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**Commissioner Crețu urged to recognise unique challenges of EU islands**

**EESC calls for more investment and policy flexibility**

**Europe's islands are home to over 21 million people, accounting for around 4% of the EU-28's population. Due to their characteristic of insularity and their detachment from the mainland, these territories frequently face serious structural handicaps. In a plenary debate with *Corina Crețu*, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, the EESC called for the adoption of an integrated policy framework to address the social, economic and environmental challenges of EU islands.**

*"There is no doubt that EU islands and island Member States face very particular circumstances and the European Union must recognise this. This is not only about money but also about policy flexibility. A one-size-fits-all approach is clearly not delivering the right results”*, stated **Stefano Mallia**, EESC rapporteur on Inclusive Islands. "*We call on the Commission to consider the condition of insularity when designing new policies and ensure a greater degree of flexibility when it comes to these economies. We also believe that the current definition of an Island Region needs to be revisited and new criteria should be set to allow for higher levels of state aid".*

**Commissioner Crețu** discussed the future of cohesion policy after 2020 and stressed her continued commitment for it to *"remain the main investment force of the EU in all regions, without exception*. *Islands indeed face substantial handicaps, just like all regions with specific geographic features"*, she said. *"But islands have the potential in energy generation, as a testing ground for modern technologies in renewable energy, in development of drugs from local plants, aqua farming, sea technology, etc.* *Our duty is to support them in this endeavour, and that's why our provisions include a great deal of flexibility for islands, whether on thematic concentration of EU funding, or the share of EU support in each project."*

In its opinion on [***Islands in the EU: from structural handicap to inclusive territory***](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.eco-opinions.40453), the EESC emphasises the need for a greater effort by the EU to recognise the uniqueness of the **social, economic and environmental challenges** facing islands, and calls on the EU to define a integrated legislative framework to overcome them.

***"Monoculture economies"***

Islands have an average GDP per capita lower than the EU28 median, with low-competitive economies frequently sustained by tourism and a large public sector. In addition, the high cost of transport and the lack of connections with the mainland complicate the accessibility of goods, services and people.

For this reason, the EESC believes that key policy areas such as the Single Market, Competition Policy, Transport, Rural Development and Fisheries must **include insularity clauses that allow for a greater degree of flexibility** in their application to islands, so as to better address the economic needs of these territories. The Committee also supports the call to launch an in-depth study on the extra costs incurred by European islands.

***Inclusive islands***

The limited economic activity on some EU islands has consistently led to high levels of unemployment resulting in demographic decline and an ageing population. The EESC believes it is essential to promote re-skilling and lifelong learning, as well as to encourage youth involvement in EU programmes aimed at promoting mobility for training and qualification, such as the "Erasmus+ programme".

The opinion also pays special attention to people with disabilities, who suffer the effects of these challenges in a more acute manner. Following the example of Cohesion Policy, which requires that project finance be accessible to people with disadvantages, all EU policies should take disabled people into account.

***Forerunners in clean energy***

Often unique for their biodiversity, most European islands have highly fragile habitats which are vulnerable to human pressure. All islands face more or less serious problems concerning sea pollution, desertification, water scarcity, fossil fuel dependency and lack of waste management facilities. For this reason, the EESC believes that islands should be a priority in the EU's clean energy agenda, and calls upon the Commission to cooperate with Member States and island authorities towards this end.

The EESC's exploratory opinion was drafted upon a request of the Maltese EU Presidency, which has placed islands as one of the priorities of their six-month mandate.

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