

Strengthening Cohesion and Connectivity: Policy Solutions for EU Islands

Public hearing under the auspices of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU

A high-level public hearing on ‘Strengthening Cohesion and Connectivity: Policy Solutions for EU Islands’ was held on Friday 16 January **under the auspices of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union**, bringing together representatives of EU institutions and national and regional authorities, experts and island stakeholders from across Europe.

Opening the hearing, **Manthos Mavrommatis** underlined that the initiative forms part of an exploratory opinion requested by the Cyprus Presidency, focusing on cohesion, competitiveness and sustainable development for islands. He stressed the importance of inclusive dialogue and noted that the hearing’s outcomes are intended to feed directly into concrete, policy-oriented conclusions at EU level on the island dimension.

Elena Calistru, president of the ECO section, stressed that a dedicated EU Island Strategy, often referred to as an ‘Islands Pact’, supported by a legislative framework, is needed to integrate island-specific realities into cohesion, transport, energy and State aid policies. **Eleni Marianou, cohesion attaché in the Cyprus Permanent Representation to the EU**, highlighted the Cyprus Presidency’s efforts to maintain momentum on island policies and concluded that collaboration with the EESC, Parliament and other stakeholders should produce concrete proposals for legislation and funding, ensuring island communities’ voices are heard.

Participants highlighted that EU islands are not marginal areas but real societies facing persistent structural disadvantages, including geographic isolation, high transport and energy costs, limited connectivity, demographic decline, labour shortages, housing pressure, climate vulnerability and exposure to external shocks. At the same time, speakers emphasised that islands are places of opportunity and strategic value, acting as laboratories for renewable energy, climate adaptation, biodiversity protection, sustainable tourism and the blue economy.

Several participants reiterated the call for a dedicated EU Island Strategy, or ‘Islands Pact’, supported by a robust legislative framework. Speakers argued that island-specific realities must be systematically integrated into EU cohesion, transport, energy, State-aid and internal-market policies. The need for continuity beyond political cycles, better coordination across EU policies and binding operational mechanisms to close connectivity gaps was repeatedly stressed.

Members of the European Parliament (**Vangelis Meimarakis, Tonino Picula and Fredi Beleris**) and regional representatives (**Marie-Antoinette Maupertuis**) highlighted that islands are communities where people live rather than just seasonal destinations, and that improving quality of life for residents is essential for social cohesion, economic resilience and sustainability. Particular attention was paid to challenges related to access to healthcare, education, water, affordable energy, transport and public services, as well as to the impacts of over-tourism and climate change.

The hearing also underscored the strategic importance of islands for the European Union, including their role in maritime security, migration management, biodiversity protection, energy transition and the extension of the EU’s exclusive economic zones. Speakers stressed that investing in islands boosts Europe’s resilience, competitiveness and strategic autonomy.

Representatives of the European Commission pointed out that islands are explicitly recognised under Article 174 TFEU and confirmed that work was ongoing on a dedicated EU Island Strategy, based on analytical evidence and broad stakeholder consultation, in order to provide a coherent framework for funding and policy coordination beyond 2028. They clarified that the outermost regions, given their specific Treaty status and extreme remoteness, will be addressed through a separate strategy.

Concluding the hearing, **Ioannis Vardakastanis, rapporteur for the EESC opinion** on the island dimension, agreed that generic, continent-focused policies are insufficient to address island realities. There is a strong consensus on the need for tailored, place-based solutions, improved data and measurement tools, stronger multilevel governance and meaningful involvement of local communities and SMEs.