

Populated islands of the European Union: A simple matrix and what it tells us.

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Introduction

Islands present curious natural laboratories for natural and social events. Darwin (1859) and Wallace (1881) were pioneers in eschewing how archipelagos permit the development of radial speciation, with different habitats engendering conditions that favour particular species, while penalizing others. MacArthur and Wilson (1967) proposed scientific biogeographic principles that would explain the number of species living on an island at any point in time as a function of the land area of that island, plus its distance from the closest mainland. More recently, both Barthón (2007) and Royle and Scott (1996) have looked at groups of islands in France and Ireland respectively, and inferred the putative relationship that bridges, causeways and similar 'fixed links' have on small island populations and demographics. Baldacchino (2013) grapples with the fact that *only ten* of the world's populated islands are shared between more than one country to suggest a correlation between physical geography and implicit political unity.

In this exploratory paper, we attempt to develop a similar, admittedly positivist and causal narrative with reference to the inhabited islands of the member states of the European Union (EU). Armed with an up-to-date database of the number of inhabited islands belonging to the 28 member states of the EU, we cautiously propose a series of observations about islands, geography and political status that could lend themselves to, or support, some powerful and innovative policy analysis.

The Setting

The islands of the EU member states can be typically divided regionally into four groups: the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Baltic and Overseas. This is a natural segmentation, based purely on locational and geo-physical criteria. The other popular way of dividing islands is according to their affiliation to a particular sovereign state. While this approach has obvious advantages when comparing policy implications on different islands belonging to the same country, it tends to sideline comparisons and contrasts between even neighbouring islands if they happen to belong to different sovereign units (such as Corsica and Sardinia; or Lemnos and Imbros/Gökçeada)

When taking part in an EESC *Smart Islands Group* meeting early in 2015, Christian Pleijel, on behalf of the European Small Islands Network (ESIN), thought it might be interesting to use two other dimensions to describe the islands of Europe: the **political dimension**, describing the islands' degree of autonomy, and the **geographical dimension**, describing the remoteness of the islands.

Definitions

The task first called for some definitions, even if just to avoid ambiguities and to establish common parameters for any subsequent analysis.

The adopted *definition of an island* is the same as that adopted by the United Nations in connection with its Law of the Sea: an island is a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, and which remains above water at high tide (UNCLOS, 2015).

A *local community* is a local non-governmental and non-municipal organisation representing an island before relevant authorities in political matters, most often with a distinct charter, assignment and/or purpose, such as a committee, a council or a board. A municipality is a general-purpose administrative subdivision having corporate status; typically, the lowest level of government and locally elected.

A *region, a state or a province* is a part of a sovereign state with a high degree of authority and executive power; especially in federal states.

A *country*, in this case, is one of the 28 EU member states.

The '*overseas*' category was assigned to islands located outside or beyond the geography of the European continent. These include the 'ultra-peripheral regions' which, in the EU context, are a grouping of territories belonging to various member states located at a very great distance from the European continent. They include the French Overseas *Départements* (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, French Guyana and recently added Mayotte), the Canary Islands (Spain), and Madeira and the Azores (Portugal). All except French Guyana are island or archipelago regions and are, in addition, often mountainous.

The '*high seas*' category was assigned to islands located beyond a country's territorial sea, located more than 12 nautical miles (or 22.2 nautical kilometres) from a country's coast.

The '*coastal*' category was assigned to unbridged islands located less than 12 nautical miles (or 22.2 nautical kilometres) from the mainland coast.

The '*bridged*' category was assigned to islands that have fixed links (bridges, causeways, tunnels) to their respective mainland.

Having established these criteria, a matrix was populated, plotting the geographical dimension as one axis and the political dimension on the other. The tabulation of all results across the EU appears as [Table 1](#) below. Tabulations for the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Baltic, and Overseas follow as [Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5](#) respectively.

Grand Totals

There are 2,160 populated islands in the European Union, belonging to twenty EU Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom). The eight other EU Member States (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Slovenia) do not have populated islands (excluding those in lakes and rivers).

