Islands and cohesion policy: current situation and future challenges

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The European Parliament adopted by 577 votes to 38, with 10 abstentions, a resolution on EU islands and cohesion policy: current situation and future challenges.

Characteristics and specific features of the EU's islands

Members recalled that insularity is a permanent structural handicap, which makes it necessary to establish integration strategies that enable islands to face the challenges and overcome the obstacles specific to insularity.

Islands often combine **multiple and permanent natural handicaps** such as small size, low population density in general, demographic challenges such as seasonal population pressure, small market size, double insularity (island and archipelago), difficult topography, dependence on sea and air transport, and dependence on a small number of productions. The islands of the European Union are also on the front line of climate change.

The physical disconnection of islands and their remoteness from the mainland create **additional constraints**, in particular for the labour market, sustainable transport links and mobility, import of raw materials and consumer products, access of island productions to neighbouring external markets, education, health care, economic activities, access to water and sanitation, energy supply and waste management facilities.

The economies of the islands are oriented towards the primary and tertiary sectors, and hyper-specialisation weakens the economic fabric by making it more vulnerable to economic downturns and crises. The current and long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis have accentuated an already precarious situation in many areas for the EU islands.

In this context, Parliament regretted the EU’s lack of vision for the European islands and called for the development of a **European strategy for the islands** as well as the valorisation of the islands' assets.

Issues and challenges for European islands

Parliament called for a better response to the challenges faced by the islands of the Union. It insisted, inter alia, on the following points

- implementing regional policies and targeted and sustainable measures to strengthen the capacity of islands to protect and restore their unique **biodiversity**, to promote a blue economy geared towards sustainable tourism and fisheries, and to supporting seabed research;

- examine the need to improve the EU Solidarity Fund to adapt it to threats such as natural disasters or the effects of **climate change**;

- mobilise additional funding to provide better support for island regions in access to and management of **water** and to adopt a common water management policy for islands;

- implement specific rules and financial support to help islands achieve climate neutrality goals and support the development of a wide range of renewable energy sources according to the geographical characteristics of the islands;

- exploit the funding offered by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to **provide employment opportunities** in regions threatened by depopulation;

- **make 2024 the European Year of Islands**;

- assess the need to adopt a regulation providing for **specific measures in the field of agriculture** for all NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 islands in order to achieve food self-sufficiency and increase the competitiveness of their production;

- promote the consumption of agricultural products from island and peripheral regions through cohesion policy;

- provide **increased support for sustainable island development**, agriculture, forest management and conservation, livestock, aquaculture, sustainable fisheries, local production and the blue economy, including through European cooperation programmes;

- provide additional specific financial support for **sustainable tourism** in the islands in order to address the problem of seasonal tourism, as the tourism sector is the main contributor to economic growth in the island regions in terms of income and employment;

- improve transport **infrastructure** in the islands to support sustainable transport, prioritise increased investment in basic infrastructure to improve access to clean water and sanitation for all households, and prioritise closing the digital skills gap;

- find coordinated solutions at European level that respect people's well-being and dignity while addressing the **migratory pressure** faced by some islands.

State aid and tailor-made EU policy

Parliament called for EU policies to take into account the specificities of the islands and their sea basins, notably through **better management and collection of statistical information** or through a **revision of the regional state aid scheme**. It called for more flexibility in the granting of State aid to air and maritime transport companies in these island territories, given their total dependence on these means of transport.

The Commission is invited to set up a European Institute of Disadvantaged Territories under Article 174 TFEU, which would be responsible for collecting reliable and aggregated statistical data, including gender-disaggregated data, which are regularly updated using harmonised criteria at all administrative levels.

An Islands Pact and a European action plan for islands

Parliament called on the Commission to use Article 174 TFEU to create a genuine European strategy for islands that corresponds to local realities and needs and takes into account the specificities of each of the EU's sea basins. It called for an Islands Pact to be drawn up and implemented as soon as possible, with the participation of the main parties concerned, along the lines of the Urban Pact and the future Rural Pact.