The Islands Commission was founded in 1980 and is therefore the oldest Geographical Commission out of the six making up the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe. Today, its membership includes eighteen European island authorities located in the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas as well as the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans, representing a total population of around 15 million.

Since its creation, its primary objective has been to represent the interests of European islands within the CPMR, ensuring that the unique concerns and challenges of islands, such as territorial cohesion, sustainable development and economic growth, accessibility and transport connections, energy supply, environmental protection, were effectively addressed at the European level.

In the years, it has been constantly defending the interests of its members in policy areas of high relevance for islands, while working in close cooperation with EU institutions, certain national governments and key partner organisations. This work includes advocacy and policy actions for more adapted EU legislation and programmes as well as networking and cooperation activities to facilitate exchanges of experiences, knowledge, and best practices among islands so to address common issues. In particular, the Islands Commission has played a significant role in shaping EU policies and programmes that directly impact islands, engaging in policy discussions and providing targeted recommendations to EU Institutions. In most recent times, the Islands Commission has played a significant role in promoting the development and implementation of a long-term Strategy for Islands at EU level.

Most of the Islands Commission working areas identified back in 1980 are still relevant today: transport, maritime affairs, coastal planning and protection of island ecosystems, etc. In this sense, the Islands Commission continues to be an important platform for its members to collaborate, engage in policy dialogue and advocate for their interests at EU scale.

Visionaries and pioneers, the first members to work towards the creation of the Islands Commission were driven by a bold vision and a deep interest in their territories. Their enthusiasm led them to come up with a dedicated structure to represent island regions and promote their development. Their efforts were motivated by the conviction that islands deserved special attention and that their potential should be somehow fully exploited.
The very first meeting of the Islands Commission was held in the city of Nuoro (Sardinia) in 1980 and attended by the following founding members: Shetland (UK), Orkney (UK), Western Isles (UK), Azores (PT), Madeira (PT), Canary Islands (ES), Sardinia (IT), Sicily (IT), Crete (GR). At that time, several of those regions were belonging even to countries not members of the European Community (Spain, Portugal, Greece).

Since its foundation, the membership of the Islands Commission has then evolved over the years as more islands have joined. Initially composed of a small group of founding islands, it has seen a considerable increase in its membership in the years, with additional island regions joining, reaching up to 24 members.
Since its foundation, the CPMR Islands Commission has achieved several significant milestones in its work:

• It contributed to the development of island-specific provisions in various EU initiatives, notably with the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997, where it succeeded in getting a reference to the islands included in relation to the provisions linked to economic and social Cohesion (currently Article 174 of the Lisbon Treaty).

• It strongly advocated in favour of the Outermost Regions (Final Declaration of Gozo-Malta in 1996) which contributed to get a dedicated article to these territories in the EU Treaties (currently Article 349 of the Lisbon Treaty).

• It participated in the Informal meeting of Ministers responsible for Cohesion Policy held in Nicosia in November 2012 - under the Cyprus Presidency of the Council - to discuss issues related to the effectiveness and governance of the new Cohesion Policy of the EU from the perspective of islands and outermost regions. During it, a number of regional delegates, the Islands Commission Presidency and the CPMR Secretary General conveyed key messages, including the call for an amendment on to the case of territories beset by geographic and demographic handicaps, mentioning specifically insularity, which was included in the conclusions of the Informal meeting.

• It supported and contributed to the Own Initiative Report on Islands and Cohesion Policy promoted by MEP Younous Omarjee, Chair of the Regional Development Committee of the European Parliament, and took part in the high-level meeting, involving among EU islands' political representatives, Ms Roberta Metsola, President of European Parliament and Ms Elisa Ferreira, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, on the occasion of the approval of such a report in Strasbourg in June 2022.

Further achievements demonstrate the impact and influence of the CPMR Islands Commission in promoting the interests of European islands:

• The Islands Commission has actively advocated for funding and support mechanisms in favour of islands: indeed, highlighting the specific needs of islands in accessing EU funding programmes, it has encouraged the inclusion of island regions as target beneficiaries in a number of EU initiatives. These advocacy efforts have helped secure dedicated funding/initiatives for islands (e.g. Clean Energy for EU islands).

