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Sent by: Francina Armengol i Socias, president of the Government of the Balearic Islands (ES/PES), and Carles Manera, president of the Economic and Social Committee of the Balearic Islands and appointed expert of the opinion

**Questions for CoR members representing the Mediterranean islands on the opinion "Towards sustainable use of natural resources within the Mediterranean insular context"**

**Introduction**

On 3 December 2019, the proposal made by the president of the Government of the Balearic Islands – who is also a member of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) – to draw up an own-initiative opinion on the sustainable use of natural resources in the Mediterranean insular context was accepted.

In this connection, based on the preliminary key issues set out in the documents "Allocation of own-initiative opinions" and "Policy Analysis Memo", and due to the need to consult certain CoR members from the Mediterranean region during the opinion drafting process – particularly those from the islands and those from the Commission for Natural Resources (NAT) – this document contains the main issues that we believe the consultation needs to address.

**Deadline for responding to the consultation: 28 February**

**Background information on the EU's islands**

More than 10 million EU citizens – 3% of the total population – live on the Union's 286 island territories, which have a total surface area of over 100 000 km<sup>2</sup> (3.2% of the total surface area of the EU). Overall, these islands, which are grouped into 30 regions, have a lower level of economic development than mainland Europe, bearing in mind that they generate around 2.5% of the EU's GDP and that their GDP per capita is 75% of the EU average. Since 95% of the inhabitants of these islands live in the Mediterranean, the islands of Sicily, Corsica, the Balearics, Sardinia and Crete account for the bulk of this demographic.



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## Blocks of questions

The document on the proposed allocation of the opinion "Towards sustainable use of natural resources within the Mediterranean insular context" sets out the bases and justifications for it. Using these points as a general framework for context questions, we would like to raise the following issues:

### 1. With regard to the political objective:

The island territories in the Mediterranean constitute heterogeneous economic, administrative, cultural and social realities.

Nevertheless, they share common challenges and problems that, in a fragmented area such as the Mediterranean Basin, need to be tackled within a more specific joint scope.

A key feature shared by all the Mediterranean islands is a fragile (environmental, economic and social) ecosystem located in a highly competitive area.

*Given the heterogeneous nature of the Mediterranean Basin, and the islands' separation from the mainland, do you think a common approach needs to be developed and enhanced?*

*Do you think that the EU institutions are sufficiently meeting the specific needs of the Mediterranean islands?*

*How do you think a common EU approach can be developed and enhanced?*

**(Maximum 500 words)**

### 2. With regard to the political priorities

The Mediterranean islands are constrained by their limited natural resources and high environmental vulnerability.

Managing natural resources and their scarcity (issues that the Mediterranean island territories will have to deal with in the coming decades due to the greater impact of human activities and climate change) is at the core of the NAT commission's remit.



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Agriculture and fishing on the islands, which were the main sources of food for centuries, have in many cases been transformed by the development of economies that are moving more towards the service sector and becoming more specialised (the economies of the Mediterranean islands are among the most specialised in the EU, particularly in the construction and tourism sectors).

However, the islands also have an extremely rich but fragile natural heritage and biodiversity, making up for the scarcity of natural resources.

*Considering the geographical, political and economic fragmentation of the Mediterranean island territories and the scarcity of their natural resources, do you think the concept of Mediterranean insularity needs to be defined in greater detail across the EU institutions so that it emphasises the common features of the islands' structural fragility and environmental vulnerability?*

*Given the urgent need to meet global systemic challenges and in light of the new Green Deal presented by the European Commission, do you agree that politicians should provide a clear picture of the Mediterranean islands' circumstances, with a view to proposing that they be dealt with separately and in a way that is specific to their unique situation, particularly with regard to the development of legislation pertaining to the Green Deal?*

**(Maximum 500 words)**

3. With regard to the local and/or regional dimension

The islands of the Mediterranean have a wide variety of administrative situations and include, among other things, very densely populated areas coexisting with less densely populated areas.

