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Elena Rapa

Islands in the European Union

Mario Borg

Abstract:

This paper discusses European islands' distinctive traits and difficulties, and how they were captured over the years the European Union legislative framework. The paper begins with definitional and classification challenges, noting the lack of a harmonised framework due to island size, population, and government variety. It uses Eurostat typologies to describe the size and distribution of EU islands, which number over 2,200 inhabited areas with over 20 million persons. The paper then examines how insularity and smallness shape island economies and explores how such structural constraints can potential cause market inefficiencies and vulnerability to external shocks. Against this background, the paper examines the evolution of island recognition in EU treaties and policy frameworks and makes an argument for more explicit acknowledgement of islands' reality in the European Union policies and strategies.

Keywords:

Gozo, Islands, Regional, Insularity.

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**Note: The opinions conveyed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official stance of the Ministry for Gozo and Planning.*

Islands in the European Union

In March 2026, the European Commission launched a four-week public call for evidence to help design a comprehensive new strategy for Islands in the European Union (EU). This strategy aims to strengthen resilience, boost competitiveness and address the specific socio-economic challenges faced by islands within the EU.

This initiative reflects increasing interest in Islands. Indeed, interest in the study of islands has increased over the years, reflecting the increase in politically independent small island states (Baldacchino, 1993). Across the globe, around one out of four independent states have a resident population of less than one million, while around 50 other islands have some form of self-government or autonomy (Baldacchino, 1993). Besides this, the European Union's interest in islands is long-standing, reflecting both the sheer number of islands within its territories and the economic and geopolitical opportunities that islands present (Eurisles, 2002) plus the fact that Cyprus and Malta are island member states, which elevated the challenges faced by these territories to another level (Deidda, 2016).

In contrast to other geographic topography such as mountains, islands have a clear delineation, and this made them easier as a subject of interest both for research as well as policy measures

(Kerr, 2005). Despite this clear delineation of islands and the interest around them, there is no harmonised list (Haase and Maier, 2021), partly reflecting the wide diversity of islands in terms of size and perhaps more importantly in terms of governance and administrative set-up (Baldacchino, 1993). This absence of a harmonised list also reflects the difficulties in the collection of statistical data, especially for very small islands, and the lack of clear delineation between islands as geographical units and islands as regional/administrative territorial units (Haase and Maier, 2021).

This paper will attempt to provide some context to the questions regarding definitions and classifications of islands. The paper will first present some statistics on EU islands and the parameters that define them. This will be followed by an analysis of the islands' characteristics, focusing on their small size and insularity. Such characteristics are key to understanding the challenges faced by islands, including loss of competitiveness, diseconomies of scale, higher transport costs, and the absence of certain services due to market failure, and how these relate to state aid rules and regulations. The last part of this paper presents an analysis of how and to what extent islands' features have been addressed in various EU treaties and official policies over the years.

Definitions and Classification of Islands in the EU

Traditionally, researchers tended to adopt thresholds based on area and population when studying islands. Article 121, Part VIII, of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines an island as "a naturally formed area of land surrounded by water that is above water at high tide." In

Colombia v. Nicaragua ruling, the Court thoroughly discussed the determination of low-tide elevations versus islands and took into consideration several factors, including the geological composition and size. However, recently, there is now a growing trend towards the application of other metrics based on socio-economic and political parameters (Murphy, 2017; Baldacchino, 1993). Nonetheless, the overwhelming criteria still centres around the physical aspect. What is less clear are the thresholds of population and area over which an island territory can be considered as such for the purpose of research. For example, can rocky outposts be classified as islands? Can a low-tide elevation be considered an island? Can a small territory link with a tunnel to a larger territory still be considered an island? These are all important questions that need an answer, especially in comparative studies.

The Methodological manual on territorial typologies (2018 edition) which is used by Eurostat for its classification of European typography, defines islands as territories having at least one square kilometer of surface area, a resident population of more than 50 inhabitants, and being located a minimum of one kilometer from the mainland without any fixed link, such as a bridge or a tunnel. It is estimated that there are around 2,200 inhabited islands in the European Union grouped under the 58 island regions. These constitute a population of over 20.5 million, which represents 4.6% of the total European Union-27 population (Haase and Maier, 2021) and around 3.5% of the area (Eurisles, 2002). The Baltic Sea boasts the highest number of inhabited islands, with 1,589, followed by the Mediterranean Sea with 284 and the Atlantic Ocean with 269 inhabited islands. Three stand as fully sovereign states: Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta, with a further 206 islands possessing some form of local governance. However,

the overwhelming majority (1,920 islands) lack any formal autonomy, even at the basic municipal level (Baldacchino and Pleijel, 2015). In terms of geographical location, most lie within 12 nautical miles of the mainland coast (Baldacchino and Pleijel, 2015).

