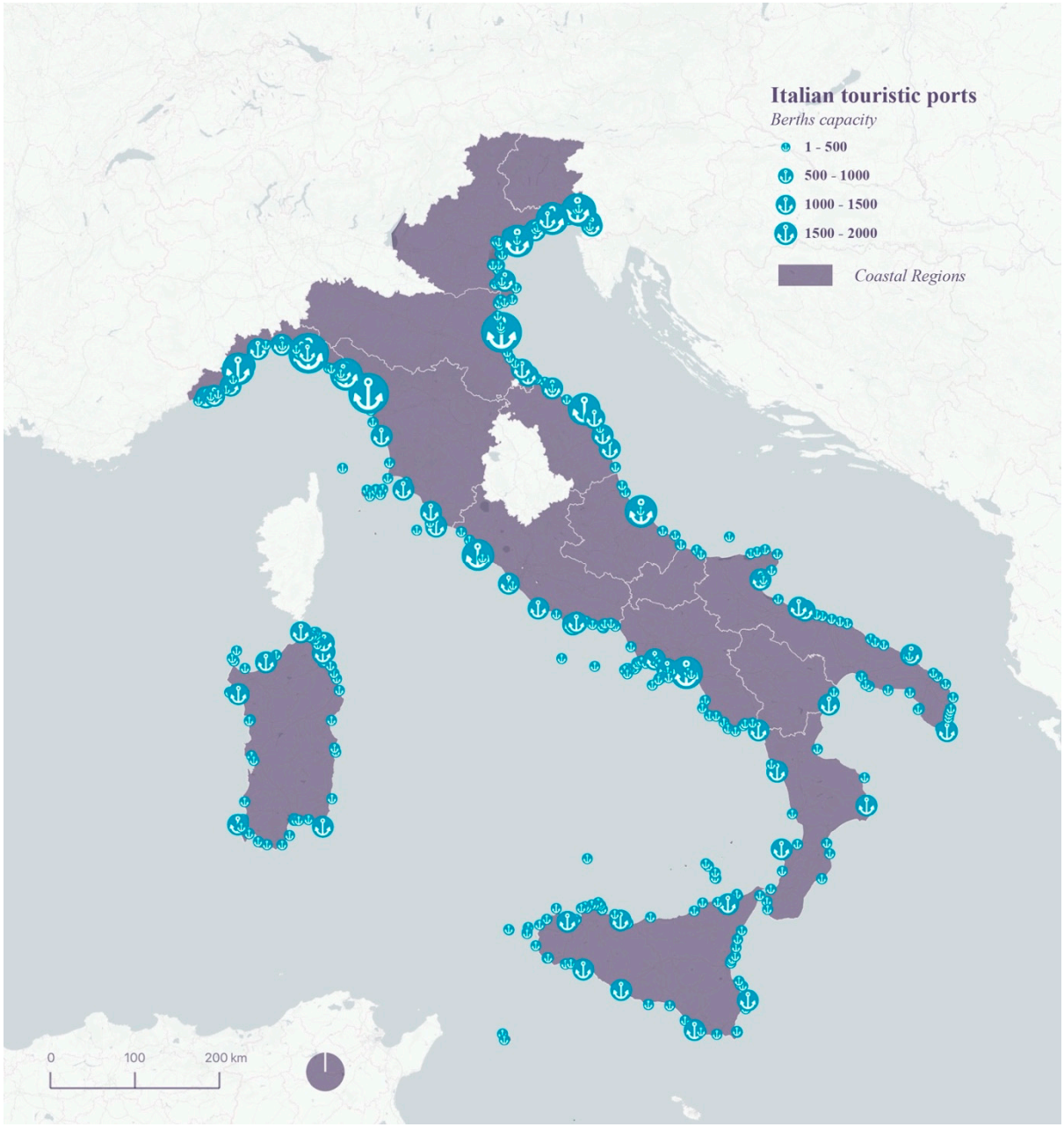

Figure 1. Italian touristic ports. Maps developed by the authors. Data source: SID il portale del mare. URL: https://www.mit.gov.it/documentazione/sid-il-portale-del-mare (accessed on 17 November 2023).

