

GREENING THE ISLANDS WEBINAR, 26 MAY 2020

- **Presentation of SEARICA, his role, and main current activities**

Dear distinguished guests, dear speakers, I am happy to be here with you today and to share my views on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on islands and possible solutions to help islanders overcoming the consequences it has caused.

First of all, allow me please to present SEARICA - European parliament Intergroup on Seas, rivers, islands and coastal areas that I have the honour to chair and present here today.

It is my great pleasure to see SEARICA continuing to exist in this, third consecutive mandate with the biggest number of members so far - 107 new members from 23 countries and 6 political groups. I like to say that, if we just compare number of members, we would be the third biggest political club in the European parliament and by far the biggest parliamentary committee. Our composition provides a great platform to stimulate debates with other EU institutions and all interested key stakeholders in the European Parliament on different subjects, but also to facilitate the coordination of the Members of the European Parliament in our activities. Aside from myself as a president, board of SEARICA consists from 12 members of the parliament covering different thematic aspects of the maritime agenda.

As some of you know, during the last mandate I was a vice-president of SEARICA in charge of islands, in fact I created this dimension of SEARICA for the first time gathering MEPs interested in islands and joining our efforts with SEARICA colleagues.

After almost 6 years, some results of this work are visible - European parliament adopted resolution on EU islands and some great new initiatives such as Clean Energy for EU islands were created and hopefully will become a permanent structure. I will speak more on that topic towards the end of my speech. For now, I would like to say that these results and increased interest in islands is encouraging, but we cannot be satisfied until the Article 174 of Treaty on the functioning of the European Union is respected. And there, in our common constitution, its written 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.”* Islands are singled out in this context and in this article for a reason.

- **General point on COVID-19 crisis some simple evidences concerning its social-economic impacts**

As all of you know, there is no holistic European maritime strategy covering all of maritime issues. That is perhaps mostly visible now during the pandemic crisis. In this context, the objective of SEARICA is to coordinate our actions and support the development of a strong maritime dimension within the European strategy and the main initiatives proposed by the European Commission.

Ongoing pandemic crisis and economic consequences that are hard to fully predict will have tremendous impact on islands too. I have been in contact with islanders all across Europe and all of them fear that some of the inhabitants, mostly small business owners, will return to mainland being unable to generate sufficient resources to live there. Many of our islands are too dependent on often times unsustainable tourism. While the nature will profit from this crisis, lack of resources generated from touristic activities that are main source of income for

most of the islanders will leave its tool. This is why SEARICA adopted declaration on the impact of COVID-19 that we discussed with the Commissioner Sinkevičius last week. The entire maritime sector is being greatly impacted, from the fishing industry to strategic infrastructures such as ports, sea and inland waterways and supply chains, waterborne transport, coastal and maritime tourism. SEARICA reaffirms its mission to defend the maritime sector and islands in the crisis and post-crisis scenario.

We welcome the measures adopted over the last few weeks to face the Covid-19 crisis, as well as those recently proposed, which are also beneficial to the maritime sector. But there was no measure specifically targeted to the needs of islands. Once again islands are left to struggle within different sectoral programmes and policies to struggle for bits and pieces of it and we want EU maritime policies to incorporate a very strong territorial dimension.

- **References to the European Parliament resolution on the EC's recovery plan**

First step to help the recovery of islands is to concentrate the EU intervention in key sectors that represent strategic asset for Islands. As mentioned, that is already partially done. On top of it I officially asked the European commission to come up with the *Communication on impact of COVID-19 on islands*. The main idea is that islanders could use that document as a base when asking to receive the share of all of assistance programmes already adopted. It would also come as good foundation to redirect the share of funding from future *Recovery plan* to islands.

While awaiting for the *Recovery plan* to be presented tomorrow I would like to remind you of some of the key demands European parliament asked for in our resolution. We call for this massive recovery package to transform our economies and strengthen their resilience through the pooling of strategic investments to support SMEs, and to increase job opportunities and skills to mitigate the impact of the crisis on workers, consumers and families. We want it to be aligned with the *Green Deal*, but most importantly, we ask for it to ensure that the recovery strengthens territorial cohesion and competitiveness, and that it addresses social and economic inequalities and the needs of those hit hardest by the crisis.

In the times when public funding and private investments will be more limited, whereas cost of investments and market size of smaller islands in particular is often not the most profitable solution, EU funding will play even greater role.

One thing I wish to underline here is that, while we are fighting for and support inclusion of islands in future programmes such as *Recovery plan* and *Just Transition Fund*, we need longer term, ***permanent strategy for EU islands*** that would also help us to turn all these challenges in to an opportunity.

- **References to TONINO's initiative in the framework of the Clean Energy for all EU Islands**

When fighting for the islands agenda we often witness similar response, it is impossible to create a special category for them or to tailor a policy that can fit all of their needs, they are so diverse, etc. I think that diversity of islands is one of their best assets and make them the perfect showcase to implement vital policies such as this one on energy transition is. Successful initiative on Clean energy for EU islands and running secretariat are the very good example how EU islands can be and are at the forefront of energy transition and decarbonisation of economies. Who if not islanders are better to show how to turn natural disadvantages and often

scarce resources into sustainable lifestyle, as it is the essence of their existence on islands. Even when natural resources are plenty, technology on how to use and extract them is missing.

This is why we need two crucial things: 1) adequate funding of all-scale projects and 2) adequate investment into research and innovation that will create replicable solutions and ease the transition for everyone.

From the institutional side what we need is a legally binding framework that can be relied upon for the funding purposes. Secretariat is running for almost 2 years now with the 2 million EUR funding my colleagues Sant and myself ensured by proposing a preparatory action plan 3 years ago and it included around 40 European islands in the process of developing energy transition plans and agendas. Their mandate is prolonged till November and in the meantime we are awaiting for the new tender for additional 2 million EUR we ensured to *Teach islands how to tender*. All of the energy transition strategies have limited impact if they are not followed by the concrete projects to implement them. This is why our main goal when proposing this project was to provide technical assistance to islands to attract the funding more successfully.

One issue is that all of these projects have limited mandate and we fight for structural change that would result in a permanent structure for the energy transition of islands and then overall EU strategy for islands. I am particularly proud that one of the concrete outcomes of Croatian presidency will be *Memorandum of understanding* signed by the Member states on 15 June as a first step towards a permanent structure. Initially, there were 14 Member States supportive of such structure and we hope that support for it would grow further.

I wish to conclude by saying that new challenges for the European Union are emerging externally and internally. During the this legislative mandate, all of us working on policies for islands will have to stand united and work together, not only to preserve what we have achieved, but also to upgrade it.

Let's continue with the good work! Thank you!