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Synopsis report on the results of the Communication on the outermost regions consultation activities

Accompanying the document

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Putting people first, securing sustainable and inclusive growth, unlocking the potential of the EU's outermost regions

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# Synopsis report on the results of the Communication on the outermost regions consultation activities

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Consultation Strategy

In the context of the 2022 Commission Work Programme (CWP) and its aim to deliver on a European economy that works for people[1], the Commission carried out consultation activities (both open consultation and targeted consultations) on a new Communication on a strategic approach with and for the outermost regions (OR). The objective of the consultation on the roadmap[2], announcing the Commission's intention for a new Communication regarding the OR, as well as the public and targeted consultations, was to allow stakeholders to share their views, concerns and ideas for action in preparation of the new Communication, which is to replace the 2017 Communication on "A stronger and renewed strategic partnership with the EU's outermost regions"[3].

This report presents the outcome of the consultation activities and aims to inform stakeholders on how their input was analysed in the development of the Communication. The consultation strategy was designed to ensure participation from citizens and stakeholders in order to gauge their views on the development challenges and opportunities in ORs and priorities for EU policies to help address them. Namely, the digital and green transition in the OR; the COVID-19 pandemic impact on these regions; new specific opportunities for the OR under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027; means to improve the dialogue with the OR; as well as mainstreaming of OR specificities across EU policies. The process included the following elements:

***Figure 1**. Consultation streams for the Communication on the OR*

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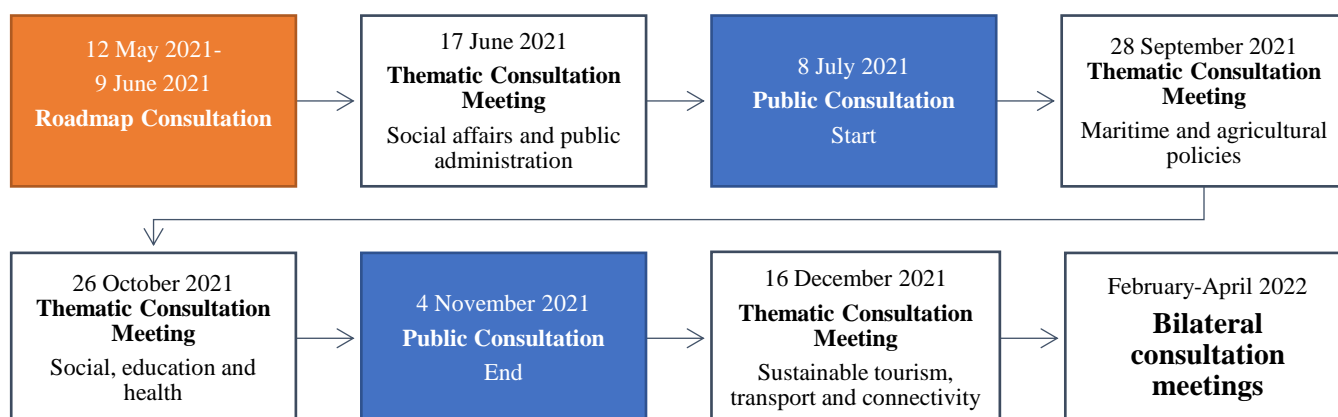
1   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar%3A9fb5131e-30e9-11ec-bd8e-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_2&format=PDF
2   Roadmap: Outermost regions - update of Commission's strategic partnership with these regions (europa.eu)
3   https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/themes/outermost-regions/pdf/rup_2017/com_rup_partner_en.pdf

These consultation steps reached the stakeholders such as the regional governments/ administrations of the OR; national governments of Member States with OR (France, Portugal and Spain); regional, local and municipal authorities; research and academia; trade, business, and professional associations, businesses, trade unions, agricultural federations, non-governmental organisations and citizens, as well as relevant international partners, neighbouring countries and territories. The consultations took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2.   Consultation activities

a. Consultation on the Commission roadmap

The roadmap consultation was open for feedback from **12 May to 9 June 2021**. Overall, **14 responses** were provided by different stakeholders, including individual citizens (29%; 4 responses), non-governmental organisations (14%; 2 responses), companies/business organisations (14%; 2 responses), business associations (14%; 2 responses) and public authorities (7%; 1 response). Approximately 21% of respondents self-identified in the category of *other* (e.g. anonymous respondents, agricultural federation, and inter-regional organisation).

The largest number of replies came from Spain (36%; 5 responses), followed by Portugal (21%; 3 responses), France and Austria (14% each; 2 responses each). The majority of replies addressed the content of the initiative, not the roadmap itself[4]. The stakeholders' contributions for this exercise have been accounted for during the analysis of outcomes of the public and targeted consultation activities.

b. Public Consultation

The public consultation, open from **8 July to 4 November 2021**, collected **57 responses from 10 Member States**. The Commission analysed these responses quantitatively and qualitatively to identify challenges, opportunities and priorities for action. The public consultation combined a mix of closed questions (where respondents replied to a pre-determined selection of answers) and open questions (where they were free to draft their response).

14 out of the 57 respondents to the public consultation also provided attachments. Out of the 14 attachments received, 8 were direct contributions to the public consultation. Such contributions outline a priority concern and corresponding proposals to address the issues presented. The remaining attachments were accompanying documents, not directly responding to the public consultation, but with relevant information about the respective respondents and their priority areas of concern. The attachments received were provided by all categories of respondents, the most common being public authorities (provided 3 out of 14 attachments) and business associations (provided 2 out of 14 attachments).