The first Italian port regulation that introduced the governance of port authorities dates back to 1994 with the law n.84 [36]. Prior to this, there was no real legislative discipline except for a pure classification of ports (Royal Decree 2 April 1885, n. 3095) [37]. However, this mainly had to do with economic aspects between the local, national, or regional bodies necessary to finance port development throughout history [16]. The Royal Decree, which was introduced in a period when Italian coast defense military activities played a significant role, divided the port system into two main categories: ports for navigation defensive purposes and ports with commercial functions. The second category was then divided into an additional four classes based on their importance in the national context. The first one included ports heading important lines of communication, dealing with international trade and classified as places of general interest to the state, which financed 80% of these, while the remaining 20% were financed by municipalities. The second class included ports

that affected general navigation and safety, serving only or mostly as refuges and military protection. Naples, Genova, and Venice, for example, belonged to this category, and their administration and management were paid for by the state. The third class included ports and docks with trade at a provincial level (50% financed by the state and 50% financed by municipalities). Finally, the fourth class included ports focused on local trade, financed only by municipalities. The classification of ports (at least for the first three classes) was dictated exclusively by quantitative parameters, i.e., by the number of goods handled. The fourth class was for "all the other ports", such as "inlets, gulfs and beaches both on the continent and on the islands". This classification of ports has prevailed for a long time, since it also affects the distribution of expenditures for the construction and maintenance of infrastructures, the drafting of port regulatory plans, and so on [37].

The Royal Decree was the first important attempt to classify ports, introducing a hierarchy among Italian ports that still exists today.

An evolution of the discipline arrived only in 1994. The law introduced a qualitative parameter for the ports belonging to the second category, which were classified based on their vocation: commercial, industrial and petroleum, passenger service, fishing boat, or tourist and recreational. In addition, in this classification, minor ports were considered, for the first time, as basins or small docks, yet not relevant on a national scale [36]. Instead, it reduced minor ports to pure terminological aspects, not even capable of fully grasping the different territorial complexities and the changes that ports on a global scale were facing.

Since the 1960s, with the arrival of containers, ports have become nodes of a global network increasingly connecting the world but quite often detached from local territories and cultures [38–40]. At that time, the concept of the port-city-territory started to appear, which ideally meant that large and minor ports would work in synergy and be governed under the same institutional umbrella. This did not really happen, and SMPs have consequently been left out of national and regional planning.

The recent port Legislative Decree 4 August 2016 n. 169 introduced port systems, merging multiple port authorities into a 16-port-authority system. This process recognized a profound change in the relationship between ports and larger regions and shifted the attention to the main ports, delegating the management of minor ports to sectoral disciplines, local organizations, and systems of concessions [23].

The Plan of Port Systems, which built upon the "Guidelines for the drafting of Port Regulatory Plans" introduced in 2004 by the Superior Council of Public Works, became a technical–functional tool in the resolution of conflicts between ports and cities. According to the guidelines, the port plan was tasked with strategically defining the port's different functional areas. The plan's strategy is divided into two main areas: the first pertains to the "operational" port related to the economy and efficiency of port activities, and the second pertains to the port–city interaction areas, where port flows and urban spaces usually coexist. These land–sea interaction areas are indeed suitable places to experiment with projects that can influence strategic plans, like reconciling the development needs of the ports with the objectives of urban and environmental quality [41].

The Legislative Decree n. 232/2017 introduced a strategic planning document aimed at defining the development objectives and the systemic planning contents of the port authorities and identifying and outlining the areas intended for strictly port and retro-port functions, the port–city interaction areas, the last-mile road and rail infrastructural connections with the individual ports of the system, and the crossing axis between ports and cities [42].

Except for a few examples, there are not many plans in Italy that have put these indications into practice, and there is, therefore, still no real systemic planning that connects ports (major and small–medium-sized) to each other and to the larger territory. It is necessary to innovate the discipline and the planning framework by questioning the current models and investigating whether minor ports can play a role in generating new maritime mindsets [38,43,44].

