Tuesday 7 June 2022

P9_TA(2022)0225

EU Islands and cohesion policy

European Parliament resolution of 7 June 2022 on EU islands and cohesion policy: current situation and future challenges (2021/2079(INI))

(2022/C 493/04)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to Articles 174, 175 and 349 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),

— having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund [1],

— having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund [2],

— having regard to the Final Declaration of the 40th Annual General Assembly of the Islands Commission of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe of 15 April 2021,

— having regard to the 7th Environment Action Programme (EAP) and the concepts set out therein,

— having regard to the Council conclusions of 16 October 2020 on the EU biodiversity strategy for 2030,

— having regard to the study conducted for its Committee on Regional Development entitled 'Islands of the European Union: State of play and future challenges', published in March 2021,

— having regard to the study conducted for its Committee on Regional Development entitled 'Cohesion Policy and Climate Change', published in March 2021,

— having regard to the NextGenerationEU recovery instrument,

— having regard to the final declaration of the 26th Conference of Presidents of the Outermost Regions, signed in Ponta Delgada on 18 November 2021,

— having regard to the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions of 10 December 2020 on the European Commission report on the implementation of the renewed strategic partnership with the EU's outermost regions [3],

— having regard to the Council agreement of 7 December 2021 on a general approach to updating EU rules on rates of value added tax (VAT),

— having regard to its resolution of 18 May 2021 on the review of the European Union Solidarity Fund [4],

---

[1] OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 60.
[2] OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 1.
[3] OJ C 37, 2.2.2021, p. 57.
[4] OJ C 15, 12.1.2022, p. 2.

— having regard to its resolution of 17 April 2018 on strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union: the 7th report of the European Commission ([5]),

— having regard to its resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences ([6]),

— having regard to its resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Green Deal ([7]),

— having regard to its resolution of 14 September 2021 entitled 'Towards a stronger partnership with the EU outermost regions' ([8]),

— having regard to its resolution of 28 November 2019 on the climate and environment emergency ([9]),

— having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,

— having regard to the opinions of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development,

— having regard to the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions of 14 October 2020 on sustainable use of natural resources within the Mediterranean insular context,

— having regard to the report of the Committee on Regional Development (A9-0144/2022),

A. whereas the island regions of the EU have an estimated population of more than 20 000 000 (4,6 % of the total EU population); whereas the EU's island population is spread over approximately 2 400 islands belonging to 13 Member States;

B. whereas EU islands with a significant number of structural problems are already largely classified as Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) 2 or NUTS 3 regions;

C. whereas islands often suffer from a combination of multiple and permanent natural handicaps such as small size, for most part low population density, demographic challenges such as seasonal demographic pressure, small markets, double insularity (island and archipelago), difficult topography very similar to that of mountainous regions, dependence on maritime and air transport and dependence on a small number of products;

D. whereas demographic change does not have a uniform impact on all countries and regions, but has a bigger impact on regions that are already lagging behind, aggravating existing territorial and social inequalities; whereas rural, peripheral and outermost regions, including islands, are most affected by depopulation, with mainly young people and women leaving those areas, resulting in an increasing share of older people living there, which may increase the risk of social isolation;

E. whereas the specific characteristics of islands are recognised by Article 174 TFEU, and whereas the concrete application of this Article with specific regard to the EU's insular territories is still lacking; whereas these characteristics should be taken into account in EU policies, in particular by drawing up a dedicated strategy, a European action plan and an island policy agenda with clearly defined priorities for action;

F. whereas island regions are all comparatively less developed than the mainland regions of their Member State and have a lower GDP per capita;

G. whereas three EU Member States are islands;

([5]) OJ C 390, 18.11.2019, p. 53.
([6]) OJ C 316, 6.8.2021, p. 2.
([7]) OJ C 270, 7.7.2021, p. 2.
([8]) OJ C 117, 11.3.2022, p. 18.
([9]) OJ C 232, 16.6.2021, p. 28.

