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P8_TA(2017)0316

Promoting cohesion and development in the outermost regions of the EU

European Parliament resolution of 6 July 2017 on promoting cohesion and development in the outermost regions of the EU: implementation of Article 349 of the TFEU (2016/2250(INI))

(2018/C 334/19)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 52 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the first paragraph of which stipulates that the Treaties apply to the Member States, and the second paragraph of which stipulates that the territorial scope of the Treaties is specified in Article 355 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),
- having regard to Article 355(1) of the TFEU, as amended by the decisions of the European Council of 29 October 2010 amending the status with regard to the European Union of the island of Saint-Barthélemy (2010/718/EU) and of 11 July 2012 amending the status of Mayotte with regard to the European Union (2012/419/EU), which stipulates that the provisions of the Treaties shall apply to the ORs in accordance with Article 349 of the TFEU,
- having regard to Article 349 of the TFEU, which confers special status on the ORs, provides for the adoption of 'specific measures aimed, in particular, at laying down the conditions of application of the Treaties to those regions, including common policies', and stipulates that these shall concern in particular, but not exclusively, 'customs and trade policies, fiscal policy, free zones, agriculture and fisheries policies, conditions for supply of raw materials and essential consumer goods, State aids and conditions of access to structural funds and to horizontal Union programmes',
- having regard to Article 107(3)(a) of the TFEU, which states that aid to promote the economic development of the ORs may be compatible with the internal market,
- having regard to Title XVIII of the TFEU, which establishes the objective of economic, social and territorial cohesion and specifies the structural financial instruments to achieve this,
- having regard to Article 7 of the TFEU, which stipulates that the Union shall ensure consistency between its policies and activities, taking all of its objectives into account and in accordance with the principle of conferral of powers,
- having regard to all the communications from the Commission on the ORs,
- having regard to all its resolutions on the ORs, and in particular its resolution of 18 April 2012 on the role of cohesion policy in the ORs of the EU in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy ⁽¹⁾, and its resolution of 26 February 2014 entitled 'Optimise the potential of outermost regions by creating synergies between the EU structural funds and other European Union programmes' ⁽²⁾,
- having regard to the judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union of 15 December 2015 ⁽³⁾,
- having regard to the Commission's report of 15 December 2016 on the implementation of the scheme of specific measures for agriculture in favour of the outermost regions of the Union (POSEI) (COM(2016)0797),
- having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on EU State Aid Modernisation (COM(2012)0209),

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 258 E, 7.9.2013, p. 1

⁽²⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2014)0133.

⁽³⁾ Judgment of the Court of Justice of 15 December 2015, Parliament and Commission v the Council, C-132/14 to C-136/14, ECLI: EU:C:2015:813.