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[4]   https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13018-Outermost-regions-update-of-Commission%E2%80%99s-strategic-partnership-with-these-regions_en

Figure 2. *Number of respondents by country of origin*
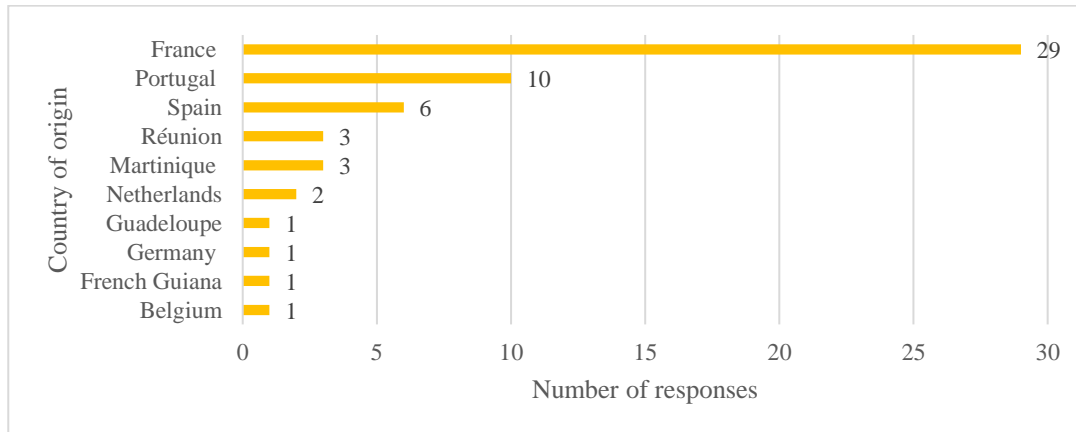
In terms of distribution by country of origin, the majority of replies (29 out of 57 replies; 51%) came from France, followed by Portugal (10 out of 57 replies; 18%) and Spain (6 out of 57 replies; 11%). When looking at the categories of stakeholders, 26 out of the 57 replies came from EU citizens (46%). EU citizens follow a similar distribution by country of origin – when compared to the overall distribution – with almost half of EU citizens replies coming from France (12 out of 26 replies; 46%), followed by Portugal (4 out of 26 replies; 15%) and Spain (4 out of 26 replies; 15%).

In addition, public authorities provided approximately 12% of replies[5]; companies/business organisations 9%; non-governmental organisations another 9%; business associations 7%; academic and research institutions 4% and trade unions 4%. Approximately 11% of respondents self-identified as *other* (e.g. sub-entities of public authorities, agricultural federation, research consortium, interest representation and consulting agency, and a publisher).

For stakeholders identifying as an organisation (approximately 54% of responses, all categories excluding EU citizens), the majority were micro-organisations[6] (35%) and large organisations[7] (31%). Small and medium-sized organisations[8] jointly made up 31% of the responses from organisations. The majority of these organisations listed France as their country of origin (55% of organisations), followed by Portugal (19%), Martinique (7%), Spain (7%) and the Netherlands (7%).

When observing categorisation by region or territory, French organisations identify their region or territory as the group of 6 French OR (41%), a specific French OR (41%) or (metropolitan) France (18%). Alternatively, the majority of Portuguese organisations identify their region or territory as a specific Portuguese OR (83%), and a minority of organisations as the group of Portuguese OR (17%). Spanish organisations have

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[5]   The public authorities participating in the consultation were either French or Portuguese. Namely, the Direction de l'Environnement, de l'Aménagement et du Logement de la République Française; Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie des Outre-Mer; Conseil économique, social et environnementale de la République Française; Conseil économique, social et environnemental de la République Française, Délégation aux Outre-mer; Direção Regional do Arquivo e Biblioteca da Madeira; Direção Regional do Ambiente e Alterações Climáticas; and Instituto para a Qualificação IP RAM.

[6]   Micro-sized organisations have nine or less employees.

[7]   Large-sized organisations have 250 or more employees.

[8]   Small-sized organisations have 10 to 49 employees, and medium-sized organisations have 50 to 249 employees.

exclusively listed their region or territory as a Spanish OR (i.e. the Canary Islands). Comparatively, EU citizens all identified their region or territory as a specific French, Portuguese or Spanish region or territory.

c. Targeted consultations

The Commission services organised two kinds of targeted consultations.

The **first set** consisted of **thematic consultation meetings** with the administrations of the OR and their respective Member States, including experts on the themes of the targeted consultation session.

The **second set** consisted of **bilateral consultation meetings** with the administrations of the OR, and also with the administrations of France, Portugal and Spain. These meetings aimed to identify the key priorities and areas for action, investments and reforms, as well as key concerns and areas for support for each OR.
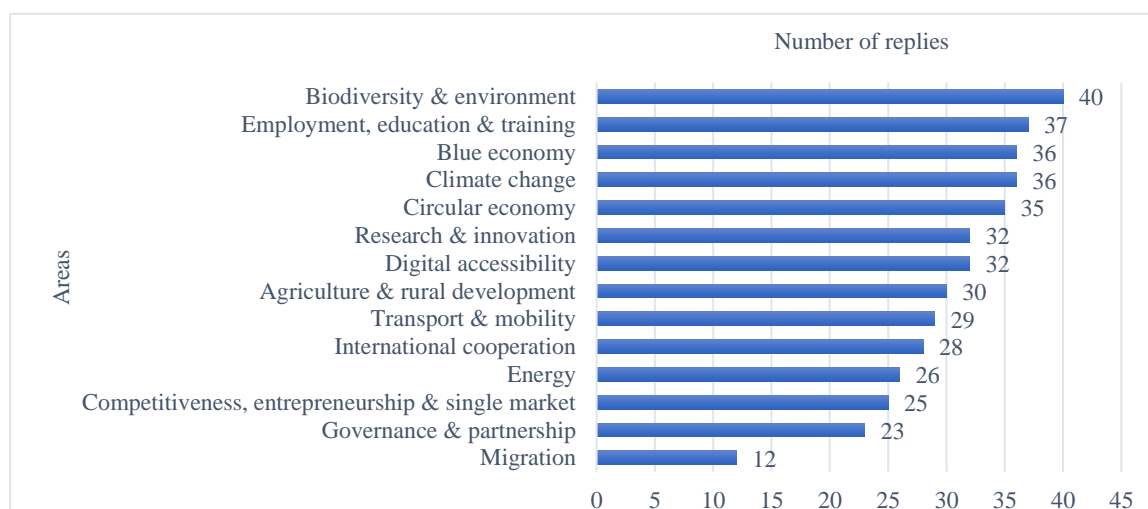
2. PUBLIC CONSULTATION

After quantitatively and qualitatively analysing the results of the public consultation process listed above, it is possible to categorise input by the questionnaire sections. Namely, (2.1) thematic areas, (2.2) green and digital transitions, (2.3) opportunities for the OR in EU funds and programmes, (2.4) COVID-19 impacts on the OR and (2.5) dialogue between the Commission and the OR. Importantly, analysis on the 14 attachments has been integrated into the questionnaire sections mentioned above.