Added to this fact is the broad range of political systems, including islands that are countries (Malta and Cyprus) and islands with varying degrees of political and administrative autonomy (e.g. for Corsica, Sardinia and the Balearic Islands, which are the westernmost islands in the Mediterranean, there is a very high level of political and administrative diversity within their respective Member States).

*Bearing in mind the political and administrative diversity and the differences in population of these island territories, which nevertheless have the same environmental vulnerability and the same weaknesses, do you agree that it is vital to bring them together politically, socially and economically so as to achieve sustainable development across the area?*



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*How do you think the multi-level governance of the Mediterranean islands should be improved to increase local and regional cohesion between the territories and heighten awareness of the islands' specific circumstances?*

**(Maximum 500 words)**

4. With regard to the strategic relevance

Recent data show that the islands of the Mediterranean are moving away from economic convergence with the EU, within the framework of economies that are highly specialised in a specific activity and in the context of high environmental vulnerability.

As mentioned above, this results in great fragility for communities which, in many cases, develop their economic models around their natural and environmental heritage.

As such, the opinion is based on three basic conceptual factors that can be used to define the Mediterranean islands' circumstances:

- **Factor 1 – social, economic and cultural cohesion:** although the principle of cohesion is one of the fundamental pillars of the EU, it is clear that there is no social, economic or cultural cohesion between the Mediterranean island territories that are part of the EU (i.e. all except the Tunisian islands of Djerba and Chergui, Albania's Sazan island, and the Republic of Turkey's islands).

Social cohesion:

*As there is currently very little cohesion between the Mediterranean island territories, what measures do you think should be taken to improve the situation?*

**(Maximum 200 words)**

Economic cohesion:

**(Maximum 500 words)**



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*The EU's cohesion policy funds are implemented less effectively in the Mediterranean island territories than in the mainland regions for which they were designed. With that in mind, do you think the EU's cohesion policy should meet the objective, specific and demonstrable needs of the Mediterranean island territories, as it does with outermost regions?*

*Do you believe the EU should seize the opportunity offered by the preparation of the new programming period to meet the specific needs of island regions, involving all levels of government within the scope of their responsibilities?*

*It has been objectively proven that companies based on the Mediterranean islands suffer a loss of competitiveness as a result of their separation from the mainland. Do you agree that financial compensation should be introduced and the state aid system revised to level the playing field in these territories, especially with regard to transport?*

*Since greater investment is required to boost competitiveness in island territories, public policies aimed at generating growth in these areas are less effective, leaving their inhabitants markedly worse off than their compatriots on the mainland. Consequently, do you think that the EU should increase the financial support it provides to improve cohesion, for example by raising the Cohesion Policy's co-financing rates in island regions?*

*Due to the fragmented nature of the Mediterranean islands, do you consider it necessary to urge the European Commission and Member States to create specific cooperation mechanisms exclusive to the Mediterranean islands (e.g. a specific Mediterranean island sub-group in the Interreg programme) and to adopt macro-regional strategies for the area?*

Cultural cohesion:

**(Maximum 400 words)**

*Given the fundamental value of cultural, linguistic and historical heritage for Mediterranean island societies, what role do you think culture can play in the sustainable development of these societies?*

*Do you think it would be a good idea to set up an inter-island higher education programme on the tourism economies of the Mediterranean islands so that students could learn about its advantages and mitigate the mistakes made on the islands with the most advanced tourism industries?*

*Do you think a sort of Erasmus programme should be promoted so that the islands can exchange scientific and technological knowledge, based on inter-university and intergovernmental agreements?*



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- **Factor 2 – periphery and neighbourhood:** the EU's Mediterranean islands are on the Union's southern and eastern border, but few of them maintain contact with the sea's south and east coast. This is demonstrated by the fact that the EU's neighbourhood policy does not take the islands into account, helping to make the management of shared natural resources more fragile due to the lack of ties and exchanges between regions.