3. Small and Medium-Sized Ports (SMPs) "within" the Italian MSP Plan

This section of the article briefly analyzes the Italian maritime spatial draft plan with reference to the methodological structure and the contents of the fourth phase of the plan entitled "Planning: vocations, specific objectives, specific measures (by areas and sectors)". It focuses on how SMPs are addressed and highlights cooperation and development opportunities, arguing that these could trigger new cognitive processes, particularly with the vocations of coastal territories.

Recently, and especially in the last 20 years, there has been increasing concern in marine planning for better coordinating a quite complex set of activities at sea that also have to preserve the landscape, ecosystem, and cultural heritage [11,31,44]. Today, thanks to maritime spatial planning (MSP), this complexity, which historically has been conceived and planned as a dividing line between land and sea, is becoming a multifunctional place, a transition space, and, consequently, an area in which to integrate land and water planning. Although the challenges that water cities are facing today are evident, and although flows of people and goods move across territories globally, we can argue that land and water are still planned in a disconnected manner. This is due to a land-based approach that has always seen the sea as a blank canvas [11,28,31,44].

Nowadays, Europe's sea is filled with continuous, simultaneous activities, primarily set by well-established sectoral planning systems, such as the maritime transport of commercial goods and related ports, fisheries, and tourism. In addition to these, it is significant to also consider the prospects offered by new technologies, such as offshore wind, submarine cables and pipelines, offshore hydrocarbon exploration, research and cultivation, and aquaculture and marine biotechnology [44,45].

In response to the imbalance between natural and anthropogenic aspects, there emerges maritime spatial planning and, consequently, the blue economy, focused on economic activities based on and actively beneficial to the ocean, promoting sustainable development as its basis [44–47].

To provide a more coherent approach to maritime issues, the Integrated Maritime Policy of the European Union (IMP) was adopted, calling for increased coordination between different policy areas under a comprehensive policy "umbrella". The MSP pillar of the EU's IMP is regulated by the European Directive 2014/89/EU, which made MSP mandatory in all coastal Member States' (MSs') planning policies and requires each identified MS to have developed a national maritime spatial plan by 31 March 2021 [31].

By asserting that MSP plans "need to take into consideration Land-Sea interactions", the MSP Directive paves the way for the possible application of MSP in supporting the strategic development and evolution of SMPs [28].

Over the last ten years, the Italian government has been actively working to develop and shape maritime policy and tools in support of the blue economy and marine conservation. The MSP process in Italy, currently in the final stages (public consultation phase), started in 2016 with the transposition of the Directive 2014/89/EU within the Italian legislation through the Legislative Decree 201/2016 and the guidelines of the DPCM (Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers) of 1 December 2017, officially activating the implementation of the three Italian Maritime Spatial Plans (PSGM), one for each maritime area: Adriatic, Tyrrhenian-Western Mediterranean, and Ionian Central-Mediterranean [31–33].

The maritime spatial plan does not alter the existing planning tools. On the contrary, it is configured as a superordinate planning level and strategic level aimed at ensuring an alignment of the various existing sectoral plans (territorial coordination plans, landscape plans, etc.). For this reason, the maritime spatial plan represents a strategic planning tool, providing guidelines and criteria for new possible directions for the use of the sea.

Due to its juridical nature, maritime spatial plans are conceived as programs capable of directly influencing not only those areas concerning marine waters but also those concerning terrestrial activities that can have effects on marine waters [11].

The Legislative Decree 201/2016 also defined a new model of multilevel governance, constituting new entities and assigning new roles to the various levels of ordinances. In

particular, Art. 8 of the Decree designated the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport (MIT) as the Competent Authority (CA) for MSP, while Art. 6 established an Interministerial Coordination Table (TIC), chaired by a representative of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (Department for European Policies) and participated in by almost all other ministries. Finally, Art. 7 established the Technical Committee (TC) with the function of preparing, for each maritime area, maritime spatial management plans.

The TC is a multilevel body composed of representatives from ministerial entities: three referents from the MIT; two representatives for each Ministry involved in marine and maritime issues (Environment and Energy Security (MASE), Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry (MASAF), and Culture (MIC)); and one representative from each of the coastal regions (fifteen in total). The TC is responsible for ensuring the consistent implementation of the MSP guidelines (according to the 2017 DPCM) and the plan processes' coordination, while the Scientific Team (ST) is responsible for the operational and scientific–technical support aspects. The ST consists of 25 researchers from different scientific backgrounds and from three different institutions: CORILA, CNR-ISMAR, and IUAV University of Venice [32,33].