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- having regard to the memorandum signed in Cayenne by the ORs (5 March 1999), complemented by the joint memorandum of Spain, France, Portugal and the ORs signed in May 2010, which stipulates that the EU should promote the sustainable development of the ORs by building on the numerous natural and cultural assets of the ORs while promoting the principles of equal opportunities, partnership, proportionality and coherence of the EU policies,
 - having regard to the final declaration of the 21st conference of 22 and 23 September 2016 by the Conference of Presidents of the ORs and the Joint Memorandum signed at the Fourth Forum of the ORs of the European Union of 30 and 31 March 2017 in Brussels,
 - having regard to Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of 17 June 2014 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty ⁽¹⁾,
 - having regard to Rule 52 of its Rules of Procedure, as well as Article 1(1)(e) of, and Annex 3 to, the decision of the Conference of Presidents of 12 December 2002 on the procedure for granting authorisation to draw up own-initiative reports,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Regional Development and the opinion of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (A8-0226/2017),
- A. whereas Article 349 of the TFEU recognises the special economic and social situation of the ORs, which is compounded by factors (remoteness, insularity, small size, difficult topography and climate, dependence on a few products, etc.) the permanence and combination of which severely restrain their development;
- B. whereas, in its landmark judgment of 15 December 2015, the Grand Chamber of the Court of Justice gave a thorough interpretation of Article 349 of the TFEU;
- C. whereas in that judgment, the Court confirms, above all, that legal acts with the aim of introducing specific measures for the ORs may be adopted on the legal basis of Article 349, that this legal basis makes it possible to derogate both from primary and from secondary law, and that the list of areas covered in the wording of Article 349 is not exhaustive, as ‘the authors of the FEU Treaty did not intend to lay down an exhaustive list of the types of measures that may be adopted on the basis of that article’,
- D. whereas, for the purpose of the application of the European Treaties to the ORs, Article 52 TEU and Articles 349 and 355 of the TFEU are linked, whereas under Article 355, first paragraph, (1) of the TFEU, the provisions of the Treaties apply to the ORs in accordance with Article 349 of the TFEU and whereas this reference to ‘the Treaties’ includes secondary legislation;
- E. whereas Article 349 of the TFEU must be read in conjunction with other articles of the Treaty, particularly Article 7, which stipulates that ‘the Union shall ensure consistency between its policies and activities, taking all of its objectives into account’;
- F. whereas the principles of equality and non-discrimination justify a difference in treatment in the case of distinct situations, in the interests, in the end, of equality in the application of European law,
- G. whereas the purpose of Article 349 of the TFEU is to ensure the development of the ORs, and their treatment both as part of European territory and as part of their own geographical regions, allowing them to benefit of European policies and where appropriate of specific measures adapted to their realities and needs;
- H. whereas the ORs have great geostrategic importance, and are crucial for purposes of research into climate change and biodiversity;

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 187, 26.6.2014, p. 1.

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I. whereas, according to the European Commission's estimates, the EU's blue economy represents around 5,4 million jobs and a gross value added of around EUR 500 billion per year;

1. Recalls that Article 7 TEU confers on the Commission the role of guardian of the Treaties; emphasises that the outermost regions are fully integrated into the European Union and assimilated to its legal order, with their specific situation acknowledged by the Treaties, particularly Article 349 of the TFEU that establishes a principle and a right of adaptation, addressed at the level of different Union policies;

2. Stresses that while facing a significant disadvantage due to the geographical distance to the Union, the ORs benefit also from several important assets such as the potential of growing tourism related activities, blue growth, of exploiting significant renewable energy resources, of developing a circular economy, as well as building on their rich natural heritage and huge biodiversity;

3. Takes the view that that Article 349 of the TFEU could be interpreted also in a more innovative and positive manner, particularly with a view to establishing ad hoc programmes and specific new policies, making use of the strong points of the ORs and giving them the means to make the most of them, particularly in areas such as renewable energies, blue growth, research and development, sustainable tourism, biodiversity protection and climate change adaptation; recalls in this context the role the Union is assuming with a view to enable the ORs to overcome their challenges and build on their assets, but stresses at the same time the necessity that the respective Member States assume more responsibility as regards the use of available EU instruments that can support them in ensuring a sustainable development of their ORs;

State of play concerning the application of Article 349 of the TFEU

4. Expresses concern that the articles of the Treaties concerning the ORs have not so far been implemented to the fullest extent possible, limiting their capacity of taking full advantage of their belonging to the Union and increasing their competitiveness in their particular geographic areas;

5. Considers that a broader implementation of Article 349 TFEU would help the ORs integrate more closely into the EU and develop and realise their potential in a way that takes full account of their specific characteristics and structural constraints but also of their assets;

6. Recalls the political will of the legislators at the time of the drafting of Article 299, second paragraph, and then Article 349 TFEU of establishing an overall strategy accompanied by specific measures under different policies and instruments;

7. Recalls that POSEI is a programme which takes full account of the special characteristics of the outermost regions, through a regulation of its own based both on Article 349 of the TFEU and on Articles 42(1) and 43(2), and recognises the dual principles of the ORs' belonging to the Union and the full adaptation of a common European policy to the realities of the outermost regions; it is, therefore, crucial for such a programme to come to fruition and new POSEI programmes relating to other EU policies should be planned;

