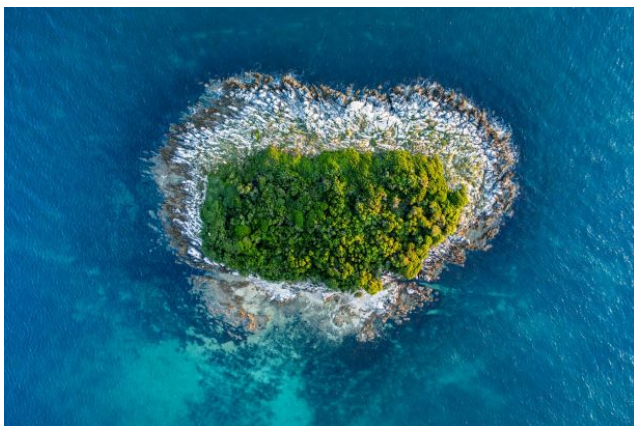


Islands of the European Union: State of play and future challenges

Islands and island regions



There is no available systematic or harmonised list of European Union (EU) islands (including the smaller ones). However, some [recent sources](#) estimate that there were about 2400 inhabited islands in the EU-28. Islands belong to 13 Member States: Poland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Estonia, Finland, Netherlands, Italy, France, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Croatia. (Ireland, Malta and Cyprus are insular Member States.) After the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU, the insular territories belonging to the UK are no longer

part of the European Union islands. It is important to mention that there is a distinct category among islands that are Outermost Regions (ORs). These belong to France, Spain and Portugal, but are located in parts of the globe that are remote from Europe, such as the Atlantic or the Indian Ocean.

In Eurostat typology islands are classified as NUTS 3 level¹ island regions, which can be composed of several islands, not just one insular territory. However, some islands belong to NUTS 3 regions

The present document is the executive summary of the study on Islands of the EU. The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3l4iAX0>

¹ European Union's Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) based on [Regulation \(EC\) No 1059/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 May 2003 on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics \(NUTS\)](#) For most recent information at the time of writing, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/background>

that also cover continental territory, therefore they are not recognized as island regions but as island units. Based on this type of regional grouping, on Eurostat, it is possible to consult data regarding islands (e.g. population, GDP, etc.), but only for islands that are part of island regions, and only for 11 Member States, as in Poland, Germany and Estonia, all islands are part of coastal NUTS 3 regions.

Based on Eurostat data, in 2020, the European NUTS 3 island regions (thus excluding islands that are part of continental Europe NUTS 3 regions) were home to a total population of over 20.5 million inhabitants, which is 2% more than the same NUTS 3 regions had in 2016. Island inhabitants in those NUTS 3 island regions represent 4.6% of the EU's population. Other than this, there is a shortage of statistical data on the exact population of the islands in the European Union. In-depth understanding of the situation of islands would require data collected at a more granular geographical level. However, the limitations of available quantitative evidence might not be overcome quickly and easily.

Policy background

Islands are recognised as distinct territories in EU legislation, as their insularity and remoteness pose specific development challenges. Articles 174 and 349 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) establish islands to be territories with certain geographical specificities, and create a clear legal basis for special measures for ORs.

In Cohesion Policy provisions, islands are usually grouped together with mountain regions and sparsely populated areas, rather than have tailor-made provisions. Most often, they belong to the “less developed” regions category. Outermost Regions, on the other hand, are better defined as a category and therefore have a more special approach under the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF/ESI Funds), as well as specific provisions in several EU policy areas. In the 2014-2020 programming period, islands benefited mainly from special rules on thematic concentration and modulation of co-financing rates, and sometimes additional allocations in order to achieve policy objectives. Based on the compromise texts available at the time of writing, in the 2021-2027 programming period the approach seems to be consistent with previous periods; a novelty being the introduction of specific provisions for ORs for their territorial cooperation activities.

Due to the diversity of islands, there is no common European strategy for all of them, but there are several macro-regional strategies addressing islands together with coastal territories in specific sea basins, and there is also a European Strategy for Outermost Regions. At EU level, the interests of islands are represented by several organizations, which are also a base for cooperation in projects and other initiatives.

Current challenges and recommendations

As islands are primarily characterized by a physical ‘disconnection’ from the mainland, there is a common understanding that many of the challenges faced by these territories are due to permanent conditionalities, such as the dependence on maritime and air transport.

Due to scarcity of land resources, it is common that insular economies depend on a limited number of sectors (which can sometimes have a seasonal character), and there is a constant dilemma between conservation and using land for development (such as economic activities, infrastructure, housing, etc.). Most insular territories still need to invest in basic infrastructure - such as roads, water supply and waste management facilities. Therefore, Services of General Interest (SGIs) are not fully developed on all islands, which leads to a certain migration trend, where people leave in search for

a better quality of life. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on island communities in terms of health crisis, job losses, food security, movement and travel, and remittances, inter alia. It is yet to be determined to what extent the pandemic has impacted island life, and whether the new European instruments such as the [Just Transition Fund](#) and the [REACT-EU](#) will be instrumental and sufficient for their recovery.

For EU islands, the dilemma between economic development and sustainability has been a constant in the past 10 years. Moreover, most islands rely on water and energy imports, fossil-fuels and unsustainable transport means, even for basic activities. With the EU Green Deal being one of the main pillars for the future of the European Union, and with the already-existing [communication on the Blue Economy](#), islands are facing a double race: towards recovery and towards sustainability, with less resources than mainland regions. Therein, their situation requires a particular coordination of efforts and resources for a successful recovery from the pandemic and a proper transition towards a green, digital and resilient future.

The recommendations included in this study come from various strategic documents, studies, reports, policy papers et al. as well as from stakeholder discussions and they tend to focus on: smart and resilient islands, energetic sustainability, better connectivity with the mainlands/continents, increased quality of life and opportunities for inhabitants and striving towards tailor-made/dedicated European policies. Overall, in the future, islands have to be more resilient, and they should have sufficient resources to better cope with situations such as natural disasters and health crisis. Inter alia, islands should develop sustainable economies that are less seasonal and more diversified.

Although a certain attention to islands is given at European level, the core of future intervention lies within the competence of Member States and in their national and regional policy papers, strategic documents, programmes and projects. Nevertheless, when it comes to representation of their interests in policy making, sharing of experience and receiving additional technical support, there is scope for improvement, maybe through common actions with other areas mentioned in Article 174 TFEU and through better coordinated exchanges of experience and expertise.

For European Union's islands, tailor-made opportunities, solutions and policy measures are not a matter of privilege, but a mean of ensuring their survival as unique landscapes, preserving their heritage as well as the communities that have inhabited them for centuries. A considerable coordination effort, from European level to macro-regional, national and regional levels will be required to make the most out of the proposed recommendations and the available policy instruments, in order to boost island life.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3l4iAX0>

More information on Policy Department research for REGI: <https://research4committees.blog/regi/>



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Research administrator: Diána HAASE, Andreea MAIER (trainee) Editorial assistant: Jeanette BELL
Contact: Poldep-cohesion@ep.europa.eu

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