H. whereas islands' physical disconnection and their remoteness from the mainland create additional constraints, including for the labour market, sustainable transport links and mobility, the importing of raw materials and consumer products, access for island products to neighbouring external markets, education, healthcare, business, access to water and sanitation, energy supply and waste management facilities; whereas this geographical disconnection makes the green transition of such territories towards a climate-neutral economy significantly more difficult;

I. whereas equal access to quality and inclusive skilling, upskilling and re-skilling measures, as well as to information on skills resources, counselling, education and vocational training for all people, including for people living in sparsely and depopulated rural and remote areas and islands, is crucial for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience;

J. whereas, in accordance with Article 349 TFEU, for the outermost regions, which are in their large majority islands, the EU must adopt specific measures aimed at laying down the conditions of application of EU common policies to those regions, in particular in areas such as customs and trade policies, fiscal policy, free zones, agriculture and fisheries policies, conditions for supply of raw materials and essential consumer goods, State aid and conditions of access to structural funds and to horizontal Union programmes; whereas specific measures in all those areas contribute to strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU;

K. whereas during the COVID-19 pandemic, seasonal and posted workers often lacked basic healthcare, decent accommodation, personal protective equipment and adequate information; whereas they often had only inadequate access or no access at all to social protection schemes in the host Member States, including sick pay and short-term unemployment schemes; whereas the mobility of workers is highly dependent on available means of transport, and workers from islands and the outermost regions of the Union are particularly affected;

L. whereas the long-term social, economic, environmental and cultural consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on the island territories of the Union are of particular concern, and whereas Europe's recovery must include the islands and must not create further regional disparities; whereas the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that island economies are highly vulnerable to such events;

M. whereas islands' often high unemployment rates, which tend to be higher than on the mainland, have been severely exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, affecting young people in particular;

N. whereas islands and outermost regions are on the front line of climate change, affected by rising sea levels and coastal erosion and the warming and acidification of seas and oceans and the increased frequency and violence of natural disasters such as cyclones, volcanic eruptions, forest fires and storms, floods, drought and the problems of desertification which can have negative effects on agriculture and food supply and can cause multiple forms of economic, social and environmental damage; whereas they can be excellent testbeds for a range of ecological transition processes and many are seeking to achieve energy autonomy based on renewables;

O. whereas islands have many assets whose potential should be better realised;

P. whereas islands have exceptionally rich biodiversity and ecosystems; whereas island ecosystems are particularly threatened by the impact of climate change and should be protected;

Q. whereas, on many islands, inland areas lag behind coastal regions in terms of economic development and service accessibility;

R. whereas agricultural holdings on islands, most of them of small size, are hampered by their remote location, insularity and environmental conditions, dependence on energy from the mainland, limited diversity in production due to local and climatic conditions and high dependence on local markets, as well as by the climate crisis, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and the lack of basic infrastructures such as roads, water supply, waste management, digital and health infrastructure; whereas these structural difficulties are often exacerbated by the absence of fully developed services of general interest;

S. whereas islands, notably outermost regions, are very vulnerable to socio-economic crises as well as natural disasters such as extreme weather events and volcanic activity; whereas due to their geographical isolation and difficulties in accessing basic supplies from mainland territories, such as fuel or water, islands are affected more severely by phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic, creating particular difficulties for farmers; whereas insular territories in the Union account for 80 % of European biodiversity, harbour many of Europe's endemic species and may act as refuges for species threatened with extinction, while also representing vital wintering grounds, stopover points or bottlenecks for migrating birds, mammals and invertebrates in addition to having landscape and environmental treasures that require specific protection;

T. whereas a substantial part of the socio-economic development of islands is based on sectors which are highly seasonal in nature, as is the case for agriculture and tourism; whereas farmers in island regions suffer especially from decreased competitiveness due to the fact that they have to bear high transport costs and cannot benefit from economies of scale, given that land is a scarce resource on many islands; whereas the EU's islands will need to comply with the farm to fork strategy as an essential part of the European Green Deal in order to develop fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food supply systems; whereas these regions may be placed at a severe disadvantage by competition from non-EU countries, which often do not respect the same environmental and food safety production standards and have much lower labour costs;

U. whereas the impact of the farm to fork strategy on EU agricultural production may have severe consequences in these regions due to their weak competitiveness vis-à-vis imports from abroad and the challenges they face in the diversification of their production;

V. whereas islands' marine and terrestrial biodiversity is largely endemic, and therefore more fragile; whereas marine and coastal pollution, as well as overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, which has an increased impact on the islands' environment with very serious consequences for employment, the small-scale fisheries sector and local communities, can be a source of concern for islands;

W. whereas the outermost regions and islands have the potential to help ensure a sustainable future for Europe in strategic sectors such as clean energy, biodiversity and ecotourism;

Characteristics and specific features of the European Union's islands

1. Recognises insularity as a permanent structural handicap; notes that this is why strategies for integration need to be developed to enable islands to confront the challenges and overcome the barriers their insularity causes;