To facilitate harmonization between the three management plans in the respective maritime areas and according to the operational guidelines represented by Legislative Decree 201/2016 and DCPM 01/12/2017, six methodological steps have been defined to allow their implementation:

1. Describe the initial status and current and expected trends by assembling a collection of data for each sector and using them to gain a cognitive framework to support the analysis and planning process.
2. Perform an analysis of the interaction (conflicts and synergies) between uses and impacts on environmental components aimed at defining the relationships among activities and uses and supporting the following phases.
3. Set a vision and strategic objectives for the individual sector based on existing strategies, plans, and standards through the collected information.
4. As a result of the three first phases, create a plan, including vocations, specific objectives, and measures (by areas and sectors). Each sub-area has defined a vision with a 10-year horizon and defined specific objectives based on the strategic ones identified in phase three. Current uses and activities recognized in phase one and their relationships in phase two have allowed the fragmentation of the sub-area into planning units, which are regulated through measures of the activities.
5. Evaluate its effectiveness by implementing a monitoring program in order to achieve the goals defined in phases three and four. It also supports an adaptive approach, which allows the plan to be tailored to different contexts and needs that may change and emerge over time.
6. Perform activities for the consolidation, implementation, and updating of the plan, progressively developed through the activities related to the monitoring system in phase five, during and after the approval process of the plans, to feed their consolidation and support the implementation process.

The SMPs' analysis particularly focuses on steps three and four of the Adriatic MSP plan process, which are the core of the plan and the identification of strategic (SO) and specific objectives and measures, in addition to spatial choices and geometries (zoning). Indeed, the elements (objectives, zoning, and measures) included in these two phases are relevant to promoting, supporting, and developing new governance practices [33].

SMPs are considered in two specific sectors of the MSP plan: implicitly in "Maritime Transport and Ports (MT)" and more directly in "Coastal and Maritime Tourism (T)".

Within the Maritime Transport and Ports strategic objectives, the plan intends to increase the competitiveness of Italian ports and foster the sharing of best practices aimed at energy efficiency and environmental sustainability. The plan directly mentions the roles of port authorities and related major commercial and passenger ports, and more implicitly, it lays the foundation for medium and small ports (SO_MT | 04).

On the other hand, the plan also aims to promote integration and dialogue among existing planning systems, seeking, in particular, to bring to the same table the authorities responsible for strategic port, land, and sea plans to ensure an exchange of information and avoid potential planning conflicts (SO_MT | 05). The establishment of these tables would also facilitate dialogue between public and private actors and consequently strengthen cooperation between major and minor ports [48].

Regarding the "maritime and coastal tourism" sector, the SMP theme related to land–sea interactions becomes a priority for the plan. In fact, strategic objective T | 02 recognizes the persuading role marinas play in favoring actions aimed at transforming these ports into nodes of connection for various types of transport [48].

As a strategy for their sub-area, several Adriatic Italian coastal regions identified specific objectives for recreational boating, including the role of SMPs in diversifying touristic opportunities while ensuring accessibility to waterways and environmental sustainability (e.g., Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia Romagna, and Marche). Moreover, the Veneto Region highlighted the importance of developing slow and experiential tourism on the coastal strip in synergy with the inland area, ending littoral and pleasure boating, encouraging the redevelopment of SMPs, integrating land and sea planning systems, and protecting the landscape characteristics of the coastal system and architectural features of seaside towns [48].

To achieve the objectives, each marine plan includes a set of national measures common to the entire Italian marine space that are valid for all three maritime areas (Adriatic included). For some sub-areas falling within the territorial waters co-planned by coastal regions and ministries, more detailed measures have also been defined.

