



**European Committee
of the Regions**

NAT-VII-004

140th plenary session, 12-14 October 2020

OPINION

Towards sustainable use of Natural Resources within the Mediterranean insular context

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS:

- stresses that the European Mediterranean islands account for 95% of the EU's island inhabitants and that, along with the other islands in the Mediterranean Basin, they share common challenges, problems and limitations that hamper their economic development;
- recognises the exceptional richness of the ecosystems of Mediterranean islands and their particular vulnerability in terms of current socioeconomic development and climate change, with the sustainable management of their scarce natural resources being their main challenge;
- stresses that, despite the specific difficulties faced, if targeted legislative measures and an appropriate financial framework are put in place, these Mediterranean island regions will serve as excellent laboratories for the various ecological transition processes undertaken by the EU;
- stresses that all Mediterranean islands have increasingly precarious environmental assets: limited land used for an increasingly large number of purposes, limited water resources, a high dependence on fossil fuels for energy, and very fragile and weakening ecosystems;
- points out that Article 174 TFEU should apply from the first stages of the decision-making process, including specific compensatory measures to overcome the challenges and constraints resulting from the specific circumstances of Mediterranean islands;
- stresses that one of the principles of the EU is economic, social and territorial cohesion, with particular attention to be paid to island regions as set out in Article 174 TFEU;
- emphasises the need to properly and effectively apply Article 174 TFEU with regard to the Mediterranean islands, in the same way that Article 349 TFEU was developed for the outermost regions.

Rapporteur:

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**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions –
Towards sustainable use of Natural Resources within the Mediterranean insular context**

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Introduction: the Mediterranean islands and their specific challenges

1. stresses that the European Mediterranean islands account for 95% of the EU's island inhabitants and that, along with the other islands in the Mediterranean Basin, they share common challenges, problems and limitations that hamper their economic development;
2. points out that the European Union (EU) Treaties do not contain specific measures on insularity except for those relating to the outermost regions, although their special status is based almost entirely on the principle of insularity;
3. acknowledges that the island regions in the Mediterranean are heterogeneous economic, administrative, cultural and social entities. Nevertheless, they share common challenges and problems which, in an area as fragmented as the Mediterranean Basin, need to be tackled specifically and together;
4. recognises that the current health crisis caused by COVID-19 (coronavirus) has brought to the fore the particular vulnerability of island territories, whose resources are scarce;
5. welcomes the fact that the European Commission is moving towards a Green Deal and a fair transition framework that will make socioeconomic development of the Mediterranean islands possible and is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals;
6. recognises the exceptional richness of the ecosystems of Mediterranean islands and their particular vulnerability in terms of current socioeconomic development and climate change, with the sustainable management of their scarce natural resources being their main challenge;
7. believes that, in light of the Mediterranean island regions' high environmental and climate vulnerability, the European Commission should take into account their specific geographical and socioeconomic circumstances when determining the path for achieving the goal of climate neutrality;
8. stresses that, despite the specific difficulties faced, if targeted legislative measures and an appropriate financial framework are put in place, these Mediterranean island regions will serve as excellent laboratories for the various ecological transition processes undertaken by the EU;
9. calls on the EU Member States and the Union for the Mediterranean to work together to draw up a ministerial declaration on the situation of Mediterranean islands, recognising them as a special area within the EU, with specific needs and a unique culture, heritage and environment that must be managed and protected jointly and specifically;

10. given the Mediterranean's position as the border between Europe and Africa, calls on the Member States, the European Commission and the Union for the Mediterranean take the area's islands into account when developing and implementing the European Neighbourhood Policy;
11. emphasises that strong territorial cohesion between the European Mediterranean islands will also help to strengthen the EU's border position and make them a strong counterpart for improving cooperation with the EU's Mediterranean partners;
12. stresses that, despite the clear similarities they have with the EU's outermost regions in terms of their general social, economic and geographical circumstances, the Mediterranean islands do not benefit from special treatment to enable them to deal with permanent geographical handicaps to their economic and social development as recognised in Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU);
13. points out that Article 174 TFEU should apply from the first stages of the decision-making process, including specific compensatory measures to overcome the challenges and constraints resulting from the specific circumstances of Mediterranean islands;