“Taking account of the structural social and economic situation of Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, Réunion, Saint-Barthélemy, Saint-Martin, 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 Council, (...) shall adopt specific measures aimed, in particular, at laying down the conditions of application of the Treaties to those regions, including common policies”

Article 349 of the Lisbon Treaty

• The Islands Commission fosters networking and cooperation among European islands: throughout the years, it has organised a variety of thematic meetings, workshops and conferences, serving as a platform for islands to exchange experiences, share best practices, and learn from one another. This collaboration has facilitated the creation of solid partnerships, the transfer of knowledge and the development of innovative solutions to common challenges, in the field of decarbonisation and renewable energy deployment, blue economy and sustainable tourism, waste management and transport connectivity, just to mention a few.

• The Islands Commission has undertaken research and data collection exercises to enhance the understanding of island dynamics and support evidence-based policymaking: it has produced a number of technical notes/reports on various topics - including in the framework of the projects in which it is/was involved - covering for instance the issue of state aid, the potential of circular economy or blue growth, the impact of COVID-19 as well as the challenges of climate change on islands, the opportunities of green investments, among others. These research/analysis efforts have particularly contributed to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities specific to islands and have provided valuable insights for policy recommendations development.
Cooperation

The cooperation with international partners dealing with insularity has always been a crucial aspect of the Islands Commission. Indeed, it has established a number of collaborations (including via ad-hoc Memoranda of Understanding) with key organisations and networks working on island-related issues, fostering exchanges with entities such as AIP (Association of the Islands of Ponant), ESIN (European Small Islands Federation), SMİLO (Small Islands Organisation), OTIE (Observatory on Tourism for Islands Economy), GTI (Greening the Islands), INSULEUR (Network of the Insular Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the EU), DAFNI (Network of sustainable Greek Islands), FEDARENE (European Federation of Agencies and Regions for Energy and Environment), etc. These partnerships have facilitated knowledge exchange, joint initiatives and the amplification of island voices in the EU context.

In most recent years, the Islands Commission has been also extremely engaged in cooperation projects, joining a variety of partnerships, along with in support of its member regions. This has led to an increasing projects’ record, dealing with key topics such as maritime affairs including coastal sustainable tourism (Interreg MED: WINTERMED, DESTIMED+) and maritime spatial planning (EMFAF: REGINA MSP), transport and mobility (H2020: CIVITAS DESTINATION), sustainable energy (H2020: MAESHA, Horizon Europe: TwinSolar and Crete Valley), environment and climate (Interreg Euro MED: NaTour4CChange). Furthermore, it supported the implementation of the EC Strategic Partnership with the Outermost Regions (OR), by contributing to a specific Study on the impact of COVID-19 on OR as well as a Programme of exchanges on climate change adaptation between the OR and their neighbouring countries, both commissioned by DG REGIO.

What is next

In the latest years, the Islands Commission has been strongly advocating for an exhaustive application of art. 174 TFEU to properly address islands’ challenges and the adoption of an EU Islands Pact – along the lines of Urban Pact and future Rural Pact – that should lead to the consequent development of an Agenda for EU Islands. This Agenda, taking the form of a long-term strategy should notably provide an overarching framework guiding the operational work of EU Institutions in the next years, focusing on a set of jointly identified priorities for islands.

Under the strong commitment of the Presidency of the Government of Balearic Islands, the Islands Commission has been following very closely, contributing to, and supporting the EP own initiative Report “Islands and Cohesion Policy: current situation and future challenges” led by the Chair of the REGI Committee, MEP Younous Omarjee. In line with the main requests of this Report, its 2022 Gotland Declaration “Towards a Pact of EU Islands” includes some key reflections and recommendations on emerging issues and main priorities for insular territories. It provides an overview of the main elements that should be considered by a long-term EU Strategy for Islands towards a holistic approach to islands’ needs, encompassing all EU policy areas of high relevance, and a related adaptation of those policies to their specificities (“insularisation” to all major EU policies).

In February 2023, on the eve of the upcoming Spanish Presidency of the Council, the Islands Commission unanimously adopted its Palma Declaration “Europa Archipelago: an Agenda for EU Islands” intended to further reflect on the operational implementation of such an agenda, by putting forward some additional suggestions in this respect, with a special focus on strengthening the cooperation among all relevant stakeholders dealing with insularity at different levels of governance.

With a view to the forthcoming EU elections of June 2024, the Islands Commission intends to reaffirm its full commitment to the specificities and needs of islands, while urging again a place-based approach of EU policies, leaving no region behind and making the Agenda for EU Islands a reality.