To help increase the competitiveness of Italian ports and the sharing of "best practices", as reported by the strategic objective MT | 04, the plan proposes a measure to bring the performance and functionality of Italian ports up to the standards required for obtaining the different existing certifications, such as European Clean Ports, Environmental Management System (EMS), PERS (Port Environmental Review System), and Environmental Port Index. Certifications might assume a relevant function for SMPs, both to overcome the fragmentation of public–private management in which many SMPs find themselves and to promote a new governance system by harmonizing and setting a common ground among different SMPs [48].

As for the tourism sector and, in particular, for the strategic objective of fostering coherent planning actions on land and at sea, including for tourism purposes, the plan intends to design and develop recreational boating monitoring activities. Plus, in order to acquire adequate knowledge of traffic flows and define management measures for the sustainable development of the sector, the measure also seeks to consolidate existing initiatives through collaboration between regions and local operators/entities. This measure, if implemented, further reinforces the need to bring SMPs' public and private owners closer together to improve data flows and obtain scientific evidence to regulate and facilitate a more cohesive and harmonized development [48].

4. MSP as a Tool to Renew Small Ports: The Interreg Italy–Croatia Framesport Experience

The need to rethink SMPs was identified within EU programs and addressed via strategic EU projects. These programs addressed ports from a regional perspective that allowed local knowledge and needs to be taken into consideration. Meanwhile, a general approach to developing SMPs focused on fostering their connectivity and greening, as indicated in the European Green Deal. This was the case for a set of EU projects taking place in the Adriatic Sea, namely, ECOMAP—Eco-sustainable management of marine and tourist ports; SUSPORT; and FRAMESPORT. All of these projects were developed through the Interreg program Italy–Croatia, which looked to strengthen collaboration among neighboring countries and promote common transboundary actions [19].

This paper focuses on the Framesport project because it offered the opportunity to test out a strategy definition method for SMPs by supporting their recognition (e.g., through MSP) and identifying them as promoters of sustainable development.

Ports and cities in the Adriatic Sea are separated from a spatial, cultural, and institutional perspective—a separation that has direct implications on the quality of the land–sea interaction. Historically, this has generated a chaotic mixture of spaces that today are characterized by an uncertain planning regime. Fragments of an industrial past, and quite often obsolete infrastructures at the edge of the port and city, are some of the tangible results of this uneven growth between the city and its port. As a consequence of this fragmentation, four main degrees of separation can be identified:

1. Spatial separation between the nautical-tourist routes and inland territories;
2. Environmental separation of ports that need to make better use of existing resources and energy sources;
3. Technological separation of ports that need to identify solutions to be safer and better connected;
4. Fractures between global and local economies that require new competitive strategies.

The activities carried out within the Framesport project dealt with the territorial complexities linked to the small Italian and Croatian ports. It also aimed at defining a methodology for the construction of a solution-and-scenario abacus capable of facing the plurality of economic, social, and environmental challenges that afflict coastal territories today. Adriatic SMPs, such as marinas and touristic harbors, are currently experiencing rather challenging spatial, social, and economic situations due to a surplus of supply compared to demand levels and the increased users' average age. Boosting competitiveness is a priority for these realities in both the Italian and Croatian contexts, which would highly benefit from new business models, measures, and actions aimed at recovering their overall efficiency and attractiveness [19].

This experimentation was carried out by IUAV and CORILA as part of the Framesport project to set the objectives of SMPs' reconceptualization as catalysts of new social, cultural, spatial, and environmental values, which often escape the gaze of regional and national planning. Particular attention was dedicated to the collection of data and the mapping of these realities as a fundamental process for the construction of future scenarios.

Framesport is aimed at supporting homogeneous and integrated improvements in Adriatic small ports' sustainability, competitiveness, and attractiveness through the following measures:

- The delivery of a strategic framework orienting their future development in the long run, also by improving their connection with the neighboring territories and populations, as well as enhancing and diversifying the overall touristic opportunities.
- The realization of an ICT platform as a virtual space available for users and stakeholders, containing results from the implementation of pilot actions and the best practices, suggestions, and proposals for Adriatic SMPs' development and management.
- An increase in competencies for the harmonized planning and management of SMPs, contributing to elevating their role as drivers of the sustainable growth of coastal areas.