2. Recalls that Article 174 TFEU stipulates that the Union must pay particular attention to European islands;

3. Underlines that European islands, while facing common challenges, have various geographical features and institutional setups, which mean it is crucial to adopt flexible solutions that take into account these specificities;

4. Regrets the EU's lack of vision for European islands and calls for a European island vision to be developed and for the islands' strengths to be exploited;

5. Points out that Article 349 TFEU also recognises insularity among the conditions restraining the development of the nine outermost regions and that it quotes insularity as one of the conditions that aggravate their structurally fragile social and economic situation; recalls that Article 349 TFEU provides for specific measures for those outermost regions; calls for a specific regulation for the outermost regions on the common organisation of the markets so that the particular environmental, geographical and social circumstances of those territories falling under Article 349 TFEU can be taken into account;

6. Stresses that the GDP and level of development of European islands lag behind the average of the EU and of the countries to which they belong;

7. Stresses that one of the islands' major handicaps lies in their geomorphological and natural conditions; notes that islands generally have a double or triple natural handicap, i.e. insularity, mountainous terrain and being part of an archipelago;

8. Recalls that insularity creates structural problems of dependence on maritime and air transport, which is a public service on which the daily lives of European citizens living on islands depend, with additional costs for importing and exporting goods, raw materials, including energy commodities, and consumer products as well as for passenger transport;

9. Stresses that, in the case of archipelagos, these difficulties are multiplied by double and sometimes triple insularity;

10. Highlights the deficits of islands in terms of population, raw materials and resources of all kinds, and notes that for many islands access to drinking water and sanitation, in particular for all households, is a central issue in people's lives and for the development of agriculture, energy production, the sustainability of the island and its tourism carrying capacity;

11. Stresses that isolation owing to insularity means a dependence on the markets of the mainland and continental areas and increases the cost of certain services such as waste management, as well as of certain goods, especially for small or remote islands that are highly dependent on imports;

12. Stresses that island economies are oriented towards the primary and tertiary sectors and that hyper-specialisation weakens the economic fabric by making it more vulnerable to economic slowdowns and crises; is concerned about long-term developments which in many EU islands can create an economy that is based solely on tourism, leading to seasonal vulnerabilities such as differences in financial resources between the high and low tourist seasons; highlights, therefore, the need to diversify the economy of islands by strengthening their secondary sectors in order to achieve a good balance and a diverse labour market;

13. Notes with concern the ongoing and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, which are exacerbating an already precarious situation for EU islands in many areas; notes with concern that the deterioration of mental health is a significant factor for precariousness, due to isolation and restricted choices of insular areas;

14. Stresses that the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis are even starker in many islands and the outermost regions than on the mainland, as reflected in soaring maritime freight prices, and that they are adding to the structural social and economic difficulties that are characteristic of these regions; notes that current price increases will only reinforce these difficulties;

15. Reminds the Member States that the Recovery and Resilience Facility should seek to reduce disparities in economic, social and territorial development between the islands and outermost regions and the most developed regions; calls on the Commission to state whether this provision has been met in the national recovery plans when submitting its review report to Parliament;

Issues and challenges for European islands

Climate change and biodiversity

16. Stresses that biodiversity on islands is characterised by unique biogeographic, phylogenetic and functional characteristics, that islands are home to a significant amount of the world's biodiversity and host major breeding congregations of important species, but that they have also experienced disproportionate biodiversity loss; stresses that targeted regional policies and actions such as more coordinated technical assistance to protect and restore the unique

biodiversity of islands as well as to preserve the scarce natural resources on them, such as soil and water, are required to safeguard their agricultural productivity, particularly for sustainable traditional products, and secure livelihoods while helping to achieve the objective of the European Green Deal; calls on the Commission and Member States to strengthen support for farmers engaging in biodiversity-friendly practices, including through higher funding and co-financing rates;

17. Stresses that many islands have a fragile environment and endemic marine and terrestrial biodiversity, and that the development of tourism, in particular on certain Mediterranean islands, is further increasing the anthropogenic pressure on biodiversity;

18. Calls for targeted, sustainable and efficient regional policies and action for islands aimed at strengthening their ability to protect and restore their unique biodiversity, promoting a blue economy focused on sustainable tourism and fisheries, and supporting seabed research; calls on the Commission to assess the impact of climate change on islands;

19. Recalls that islands are on the front line of climate change, particularly with rising sea levels and the warming and acidification of seas and oceans, the growing impact of desertification and the proliferation of natural disasters;

