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The European Union and its islands as they face today's challenges

The European Union has several thousand islands, 2,400 of which are inhabited. Island status affects 20.5 million Europeans living in the Baltic Sea, the North Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, as well as in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans in the case of overseas territories. This does not include island Member States such as Ireland, Malta and Cyprus, or countries with hundreds of islands such as Croatia, Denmark, Greece and Sweden.

Despite a wide variety of ecological, economic and institutional contexts^[1], islands all share the consequences of geographical discontinuity. These unique territories are inherently subject to structural constraints recognised by the articles [174](#) and [349](#) of the TFEU, First and foremost among these are the additional transport costs and lack of accessibility that hinder the free movement of people and goods. In island economies, monopolies and oligopolies in the transport and distribution of goods and services increase production costs and the cost of living, hampering development and competitiveness. The islands^[2] also suffer, all too often, from the exodus of their human capital, an ageing population and, at the same time, pressure on land and property caused by the massive seasonal influx of tourists. Furthermore, economic specialisation – a key feature of island production systems – and heavy external dependence make these small economies vulnerable to all kinds of hazards. Added to this are the threats of flooding, storms and other effects of global warming on land and at sea.

Territorial discontinuity, insufficient connectivity, economic vulnerability, climate disruption: the accumulation of constraints is easy to quantify and has already been widely debated in specialist literature^[3].

Just as many European tourists are getting ready to head to one of these island destinations for their summer holidays, it is important to look beyond the idyllic image that European culture has created for these places and remember that there is also an economic and geopolitical reality that EU leaders need to bear in mind in these uncertain times.

ISLANDS AND THE CHALLENGE OF ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

Whether located in the north, such as Gotland, in the south, such as many Mediterranean islands, in the west, such as the Azores, or far away, such as Réunion or Mayotte, European islands continue to face new challenges in addition to the existing '*structural handicaps*' mentioned in the treaties, but they also have exceptional opportunities at their fingertips.

It should therefore be recognized that, having been spared the harmful environmental effects of industrial capitalism, their marine and terrestrial ecosystems have been preserved and are therefore remarkable for their biodiversity. The new wealth of the islands lies in the natural resources of the blue and green economies. No Member State would consider giving up these 'confetti' pieces of the Union, some of which are

^[1] Taglioni F. « [Les petits Etats insulaires face à la variabilité de leur insularité et de leur statut politique](#) », *Annales de géographie*, 2006.

^[2] [The Development of the Islands – European Islands and Cohesion Policy \(EUROISLANDS\)](#), 2013 [ESPON Programme](#)

^[3] Baldacchino G., [A World of Islands : an Island Studies Reader](#), Charlottetown Canada, Luga Malta, Institute of Islands Studies and Agenda Academic, 2007. et Briguglio L. « [Small Islands Developing States and their Economic Vulnerabilities](#) », *World Development*, 1995

located thousands of kilometres from their parent state, such as Clipperton, a French atoll in the North-East Pacific. Their exclusive economic zones (EEZs) have always provided European states with fishing resources, exceptional seabeds and now, deposits of various minerals in the form of polymetallic nodules.

But this ecological wealth is vulnerable to global warming and attempts at economic exploitation. Scientific research is closely monitoring these island ecosystems, enabling us to explore not only the uniqueness of island biodiversity and the drivers behind its evolution and resilience, but also the full potential of islands for renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, tidal and geothermal power. Sustainable water and waste management is also the subject of significant academic research in areas that are often subject to excessive tourism.

The third [UN Conference on the Ocean](#) (UNOC 3), held in Nice from 9 to 13 June, highlighted the threats but also the opportunities associated with the exploration of the seabed and, in doing so, of island territories.

Explorers and scientists since Darwin have been right: islands and their surrounding waters are veritable open-air laboratories, and European research would be wrong to ignore them, especially since the climate is now changing.

Consider, for example, an island initiative that perfectly illustrates their innovative nature: the government of the Canary Islands has established the [IRLab](#), a think-tank and action group based in the archipelago that is committed to addressing social, environmental and economic issues by developing concrete, localised approaches. This is based on five areas of intervention: the territorial implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the environmental responsibility of islands, innovative management of migration flows, social innovation and support for rural development. Through these levers, IRLab aims to transpose the major objectives of sustainable development into an island perspective. Its team also closely monitors European policy developments to establish links between the realities experienced on islands and

the EU's future directions. The laboratory relies on a three-pronged approach of '*reflection, participation and experimentation*' to promote territorial resilience.