This strategy is the result of a complex analysis and consultation work with stakeholders achieved through meetings and semi-structured surveys. It will support decision makers' and port management's decisions in the coming years to ensure that small Adriatic ports are greener, connected, competitive, and safer. The state-of-the-art study informed the definition of the different key aspects composing the strategy. The state of the art is composed of EU directives, regional strategies, and national laws; data on ports describing their current state; an analysis of demand and supply; the results of Framesport pilots; and inputs from local stakeholders via dedicated surveys and workshops [19].

The methodology for the common-strategy definition began with the identification of objectives (already included in the Framesport focus) by considering European directives and strategies and national laws and strategies on tourism and sustainability. The

combination of analysis and educated guesses from collected data verified via stakeholder engagement with a set of dedicated events and a questionnaire informed the definition of a vision and strategic actions. Moreover, the results from Framesport tools and the analysis of demand and supply reinforced the selection of actions and aggregation in dedicated areas of interventions linked to the tools' macro-topics.

The main areas of intervention were identified as follows:

1. Governance and planning (land/sea), where the discussion pointed out the fragmentation of tools and a lack of strategic vision.
2. Tourism, where the urgency to diversify routes and better connect the coast to the inland territory, among other topics.
3. Maritime culture and involvement, where different actors discussed the uses related to marinas and leisure boating and how these will change in the future.
4. Landscape and heritage protection and the challenges related to climate change. This condition of great uncertainty due to climate extremes highlighted the need to identify clearer actions capable of protecting heritage from changing water conditions.
5. A green transition. This needs to take place to allow SMPs to grow sustainably within the territory. SMPs are also facing problems due to obsolete infrastructures. They are often insufficient and, therefore, need to build a strategic and interconnected vision to reconnect ports and regional territories.
6. Climate change and risk management. These are also important topics that need to be addressed by the strategy by, for example, introducing monitoring systems that deal with changing risk mitigation.
7. Coastal and water management, as well as ecosystems and coasts' physical assets, to ensure high-quality standards, including in connection with river routes and land.
8. Maritime transport: the need for a structural rethinking of land–sea interactions. Today, the line between ports and cities quite often appears as a fragmented and chaotic space. In fact, there is a territorial fracture that manifests itself in abandoned or underused spaces that can play a significant role in terms of economic and new ecological connections between SMPs and the larger regions [19].

The actions resulting from stakeholders' engagement and analysis of needs were divided according to this categorization and assigned to one of the specific objectives (connected, green, competitive, and safe) and one macro-topic (sustainable growth, business development, and system management). The strategy identified the stakeholders to be involved in each action (government and management, private sector and industry, and end-user research) and its level of priority (Figure 2).

The proposed strategy aims at systematizing the plurality of challenges at stake and, in line with the feedback collected through interviews with key stakeholders, seeks to conceptualize SMPs from a sustainable perspective (environmental, economic, and social). The strategy looks at the spatial and governance redesign of land–sea interaction with a specific focus on the sectors and identified actions.

All of these different dimensions of separation challenge the current understanding SMPs, requiring decision makers to move away from a planning approach that has conceived them as isolated and punctual dots. On the contrary, current and future challenges are urging decision makers to design them as greener, safer, and more competitive. While big ports are hard to change due to the scale of relations and to a complex governance structure and, therefore, institutional rigidity, SMPs have a different scale and can play a key role in testing key changes and eventually connecting them to the larger context. Thus, working on SMPs is essential to adapting to climate, environmental, and social transitions [19].