20. Calls on the Commission to examine the need to improve the European Union Solidarity Fund and adapt it to new realities and threats such as natural disasters or the effects of climate change, in order to deal more realistically with the consequences of these phenomena;

21. Calls on the Commission to swiftly address the importance of adapting existing emergency mechanisms to deal with increasingly severe natural disasters such as the eruption of the volcano on the island of La Palma (Spain), an unprecedented social and economic challenge requiring a proportionate response to the damage caused;

22. Notes with concern the risks associated with overfishing and marine and coastal pollution; calls, in the context of the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal, including the Climate Law, for specific support for islands, this being essential to make them suitably adaptable, resilient and foresighted to combat and adapt to climate change; calls for instruments to compensate for the adverse social impacts of the European Green Deal to be deployed in the EU's islands;

23. Calls for an analysis of natural disaster risk prevention strategies, climate change adaptation measures and regional policies in order to avoid the proliferation of housing and infrastructure on coastal floodplains or in landslide-prone areas;

Access to water and water management

24. Considers that islands can represent a formidable laboratory for sustainability practices in sectors such as clean energy, the circular economy, smart mobility, waste management and the blue economy; considers it necessary in particular to shorten distribution chains in order to reduce emissions from the transport of raw materials and promote the circular economy, this being of great importance in making islands more competitive and self-sustaining;

25. Stresses the increasingly precarious condition of almost all islands in terms of their environmental assets, particularly water resources; calls, in this context, on the Commission to 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;

26. Stresses the need to promote the purification of water, and particularly waste water, and to guarantee a sustainable water cycle; recalls that desalinisation is often costly and not an effective way to provide an island's entire water supply; recalls also the challenges connected with waste management in island territories which have limited resources to store and process waste, particularly in high tourist seasons during which waste production is increased; Highlights, furthermore, the strategic role of the circular economy, which must be extended to encompass the collection and economical recycling of marine waste;

Energy transition

27. Calls for specific rules and financial support to help islands achieve climate neutrality goals, taking into account the additional costs linked to sectors such as energy and transport as well as the impact of mobile technologies on their energy systems; recognises that proportionally very high levels of investment are needed to manage intermittent renewable energies; calls for these costs to be taken into account in the 'Fit for 55' legislative package;

28. Underlines the need for and opportunities arising from the 'Fit for 55' legislative package; is of the opinion, however, that the concrete implementation of these legislative measures should go hand in hand with the promotion of economic, social and territorial cohesion, since islands solely rely on air and maritime transport;

29. Calls for concrete compensatory measures that offset any negative consequences for islands' economic, social and territorial cohesion of the process of transitioning to a cleaner economy and society that may arise due to their dependence on the aviation and the maritime sectors;

30. Considers close monitoring to be important to ensure that islands are fully integrated into the development of green maritime infrastructure; calls for islands to be made a priority in the development of infrastructure aimed at decarbonising air and maritime transport; highlights that islands' structural handicaps leave their citizens and businesses more exposed to rising prices;

31. Points out that owing to their small size and isolated energy systems, islands face a major challenge with regard to energy supply as they generally rely on fossil fuel imports for electricity generation, transport and heating;

32. Considers that the use of renewable energy, including tidal energy, should be a priority which brings substantial benefits to islands, while taking into account the needs of local communities, including the preservation of islands' traditional architecture and local habitats; calls, therefore, for the development of a wide range of renewable energy sources to be supported according to islands' geographical features; welcomes the green hydrogen programmes that islands have launched;

33. Calls for renewables-based energy autonomy to be established as a target for all European islands, to be supported by the requisite financial resources and approached through the phasing out of fossil fuels and the introduction of measures to increase the potential of sustainable and renewable energies; calls for additional research to make offshore renewables more affordable and fit for the geographical features of the different sea basins;

34. Underlines that, in order to achieve an effective environmental transition, it is key to enhance the administrative capacity of the local institutions of European islands and to develop their potential both as enablers of economic, social and territorial competitiveness and as promoters of climate-friendly behaviour among citizens; recalls that this transition also depends on robust research and innovation policies and initiatives that foster collaboration among local stakeholders while promoting a wider uptake of research facilities in insular territories;

35. Reminds the Member States that their national transition plans, as provided for under the Just Transition Fund, must include a specific study and analysis for each of their islands;

Economic and social development

36. Highlights the importance of supporting the local economic fabric of European islands, in particular micro-enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);