The Eurostat classification reflects the common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS), as stipulated in Regulation 2017/2391. Eurostat makes a distinction between islands as geographical units and islands as regional/administrative territorial units. For geographical units, statistical data is difficult, especially for very small territories. Classification as NUTS level 3 include island regions which might consist of more than one island thus, some islands are regarded as island units within the island region. This grouping implies that several islands are not classified as island regions. The typology of NUTS 3 has five categories for island regions. The categories include regions where the major island has fewer than 50,000 inhabitants, those with between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, regions with between 100,000 and 250,000 inhabitants, regions corresponding to an island with between 250,000 and 1 million inhabitants, and those that are part of an island with at least 1 million inhabitants.

At NUTS 3 level, the European Union has 58 island regions. Three independent member states are also islands, namely Ireland (with 8 NUTS 3 regions), Cyprus (with 1 NUTS 3 region), and Malta (with 2 NUTS 3 regions – the island of Malta and the island of Gozo). The other 47 island regions (NUTS 3) mainly form part of Italy (having 14 NUTS 3 island regions), Greece (12 NUTS 3 island regions), Spain (10 NUTS 3 island regions), France (6 NUTS 3 island regions), Portugal (2 NUTS island regions), and Denmark, Finland, and Sweden (each having one NUTS 3 island region).

Apart from NUTS 3 island regions, there are several other islands in the European Union. For example, Denmark has 99 inhabited and uninhabited islands, but only one is classified under NUTS 3 (Haase and Maier, 2021). The table below, adopted from (Margaras, 2016), provides a general classification of European Union islands according to area and population.

Table 1: Categories of European Union Islands

Category	Population Size	Number of islands in the EU
Large islands	More than 50,000 permanent inhabitants	15 islands, of which 6 have more than 50,000 inhabitants (Sicily, Sardinia, Mallorca, Cyprus, Crete, and Malta)
Medium-sized islands	Between 5,000 and 50,000 permanent inhabitants	44 islands
Small islands	Between 50 and 5,000 permanent inhabitants	303 islands
Very small islands	Fewer than 50 permanent inhabitants	228 islands

Source: Adopted from Margaras, (2016).

It is to be noted that although NUTS 3 consists of relatively small regions, the European Union cohesion policy is based on NUTS 2 which consists of “larger” regions typically encompassing populations between 800,000 and 3 million. For the purpose of this research, islands do not have to be classified as island regions; however, they must be inhabited according to the Eurostat definition.

Insularity and Peripherality: Consequences for Islands in the EU

The majority of islands in the European Union are relatively small, and the area available for human activity is further restricted by

the terrain of the islands, for example, mountains in the case of volcanic islands and other protected areas (Eurisles, 2002). The shift over the last decades from traditional activities such as agriculture towards activities related to tourism has increased both urbanisation and population density (Eurisles, 2002). However, the small size of islands still limits the domestic market. Such a restricted internal market implies that islands do not enjoy the benefits of economies of scale; thus, the production of goods is generally higher than in bigger regions. Furthermore, smallness also has consequences on research and development activities, as these require a certain level of production that is absent on islands (Cordina, 2007).

The distance and the quality of links between the islands and the mainland determine their integration with the main territory, which is usually served by sea transport and sometimes by air transport. These connections are generally with the mainland of their state, but there are many instances where the nearest land falls under the jurisdiction of a different state. The majority of islands lie less than 22 nautical kilometres from their mainland coast (Baldacchino and Pleijel, 2015), but some islands are 'ultra-peripheral', which includes a grouping of territories that are often referred to as outermost regions. These include the French overseas territories. The physical disconnection with the main territory results in higher transport costs, rendering business in islands less cost-effective. However, there is an open debate in literature on the extent to which distance impacts the level of development of islands. For example, it has been suggested that globalisation and the use of information and communication technologies have mitigated some of the traditional challenges associated with distance (Cairncross, 2002). Such an observation has led to arguments suggesting that the physical barriers are no longer

valid (Cairncross, 2002), although such an assessment is often strongly challenged (Morgan, 2004).