Scarcity of natural resources on Mediterranean islands

14. stresses that all Mediterranean islands have increasingly precarious environmental assets: limited land used for an increasingly large number of purposes, limited water resources, a high dependence on fossil fuels for energy, and very fragile and weakening ecosystems;
15. emphasises that the islands' scarcest resource is land, with the situation being more severe in regions with limited space, where physical expansion makes congestion processes faster and more obvious;
16. points out that most Mediterranean islands depend on the mainland and an external supply of fossil fuels for energy, and welcomes the action taken by the EU to decarbonise the area;
17. stresses that the Mediterranean islands' water resources are usually limited and often overused, so they tend to become depleted, polluted and salinised;
18. believes that, while it is true that many Mediterranean islands have opted for desalination to provide water supply, water policy should mainly be driven by demand-side policies (such as saving and reusing water, and using and allocating it more efficiently) and policies for the conservation, protection and comprehensive management of water resources;
19. points out that, due to the specific features of their infrastructure and the actual opportunities for accessing the European energy market, the Mediterranean islands incur significant additional energy-generation costs and costs associated with redeveloping and restructuring their economic sectors;
20. emphasises that the Mediterranean Basin is a global biodiversity hotspot with a particularly high number of endemic species in its island regions;

21. notes that the Mediterranean islands have many habitats of Community interest – some of which are considered a priority – that are threatened by considerable anthropic pressure, habitat degradation and the arrival of exotic and invasive species that destabilise ecosystems;
22. considers that the EU should develop specific environmental protection measures for the Mediterranean islands as they have unique terrestrial and marine biodiversity and therefore require sustainable development policies and tailored environmental protection measures;

Socioeconomic activities and their impact on natural resources

23. stresses that the Mediterranean islands have an economic structure that is highly specialised, in either the primary (agriculture and fishing) or the tertiary (tourism) sector, making their production structure very fragile in a highly competitive European and global socioeconomic environment;
24. emphasises that the agri-food sector is strategically important for the Mediterranean islands in terms of using natural resources more sustainably, considering its great regional importance in terms of the large percentage of land it takes up and as a source of food for inhabitants;
25. urges the European Commission and the Member States to make the Mediterranean islands' agri-food systems more resilient so that they have sufficient food sovereignty to cope with situations such as natural disasters, political and social conflicts and health crises such as COVID-19, where supplies cannot be delivered from outside;
26. highlights the overfishing of some fish stocks in the Mediterranean and calls for specific fishery management plans to be developed for the Mediterranean Basin, to enhance and modernise local fishing fleets and sea-farming systems by combining traditional methods with the most innovative methods;
27. notes the importance of small-scale fisheries for the economic ecosystems of Mediterranean coastal communities, and encourages the Mediterranean islands to consider fishery co-management models that involve the relevant socioeconomic sectors. It is of utmost importance that these include promoting fishing tourism and eco-tourism at sea, which require specific skills;
28. believes that the creation of new marine protected areas (MPAs) on the islands should be accompanied by parallel innovative economic strategies for the sustainable use of fishery resources by MPA managers and representatives of the fishing and tourism industries;
29. emphasises that most Mediterranean islands do not develop industrial sectors due to their low productivity, which is linked to the lack of raw materials, high production costs and transport logistics problems;
30. stresses that, in general, the highly distinctive demand for services and the specialised nature of their tourism makes their economies more fragile than those of the mainland, with economic development highly dependent on the global situation. For example, the health crisis caused by the

global spread of COVID-19 and its particularly significant impact on the Mediterranean island economies, most of which are highly dependent on the services sector;

31. urges the European Commission and the Member States to bear in mind that the Mediterranean islands have a high floating population which increases the infrastructure needs of the resident population and heightens demand for all types of public service;
32. considers that the roll-out of the EU's Circular Economy Action Plan should include specific measures that take into account the high floating population linked to tourist flows and high servitisation of many of the Mediterranean island economies;
33. calls on the European Commission and the Member States to support exchanges of best practices regarding sustainable tourism on the Mediterranean islands, as is currently the case with programmes implemented as part of Interreg MED¹;
34. highlights the low training level in Mediterranean island regions compared to the EU average, particularly with regard to post-secondary and vocational training, which encourages students to leave school prematurely and enter the labour market early in economies strongly geared towards the services sector;
35. stresses that islands in general are highly dependent on air and maritime transport, and calls upon the European Commission to properly consider these specific features²;
36. points out that transporting goods is between two and four times more expensive than on the mainland³, which is a key factor and directly impacts the competitiveness of the islands' output;
37. proposes revising the state aid rules applicable to the Mediterranean island region with a view to recognising its specific features and taking into account its handicaps;
38. stresses the need to develop *synthetic sustainability indicators* that incorporate, in a holistic way, economic parameters that are correlated with economic-environmental and economic-social indicators and that focus on biophysical conditions;
39. points out that, while Directive (EU) 2016/802 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 relating to a reduction in the sulphur content of certain liquid fuels aims to achieve important environmental protection goals, its application has led to a significant increase in the cost of maritime transport services, generating additional costs downstream, both for individuals and businesses on the islands. Therefore calls on the Commission to adopt temporary state aid derogations for regional and local island authorities that intend to play a role in the maritime transport sector;

¹ For example, projects such as BLUEISLANDS, MITOMED+, WINTERMED and SMARTMED have been developed.