37. Calls on the Member States to use funds from the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund to support the creation of quality jobs, promote a better work-life balance and provide job opportunities in regions at risk of depopulation, with special attention paid to improving the labour market participation of women; stresses the importance of counselling services, lifelong learning and programmes for reskilling and upskilling workers at all ages;

38. Calls for urgent measures to limit the depopulation of islands as well as brain and skill drain and to improve quality of life, including by improving accessibility for vulnerable groups, to support local businesses and protect jobs, and to address population ageing; calls also for the development of education, professional training, upskilling, innovative and sustainable entrepreneurship and employment establishments for island inhabitants to be promoted, particularly for women, who face a higher unemployment rate than men in almost all EU islands, and young people;

39. Stresses the need to expand the Council's agreement of 7 December 2021 to update EU rules on rates of VAT for all insular areas in the EU where applicable;

40. Points out that the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the health fault lines in many European islands; stresses, therefore, the importance of developing and improving health infrastructure, access to care and providing support to encourage the establishment of healthcare professionals, particularly in the most remote island territories;

41. Stresses the need to encourage, at the local level, close cooperation, mobility and exchanges of knowledge between education, research and technological innovation institutions, businesses, and individual citizens; calls on the Commission, therefore, to ensure that the inhabitants of European islands, particularly those furthest from mainland Europe, can participate fully and equitably in European mobility programmes such as Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, DiscoverEU and the future Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve (ALMA) programme;

42. Recalls the importance of EU programmes such as the Youth Guarantee; calls on the Member States to quickly implement this programme, in close alignment with EU funds such as the ESF+, to address the situation of young people who are not in employment, education or training, with particular concern for those living in rural areas and regions with natural or demographic constraints in their labour markets, including islands, in order to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, vocational education or training, are able to develop the skills needed for employment opportunities in a wide range of sectors, or are offered a remunerated apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education;

43. Welcomes the efforts to make the Youth Guarantee more inclusive and to avoid any form of discrimination, including of young people living in remote, rural or disadvantaged urban areas or in overseas territories and island regions;

Culture

44. Believes that culture and development of the cultural sector in islands are fundamental; considers that islands' cultural and linguistic identities should be protected and promoted, including in educational settings, as they contribute to their enhancement, and that of the entire EU, on many levels;

45. Calls on the Commission to make 2024 the European Year of Islands;

Agriculture and fisheries

46. Calls on the Commission to assess the need for a regulation laying down specific measures in the area of agriculture for all NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 level islands with a view to achieving food autonomy and increasing the competitiveness of their products, without prejudice to existing instruments such as the programme of options specifically relating to remoteness and insularity (POSEI) and the regulation laying down specific measures for agriculture in favour of the smaller Aegean islands ([10]);

47. Calls for actions aimed at bridging the economic gap between inland areas and coastal regions which very often persists in insular territories;

([10]) Regulation (EU) No 229/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 March 2013 laying down specific measures for agriculture in favour of the smaller Aegean islands (OJ L 78, 20.3.2013, p. 41).

48. Notes that island agricultural and food products are of unique quality due to islands' specific microclimatic and topographic conditions; stresses the need to promote the consumption of agricultural products from island and peripheral regions through the cohesion policy; urges the Commission and the Member States to develop sustainable solutions for transporting agricultural products between most islands and the mainland; is of the view that this will increase competitiveness in particular of smaller islands and empower small farmers;

49. Stresses the need for increased support for the sustainable development of islands, within ecological limits and with due regard for a healthy land and marine environment, for agriculture, forest management and conservation, animal husbandry, aquaculture, sustainable fisheries, local production, and the blue economy, including through European cooperation programmes; considers it necessary to strengthen EU support for the modernisation of agricultural activity in the islands, including through the promotion of precision farming, to help those regions meet the objectives of the European Green Deal;

50. Points out that the development gap endured by island rural areas is further increased by the fact that, most islands not having vibrant cities, they cannot benefit from urban financial spill-over; notes that this leads to decreased competitiveness, especially regarding the capacity of SMEs to explore economies of scale;

51. Stresses the importance of spatial planning focusing on effective and efficient land use;

52. Stresses the importance of reaching people in rural and remote areas and making up-skilling and reskilling opportunities more accessible and designing them for people working in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and other jobs in these regions, and of providing them with green and digital skills and all other necessary skills to better grasp present and future opportunities offered by the green and blue economy, and to enable them to make an important contribution to the preservation of the environment;

53. Highlights the lack of sustainable solutions for transporting agricultural products between most islands and the mainland and for exporting and importing agricultural products from and to islands, and calls on the Commission and the Member States to support innovative projects for greener connections in their development plans for EU islands;