2.1. Thematic areas

The 2017 Communication listed four main objectives, namely, **(i) a new governance based on a strong partnership**, **(ii) building on the OR's assets**, **(iii) enabling growth and job creation** and, **(iv) scaling up cooperation with neighbouring countries**. This section of the questionnaire reflected on current and future thematic areas of the 2017 Communication and the 2022 Communication.

When asked which areas should continue to be prioritised in the 2022 Communication, stakeholders were homogenous in expressing a strong preference for priority areas under objectives **(ii)** and **(iii)** of the 2017 Communication. In particular, most of the top voted areas fall under objective **(ii)** i.e. biodiversity and environment, blue economy, climate change and circular economy. Employment, education and training also figured prominently as the second most popular area to retain as a priority. Areas relating to objectives **(i)** and **(iv)** figured in the bottom five of respondents' selections. In particular, less than 25 out of 57 respondents (44%) voted on migration as well as on governance and partnership.

Figure 3. *Which of the areas of the 2017 Communication would you like to see kept in a new Communication?*

Number of replies

Area	Number
Biodiversity & environment	40
Employment, education & training	37
Blue economy	36
Climate change	36
Circular economy	35
Research & innovation	32
Digital accessibility	32
Agriculture & rural development	30
Transport & mobility	29
International cooperation	28
Energy	26
Competitiveness, entrepreneurship & single market	25
Governance & partnership	23
Migration	12

When discussing **which policy areas should be added to the 2022 Communication**, a majority of respondents expressed a clear preference for cooperation between the OR and other EU countries/regions (39 out of 57 respondents; 68%), water and waste management (33 out of 57 respondents; 58%), as well as cohesion policy (26 out of 57 respondents; 46%). Other noteworthy areas include health (23 out of 57 respondents; 40%), economic recovery (22 out of 57 respondents; 39%) and social policy (21 out of 57 respondents; 37%). Less than 20 respondents selected tourism, culture, and taxation. Finally, less than 10 respondents selected trade and other categories. Under other category, respondents referred to diversity; industry; health infrastructure; creative industries; social economy; cybersecurity; and diplomacy.

Figure 4. *Which should be the top five areas of the new Communication?*

Area	Number
Employment, education & training	27
Cooperation between OR and other EU…	23
Climate change	22
Culture	18
Biodiversity & environment	18
Circular economy	16
Research & innovation	12
Competitiveness, entrepreneurship & single market	12
Cohesion policy	12
Blue economy	12
Agriculture & rural development	12
Transport & mobility	11
Health	11
Digital accessibility	11
Water and waste management	10
Economic recovery	9
Energy	8
International cooperation	7
Tourism	6
Trade	5
Taxation	4
Social policy	4
Governance & partnership	3
Other (mentions industrial development)	1
Migration	0

Number of replies

When asked **which should be the five main priority areas** of the 2022 Communication, no single area was preferred by a majority of respondents (over 50% of respondents). Nevertheless, the least voted areas, namely migration, governance and partnership, taxation and trade consistently appear in the bottom five priority areas, with less than five votes each (less than 9% of respondents, each). The same applies to the **top five voted areas**, which have each been voted for by at least one third of the respondents (less than 33% of respondents). These were in particular, **employment, education and training, cooperation between OR and other EU regions/countries, climate change, culture and biodiversity and environment**.

In addition, a few priority areas of previous questions – for instance, social policy, tourism and water and waste management – received 10 votes or less under this question, signalling that such areas may be important to include in the strategy, but may not be headline or priority areas. Importantly, even if not in the top five areas, several areas have been consistently voted for across the questionnaire – expressly, areas with 11 to 15 votes in Figure 4.

Looking more closely at priority areas by type of respondent, **EU citizens and companies/business organisations** overlap in their priority areas. Even if in a slightly different order, **employment, education, and training, international cooperation, climate change, biodiversity and environment, and circular economy, all feature in the top five areas of these respondents**.

Public authorities and business associations also overlap in their priority areas. In this case, **employment, education, and training, research and innovation, competitiveness, entrepreneurship, and single market are priority areas for both types of respondents**.

Overall, the areas of **employment, education, and training (with votes from all types of respondents)** are the most common selections across the board. In addition, the written contributions to the questionnaire reflect these quantitative results. When asked about **specific actions that should be added in the 2022 Communication, the most referenced areas include: employment; education and training; development of basic infrastructures; the sustainable recovery of important sectors such as tourism, blue economy and culture; cooperation between the OR and their corresponding Member States**. In these responses, the socio-economic and environmental dimensions were consistently prioritised by respondents.

When asked about other issues that should also be addressed by EU policy for the OR, respondents mentioned a range of themes, including: improved accessibility and quality of higher-education; improved response in the OR to health emergencies; further investment in basic infrastructures, for instance waste management facilities; improved response to migratory pressures in relevant ORs; and implementation of strategies to combat discrimination.

2.2.   Green and digital transitions

This section of the questionnaire sought to understand **how the OR can contribute to fostering a green and digital transition**. First, OR are viewed as 'strategic territories', 'open air laboratories' or 'experimental regions' for both the green and digital transitions. Respondents described the OR's unique assets and characteristics (i.e. remote, geographically smaller, rich biodiversity, etc.) and expressed that these could be ideal locations to test good practices in the fields of green and digital.

Second, there was a strong emphasis across all categories of respondents on the potential contribution of the OR to research and innovation, in particular, in poles of research on climate change, biodiversity and the environment, forest protection and renewable energies. Respondents encouraged structural projects in the fields of agriculture, transport and mobility, as well as energy in the OR. Respondents argued that the OR could contribute to the twin transition (i.e. the green and digital transition) with sustainable and self-sufficient production/ consumption models that could be tested in the OR and later incorporated across the EU continent.

Finally, there was a stronger focus on the green transition rather than on the digital transition. When discussing digitalisation, respondents emphasised the need to establish and maintain basic infrastructures for improved connectivity, as well as the importance of digital skills in education and training. Comparatively, the green transition received more attention from respondents in the form of a broader range of ideas and concerns, for instance, climate change; biodiversity and the environment; forest protection; marine protection; blue economy; renewable energies; and sustainability in agriculture.