8. Considers that the success of POSEI justifies retaining provisions specifically pertaining to the ORs rather than diluting them by spreading them across several cross-cutting programmes;

9. Notes that several communications on the ORs have been adopted by the Commission; deplores the fact that the various European strategies for the outermost regions have so far been only partially implemented and fleshed out;

10. Calls now on the Commission to put forward an action plan accompanied, if necessary, by legislative initiatives making it possible to implement a consistent and effective strategy with regard to the outermost regions, a plan which takes full advantage of the possibilities offered by Article 349 TFEU, particularly for the creation of specific programmes and policies –especially on innovation and long-term investment – appropriate to their sustainable development needs; emphasises the need to work in close cooperation with the regional authorities of the ORs and the stakeholders; calls, therefore, on the EU institutions, in concert with the regional authorities in the ORs, to open a new chapter in relations between the EU and the ORs

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11. Welcomes the work of the Commission on a renewed strategy on ORs which will be adopted latest end of 2017; calls on the Commission's strategy to comprise a detailed approach to the ORs, detailed, targeted policy frameworks on investment needs and specific, achievable and measurable objectives; encourages France, Spain and Portugal to lend greater support to their ORs;
12. Recalls that Article 349 of the TFEU enables the outermost regions to be given operating aid that is not limited in time and not progressively reduced, on the basis of flexible procedures, intended to offset the additional costs that they have to handle; recalls that those exemptions relate both to the EU's financial instruments and to State aid;
13. Stresses the need to ensure that the instruments, provisions and derogations adopted for the purpose of maintaining the stability conducive to the structural development of the outermost regions remain in force for a long time, paying due account to the assessments already conducted;
14. Calls on the Commission to compile a precise overview of the approach to the outermost regions and to examine the economic and social situation of each OR so as to help realise EU regional development policy objectives, particularly making up for delays and achieving sustainable development, with a view to enabling the outermost regions to approach the average levels of development which exist in Europe;
15. Calls on the Commission to step up coordination between its directorates-general in the areas concerning the ORs with a view to having an appropriate approach to outermost area issues in European policies and strategies; on that point, emphasises the crucial role of the Secretariat-General in ensuring that Article 349 of the TFEU is applied soundly, given the fact that adjusting EU policies to the special characteristics of the ORs entails decisions being taken at the highest political level;

Agricultural policy

16. Welcomes the recent report by the Commission (COM(2016)0797), which concluded that the overall performance of the POSEI programmes (2006-2014) was positive, considers that that programme seems essential for the purpose of maintaining production by the ORs and that it accords with the new objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and recommends that the current basic regulation should remain in force, while bearing in mind the fact that budget adjustments might be required following the entry into force of any free trade agreements that might change or threaten to change the production of the ORs;
17. Considers that POSEI has been very successful ever since it was established;
18. supports the conclusion of the Commission's report calling for the basic features of POSEI to be consolidated, so as to avert the danger that agricultural production might be abandoned, with all the harmful consequences which that would entail for employment, the environment and the territorial dimension of the ORs;
19. Considers it necessary to provide better support for diversification of production in the ORs, and to introduce actions designed to resolve the market crises which certain sectors are facing, particularly the tomato and livestock sectors, and to facilitate the development of small-scale holdings, such as dairy product holdings;
20. Recalls that the successive reforms of the common organisations of the market (COMs) have not paid sufficient attention to the specific characteristics of the ORs and urges for them to be better taken into account in future;
21. Observes that the disappearance of quotas and guaranteed prices which began with the reform of the COM in sugar in 2005 is damaging cane sugar producers in the ORs; emphasises the need to place on a permanent footing all the specific instruments put in place within the framework of Article 349 of the TFEU in the interests of the sustainable competitiveness of this industry; calls for the establishment of a support scheme for sugar-cane growers in the event of a fall in world sugar prices;
22. Calls on the Commission to take account of the crucial importance of milk production in the Azores, to maintain support to producers and to lay down additional measures in the event of a market crisis;