54. Calls on the Member States to utilise all available tools under cohesion policy and to identify and promote opportunities for complementarity and synergies between the various European policies and funds, in order to reinforce food security and the self-sustainability of islands, inter alia through the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources, and make them an integral part of the transition towards sustainable, circular food systems and smart rural areas, thus turning geographical handicaps into opportunities; is of the view that promoting the role of islands in the sustainable food chain through EU policy instruments including cohesion policy could generate additional job opportunities and halt the depopulation trend in island regions;

55. Stresses the need to support remunerative and environmentally friendly short supply chains and the development of a farming sector that prioritises high value-added traditional products, local consumption and green solutions, and contributes to achieving food autonomy;

56. Stresses the need for the further implementation of the Cork II declaration on a better life in rural areas to reflect on the current challenges and opportunities facing Europe's islands; calls for the long-term vision for rural areas to specifically integrate the particularities of outermost regions and Aegean islands; calls for the Commission to promote island policies during regional planning processes to support sustainable agriculture, food production, agro-tourism, the blue economy and connectivity including with funds complementary to those from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), addressing climate change, protecting biodiversity, introducing the circular economy and shifting towards renewable energy; urges it also to assess the real cost of insularity and double insularity of archipelagic regions, taking into account vulnerabilities and assets of the island regions, particularly the outermost regions; believes that the real cost of insularity for the island regions should be taken into account in EU cohesion policy, while at the same time an

impact assessment of EU initiatives and actions on the islands should be carried out and be based on up-to-date and harmonised data; stresses that the Rural Observatory represents a unique opportunity for the production of adequate and up-to-date high-quality data for island territories focused, amongst others, on access to land, establishing the grounds for holistic agricultural and economic development of islands;

57. Believes that live animals should continue to be transported by sea, given the heavy dependence on exports of some islands' farming sectors, mainly the smallest islands, which are unable to ship animal carcasses owing to their small size and resulting lack of infrastructure;

58. Considers it necessary to strengthen EU support for the modernisation of agricultural activity in the islands, including through the promotion of precision farming, to help those regions meet the objectives of the European Green Deal;

59. Points out, however, that since the farm to fork strategy further restricts the use of plant protection products in the Union, it should also take into account the specificities of tropical and subtropical crops in the outermost regions and limit access to Union markets for products that do not meet Union standards;

60. Believes that, with specific regard to the outermost regions, EU cohesion should be pursued through: reinforcing Article 349 TFEU, notably by consolidating the 'EU acquis' applicable in those regions; maintaining and reinforcing the POSEI programme and its budget, notably by transposing it to other sectors beyond agriculture such as fisheries, transport, tourism, etc.; and assuring a differentiated treatment of outermost regions' products in the renegotiation of all economic partnership and free trade agreements and fully protecting sensitive agricultural products such as bananas, tomatoes, sugar and milk in those negotiations;

61. Calls for specific mechanisms to be strengthened within the framework of the CAP through the POSEI programme in order to reduce the dependence of the outermost regions on agricultural and agri-food imports, and to strengthen food security and the capacity of these regions to access their markets, whether they be within their own territory or elsewhere in the Union; to this end, calls for an increase in the POSEI budget from 2027 to meet the growing needs of these remote and island regions and to develop their local production, since they are saddled with significant additional production costs;

62. Calls on the Commission to maintain the long-term co-financing rate for the outermost regions at 85 % for the EAFRD in order to ensure the socio-economic development of these territories and thereby alleviate the problems arising from their remote location;

63. Calls for strict compliance with European environmental and social standards applicable to tropical goods from non-EU countries and for systematic import quotas for tropical products from such countries, based on existing trade flows; considers that specific surveillance and sanction mechanisms should be introduced to check compliance with these conditions; recommends imposing the principle of conformity for imports from non-EU countries, in particular for organic products;

64. Acknowledges that coastal regions and outermost regions are historically dependent on fisheries and should benefit from financial support in order to consolidate the jobs in the fisheries sector and develop new sectors as well as create new jobs, especially in small-scale fisheries; calls on the Member States to put in place targeted policies to protect existing jobs, create diverse new jobs and promote digitalisation; stresses the importance of preventing any kind of discrimination in the labour market and protecting and supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged groups; supports the combined use of the European Structural and Investment Funds to create synergies, while avoiding duplications;