This section also looked at the **constraints faced by the OR in fostering the twin transition**. In a similar manner, the second question of this section reflected uniformity across all categories of respondents, including by country and region of origin. Some of the listed constraints include:

- The geographical characteristics of the OR, such as remoteness, insularity and vulnerability to natural catastrophes and extreme climate events;
- The socio-economic characteristics of the OR, such as low Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, lack of economies of scale, additional costs, dependency on vulnerable sectors and their relatively small market size;
- High imports in areas such as agriculture and energy, and high exports in waste management (i.e. dependence on shipping to the continent);
- Lack of investment and infrastructure for essential services, renewable energy production and distribution, waste management, connection to broadband or fast fibre;
- Lack of education and professional training in green and digital areas;
- Burdensome administrative requirements in access to funding;
- Lack of administrative capacity and skills in public administration.

Finally, this section sought to understand **how each governance level (Commission, Member States, and regional/local authorities) can support the OR in fostering the twin transition**. Respondents did not always clearly attribute actions to a specific governance level; however, certain patterns can be observed. As in Figure 5 , demands for the Commission generally focused on issues of access to adequate funding, regulation of essential services, and engagement with relevant stakeholders across the EU population (e.g. youth in the OR). Interestingly, the demands for Member States and regional and/or local authorities tended to overlap, with an overall focus on ensuring adequate education and training, assisting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the twin transition, and investing in basic infrastructure for essential services linked to the twin transition, among others.

Figure 5. How can each governance level (Commission, Member States, and regional/local authorities) support the OR in fostering the twin transitions?

Commission	Member States	Regional and/or local authorities
• Continue to provide funds and expertise through relevant programmes; • Reduce the administrative burden for access to funding; • Connect stakeholders from different regions and to the continent; • Engage with the youth on policy making; • Monitor distribution of funds in the OR; • Consider OR specificities when regulating essential services (i.e. energy or connectivity).	• Focus on education and training on green and digital transitions; • Facilitate SMEs' applications in access to EU funding through training and assistance; • Invest in basic infrastructure for essential services (i.e. waste, energy, connectivity, health and transport); • Consider the competitive disadvantages of the OR compared to the continent and steer implementation of EU and national policies adequately.	• Provide education and training opportunitites in EU policies for local authorities; • Increase awareness of the twin transition in local populations; • Create programmes for assisting SMEs in the twin transition; • Strengthen public procurement, in particular, for provision of basic infrastructure for essential services; • Introduce payment of green supplementary fees in tourist packages.

2.3. Opportunities for the OR in EU funds and programmes

The EU funds and programmes for 2021-2027 provide unprecedented opportunities for the OR, with specific provisions for these regions in more than 20 pieces of legislation. This section of the questionnaire examined respondent awareness of such opportunities, reflected on adequate communication channels, and probed the existing constraints currently encountered in the OR, when accessing funds and/or programmes.

When considering respondents' awareness of EU funds and/or programmes for 2021-2027, 25 out 57 respondents (approximately 44%) claimed to be aware of opportunities for the OR under such funds and/or programmes. From the perspective of categories of respondent, there is a disparity in awareness levels between categories. As demonstrated in Figure 6, all respondents in the categories of academic/research institutes (2 respondents), business associations (4 respondents) and trade unions (2 respondents) claim to be aware of such opportunities. In contrast, all respondents in the category of non-governmental organisations (5 respondents), claim to be unaware or unsure of such opportunities for the OR. Interestingly, EU citizens (9 out of 26 respondents; 32%) score higher than public authorities (1 out of 7 respondents; 14%) in awareness.

Figure 6. Are you aware of opportunities for the OR in the EU funds and programmes for 2021-2027? (by category of respondent)
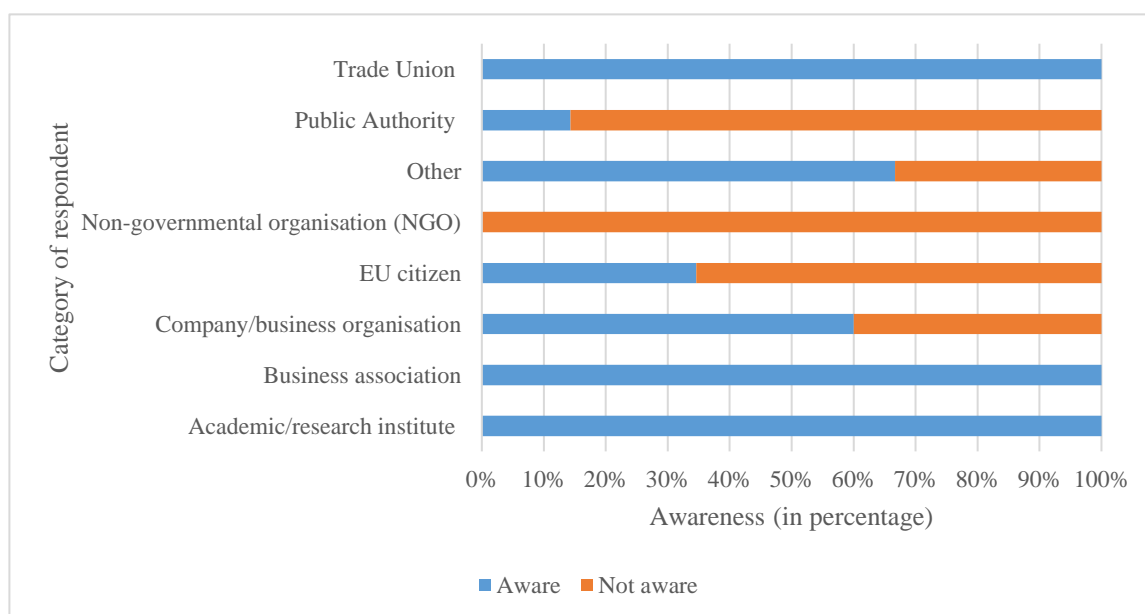
When asked what would be the best communication channels to raise awareness of funding and programming opportunities for the OR, replies differed by category of respondent. A recurring theme, in most respondents' replies was the need for a more "local dimension" for communication channels to raise awareness[9].