In line with this approach, Corsica is committed to anticipating global change with [Corsica Pruspettiva](#) (CP50), launched on 27 October 2022 by the Corsican Assembly, this project seeks to better understand how major contemporary upheavals (climate change, technological advances, geopolitical restructuring) will influence the island's future by 2050. Far from being a normative plan, CP50 is a collective decision-making tool that includes elected officials, experts and citizens to address the challenges and opportunities ahead. Led by a forward-looking laboratory of the Corsican Assembly, the initiative draws on scientific expertise as well as public debate and international partnerships, notably with the OECD. Like the Canary Islands, Corsica is positioning itself as a genuine space for democratic and territorial innovation to prepare for the future, particularly in the Mediterranean.

ISLANDS AND GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES...

Because insularity is also a front line. First and foremost, it is a migratory front line, as witness on the Greek and Italian islands, but also for the Canary Islands, which require increased support from the European Union[4]. It is also a geopolitical front line, which no one doubts at a time when the President of the United States is considering annexing [Greenland](#), an autonomous Danish island rich in rare earth elements that are being released by melting ice and, above all, having acquired a prime geostrategic position.

In this respect, the seminar organised in Bastia on 6th and 7th[5] March last on the theme of maritime borders, supported by the Assembly of Corsica, with the participation of the [Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière](#) (MOT), the French and Italian ambassadors responsible for cross-border cooperation, along with the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Younous Omarjee, perfectly illustrated the importance of recognising maritime borders in defining sovereignty, sustainable resource

[4] Redon M., "Les îles, points névralgiques des flux migratoires", in *Géopolitique des îles, Des îles rêvées aux îles mondialisées*. Le Cavalier Bleu, 2e édition, 2024

[5] Seminar "Traité du Quirinal et frontières maritimes", organised by the Corsican Assembly, Bastia, 6-7 March 2025

management, and the geopolitical challenges facing island regions. This meeting brought together experts, institutional representatives, local and European players to discuss the issues raised by the [Quirinal Treaty](#) and the dynamics of cross-border cooperation in the Mediterranean, underlining the need for an integrated European approach in this area, taking account of the specific island characteristics.

This initiative bears witness to the ambition of island territories to establish themselves as full participants in European and international strategic discussions concerning their respective maritime waters, thereby strengthening their role as coastal frontlines at the heart of security, economic and environmental challenges.

The European Union, which is facing, on the one hand, a trade war that is unprecedented since its inception and, on the other, security threats resulting from the war in Ukraine and the Middle East, would be well advised to focus on its island territories in the far north, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Pacific. These fragments of land surrounded by water have played and could once again play a significant role in terms of trade (think of the island trading posts of the major European shipping companies over the centuries!), migration and geopolitics. Their location is very often a valuable geostrategic asset in the event of conflict. The US military leadership is well aware of this.

The European Committee of the Regions[6][7], the European Economic and Social Council[8], the network of European chambers of commerce [INSULEUR](#), the [Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions](#)[9] have been calling for nearly three decades for differentiated treatment for European islands on the part of European institutions. In June 2022, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on islands and cohesion policy.

This political momentum, while welcome, must be complemented by the effective implementation of the rules[10]. European legislation has long recognised the specific constraints of its island territories, whether

in [Article 154 of the Maastricht Treaty](#) or articles [158](#) and [299](#) of the Treaty of Amsterdam (the Corsican MEP at the time contributed to this acknowledgement) explicitly recognise the structural handicaps of the island communities.

However, this recognition remains largely theoretical, with no operational measures commensurate with the challenges at stake. It is high time that the European Union transformed these principles into effective public policies and, as part of a future revision of the Treaties, committed to the full integration of all European islands as an essential part of its action. This requires opening up a genuine legislative process, with a cross-cutting, enforceable insularity clause that is integrated into the instruments of cohesion, transport, competition, research and competitiveness policy. In short, into all of the Union's territorial policies.

As of 2001, the [White Paper on European governance](#)[11] set out clear principles: openness, accountability, efficiency and consistency. These principles, as highlighted by Elina Devoue in her work on island governance[12], 'apply at all levels – European, national, regional and local – and aim to ensure more democratic and responsive governance.' Their implementation should therefore strengthen the mechanisms of proportionality and subsidiarity, so that the levels of action chosen and the instruments mobilised truly meet the needs of the territories concerned. However, in reality, island territories, which are often less developed, struggle to access European funding and mechanisms. This is a worrying paradox: islands are both the most exposed to contemporary challenges and the least equipped to respond to them.