65. Is highly concerned about the physical and mental health of workers in the fishing industry, which is often put at risk not only by the inherent danger of working on the open seas, but also by using vessels that do not meet the current safety regulations, which increases their exposure to work-related accidents, including serious accidents; calls, therefore, on the competent authorities to ensure safe and decent working conditions for all workers in the sector as well as a level

playing field and fair competition among fishing companies globally without lowering European standards; calls on the Member States to provide adequate support for the improvement of fleet safety and working conditions in compliance with environmental sustainability requirements and with a particular focus on small-scale fishing, in particular in island and outermost regions, where the average age of vessels is significantly higher than in industrial fisheries; welcomes the Commission's initiative to seek agreement on the safety of fishing vessels;

Tourism

66. Notes that the tourism sector is the main contributor to the economic growth of island regions in terms of income and employment; calls, therefore, on the Commission to provide specific additional financial support for sustainable tourism in islands, solving the problem of seasonal tourism and supporting innovative pilot projects to promote more ecological and digital solutions in line with European Green Deal objectives and to help islands that are heavily dependent on tourism to diversify their economies; calls on the Commission, furthermore, to establish a European sustainable tourism label to champion the strengths and efforts of islands and the island regions in this area;

67. Stresses the need to strengthen both the integrated territorial development approach towards islands, such as integrated territorial investments and community-led local development, and initiatives such as smart villages and European digital innovation hubs with regard to islands in order to support sustainable agriculture and food production with a special focus on environmentally friendly practices, as well as sustainable agro-tourism; highlights the importance of promoting the smart use of energy and water in order to ensure that islands make the most of their scarce resources;

Access to public services

68. Calls for the development and improvement of islands' transport infrastructure in order to foster sustainable transport, and for support for the modernisation and greening of road, airport and port infrastructure while ensuring a socially just transition; calls, in particular, for support to be provided for environmentally friendly public and private transport;

69. Calls for priority to be given to greater investment into basic infrastructure to improve access of all households to drinking water and sanitary services;

70. Stresses the need to ensure the territorial continuity of all islands through sustainable maritime and air transport, taking strict care to avoid monopoly situations, except in cases of shortage of regular transport services in a situation of free competition, which necessitate resorting to public service agreements; underlines the importance of reducing transport costs for passengers and goods, including by offering reduced fares for residents, and of ensuring the safety and suitability of land bridges and road links;

71. Calls on the Commission to ensure that the 2021-2023 work programme of the Connecting Europe Facility and European cooperation programmes contributes to the territorial accessibility of islands; notes that improving the accessibility of islands and developing sustainable transport links to and between them are crucial to their development and for the provision of essential public services such as education, health and social care; believes that improvements of this nature should not be limited to the mainland or, where applicable, to EU Member States;

72. Stresses, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the importance of improving health infrastructure, reinforcing telemedicine and tele-psychiatry services and upgrading primary healthcare provision and access to medicines on EU islands;

73. Underlines that equal opportunities for all are key, and calls on the Commission and the Member States to make it a priority to close the digital skills gap by ensuring that vulnerable regions, including rural and remote areas and deprived citizens, have access to digital education and training, the minimum required hardware, widespread access to the internet, and digital support and other technological learning tools; underlines that support must be given to these categories to raise the digital skills they need to thrive and to avoid deepening inequalities, ensuring that no one is left behind;

74. Underlines that digitalisation and efficient digital connectivity for islands is an utmost priority, in particular to contribute to overcoming the geographical disadvantages they face and to enhance the provision of digital technologies and infrastructures, education and training services as well as e-health, including telemedicine and tele-psychiatry, and other essential government services for citizens and SMEs that bring positive effects for business strategies and operations;

75. Stresses the importance of maintaining the digital infrastructures that connect EU islands to the rest of the world, namely by earmarking sufficient European funding for the replacement of obsolete submarine cables;

76. Believes that, especially in small islands, it is difficult for SMEs to easily access all the information regarding the promotion of entrepreneurship, skills development and EU-funded opportunities; calls for stronger financial support in this regard as well as the provision of enhanced information sessions, advisory services and tailor-made training;

Migration

77. Notes that some islands are faced with the arrival of large numbers of migrants, who sometimes far outnumber the local population, and that they are not in a position to supply the necessary means of accommodation and assistance;

78. Draws attention to the specific and disproportionate pressure on asylum and reception systems in islands, peripheral islands and outermost regions; calls for the European action plan for islands to recognise the aforementioned asylum and migration reality, which requires coordinated solutions at European level which respect the well-being and dignity of the individual, while addressing the pressure;