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23. Recalls that banana production plays a crucial role in the socio-economic fabric of some ORs; calls, therefore, for support for producers to be maintained and, where necessary, increased;
24. Calls on the Commission to include, in its tools for managing and detecting market crises in agricultural sectors such as banana, sugar, rum, fisheries or milk, with the European Milk Market Observatory, a clear definition of a market crisis in the ORs, and to adapt its indicators to the actual situations in those regions;
25. Deplores the fact that the different schemes applicable for organic certification in third countries and in EU Member States distorts competition on that market, to the detriment both of European producers operating in the ORs and of European consumers, who are misled regarding the actual conditions under which those products are produced; calls, therefore, within the framework of the negotiations in progress on the future European standards for the production and labelling of organic products, to replace compliance with the equivalence system currently in force, in order to guarantee fair competition between ORs and third countries;
26. Considers it is necessary to adopt a legal framework, on the basis of Article 349 of the TFEU, for products under the organic label, and a legal framework concerning sanitary and phytosanitary issues that take into account the characteristics of agricultural in the ORs, in a tropical context;
27. Calls on the Commission to encourage the farmers of the ORs to promote their high-quality products by supporting the use of the ORs logo, as well as other forms of quality certification;
28. Highlights that product differentiation and specialisation can further stimulate and promote local production, the processing and marketing of foodstuffs and thereby reduce existing disparities between the ORs and other EU regions;
29. Stresses, in the name of consistency of policies, the fact that the efforts made in the outermost regions to modernise and to render their industries competitive should not be undermined by free trade agreements signed between the EU and third countries;

EU trade policy

30. Recalls that Article 207(3) of the TFEU requires agreements which are negotiated with third countries to be compatible with the Union's policies and internal rules;
31. Notes that the growing number of trade agreements with third countries, including the largest global producers of bananas and sugar, is changing the distribution of the market, creating pressure on prices and threatening the competitiveness of the EU producers of those goods;
32. Considers, therefore, that the Union's trade policy ought not to endanger the industries of the outermost regions, since they play a major role in economic, social and environmental terms;
33. Calls for the trade negotiations conducted by the Union to duly take into account the specific characteristics of ORs and products that are sensitive to them, in particular bananas, sugar, rum, tomatoes and fishery products;
34. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to be painstaking and act with due care and attention in the defence of the interests of the ORs in the negotiations on Brexit;
35. Urges the Commission, in line with the commitment made in its communication of 20 June 2012 to accompany 'proposals for trade agreements, such as the Economic Partnership Agreements, with impact analyses' which should, where relevant, 'address the OR dimension' and encompass the environmental, social, economic and territorial impact on ORs; calls for these impact analyses to measure, in addition, the cumulative effects of trade agreements on the outermost regions;

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36. Deplores the fact that to date no study has been conducted on the consequences of free trade agreements on the agricultural sectors of the ORs; deplores, too, the fact that the ORs have not been taken into account in the Commission's report of 15 December 2016 on the cumulative economic impact of trade agreements contrary to the regulatory provisions laid down by POSEI;

37. Calls for the Union's trade policies to take into account the competitive disadvantages of the ORs; urges, in the event that they are crucial for the protection of products from the ORs, for tariff and non-tariff barriers to be maintained and for safeguard clauses and stabilisation mechanisms to be activated if the products of the outermost regions being seriously affected, or are at risk of this happening;

38. Underlines the limits on the principle of equivalence, particularly for organic agriculture products, which makes it possible for products from third countries which are not in compliance with all the European requirements to enter the European Union; calls for the principle of compliance to be applied immediately and for inspection measures to be stepped up;

