



European Committee
of the Regions

SPEECH BY 1ST VICE PRESIDENT TZITZIKOSTAS

CPMR - ISLANDS COMMISSION

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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**POLITICAL SESSION: A PACT FOR EU ISLANDS: TOWARDS THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ISLANDS AGENDA (INCLUDING FOCUS ON SPAIN)**

Dear President Armengol i Socias

Dear Colleagues,

It is a pleasure for me to join your debate today.

For all of us is clear that insularity means
to tackle a **territorial handicap**,
and restore by means of regulatory or financial tools
the unbalance suffered by islanders
when competing with the mainland.

But the evidence of the added cost of insularity
is not yet understood by many actors
both in Brussels and in some capitals.

Somewhere the **added cost of insularity**

is counter-balanced with ad hoc internal repartition of funds. If this is welcome, it is not a reliable and sustainable answer. For us, "**Territorial cohesion**", as enshrined in the Treaty, is the answer to be used, as it is already the case for the outermost regions.

The European Committee of the Regions therefore strongly supports the European Parliament's proposal call for the European Commission to draw up an "**EU Strategy for Islands.**"

I come from Greece, and I understand very well the need to put forward an agenda to alleviate the cost of insularity, thus allowing islanders and local business to **fairly compete** within the EU's single market, thus overcoming the inability to achieve economies of scale due to the small size of their own regional market.

We talk about securing a **level playing field** for more than 17.7 million people, a population which is bigger than many EU member states.

For this reason, we look forward to the creation of an "**Islands Pact**" which shall involve all actors via a multilevel

and cross-sectoral approach.

In this process, it is essential to duly take into account several European policies, as insularity affect all of them.

I think to start, the **green transition**, which can unwillingly penalise island citizens as they have less flexibility when it comes to adapting rapidly to the ambitious EU move towards climate neutrality.

We therefore need to think out of the box, and act with tailored tools: one instrument could be for instance joint public procurement for local authorities wishing to join forces in a given area and sector, such as the **procurement of clean buses**.

Concerning **energy transition**, where islands can become models in the light of their abundance of renewable energy sources, renewable penetration remains small compared to the mainland as many islands have weak energy networks, which forces them to rely on the use of fossil fuel imports. This makes the **decarbonisation** significantly more difficult, and ad hoc measures are needed.

Islands are also the firsts to feel what **climate change** means in practice. Rising sea levels threatening critical infrastructure, extreme weather events test islands' territorial resilience.

In this context, **civil protection** preparedness, due to distance from the mainland and accessibility, faces additional constraints and it requires specific infrastructure and financial support to protect local populations. For these reasons, it would be illogical not to tackle the problem with a dedicated approach and dedicated funds.

Moreover, most of our islands, are destinations attracting a significant number of visitors every year, including retired people with their specific needs. Yet islands are particularly vulnerable in terms of **accessibility**, dependence on commercial sea and air carriers and seasonality. Specific exemptions, I think in particular **state aid rules** concerning airport and airline support, should be intensified to preserve tourism appeal, and keep them accessible all year round. But let's also talk about the potentialities:

islands are **living laboratory**

where the margins between the Green Deal and **Blue Economy** blend in, and synergies occur.

The blue economy's potential for creative growth needs to be better taken into account in the review of the national recovery plans financed by NextGenerationEU.

The Blue economy will thrive if people are offered the opportunity to get skilled and dare a career connected to our seas and oceans.

In this context, I suggest you make full use of the current **European Year of Skills** and of the initiative by Commissioner Suica "**Talent Booster Mechanism**"

aiming at delivering our commitment of **leaving nobody and no place behind**.

Similarly, digital cohesion is vital to tackle the **demographic challenge**, and its potential needs to be further financed.

The **European Year of Islands 2024**

will be a great opportunity.

We would be interested in actively participating in the **Islands Pact**

with a view to creating a solid political network aimed at

demonstrate the cost of insularity,
and propose solutions to overcome.
We also believe that setting up an
"Island Desk" within European Commission,
would be a useful step forward.

Dear colleagues,
much of the debate about islands
revolve around the concept
of "**going beyond the GDP**" when allocating EU funds,
as the support to island regions
cannot be granted only by measuring their own GDPs.

This requires a shift of the mindset in Brussels.

But also help from a number of Member States,
and I think in particular **Sweden and Spain**
which hold the presidency of the Council in 2023
and both have islands.

The **Committee of the Regions** along with the CPMR
and your commission in particular
can help making your voice heard
at all levels of governance in Europe:
it is particularly important to act now,
as we will start this year the reflection
on the future of Cohesion policy,
also in view of the debate over the future EU Budget.

Our **Cohesion Alliance** will echo your specific needs:
you can count on us.

There we will highlight how the handicap of insularity
affects the wealthiest of the regional islands too,

as a number of **unpredictable events**

– I think of terrorist threats, or sanitarian crises –
can disrupt services overnight,
and seriously damage incomes, and jeopardise jobs
in island regions which often rely massively on,
sometimes exclusively,
on a fragile single revenue of income: tourism.

Fragility is indeed

the key word to describe the specificity of all regional islands.

In other words, we need

a structured European action based on **solidarity**

to fight the fragility that all islands suffer,

thus allowing local businesses to fairly compete

without extra burdens,

and islanders to **freely choose** to live

in their home regions if they wish,

and not leave them.

I thank you for your attention.