Re-assessment of State aid schemes and measures to reduce the development deficit

79. Calls on the Commission to produce an analysis of the volume of State aid granted to undertakings based in EU islands; considers it imperative, despite the efforts made by the EU and the Member States, to determine whether and to what extent undertakings located in island territories have benefited from such measures and to re-assess State aid rules accordingly; underlines, in this connection, the importance of more flexible State aid for air and maritime transport companies in these island territories, given their total dependence on these means of transport;

80. Calls for any future revision of the legislative framework on State aid to be subject to impact assessments based on specific indicators to assess the lagging competitiveness of island region economies, also vis-à-vis the consequences of the 'Fit for 55' package on these territories, and to design a specific degressive scheme for island territories when the extraordinary measures provided for under the State Aid Temporary Framework end after 31 December 2021;

81. Calls for the creation of an 'islands' sub-category, given their distinct characteristics, in connection with the application of the rules on regional State aid for the period 2021-2027, and the abolition of the 'de minimis' ceilings for European islands and outermost regions, above which the Commission's authorisation is required;

82. Stresses the need for a more flexible approach to ensure the more effective deployment of European funding in island territories and outermost regions, without compromising the relevant quality standards and monitoring procedures;

83. Notes that the current de minimis rule restricts competitiveness and raises difficulties in European islands and outermost regions; is of the opinion that the EU's islands should all be exempted from the applicable ceilings of the de minimis rule, so that they are at less of a disadvantage; calls on the Commission, furthermore, to adapt State aides rules to ensure that subsidies to remedy insularity are not considered as State aid but as compensation to put European islands and outermost regions on an equal footing with their continental counterparts;

84. Calls for a reassessment of the distance criterion (150 km) used to classify islands as border regions eligible for financing under cross-border cooperation programmes that come under the cohesion policy's territorial cooperation objective or the European Neighbourhood Policy, taking into account the situation of islands; believes that if some kind of limit has to be established, it would be more appropriate, in the case of island regions, for the cross-border territory condition to be applied at maritime basin level;

A specific EU policy tailored for islands

85. Stresses that the lack of statistical data on islands is hindering the development of targeted policies; calls on the Commission to set up a European Institute for Disadvantaged Territories, related to Article 174 TFEU, to collect reliable and aggregated statistical data, including gender-disaggregated data, that is regularly updated using harmonised criteria at all administrative levels; calls on the Commission to improve the collection of statistical data on European islands and to introduce territorial proofing in impact assessments of its proposals, with the aim of developing targeted policies and assessing how proposed legislation would affect citizens and businesses based in the different regions;

86. Points out that the islands are not all currently covered by EU legislation on territorial classification; calls on the Commission to start a discussions on this, with a view to including islands in the common classification of territorial units for statistics and to consider setting up a programme similar to the European urban initiative to support partnerships between European islands in order to establish innovative approaches to island-specific problems and to share best practices and implement solutions that are beneficial for citizens and businesses;

87. Calls on the Commission to take note of the studies already produced by European islands concerning the challenges and additional costs associated with insularity, and to establish interdisciplinary analyses covering the demographic, geographical, economic, social and environmental characteristics of island territories so as to ensure that these regions do not suffer from any competitive disadvantage linked to their geographical condition;

88. Calls for an additional budget allocation, geared towards helping European islands to overcome the challenges and disparities they face and covering the extra costs connected with European islands under the future cohesion policy; suggests expanding the island contact point by setting up an island task force within the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy of the Commission;

89. Calls on the Commission to take into consideration the allocation of the budget based on GDP per capita in order to cover all the disparities between islands;

An Islands Pact and a European action plan for islands

90. Calls on the Commission to undertake a dynamic assessment of Article 174 TFEU and to build on that article with a genuine European island agenda and to create a European strategy for islands based on this report, that is in line with local needs and realities on the ground and takes into account the specific features of each of the EU's sea basins; calls on the Commission to carry out a study on the diverse situations of island territories and to consider a strategy for islands with tangible proposals;

91. Calls for an Islands Pact to be drawn up as soon as possible and implemented, with the participation of the principal stakeholders, namely national, regional and local authorities, economic and social operators, civil society, academia and non-governmental organisations, along the lines of the Urban Pact and the future Rural Pact;

92. Emphasises that dialogue with and between island communities is essential for fostering proximity to the European project, building bridges between cultures, stimulating interest in decision-making processes and promoting the construction of the European Union itself;

o

o o

93. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the national and regional parliaments of the Member States.