THE CHALLENGES OF A FUTURE EUROPEAN ISLAND STRATEGY

In 2024, this widely held view was confirmed once again in the [ninth report](#) of the European Commission on economic, social and territorial cohesion. It highlights that islands, along with rural, mountainous and sparsely populated areas, face

[6] European Committee of the Regions, Opinion on "Entrepreneurship on islands: contributing to territorial cohesion", rapporteure : Marie-Antoinette Maupertuis, 12 May 2017

[7] Opinion "Strengthening the support provided by cohesion policy to regions suffering from geographical and demographic handicaps (article 174 of TFEU)", rapporteure : Marie-Antoinette Maupertuis, December 2022.

[8] Opinion, [Main challenges faced by EU islands, and mountainous and sparsely populated areas](#), rapporteur : Ioannis Vardakastanis, 14 December 2023

[9] [Final Declaration of La Palma](#), 23–24 April 2025

[10] Spilanis, I., Kizos, T., Kavroudakis, D., et al., [Improving the quality of multi-level governance and strengthening the resilience of island economies of Croatia, Greece, and Sweden – Policy Report on factors affecting growth and productivity of island economies in Greece](#), 2024

[11] Communication by the Commission, 25th July 2001, « [European Governance – A White Paper](#) »

[12] Devoue E., « [Good Governance and Insularity](#) », *Études caribéennes*, 2014

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persistent structural challenges that hinder their growth and development.

An entire section of the report is devoted to regions with specific geographical features, including island regions and outermost regions, all of which are islands except for French Guiana. The [report](#) emphasises the geographical features that have a considerable impact on the economic dynamics of these regions and require a differentiated approach to cohesion policy, even at comparable levels of development. *'Islands, for example, may have higher transport costs, which affect the competitiveness of their industries (...) The outermost regions, geographically distant from the European continent, face problems of isolation and reduced access to markets.'*

The comparative analysis carried out by the Commission thus provides a better understanding of the structural factors of regional underdevelopment, but also of their concrete consequences: emigration of young workers, widening social inequalities and growing political tensions in the territories concerned.

The combination of these vulnerabilities alone justifies a differentiated and ambitious response. The report concludes: *"Further reflection is needed on how best to tailor policy more closely to the different economic profiles and geographical features of the regions in order to target investments strategically. There is a growing need to better identify the multiple development challenges, reform needs and differences in social and employment situations so as to facilitate more effective programming of EU funds in the outermost regions, sparsely populated regions, islands, etc."*

It was therefore with relief and hope that informed observers of the island cause welcomed the prospect opened up on 1st April by the Executive Vice-President of the European Commission for Cohesion and Reforms, Italy's Raffaele Fitto, in a [communication](#) by the Commission proposing the establishment of a strategy for Europe's islands. This declaration must now be translated into action. While the islands deserve greater attention than they currently receive from Member States, their unique situation calls for a

new approach by the European Commission in its post-2027 policy planning.

This approach will need to be included in the upcoming schedule of the [multiannual financial framework 2028-2034](#) and, in particular, the next cohesion policy. Once the constraints, challenges and opportunities that islands present in the [Pact of Islands](#), in the same way that there is a [Rural Pact](#) and an [Urban Agenda](#), could benefit from specific European policy measures based on the principle of subsidiarity, a place-based approach and an *ex ante* assessment of the impact of cohesion policy on the island in question.

If such an approach were adopted, issues such as cohesion and connectivity, state aid, biodiversity protection and enhancement, and access to essential public services might become much less problematic for our island citizens.

After all, doesn't every islander, just like every European, aspire to the right to be able to come and go easily, but also, and above all, to the right to be able to continue living on their island?[13]

ISLANDS ARE NOT PERIPHERAL, THEY ARE CENTRAL TO THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

The [island territories](#) are 'small worlds' that concentrate all the major contemporary transitions in a limited space and time. Taking the pulse of the islands means understanding, on a scale that is understandable to all, the systemic interactions between climate change, demographic change, energy transition and geopolitical transformation. And addressing the structural problems of island economies and ecosystems through appropriate measures, such as the introduction of an insularity clause in cohesion policy or transport policy, would already be a first step towards meeting the major challenges facing the European Union today.

Let us make no mistake: Europe's power tomorrow will also be played out at sea, on the cliffs of Ireland and in the coves of Malta, Corsica, Sardinia, Crete, Cyprus, the Canary, the Azores and the Balearic

[13] Enrico Letta, report
[Much more than a market](#)
18 April 2024

Islands, Mayotte, Réunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and as far as the cold shores of Gotland.

Wherever the European Union has islands, its future is at stake. The major powers have understood what the European Union has not yet dared to acknowledge: islands are strategic beacons in an uncertain world.

We are calling for a shift in paradigm: a Union that fully embraces its geography and its island territories, making its islands drivers of transition, bastions of resilience, and platforms for innovation, solidarity and peace.

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