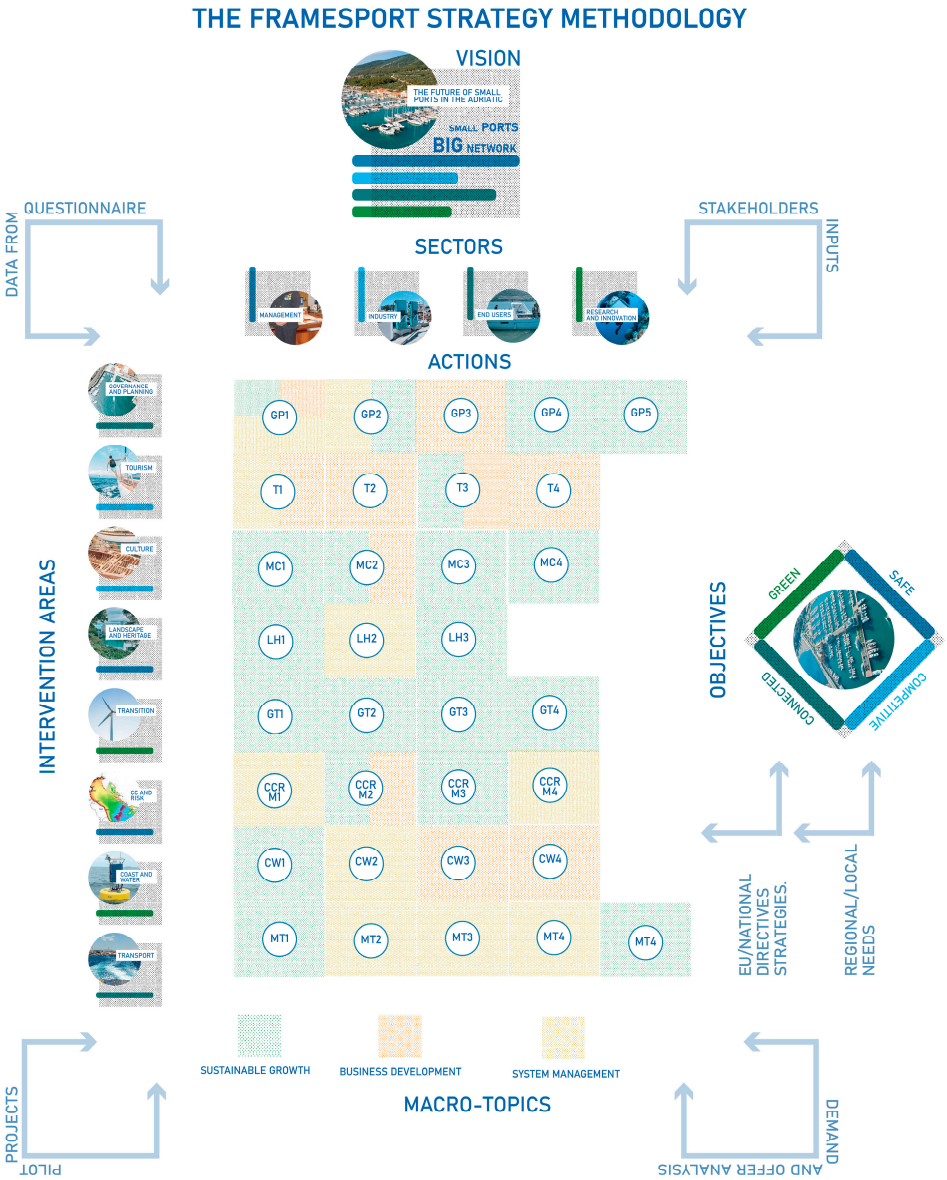

Figure 2. Framesport strategy. The scheme shows the interconnections between data, objectives, intervention areas, sectors, and macro-topics.

5. Conclusions

Port cities are under pressure due to a plurality of spatial, social, environmental, and economic challenges. Climate change and sea-level rise, specifically, are pushing a multitude of stakeholders to identify solutions that can improve ports and cities' relationship in the short, medium, and long terms and that also respond to spatial and institutional fragmentation. With all current public discussion and research focused on big ports, SMPs often escape the gaze of regional and national planning, with tangible consequences for spatial and governance divisions. This article argues that major ports are hard to change due to strong economic, regulatory, and cultural dependencies (e.g., energy dependence), and transition will likely require longer timeframes. Therefore, juxtaposing a parallel focus on smaller ones, such as minor harbors, marinas, and touristic harbors, according to their fragmented nature (private and public), might trigger new opportunities and sustainable practices: from the energy sector to new touristic experimentations, such as fishing tourism. In response, the need for new approaches and models (governance and methodologies) becomes clear. SMPs could be fully recognized as exemplary solutions to design a broader,

trans-disciplinary, and more coordinated vision, resulting in a holistic transition approach applicable to all port sizes and also improving the connection between large and small ones.