39. Calls for the ORs to play a more important role in shaping the foreign policy of the European Union with their neighbouring countries, in an effort to bolster its foreign policy in the areas of poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, strengthening democracy, cultural exchange and gender equality;

Sustainable maritime policy, fisheries and blue growth

40. Recalls that Article 349 of the TFEU stipulates that the Commission may propose measures specific to the ORs, also concerning fisheries policies;

41. Asks the Commission to consider setting up a support system for sustainable fisheries in the ORs based on Article 349 TFEU, in the light of what is being done in the agricultural sector under the POSEI programme;

42. Urges the Commission and the Council to implement all the measures set out in Parliament's resolution of 27 April 2017 on the management of fishing fleets in the outermost regions ⁽¹⁾,

43. Calls on the EU to join forces with the ORs to become a world maritime power;

44. Stresses that both the wealth of the oceans and the technological advances currently being made and to come in the future are able to open up unprecedented growth opportunities for the ORs; considers that sustainable 'blue growth' constitutes an opportunity to mitigate the structural inequalities between the ORs and continental Europe; considers, also, that it can help to make the ORs the focus of a future-centred European policy;

45. Recalls that, in view of their location, the ORs hold an important position with regard to maritime governance, monitoring coastal waters, combating illegal fishing and improving transport safety;

46. Encourages the Union and the Member States to further invest in the seas and oceans, especially in relation to the outermost regions, with a view to ensuring sustainable and efficient economic development of their exclusive economic zones;

47. Welcomes the study launched by the Commission concerning the potential for sustainable blue development in the outermost regions and calls for a genuine European programme for the ORs addressing the challenges on food security, sustainable agriculture, marine and maritime research and the bio-economy; stresses, however, that some activities like the extraction of oil and gas located under the sea floor and the exploration for minerals from deep sea deposits may have severe impacts on sensitive marine areas, and disturb marine species and vulnerable ecosystems;

48. Points out the importance of marine protected areas in the ORs;

⁽¹⁾ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2017)0195.

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Cohesion policy

49. Recalls that Article 349 TFEU provides for specific access to structural funds for the outermost regions and that, on that basis, all the ORs should be regarded as 'least developed regions'; welcomes the Commission's actions in favour of the Outermost regions within in a series of four Communications on the Outermost regions (2004, 2007, 2008 and 2012); stresses the importance of the EU financial support for all the outermost regions which amounts to EUR 13 billion for the 2014-2020 period;

50. Reaffirms that cohesion policy must remain one of the key instruments of European action after 2020, especially with regard to the ORs, where regional disparities are still evident;

51. calls on Member States, given the principle of subsidiarity and their responsibilities, to fully implement the pre-conditions, with regard, in particular, to investment in the areas falling within their jurisdiction, so that European funds and policies in the outermost regions perform as well as possible;

52. Considers that, for the next programming period, more flexibility could be envisaged within the thematic concentration in the case of the outermost regions as regards defining some of their priorities for the use of the structural funds to ensure sustainable development; calls for the continuation of budget allocations to the ORs, of compensation of excess costs, and of all duly justified derogations intended to compensate them for their structural disadvantages;

53. Calls, in the context of the next multiannual financial framework (MFF), for the strict application of the criteria laid down in the general regulation setting financial envelopes;

54. Recalls the shared objective of twofold integration of the ORs; calls for all schemes concerned with cross-border cooperation between the ORs, EU overseas countries and territories (OCTs) and third countries in their geographical regions to be intensified and made operational, in particular by maintaining and improving synergies between the legal and financial provisions of the EDF and EFRD regulations;

55. Stresses the importance of adjusting the European Territorial Cooperation strategies with a view to reducing the negative impact felt by the ORs as a result of their position on the EU's outermost edges and to promoting networking;

56. Recommends that more attention be paid, in the implementation of the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI), to the ORs and the least developed and most isolated regions;

57. Recalls, in the light of youth unemployment in the ORs, the need to intensify EU action to support and train young people in the ORs, particularly by means of the Youth Employment Initiative;