EU citizens responding to the questionnaire repeatedly mentioned easily accessible communication channels such as social media, television and radio, as well as public events in local universities. Several EU citizens also expressed the need for paper-based dissemination, in particular for the French and Spanish OR. In contrast, trade unions, companies/business organisations and business associations expressed that European institutions should target companies directly and rely on local authorities (e.g. local chambers of commerce), social partners, local business organisations and professional federations. Public authorities tended to agree with the latter, adding the creation of local bodies and digital platforms to disseminate information. Non-governmental organisations pointed towards paper-based publicity, and the organisation of information, clarification and outreach activities aiming towards direct contact at the local, regional and national level. Finally, when outlining the existing constraints for funding and programming in the OR, respondents across all categories, countries and regions consistently expressed a need for more transparent and accessible communication of opportunities for the OR under the EU funds and/or programmes. Several argued that despite their existence, awareness or understanding of such opportunities is verifiably low (only 25 out 57 respondents; 44%).

Respondents called for more flexibility and an overall simplification of the application process for EU funds and/or programmes. Several maintained the existence of 'red tape' that privileges larger companies/business organisations with sufficient human and financial resources to overcome the administrative burden, and restricts very small enterprises (VSEs) and SMEs. Respondents also highlighted the need for more

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9 The Commission has promoted the presence of Europe Direct Centres in the OR, which provide information about EU programmes.

(administrative) support measures from, for instance, managing authorities or local chambers.

In order to tackle some of these issues, respondents suggested that regional and local authorities in the OR are trained to better understand EU funds and/or programmes, with an aim to support VSEs and SMEs in the application process. In addition, respondents recommended the establishment of support and advice points in professional and business associations, with direct access to companies and/or business organisations. Due to the specificities of the OR – including their remoteness – respondents advocated for a more decentralised and tailor-made management of EU funds and/or programmes. This would entail accounting for language barriers, lack of human and financial resources and the specificities of most companies/business organisations in the OR. Several respondents sustained that tailoring the award criteria of such funds and/or programmes to OR specificities would be useful to maximise access across these regions.

2.4.   COVID-19 impacts on the OR

The following section of the questionnaire surveyed respondents on their outlook on the impacts of the global health crisis in the OR. In particular, it asked respondents **how they themselves, their communities or their organisation had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic**, and what **actions are needed at each governance level to mitigate these impacts**.

In terms of impacts, respondents outlined the overall fragility of the healthcare systems in the OR and their vaccination efforts. Importantly, in all French OR the vaccination rate is lower than in metropolitan France, while in the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Islands, vaccination has progressed well. Respondents across different countries and regions emphasised that all the OR had experienced lockdowns and closure of non-essential services, which undoubtedly resulted in socio-economic repercussions for companies/business organisations and civil society. Many respondents pointed towards the disproportionate connectivity and socio-economic impact of border closures in the OR, due to their remoteness (i.e. dependence on imported goods) and high-dependence on the tourism sector. Across all categories of respondents, EU citizens focused most on unemployment, social security, social isolation and mental health.

In terms of suggested response strategies, respondents listed a diverse range of possible solutions. EU citizens expressed appreciation for the support from all governance levels towards vulnerable sectors and citizens. Companies/business organisations and business associations focused on the need to ensure financial support mechanisms for companies/business organisations to remain operational and recover from the socio-economic impacts of the crisis. In particular, respondents called for the EU funds and/or programmes to be delivered as rapidly as possible to ensure a sustainable recovery from the crisis. Furthermore, these categories of respondents encouraged further subsidised education and professional training, particularly in the context of the twin transition.

Many respondents from different categories, countries and regions, advocated an acceleration and/or completion of the vaccination campaign in the OR, through awareness campaigns and increased accessibility to vaccine centres in remote or rural areas (i.e. transportation). Respondents also called for further strengthening of health systems in the most impacted ORs, including in the field of mental health. Lastly, there

was clear agreement on the need to encourage and support the safe reopening of the tourism sector in the OR, given its importance for cultural, economic and social stability.
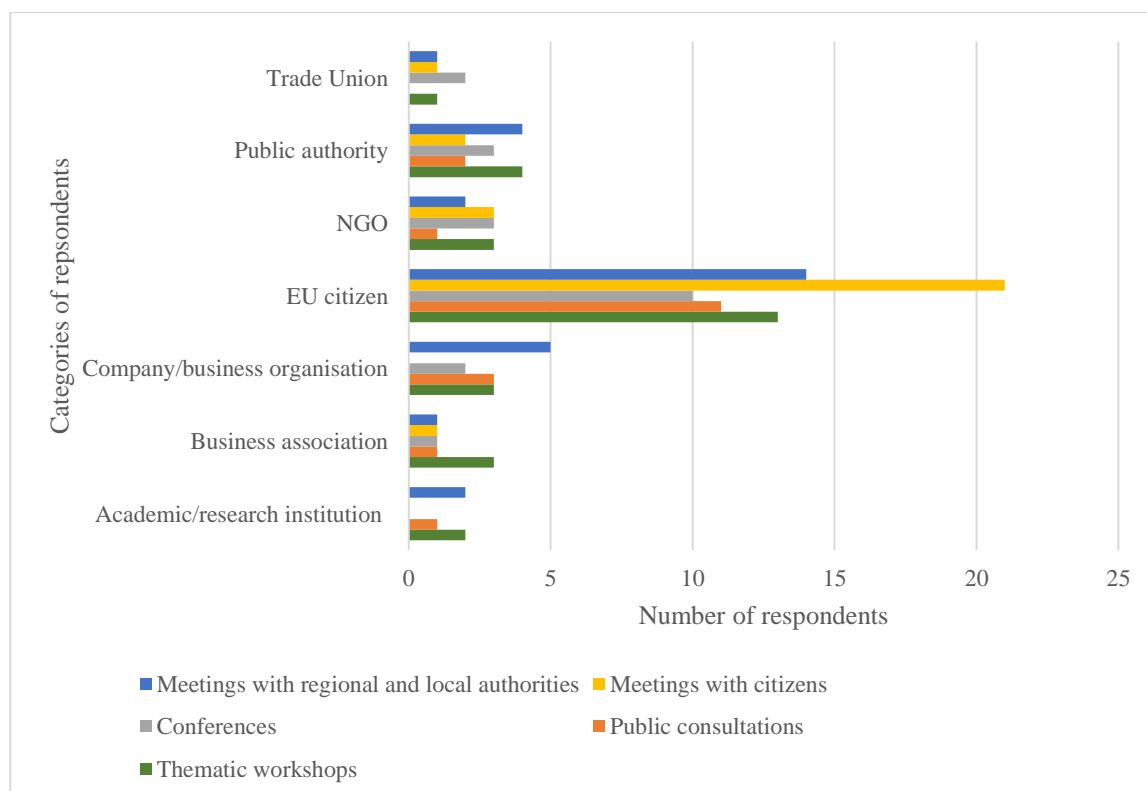
2.5.   Dialogue between the Commission and the OR

The final section questioned respondents on their views on current dialogue and partnership between the Commission and the OR. Respondents were asked to indicate – from a list of five possibilities – which are the best ways to strengthen the dialogue and partnership with the OR.