*Considering the environmental, social (and humanitarian), economic and cultural challenges of the Mediterranean, do you think that its islands should be taken into account more in the EU's neighbourhood policy?*

**(Maximum 150 words)**

*Do you believe that social, scientific, cultural and commercial exchanges should be promoted and facilitated more between some Mediterranean island territories and regions in Africa and/or the Middle East, given their proximity to each other?*

**(Maximum 150 words)**

- **Factor 3 – environmental and climate vulnerability:** the Mediterranean islands are located in one of the regions most affected by climate change. At the same time, the Mediterranean is one of Earth's main biodiversity hotspots and its islands still have many endemic plant and animal species. However, the Mediterranean is also one of the world's most polluted seas and its coasts strongly feel the impact of human activities. Of course, all environmental effects are significant for the entire basin, but they are especially critical on the islands, which are enclosed areas that are separated from the mainland.

*Bearing in mind the established environmental fragility of the Mediterranean islands and the importance of natural heritage for their economies, do you agree that the European Commission should take this into account in the specific design of all Community acquis regarding the environment and energy?*

**(Maximum 150 words)**

*How do you think the expected legislation pertaining to the Green Deal could be specifically adapted to the Mediterranean islands?*

**(Maximum 150 words)**



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The opinion also aims to find viable solutions that, due to the fragmentation of the islands, and the basin's heterogeneity in terms of political and administrative systems and population, are best addressed at EU level.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of some of the major points that the opinion will cover, along with the corresponding objective to be pursued:

- The Mediterranean islands face similar challenges to those of the outermost regions (ORs) but are treated as mainland regions. In this regard, ORs fall under Article 349 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), which recognises the special situation of these regions, for which the EU is developing specific policies. However, although Article 174 states that particular attention will be paid to island territories, in reality, there has been no regulatory development in secondary legislation at EU level for these territories.

**Objective:** achieve specific recognition from the EU and all Member States of the particular circumstances of the Mediterranean islands, especially with regard to sustainable development and the use of natural resources.

*How do you think this objective can be achieved?*

**(Maximum 150 words)**

- Many Mediterranean island territories are linked to their respective country's mainland but not to each other, despite the environmental, cultural, historical, economic and social ties.

**Objective:** improve social, economic, cultural, territorial and environmental cohesion between the Mediterranean island territories to ensure that their natural resources are used sustainably, which is vital for developing and supporting their economies.

*How do you think this objective can be achieved?*

**(Maximum 150 words)**



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- Integrated coastal development and a strategic and sustainable approach to developing every aspect of the blue economy are essential for the sustainable development of the Mediterranean islands and the sustainable use of their natural resources.

**Objective:** develop the blue economy in these island territories jointly and synergistically, and promote and support the development of their integrated maritime policy strategies, which are key to preserving their maritime and coastal heritage and growing their economies.

*How do you think this objective can be achieved?*

**(Maximum 150 words)**

- Environmental preservation is crucial for the future social, economic, cultural and environmental development of the Mediterranean island territories. On top of the efforts undertaken by regional and local governments, climate change and the environmental vulnerability of the Mediterranean islands need to be dealt with collectively and at all levels (EU, national, regional and local).

**Objective:** get the EU institutions to recognise areas that are particularly vulnerable to climate change (as the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change does for the entire Mediterranean region, with the added factor of these being island territories) so that new EU legislation (particularly the Green Deal) deals with them separately and in line with their specific circumstances.

*How do you think this objective can be achieved?*

**(Maximum 150 words)**

- If the islands' economies are to grow and if their natural resources are to be used sustainably, their economies must be diverse and competitive, but this is currently far from being the case. Firstly, not only are the Mediterranean economies a long way off the EU's most competitive regions, they are among the least developed regions in their respective Member States. Secondly, the Mediterranean islands are highly specialised, resulting in high economic fragility and environmental vulnerability (in this regard, it should be stressed that tourism-related activities play a larger role in the economies of the islands than those of the EU or their respective Member States as a whole).



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**Objective:** get the EU institutions to recognise the intrinsic and specific difficulties of the Mediterranean island economies in terms of smart growth, and develop measures to promote investment in research, development and innovation, and the availability of research staff and workers in highly technological sectors.

*How do you think this objective can be achieved?*

**(Maximum 150 words)**

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