58. Recalls that the most important fund for training and employment is the European Social Fund (ESF); calls on the Commission — in view of the structural nature and critical levels of unemployment in the ORs, and on the basis of Article 349 of the TFEU, which grants the ORs the right to specific access to the Structural Funds — to create an additional allocation within the framework of the ESF in order to support employability, mobility and training in the ORs;

59. Emphasises the importance of continuing to promote research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation (RIS3) in the ORs as a central element in the implementation of cohesion policy;

60. Recalls the importance of local development instruments such as community-led local development (CLLD) and integrated territorial investment (ITI) as a bottom-up approach to respond to local structural challenges while promoting community ownership; calls therefore on the Commission and the concerned Member States to explore ways of strengthening the use of CLLD as a flexible and innovative answer to the need for adaptation expressed by the ORs;

61. Stresses the need to take into account demographic changes in the ORs as a determining factor in the definition of policies to benefit them, particularly as regards education, training and employment policies;

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Competition policy and State aid

62. Recalls that Article 349 of the TFEU stipulates that the Commission may propose measures specific to the ORs, particularly concerning customs and trade policies, fiscal policy, free zones, conditions for supply of raw materials and essential consumer goods and State aids;

63. Recalls, furthermore, that Article 107(3) of the TFEU states that aid to promote the economic development of the ORs may be considered to be compatible with the internal market, in view of their structural, economic and social situation;

64. Calls on the Commission to rely further on Articles 107(3)(a) and 349 of the TFEU in the Regional State Aid Guidelines and the GBER (General Block Exemption Regulation) in order to contribute to the economic and social development of the ORs and pay greater attention to them;

65. Stresses that, given the remoteness and small size of their markets, strengthening the derogations to competition law obtained on the basis of Article 349 of the TFEU and Article 42 TFEU is not liable to affect trade between Member States, nor to destabilise the internal market;

66. Deplores the fact that the initial proposals for simplifying the GBERs and RSAGs did not from the outset and upstream make any provision for altering the rules for the outermost regions so as to successfully ensure the economic development of the ORs;

67. Calls on the Commission to step up its action to combat the large monopolies in the ORs, which contribute to the increase in the cost of living for local people, particularly in the sectors of imports that compete with the development of the local economy, energy, transport and telecommunications;

68. Calls on the Commission to extend the exceptional tax regimes for the outermost regions beyond 2020, based on thorough assessment of their situation, while ensuring progress towards fair and efficient tax systems and stepping up efforts to combat tax fraud in the EU and third countries;

69. Warns of trade practices such as those of clearance markets, which can destabilise the island micro-markets of local economies;

Research, the environment, education, culture, transport, energy and telecommunications

70. Recalls that Article 349 of the TFEU stipulates that the Commission may propose measures specific to the ORs, also concerning the conditions governing their access to the Union's horizontal programmes;

71. Takes the view that cross-cutting EU programmes should provide for access conditions specific to the ORs so as to ensure their effective participation and to promote their assets by means of programmes such as Horizon 2020, Creative Europe, COSME or LIFE;

72. Asks the Commission to integrate the outermost regions fully into the trans-European transport, energy and telecommunications networks;

73. Recalls the need to make the sustainable energy autonomy of the ORs a priority; underlines that the ORs benefit from numerous advantages with regards to the development of renewable energies, energy efficiency and the circular economy;

74. Points to the significant potential of developing research and innovation activities for a solid and sustainable development; calls for the ORs to be given better access to the ESI Funds and Horizon 2020, in order to better connect their universities, research centres and innovative companies, thus making them more attractive and promoting greater exchange between people and institutions, not only within the outermost regions, but also with the European continent and third countries;

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75. Points out the central role played by SMEs in the outermost regions with regard to economic and social development; calls on the Commission, therefore, to take better account of the situation of the ORs within the framework of the COSME programmes, or the EU employment and social innovation programme (EaSI);