Table 1

| Grand Total | | Political dimension | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|---------|-------|
| | | Local community - no jurisdiction | Municipality | Region State Province | Country | |
| Geographical dimension | Overseas | 5 | 19 | 6 | 0 | 30 |
| | High seas | 184 | 75 | 19 | 2 | 280 |
| | Coastal | 1 365 | 83 | 5 | 0 | 1 453 |
| | Bridged | 366 | 29 | 2 | 0 | 397 |
| | | 1 920 | 206 | 32 | 2 | |

2 160 Populated islands

Table 2

| Mediterranean | | Political dimension | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|---------|-----|
| | | Local community - no jurisdiction | Municipality | Region State Province | Country | |
| Geographical dimension | Overseas | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | High seas | 96 | 42 | 6 | 2 | 146 |
| | Coastal | 104 | 27 | 0 | 0 | 131 |
| | Bridged | 1 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| | | 201 | 75 | 6 | 2 | |

284 Populated islands

Table 3

| Atlantic | | Political dimension | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|---------|-----|
| | | Local community - no jurisdiction | Municipality | Region State Province | Country | |
| Geographical dimension | Overseas | 2 | 15 | 3 | 1 | 21 |
| | High seas | 38 | 23 | 10 | 0 | 71 |
| | Coastal | 118 | 30 | 1 | 0 | 149 |
| | Bridged | 21 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 28 |
| | | 179 | 74 | 15 | 1 | |

269 Populated islands

Table 4

| Baltic | | Political dimension | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|---------|-------|
| | | Local community - no jurisdiction | Municipality | Region State Province | Country | |
| Geographical dimension | Overseas | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | High seas | 49 | 10 | 3 | 0 | 62 |
| | Coastal | 1 135 | 25 | 4 | 0 | 1 164 |
| | Bridged | 343 | 17 | 3 | 0 | 363 |
| | | 1 527 | 52 | 10 | 0 | |

1 589 Populated islands

Table 5

| Overseas | | Political dimension | | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|---|--------------|-----------------------------|---------|-------|
| | | Local community - no jurisdiction | Municipality | Region State Province | Country | |
| Geographical dimension | Overseas | 5 | 19 | 6 | 0 | 30 |
| | High seas | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 280 |
| | Coastal | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 453 |
| | Bridged | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 397 |
| | | 5 | 19 | 6 | 0 | |

30 Populated islands

Analysis

Three inhabited islands – Cyprus, Ireland, Malta – are sovereign states; 32 inhabited islands are counties, regions and/or provinces of other states; 206 inhabited islands are municipalities, while 1,920 inhabited islands – 89% of the total number of European islands - are local communities with no official political autonomy unto themselves, not even at local government/municipality level.

1,850 inhabited islands are within 12 nautical miles of the coast: of these, almost one fourth (397) are bridged. Meanwhile, 280 other populated islands lie in the high seas, and another 31 are located overseas.

The *Mediterranean* has the largest proportion of large islands as well as the largest proportion of islands with large populations in Europe. There are 284 populated islands in the Mediterranean. Of these, 131 are coastal (amongst which 104 are local communities with no political jurisdiction). 146 islands are situated in the high seas. 83 islands are municipalities, regions or states. There are only seven populated islands in the Mediterranean that have a fixed link to their respective mainland.

In the *Atlantic*, the number of populated islands is 269. 149 of these islands are coastal, of which 118 are local communities and 31 are municipalities or regions. Of the 71 islands in the high seas, 33 are municipalities, regions or counties.

The *Baltic* has the largest number of populated European islands, with a tally of 1,589. Of these 363 are bridged, 1,164 are coastal/unbridged, and 62 lie in the high seas. The majority of these are just local communities: only 4 percent are municipalities, regions or

counties. Only 3 percent of coastal islands and 4 percent of the bridged islands in the Baltic are municipalities. Of the 62 islands in high seas, one third are municipalities, regions or counties.

In general, the 206 small islands that are independent municipalities are almost equally split between the three regions (Mediterranean 75, Atlantic 74 and Baltic 52). Half of them are situated in high seas; and only 10 percent are bridged. Of the 280 islands in the high seas, just over a half of these are local communities and these often belong to an island region or province.

Of 397 bridged islands, 366 are governed as larger units, often from elsewhere, by a municipality that includes a coastal region or the mainland. Put differently, only 31 of the 397 bridged islands – less than 10% - maintain their own political jurisdiction.

1,554 populated islands are remote or coastal, with no jurisdiction of their own. Of these, 583 are Finnish, 555 are Swedish, 112 Greek, 74 Danish, 50 Italian, 29 Croatian and 29 Irish, found in all the regions, with the majority (in number of islands, not in population) in the Baltic.

At the other end, practically all overseas populated islands in Europe enjoy a measure of political autonomy.

Discussion

There is a strong, and possibly largely under-researched, correlation between remoteness and jurisdiction. The further an island is from its mainland, the greater the political autonomy it is likely to enjoy. This observation is partly a function of necessity: historically, it would have been expedient to locate administrative capacity on a remote island, if the closest alternative is simply too distant for practical and logistic reasons.