On average, all five possibilities received votes from at least 19 out of 57 respondents (33% of respondents). Overall, thematic workshops and meetings with regional/local authorities each received votes from 29 out of 57 respondents (23% of total votes, each). Meetings with citizens followed closely (28 out of 57 respondents; 22% of total votes), followed by conferences (21 out of 57 respondents; 17% of total votes) and public consultations (19 out of 57 respondents; 15% of total votes).

When analysing these results by category of respondent, it is unsurprising that 21 out of 26 EU citizens (81%) advocate for further meetings with citizens, and that 4 out of 6 public authorities (67%) prefer meetings with local/regional authorities. Business organisations, academic/research institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) appreciate thematic workshops the most, while companies/business organisations side with public authorities in their preference for meetings with regional/local authorities.

Figure 7. What are the best ways to strengthen further the dialogue and partnership between the Commission and OR?
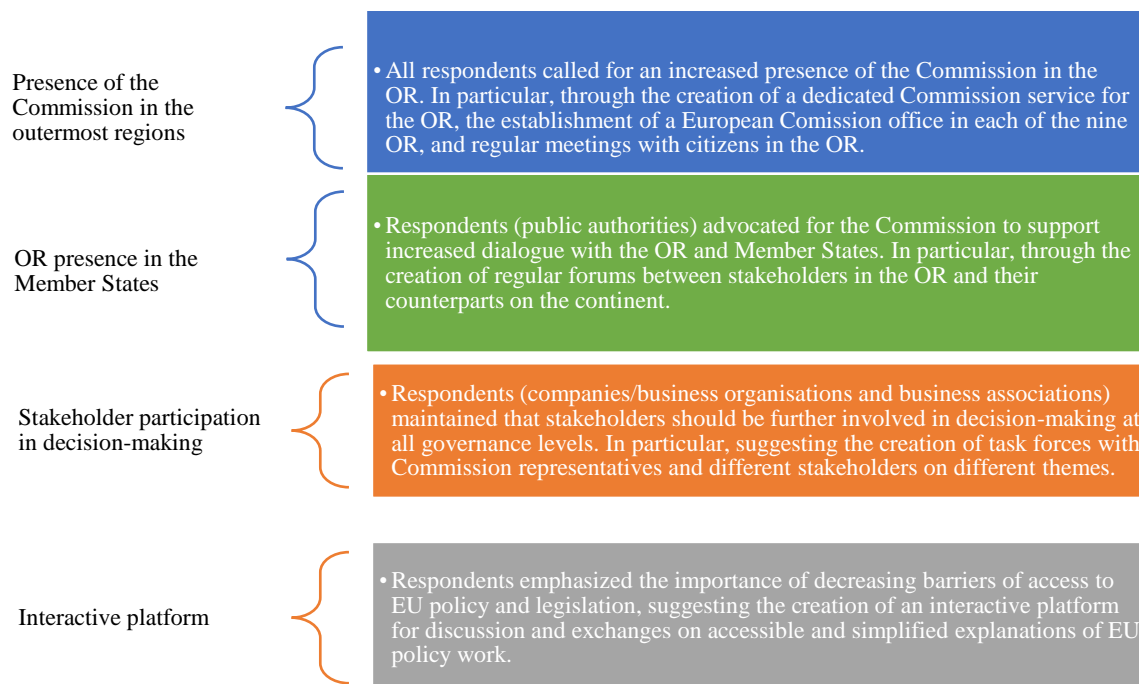

When considering improvement of existing dialogue and cooperation tools, only public authorities were asked to comment. As such, 7 out of 57 respondents (12%) replied to the questionnaire. The replies indicate that **respondents are satisfied with the existing**

dialogue and cooperation tools mentioned in the questionnaire. A couple of respondents maintained that while at political level dialogue is strong, further cooperation is welcomed at technical level for research and innovation.

Finally, respondents were asked about their suggested means to strengthen the dialogue and partnership between the Commission and the OR. Four main areas were highlighted:

Figure 8. Which other means could strengthen the dialogue and partnership between the Commission and the OR?

Presence of the Commission in the outermost regions	• All respondents called for an increased presence of the Commission in the OR. In particular, through the creation of a dedicated Commission service for the OR, the establishment of a European Comission office in each of the nine OR, and regular meetings with citizens in the OR.
OR presence in the Member States	• Respondents (public authorities) advocated for the Commission to support increased dialogue with the OR and Member States. In particular, through the creation of regular forums between stakeholders in the OR and their counterparts on the continent.
Stakeholder participation in decision-making	• Respondents (companies/business organisations and business associations) maintained that stakeholders should be further involved in decision-making at all governance levels. In particular, suggesting the creation of task forces with Commission representatives and different stakeholders on different themes.
Interactive platform	• Respondents emphasized the importance of decreasing barriers of access to EU policy and legislation, suggesting the creation of an interactive platform for discussion and exchanges on accessible and simplified explanations of EU policy work.

3. TARGETED CONSULTATIONS

The targeted consultations consisted of **thematic consultation meetings** with the administrations of the OR and their respective Member States, as well as **bilateral consultation meetings** with the administrations of the OR, and also with the administrations of France, Portugal and Spain.

3.1. Thematic consultation meetings

The thematic consultation meetings addressed four main themes: (a) social affairs and public administration; (b) maritime and agricultural policies; (c) social, education and health; and (d) sustainable tourism, transport and connectivity. These themes were selected according to potential priorities of the 2022 Communication and upon request of the OR authorities. At each targeted consultation, relevant Commission services presented, on each respective theme, existing legislation, policy initiatives, as well as funds and programmes, with a focus on the specific opportunities and provisions for the OR. The Commission and representatives from the OR and Member States participated in all meetings and were given the opportunity to present their priorities and raise questions on various EU matters. The bilateral meetings addressed questions related to each region's development strategies, areas for support and important obstacles.

