Problems of the European Union's island regions

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Adopting the own initiative report by Mr Vincenzo VIOLA (PPE, I) on the problems of island regions in the EU, the European Parliament called on the Commission not to regard macroeconomic factors as the only criteria to be taken into account in determining whether the island regions of the EU qualify for inclusion under Structural Fund objectives and to take account also of geographical and economic criteria as permanent physical obstacles to viable regional development. It considered that it was too inflexible to apply the threshold of 75% of per capita GDP since, by virtue of the Treaty of Amsterdam, they ought to benefit from specific measures geared to their respective levels of development. Exceeding the threshold of 75% of per capita GDP should not automatically disqualify them from eligibility for aid under article 92, paragraph 3 a) of the Treaty. It considered it necessary to include a new programme entirely devoted to island regions during the reform of the Structural Funds and new Community initiatives. Parliament felt that the particularities of island regions should be taken into account in drawing up and implementing Community legislation. It also hoped that the Commission would create an "Interservice Group" with a view to implementing an integrated island policy with the other European and national institutions. In order to offset the disadvantages and additional costs of the islands, Parliament recommended a number of measures in the following areas: - state aid: it called on the Commission to permit operational assistance, including for transport, in order to offset natural disadvantages. It also asked for future guidelines concerning state aid for the regions to be modulated to allow island status to be taken into account and for island regions concerned by Objective 1 to qualify for a grant rate of 50% (with other regions allowed 30%); - transport: it called on the Commission to evaluate the additional costs arising from island status and to take measures to offset these additional costs; - energy: it called on the Commission to give the islands better access to sources of energy, in particular by using them as laboratories for the alternative energy sector; - environment and supplies: it called for measures to make islands self-sufficient in water and other supplies of necessities; - tourism: it considered that excessive and aggressively marketed tourism should be reduced with less coastal tourism and more tourist development of the countryside. It also proposed cofinancing means of transport for medical emergencies and a series of cultural measures. All initiatives for island regions should promote sustained development and aim to safeguard the heritage of the islands. It also suggested protecting coastal areas and agriculture and fisheries by introducing "island quality labels". The European Parliament also proposed that islands should enjoy financial and tax incentives to encourage their development and felt that a "European Year for the Islands" should be designated.