Perhaps clearer is the relationship between distance and the political and social set-ups of the islands and their economic structure. There is evidence that suggests that the further the distance between the island and the mainland, the more likely the island is to enjoy some form of political autonomy in decision-making (Baldacchino, 2020). Some of the arguments rest on the assumption that domestic politics and governance in islands, especially those that are very small, are more informal and personalised (Prinsen, 2020). These characteristics can have positive effects, such as policies that more strongly reflect voters' preferences; however, this closeness to decision-makers can also lead to patronage and inefficient governance, including weak checks on rent-seeking activities (Prinsen, 2020).

According to Eurisles (2002), the per capita GDP of islands in the European Union is generally lower than the European Union average, although it is to be noted that this study was conducted when the European Union was made up of 15 member states and hence with many fewer islands in the sample. Wider literature frequently disputes the negative correlation between smallness and development, as measured by GDP. On one hand, there is some evidence that suggests islands, especially small islands, are negatively affected mainly because of unexploited potential and institutional inefficiency (Briguglio, 1995). This point is further highlighted by the fact that European islands are struggling to achieve fully the Lisbon Treaty's strategic goals in terms of employment, education, and research (EPSON, 2010). On the other hand, there is evidence that small economies do rather well compared to bigger ones (Easterly and Kraay, 2000). This positive performance was attributed to flexibility in decision-making and

economic openness (Armstrong and Read, 1995), both associated with long-term growth. There is overwhelming evidence that shows that island economies are generally very open (Kemp-Benedict et al., 2018) due to not being self-sufficient and hence need to engage in overseas trade. Kemp-Benedict et al. (2018) also argue that smallness tends to favour specialisation, or at least dependency, on a narrow range of products and services and thus makes islands export-oriented. Such export-orientated activities, including, to a certain extent, tourism, help explain the mixed evidence about the performance of islands in terms of economic prosperity. Furthermore, the use of GDP as the sole measure for success has also been heavily debated, as small economies are more vulnerable to external shocks even if they register high GDP levels per capita (Briguglio, 1995). This issue is also highlighted in a Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) policy brief which argues that small islands “suffer from a host of inherent vulnerabilities” and are also “disproportionately exposed to economic and non-economic shocks” (Rustomjee, 2016).

Of less debate is the assessment that size and remoteness subject islands to some form of insularity and a degree of vulnerability. Insularity can be described as *“the connecting link and the common characteristic of all islands regardless of their size, population and development level”* (ESPON, 2013), and it is widely accepted that it impacts negatively on the economic attractiveness and market efficiency of islands (Armstrong and Read, 1995). Insularity in islands tends to result in a concentration of economic activities and a large public sector, at times around 25% of the economy (Eurisles, 2002). The large share of the public sector reflects the indivisibilities of costs (Briguglio, 1995; Cordina, 2007) and the need to provide essential services such as health services, education, transport and infrastructural services (Deidda, 2016), which are often absent if not provided by public

authorities given that the small market size of islands generally results in situations of missing markets (Cordina, 2007). Apart from providing public goods, a large share of public services also serve a distributional purpose, mainly through the provision of public sector employment (Jofre-Monseny et al., 2020). On the other hand, public employment is generally assumed to be less productive and competes directly with the private sector for human resources; hence, the end result is lower opportunity for the development of the private sector (Barigozzi et al., 2018). This phenomenon leads to a further issue of policy failure in small states, including islands where government interventions may be motivated by political motives that are not in line with long-term socio-economic objectives (Cordina, 2007). In conclusion, the net direct effect of the small size on the economic development of islands is debatable. What appears clearer is the effect of insularity on islands, which is considered to lead to market failure and vulnerability.

Islands in European Union Treaties: Recognition over the years

The large number of islands in the European Union, with diverse geographical locations and different political setups, represent various realities and challenges. Over the years, these realities and characteristics were increasingly recognised by the European Union treaties, with references to islands in European Union legislation – as published in the OJEC – increasing from practically nil in the 1970s to over 200 references in thirty years (Eurisles, 2002). Such recognition is important for several reasons. First, such acknowledgement makes the socio-economic realities of islands, including their insularity, explicit. Secondly, it provides legal certainty for European Union policies that are meant to address

the insular nature of islands and help them obtain financial support, including cohesion funds. Thirdly, the direct references to islands in European legislation help islands to participate in the formulation of the Union policies (Margaras, 2016). Despite the acknowledgement in EU legislation of islands' insularity and remoteness, including several references in European Union treaties and regulations, there is a coherent common policy within the European Union for islands (Margaras, 2016). This section will provide a historical legal perspective of how the references to islands in the European Union legislation developed over the years.