² This point is taken from the opinion *European Strategy for Coastal and Maritime Tourism*, rapporteur: Vasco Ilídio Alves Cordeiro (PT/PES) (<https://webapi2016.cor.europa.eu/v1/documents/cor-2014-02645-00-00-ac-tra-en.doc/content>).

³ PLANISTAT EUROPE-BRADLEY DUNBAR ASS., *Rapport Final. 2000. CE. 16. 0. AT. 118. Analysis of the island regions and outermost regions of the European Union*, European Union, March 2003.

A new governance model for Mediterranean islands

40. emphasises the importance of establishing multi-level governance to enable local, regional, state and supranational levels of governance in the Mediterranean Basin to move towards efficient and flexible management of natural resources in island regions;
41. calls on the European Commission to adopt a multiannual strategic plan for the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of the European Mediterranean islands, and take a consistent approach with regard to the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Euro-Mediterranean partnership;
42. encourages the Mediterranean islands to develop closer relations with each other that will promote exchanges of best practices and policies between the different areas, and to expand alliances such as "Med Insulae", which was set up by Sardinia, Corsica, Gozo and the Balearic Islands;
43. emphasises how important it is for the island communities' economic and social models to implement integrated management of coastal waters that can boost and promote innovative "coast-sea" interactions, and business models allowing the sustainable use of both island areas and the marine environment;
44. urges the European Commission and the Mediterranean states to devise and promote sea basin strategies⁴ to improve cooperation and integration across the region and develop integrated management of coastal waters to take a more holistic approach to the Mediterranean Basin;
45. encourages the regions and states to define and develop international models to protect and manage particularly sensitive marine areas, such as those that exist under the International Maritime Organisation;

Proper funding for the sustainable use of natural resources

46. points out that isolation, limited size and vulnerability are three characteristics inherent to the Mediterranean islands that hinder their harmonious development within the EU and hamper their economic, social and territorial cohesion, directly and permanently affecting their ability to grow and progress;
47. calls for existing EU funding mechanisms to be tailored more to the actual circumstances of the Mediterranean islands;
48. asks the Member States and the European Commission to streamline and coordinate their multiannual plans to find solutions that will also improve cross-border cooperation between Mediterranean areas;

⁴ Such as the Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the western Mediterranean or the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR).

49. urges the European Commission to boost investment in research, development and innovation by increasing its public funds and promoting more private investment through public-private partnerships with a view to diversifying the economic activity and progress of the Mediterranean island regions;
50. calls on the European Commission to exempt the Mediterranean island regions from the 150-km limit in all cross-border cooperation programmes;
51. deems it necessary to include geoeconomic criteria in the system for allocating future cohesion policy funds, such as remoteness and insularity, which are permanent physical obstacles and hinder the sustainable development of the Mediterranean islands;
52. calls for more flexible thematic concentration requirements, taking into account not only state development levels but, above all, the economic, social and territorial reality of the Mediterranean island regions;
53. requests that the current ERDF and ESF co-financing rates be maintained and adjusted for areas with severe and permanent natural disadvantages so that these mechanisms are more geared towards the actual circumstances of Mediterranean islands;
54. requests that investment in infrastructure to improve airport, port and land transport and accessibility on the Mediterranean islands be eligible for support;
55. calls for a Mediterranean island subprogramme to be created as part of the future 2021-2027 Interreg MED programme, as a more efficient way of working with the EU funds allocated to the area's island regions;

Conclusions

56. stresses that one of the principles of the EU is economic, social and territorial cohesion, with particular attention to be paid to island regions as set out in Article 174 TFEU;
57. welcomes the fact that, because a specific EU strategy has been developed for the outermost regions, these regions have special aid programmes that have enabled them to improve sustainable development;
58. emphasises the need to properly and effectively apply Article 174 TFEU with regard to the Mediterranean islands, in the same way that Article 349 TFEU was developed for the outermost regions;
59. urges the European Commission to devise a strategy for the Mediterranean islands that caters for their specific features and vulnerabilities, and to develop a stronger partnership between these regions, the Member States and the EU with specific, coordinated measures.

Brussels, 14 October 2020

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Blížkovský

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Towards sustainable use of Natural Resources within the Mediterranean insular context
Reference(s)	
Legal basis	Own-initiative opinion
Procedural basis	Article 307(4) TFEU
Date of Council/EP referral	
Date of Bureau/President's decision	3 December 2019
Commission responsible	Commission for Natural Resources (NAT)
Rapporteur	Francina ARMENGOL I SOCIÀS (ES/PES), President of the Government of the Balearic Islands
Analysis	15.01.2020
Discussed in commission	18 June 2020
Date adopted by commission	18 June 2020
Result of the vote in commission (majority/unanimity)	Unanimously
Date adopted in plenary	14 October 2020