Many small islands, because they are islands, enjoy some degree of administrative autonomy. This same feature supported the transition of some two dozen small islands or archipelagos to sovereign statehood, starting with Iceland, in the period 1944–84. (Baldacchino, 2010, p. 55).

The correlation also works conversely: the closer an island is to a mainland, culminating in a fixed link, the less the necessity for that island to maintain or obtain, jurisdictional autonomy of any sort, and especially with low resident populations.

One may find that, at a certain distance from the mainland, the probability of an island being a municipality or region exceeds the probability of it not being a jurisdiction. Such a consideration of island-mainland distance, and so remoteness, may be differently interpreted across different European countries.

Reflections

Distant islands are often municipalities, regions or countries with an ability to take care of their own interests through different strategies. They participate actively in lobbying organisations (such as the CPMR) and involve themselves in partnerships (such as Islenet and the Natwest Island Games).

The 397 bridged islands of Europe lack the physical and economic challenges that unbridged islands face. They principally depend on their contiguous mainland and do not need partnerships or alliances with other islands to advance their interests. (Indeed, none of the island members of either ESIN or INSULEUR are bridged.) Conversely, such islands lack the jurisdictional autonomy to manage their own affairs, and may not even consider themselves as island communities.

Out of 397 bridged and populated islands, 366 (over 90%) have no local jurisdiction. Many, but not all, of the 31 bridged islands have continued to enjoy local political autonomy and have held on to this status which they have obtained or enjoyed *before* they secured their fixed link to the mainland. No bridged island has secured political autonomy *after* the construction of a fixed link; while a few other islands – like Skye in Scotland – have *lost* their jurisdictional autonomy after they secured their fixed link to the mainland: since 1996, the municipality includes both Skye and Lochalsh; the bridge opened in 1995 (McQuaid and Grieg, 2007).

In another example, Replot was an independent island municipality in Finland until 1973, when it was consolidated with the municipality of Korsholm. Replot has been connected to the mainland by a bridge since 1997. In such a case, the fixed link did not exacerbate but consolidated a prior political amalgamation.

Another 1,915 coastal and remote European islands are not bridged and yet lack their own jurisdiction, do not have strong locally-based political organisations and have difficulties in managing cooperation over national and regional borders. From economic, social and environmental perspectives, these island societies are often relatively underdeveloped and risk wholesale depopulation.

Many inhabited islands also have a significant part-time population with no political rights and who are often not taxed: this condition clearly differentiates islands from most other societies.

Many populated islands also lack a specific voice in both their national or European Parliament (EP), being obliged to share their representative with what are usually much larger population centres on mainlands. In the United Kingdom, the Western Isles of Scotland have 1 MP (in London) and 1 MSP (in Edinburgh), but no MEP. Åland has 1 MP (in Helsinki). Croatian islands has 1 MEP (Tonino Picula). Malta and Cyprus have 6 MEPs each. Gozo has a Minister (who is one of 5 elected deputies from Gozo in a 65-member national chamber) in the Malta Parliament.

A note on methodology

The database at the heart of this paper was developed in 2015 with the help of national ESIN representatives¹, Professor Beate Ratter at the University of Hamburg, Germany and Panos Coroyannakis of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR).

¹ Pia Prost, Pargas, board member of FÖSS (Small Islands of Finland Association); Elle Puuman, Vormsi, Estonian Small Islands Association; Lise Thillemann Sørensen, Strynø, Danish Small Islands Association; John Walsh, Bere island / Irish Islands Association; Camille Dressler, Eigg / Scotland Islands Federation; Jonathan Tagliatela, Ischia,

The count also involved counter-checking numbers with other suitable and comparable sources, notably Eurostat, the ESPON EUROISLANDS Report and Wikipedia. Eurostat counted 440 inhabited islands in the European Union in 1994 (EU 15, with 10 member states having inhabited islands), but excluding islands which are host to a national capital, and islands linked to the mainland by a bridge (CEC, 1994). The EUROISLANDS study counts islands with more than 50 inhabitants and finds 373 islands in the EU, of which 2 are states, 6 are NUTS II regions and 14 are NUTS III regions (ESPN, 2013). Wikipedia's List of European islands by area lists 303 islands with a land area of more than 50 km², plus an (admittedly incomplete) list of 172 islands with a land area of between 20 km² and 50 km² (Wikipedia, 2015).

Islands in rivers and lakes were not counted in this exercise. This would call for a separate and supplementary research project.

In this exercise, the islands of Great Britain and Greenland were both counted as islands, surrounded by smaller islands. Only European Union member state islands were included.

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