The 1973 establishment of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe (CPMR) first formalised the interest in specific characteristics of European islands. The aim of the CPMR was to push for increased political recognition of islands and to find solutions to shared problems. The European Conference of Sustainable Island Development held in Minorca, Spain, in April 1997, expressed its commitments to *"recognise the significance of socio-economic development and human well-being for the people of our islands and shall give to these goals the highest priority"*. In the European Parliament, the specific characteristics of islands were the subject of several debates and motions. In 1985, the European Parliament Assembly adopted Recommendation 1002 on Island Farming and the Problems of Agriculture in Small Islands, while (Doc. 8348) highlighted the challenges to economic co-operation in the Mediterranean region, including its islands. In 2005, the Committee of Economic and Social Development of the European Parliament discussed a report by Hunault (2005) entitled "Development challenges in Europe's islands". The European Parliament adopted a resolution 2002/2119 in 2002 on disadvantaged regions, which included islands and regions with low population density. The resolution highlighted the principle of solidarity in overcoming

the inherent difficulties faced by such regions. In 2006, the European Parliament resolution 2006/2106 was passed that dealt with islands and their constraints. This resolution called for more adequate statistical indicators that better capture the reality that islands face and also called for increased flexibility with the implementation of certain policies, especially state aid.

The first important references to islands in the European Council date back to 1988, when the Council meeting in Rhodes referred to the special socio-economic constraints faced by island regions (Hunault, 2005). During that meeting, the Council, through Declaration 30 *“recognises that island regions suffer from structural handicaps linked to their islands status, the permanence of which impairs their economic and social development”*. The declaration adds that *“legislation must take into account these handicaps and that specific measures must be taken, where justified, in favour of these regions in order to integrate them better into the internal market on fair conditions”*. It was followed by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 (Article 154) and the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997 (Articles 158 and 299), in which the need to *“link island, landlocked and peripheral regions with the central regions of the Community”* was explicitly mentioned. The Treaty of Amsterdam also acknowledged the issue of disparity in certain regions, including islands, through Article 130a, whereby it states that *‘The Community shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions or islands, including rural areas’*.

The adoption of Article 229(2) on the outermost regions was another step in recognition of the special status of islands. The Article refers to the *“structural social and economic situation of the French overseas department, the Azores, Madeira and*

the Canary islands which is compounded by their remoteness, insularity, small size, difficult topography and climate, economic dependence on a few products, the permanence and combination of which severely restrain their development". The conditions of these islands particularly highlight the issues of peripherality and insularity as well as economic vulnerability.

Further amendments were introduced in the European Union following the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty. The amendments by means of Article 174 TFEU state that "In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion. In particular, the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions. Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions." Article 170 (Trans-European Networks) emphasises the crucial role of connectivity in the socio-economic developments of European regions. The Article mandates the European Union to take into account the particular characteristics of connectivity, whether by sea link or by other means, of islands when formulating its policies (Hunault, 2005).

Conclusion: An emerging legislative framework

This paper suggests that islands' potential for attracting and keeping economic activities is impaired, mainly because of insularity and vulnerability to external shocks. Indeed, it is

rather clear that there is a significant discrepancy between regions forming part of the mainland and islands in terms of achieving Lisbon's strategy goals. Furthermore, the combination of remoteness and small markets limits their opportunities for economies of scale and often leads to a situation of either market inefficiency or outright market failure, meaning that in the absence of intervention by public authorities, several services will not be provided. Thus, the recent initiative by the European Union to have a strategy for Islands assumes particular importance.

Therefore it is important to look at the legislative framework vis-à-vis islands in the EU. This paper assess that the European Union legislative interest is a long-term journey with various important milestones. Over the last half a century, the European Union increasingly acknowledged the specificities of its islands in Treaties and policies. This legislative and policy development helped islands to advocate more strongly in favour of differential treatment to reflect their structural disadvantages. Among the first was the establishment in 1973 of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe, which helped push for increased political recognition of islands. These amendments in legislation were very important, as they helped islands to access structural funds to strengthen territorial cohesion across the European Union. Furthermore, these amendments helped Islands argue in favour of flexibility regarding state aid rules. The legal provisions and the upcoming EU strategy for islands argue well for the strengthening and deployment of an approach more adaptable to islands aimed at alleviating some of the structural disadvantages of insular territories.

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