Islands and natural and economic constraints in the context of regional policy

2006/2106(INI) - 15/03/2007 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Francesco **MUSOTTO** (EPP-ED, IT) on the islands and natural and economic constraints in the context of the regional policy. The report was adopted by 473 votes in favour to 26 against with 35 abstentions. It drew attention to the plight of islands suffering from an accumulation of disadvantages, and stressed the need to help them to overcome those difficulties and to reduce regional disparities.

Parliament believed that insularity was both a geocultural characteristic that was open to potential exploitation by a development strategy, and a permanent handicap which rendered the situation even more difficult as regards the competitiveness of these regions. Whilst some concrete provisions in favour of structurally disadvantaged regions had been incorporated in the regulations on the Structural Funds 2007-2013, the Council failed to take on board other important proposals from the Parliament, such as the possibility of increasing the co-financing rate for areas affected by more than one geographical or natural handicap. It called on the Commission, with regard to the programming period 2007-2013 concerning the operational programmes of island regions, to exhaust all avenues giving them the possibility to carry-out measures related to infrastructure works.

In order to deal more satisfactorily with the permanent disadvantage of such territories, Parliament felt that there should be increased flexibility in the implementation of existing and future state aid policies, without such flexibility causing unacceptable market distortions within the EU. The Commission was asked to review matters so as to take better account of the need of islands to enjoy access to the internal market on equal terms with mainland regions. Improved transport links should constitute a priority action in this field, especially in the case of ports and airports.

Parliament went on to ask the Commission to do the following:

- to pay particular attention to islands in the context of the European Spatial Observation Network (ESPON) in order to acquire a thorough knowledge of their situation. The Member States should establish specific mechanisms for gathering and sending relevant local data to the Network, while the Commission should update the island statistics last gathered in 2003 and define more pertinent statistical indicators better suited to measuring development;

- to study the possibility of permitting state aid to be granted to island regions where fuel and energy costs clearly adversely affect the competitiveness of the communities living on them, since significant fluctuations in the cost of fuel can make transportation between island regions and mainland Europe significantly more burdensome. In its next regional state aid guidelines, a regime allowing operating aids should be extended to all island regions which are not island states or inland islands;

- to undertake a “special needs assessment” study of island regions taking into account issues of specific concern to islands and proposing measures to address them. This refer especially to the impact of the implementation of regional policy on islands, including on levels of investment, the spread of economic activity, unemployment, transport infrastructure (notably, ports and airports), environmental pressures and the overall level of economic and social integration of islands within the internal market;

- to set up an administrative unit for the islands, along the lines of the existing administrative unit for the outermost regions;

- to consider what adjustments are needed to the "market investor" test for state aid in order to reflect the realities of life on islands and other remote regions where it can be impossible to find or evaluate a market investor as there may be none in the area;

- to give priority to the energy security of the islands and to funding for the development and implementation of projects for the production of energy using new technologies and renewable energy sources and to promote efficient use of energy, whilst protecting the environment and preserving its natural beauty;

- to place particular emphasis on the development of broadband and to promote measures for solving the specific difficulties of providing services in island regions, such as health care and online medical services, electronic governance and citizens' services;

Parliament encouraged the efforts made towards a holistic Community maritime policy, and felt that special attention should be given to those areas of economic activity which were more prevalent on islands, notably agriculture, fisheries, tourism and crafts. Tourism represented for most islands a primary source of wealth creation, having a direct influence on the growth of other sectors (agriculture, commerce, services, fisheries), it was imperative to put in place an integrated policy capable of ensuring the sustainability of island tourism. This policy needed to be accompanied by an European information campaign directed at European citizens through the creation of a quality and island origin label. With this in view, Parliament called on the Commission to carry out a cross-sectoral analysis paying special attention to opportunities to support sustainable tourism within the regional strategies of islands that are far from centres of population.

Lastly, Parliament proposed that the Commission and the other Institutions designate the year 2010 as the European year for the islands.