76. Considers that exchanges and cooperation between the ORs and neighbouring third countries in the fields of research and innovation, culture and education should be further promoted so as to promote their regional integration;

77. Welcomes the fact that the new Erasmus+ programme encourages the mobility of students and youth entrepreneurs from the ORs by providing for the maximum amount of aid; calls for similar provisions to be included in the Creative Europe programme; wishes, however, for improvement in the way the common characteristics of the outermost regions are taken into account within the framework of the Erasmus programme, including through the promotion of exchanges between outermost regions; Deplores the fact that in spite of recital 37 of the Erasmus+ regulation, which states that 'the constraints imposed by the remoteness of the ORs and the OCTs should be taken into account when implementing the Programme', the amounts of the Erasmus travel allowances are often insufficient to cover the real costs of travel to the mother country for students receiving the allowance who come from the outermost regions;

78. Calls on the Commission to extend the new mobility instrument targeting young people, 'Move2Learn, Learn2Move' to European citizens living in the ORs and to adjust the amounts paid to cover the travel costs offered to them to meet the real costs involved in travelling between the ORs and continental Europe; welcomes the Commission's decision not to restrict this instrument to travel by rail only, which would marginalise young people from overseas;

79. Notes that the Natura 2000 programme is not applicable to French ORs although they enjoy extraordinary biodiversity but are hit particularly hard by the effects of climate change; calls, therefore, for specific protection mechanisms to be set up and for the BEST preliminary action to be put on a permanent footing by creating a sustainable mechanism for funding projects on biodiversity, the promotion of ecosystem services and adaptation to climate change in European overseas countries and territories;

80. Suggests that an impact study be carried out regarding the possibilities of applying the Natura 2000 programme to the French ORs, with a view to establishing the most appropriate tools for the protection of the biodiversity and environment of these regions;

81. Recalls that the mid-term review of the EU Biodiversity Strategy published by the Commission in October 2015 and mentioned by the European Court of Auditors in the Special Report No 1/2017 concluded that, although significant progress has been made since 2011 in implementing the measures under Objective 1, the most significant challenges remain the completion of the marine element of the Natura 2000 network and the guarantee of effective management of the sites and funding needed to support the Natura 2000 network, both of which are important factors for ORs;

82. Recalls that the European Court of Auditors in the Special Report No 1/2017 considered that significant progress was needed from the Member States and further efforts by the Commission to better contribute to the ambitious objectives of the EU's biodiversity strategy for 2020;

83. Recalls that the European Court of Auditors in the Special Report No 1/2017 considered that 'Further efforts are needed to implement the Natura 2000 network in order to fully exploit its potential';

84. Reiterates the role that better internet connectivity must play in territorial cohesion and in promoting equal opportunities, creating jobs and improving people's living standards in the ORs;

85. Invites the Commission to pay attention to the specific nature of the ORs when addressing matters relating to digital network coverage;

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86. Calls for the creation of a specific POSEI-type programme for transport to promote the territorial, social and economic cohesion of the regions and to reduce the isolation, or double isolation, of some ORs; stresses that this programme should provide for support for the transport of people and goods between the ORs and the continent, within the ORs themselves and between ORs that are close to each other, such as the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Isles; highlights that this programme should also promote trade between these regions;

87. Emphasises that the outermost regions are important tourist areas and that investment in a high-quality, affordable transport system is essential, particularly with regard to the internal market;

88. Calls on the European Union to commit decisively to making the ORs internationally accessible, through transport routes and infrastructure, not only to the European continent but also to neighbouring third countries and the rest of the world;

89. Calls for a genuine European industrial strategy to be deployed in the ORs, generating jobs that cannot be outsourced, and based on the capacity of businesses to consolidate their local roots;

90. Considers that the ORs could constitute prime areas for introducing pilot projects for measures to be applied horizontally across the Member States;

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91. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Member States and their regions and the Committee of the Regions.