3.1.1. *Social affairs and public administration*

The thematic consultation meeting on **social affairs and public administration** took place virtually on 17 June 2021. The discussion aimed at understanding current OR concerns on the social dimension.

The **French OR** focused on two major issues, namely **access to social rights** and **support for education and training opportunities**. Representatives of two French regions called for putting priority on education, training and lifelong learning in the 2022 Communication, in particular for women and the youth. Three other regions highlighted the social issues linked to rapid population growth (e.g. youth unemployment, high demand for social supports, increasing vulnerability of the elderly), and the need for mobility in the labour market.

The **Portuguese OR** emphasised that OR specificities perpetuate certain socio-economic difficulties. One of the regions called for additional support in four main areas: education and vocational training; employment (labour mobility and entrepreneurship); social (ageing population and access to health care); and State aid (further support under the COVID-19 temporary framework). A representative of another region echoed these concerns, adding that further social support will be needed for full socio-economic recovery in the most vulnerable sectors (e.g. tourism).

Finally, the **Spanish OR** echoed comments from the other regions and reported that further accessible funding and support is needed to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights in the OR. This region also mentioned the growing issue of migration and echoed the French OR in calling for an ambitious strategy on migration and asylum, in particular for unaccompanied minors.

3.1.2. *Maritime and agricultural policies*

The second thematic consultation meeting, on **maritime and agricultural policies**, took place virtually on 28 September 2021. This consultation focused on outlining the current priorities for the OR regarding maritime and agricultural policies.

Maritime policies

The **French OR** mentioned a range of concerns and priorities. First, they expressed the need for further assistance for the renewal of the fishing fleet for small-scale coastal fishing. The French OR also emphasised the strengthening of the blue economy (through investment on aquaculture, renewable marine energies, etc.), including improvements on data collection on blue economy (through more investment in research centres/observatories). One of the regions specifically mentioned the importance of maritime spatial planning (through better port infrastructure and landing sites), and echoed comments on the need to continue fighting against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Another region added that combatting marine hazards (such as invasive species, plastic pollution, etc.) should also be prioritised.

The **Portuguese OR** stressed the importance of fisheries as a traditional sector and blue economy strategies in the coming years, and expressed the need for improving data collection on blue economy and for further support for promising blue sectors (e.g. biotechnologies and desalination).

Lastly, the **Spanish OR** underlined the need to coordinate action across sectors in implementing their blue economy strategy, to improve the fishing fleet, and to consider

the adoption of implementing acts for the entry/exist scheme of Article 23 of the Common Fisheries Policy.

Agricultural policies

The **French OR** focused on the persistent issues of lack of equipment and infrastructure, despite support at European, national and regional level. One of the regions in particular highlighted the need for EU support to finance surveillance systems in agricultural holdings.

The **Portuguese OR** stressed four main priorities in agricultural policy. First, the need to increase the POSEI budget to account for specific challenges in the agricultural sector of the OR. Second, the need to increase the maximum thresholds for State aid measures and eligibility rules in agriculture policy. Third, the need to consider the specificities of the OR in the context of animal transport and finally, the need to take into account the structural difficulties faced by the OR in view of the 'Fit for 55' package.

The **Spanish OR** also stressed obstacles in its agricultural sector. Namely, the low production standards from third countries with similar agricultural goods, the lack of indexation of the POSEI budget, and the inclusion of the Spanish OR in the national Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan.

3.1.3. *Social, education and health*

The third thematic consultation meeting, on **social, education and health policies**, took place virtually on 26 October 2021. This consultation focused on outlining the current priorities for OR in social, education and health policy.

Social and Education policy

The OR raised issues on a number of social and education gaps in the OR, in particular, in the areas of digital skills, soft skills and vocational education and training (VET). In addition, the inclusion of cross-cutting issues such as the need to include green and digital issues in curricula was emphasised as a priority, in particular in cases where sectors require internationally-recognised certifications. Finally, the OR expressed the need for increased investments in school infrastructure and facilities, digital resources and mobility. **The French OR** focused on improving opportunities for exchanges under the Erasmus+ programme, including with neighbouring countries. The **Portuguese and the Spanish OR** raised the need to reduce school dropout rates and asked for further support on VET, including the digitalisation of curricula. OR also raised the lack of uptake in technology and digitalisation by smaller enterprises.

Health policy

Across the board, the fragilities of the health systems in the OR were stressed. The **French OR** raised questions of eligibility in the EU4Health Programme and emphasised significant shortages of medical staff. The **Spanish OR** stressed that they are particularly vulnerable to diseases and natural disasters, and advocated for further investment on local protection and prevention measures against these hazards.

3.1.4. *Sustainable tourism, transport and connectivity*

The final thematic consultation meeting, on **sustainable tourism, transport and connectivity**, took place virtually on 16 December 2021. This consultation focused on outlining the current priorities for OR in these policy areas.

Sustainable tourism

Across the board, OR representatives stressed that the recovery of the tourism sector will be crucial for the socio-economic recovery of these regions. In the specific context of the global health pandemic and the issue of the volcanic eruption on La Palma, the **Spanish OR** called for further consideration of OR specificities in EU legislation (e.g. exemptions from emission reduction schemes). The **Portuguese OR** echoed these comments and underlined that ensuring direct and stable transport is imperative for the recovery of the sector.

Transport

The OR recalled that the current state of transport and mobility in several of the nine regions is below EU standards. In line with the conclusions of the 2021 Conference of Presidents of the Outermost Regions, calls for improvements in land, air and maritime transport were expressed by the OR representatives. The **Spanish OR** stressed the importance of transport and mobility for tourism and underlined that sustainable and smart transport infrastructure is essential for the recovery of this sector.

Connectivity

The OR outlined the current gaps in connectivity when compared to their Member States on the continent, specifying that broadband coverage is not satisfactory for several of the OR. The **Spanish OR** explained that these differences also exist between regions and within regions, with a particularly acute disparity in connectivity between urban and rural settings. The **Portuguese OR** recalled that the submarine cables that ensure connectivity between them and the European continent would need to be renewed.