European and national policy documents reveal a lack of specific regulations on SMPs. Despite recognizing ports as relevant engines for urban development at multiple scales, these documents do not pay enough attention to aspects of the management and development of SMPs—not even from a terminological point of view.

Designing maritime spaces and the interaction between land and water requires in-depth knowledge of the territory and its vocations. Plus, there is a need to consider activities, functions, and land uses that start on land and continue at sea, and vice versa, such as port-related logistics, the movement of goods and people, the energy sector, tourism, and fishing. This intricate interweaving of activities and flows, belonging to different logics and dynamics by their nature, has traditionally been planned through an approach that ignored their interactions.

This growing attention to the sea's history and its spaces is reflected in current political, economic, and spatial planning discourses around the sea, as demonstrated by a significant amount of research. Directive No. 2014/89/EU and Legislative Decree No. 201 of 17 October 2016 provide a framework for maritime spatial planning (MSP) in Italy. Even if it does not directly work on ports, the MSP plans provide a strategic orientation on a national scale concerning maritime areas and address the coastline sea uses with a specific focus on land and sea interactions. MSP represents the first attempt where SMPs are explicitly considered and included, not only in the specific objectives but also in the national measures aiming to promote and set a common strategy. The MSP plan paves the way to overcome public and private barriers by proposing measures to improve efficiency and striving for European certificates that would unlock economic incentives.

Despite the great opportunities offered by the plan and the process, there are still doubts regarding the economic availability that would enable some measures to be actually implemented.

Following existing research on MSP, this article claims that small and medium ports, through MSP, might have a relevant role in better managing passenger and good flows, promoting sustainable mobility, and valorizing tangible and intangible heritage. Dealing with these assets will drive SMPs toward a coordinated strategy and a new governance model.

These themes and challenges were also the starting point for the Framesport project, which represented an interesting laboratory that looked at the SMPs in the Adriatic between Italy and Croatia. As its main output, the Framesport project defined a strategic and common framework that might be the answer to the pressing spatial and institutional fragmentation that characterizes the small Adriatic ports and beyond. This means providing a multi-scale and multi-sectoral categorization capable of bringing together challenges due to climate change with the issues of heritage protection, energy, culture, infrastructure, and logistics, responding to sustainability requirements in a more systematic way. The strategy is a document that discusses an uncertain future, yet one filled with new opportunities for SMPs. Particular attention was given to the interaction between land and water as a transversal principle and as a space of tangible and intangible opportunities for an enlarged reconnection between ports and inland regions.

The need for a regional approach, one that can harmonize and connect ports in a given area that may deal with similar challenges (e.g., subsidence in the Adriatic case) and have similar opportunities (e.g., desalination), has emerged. A connection between ports at the regional level would be relevant for SMPs in sharing costs and efforts to maximize resource uses and limit impacts on connected ecosystems. To what extent and, especially, how MSP may be a game changer for SMP management in the Italian context is still to be fully understood, mainly depending on the plans' implementation at a national level and their possible downscaling to further local tests.

Author Contributions: F.C.: conceptualization, writing, investigation, and visualization; P.D.M.: conceptualization, writing, and investigation; F.S.: writing, investigation, and visualization; V.N.: investigation; F.M.: investigation and supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the INTERREG V-A IT-HR CBC Programme—"Strategic", Subsidy Contract—Project: "Framework initiative fostering the sustainable development of Adriatic small ports, FRAMESPORT" (Project ID: 10253074) and by EASME through Grant Agreement number 887390—MSPMED—EMFF-MSP-2019, corresponding to the call for proposal Call EMFF-MSP-2019 (Maritime Spatial Planning), Topic: EMFF-MSP-2019, Type of action: EMFF-AG for Projects on Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP). The APC was funded by Università Iuav di Venezia within the activities of the Iuav Planning and Climate Change Lab.

Data Availability Statement: For additional information regarding the Framesport project, please visit the following website: https://framesport.eu. For data on Italian MSP, please visit https://www.sid.mit.gov.it/mappa, and for more information regarding the MS Italian draft plans, please visit the following webpage: https://www.mit.gov.it/documentazione/pianificazione-dello-spazio-marittimo.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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