3.2. Bilateral consultation meetings with the OR

The Commission services organised bilateral consultation meetings with the administrations of the OR to consult them individually on key priorities and areas for action, investments and reforms, as well as key concerns and areas for support for each OR. Eight bilateral consultation meetings took place in February and March 2022 and one written contribution was provided to the Commission in April 2022[10]. The following key priorities and concerns were raised.

3.2.1. *Key priorities and areas for action, investments and reforms*

Social dimension: the OR underlined their commitment to measures in the areas of education and training, health, and employment as priority areas for action, investments and reforms. The OR highlighted the positive impact of investments in

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[10] On 11 February 2022 with the Azores and Madeira respectively, on 16 February 2022 with the Canary Islands, on 17 February 2022 with French Guiana, on 28 February 2022 with Guadeloupe, on 9 March 2022 with Réunion and Martinique, and on 10 March 2022 with Mayotte. Saint-Martin provided a written contribution in April 2022.

basic infrastructure, access to essential services (e.g. education, health, transport, water management, waste management, energy, etc.) and poverty reduction.

Economic recovery and resilience: the OR emphasised on-going efforts to strengthen their regional economies to reduce current divergences with national socio-economic indicators (e.g. GDP, (youth) unemployment rates and poverty). The OR continue diversifying and formalising their economies, and investing in the sectors hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. tourism).

Environment and climate change: most OR underlined the importance of preserving and optimising regional natural resources (i.e. air, sea and land) for sustainable exploitation of their assets (e.g. geographic location, tropical climate, rich biodiversity). The OR underlined the importance of investing in basic infrastructure to better adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Optimisation of regional assets: the OR underscored their commitment to investing in sectors that optimise regional assets and diversify their regional economies (e.g. tourism, blue economy, circular economy, renewable energies). This includes improving the competitiveness of their business sectors, attracting investment into regional areas of speciality as well as research and innovation.

3.2.2. Key concerns and areas for support

Structural unemployment, poverty and social exclusion: the OR prioritised the social dimension, stressing challenges such as (youth) unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. Most French OR in particular asked for further support for basic infrastructure and essential services, in particular, for vulnerable populations such as the youth and the elderly. The OR are particularly concerned about the persistent high rates of youth unemployment and secondary school drop-out.

Connectivity: the OR asked for further support in ensuring regular, reliable and affordable connectivity between the OR and mainland EU. There was particular emphasis in the areas of digital connectivity, energy and transport. The OR asked for support in ensuring that their specificities are adequately considered in relevant EU legislative proposals (e.g. 'Fit for 55' package).

Administrative and technical capacity: the OR asked for support in further building their administrative and technical capacities, in particular as regards managing EU funds and preparing applications for competitive EU programmes (e.g. the Connecting Europe Facility and the LIFE Programme). The OR also expressed the need for technical expertise in preparing calls for proposals/requests for funding, especially for complex infrastructural projects.

Migration: some OR are facing acute migratory pressures and expressed concern that regional migratory trends exceed their capacities (including unaccompanied minors). The OR requested technical and financial support in particular for adequate housing and care for incoming asylum seekers and their adequate distribution across the EU.

3.3. Bilateral consultation meetings with the Member States

At the bilateral meetings with France, Portugal and Spain, which took place on 1-4 April 2022, these Member States raised the following main issues. Improving the social situation in their respective OR e.g. implementing the European Pillar of Social rights, in particular reducing poverty, supporting job creation and improving access to healthcare

and education, is a priority for the three Member States. Economic recovery is also part of these Member States' priorities and the need to focus on key sectors such as tourism was raised. In addition, digital connectivity, mobility and the possible impact of climate related regulations on transport prices are shared concerns. The three Member States raised the need to reflect the OR specificities across policies and in proposals for EU legislation in line with Article 349 TFEU.

Key challenges raised include the important needs in terms of basic infrastructure in some OR (e.g. water and waste management infrastructure), OR vulnerability to extreme weather events, demographic challenges, the strong migration challenges that affect some OR, and the impact of the war in Ukraine e.g. on energy prices.

4. INPUT BY THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE ADVISORY BODIES, THE OR AND THEIR MEMBER STATES

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the OR[11] and the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee also adopted an opinion each[12].

In November 2021, the Conference of Presidents of the Outermost Regions endorsed a declaration and an annex presenting proposals for the new Communication.

In addition, in January 2022, the Conference of Presidents of the Outermost Regions, together with France, Portugal and Spain endorsed a joint position paper[13] presenting proposals for future EU action in the context of shaping the new Communication.

[11] Towards a stronger partnership with the EU outermost regions – European Parliament resolution of 14 September 2021 towards a stronger partnership with EU outermost regions (2020/2120(INI))

[12] Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on the European Commission report on the implementation of the renewed strategic partnership with the EU's outermost regions – 2021/C 37/10 Official Journal of the European Union; Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the benefits of the outermost regions for the EU (exploratory opinion) ECO/567-EESC-2021

[13] Document de position commune aux 3 États membres et aux 9 Régions Ultrapériphériques

5. CONCLUSIONS

The consultation activities outlined in this synopsis report aimed to provide stakeholders with a wide range of opportunities to share their views, concerns and ideas for action in the context of the preparation of the Communication. Overall, the following conclusions can be taken from this report:

- In the context of addressing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders emphasised the following **key priorities and areas for action, investments and reforms**: the **social dimension** (e.g. employment, education, training and healthcare); **economic recovery and resilience** (in particular of the sectors hardest hit by the crisis); **environment and climate change** (e.g. biodiversity, preparedness and mitigation of natural disasters, circular economy), the **optimisation of regional assets** (e.g. tourism), and **cooperation** between the OR and other EU regions/Member States.

- Stakeholders stressed that **structural unemployment, poverty and social exclusion** are key concerns and areas where EU support is needed.

- Improving **basic infrastructure and essential services**, **ensuring connectivity**, and tackling region-specific issues such as **migration**, were amongst the most important concerns raised by stakeholders.

- The need for support in **building administrative and technical capacity** to benefit from EU funds and programmes was another recurring concern expressed.

- Stakeholders emphasised the **potential contribution of the OR to fostering the green and digital transition**, e.g. through research on climate change, and action on renewable energies, circular economy, digital infrastructure and digital skills.

- Stakeholders underlined the need for **accessible information on opportunities under the EU policies, funds and programmes**, and more in general for stronger **dialogue and support for the OR**.

All input provided was analysed and taken into account in the shaping of the 2022 Communication.