

(English version)

**Question for written answer E-000531/26
to the Commission**

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(10 February 2026)

Subject: Social Mobility Subsidy for Madeira and the Azores and compliance with EU law

Residents of the autonomous regions of Madeira and the Azores, both outermost regions of the EU, benefit from a mobility support scheme designated as the Social Mobility Subsidy (SSM). The scheme applies to air travel between these regions and mainland Portugal and to flights between Madeira and the Azores but excludes inter-island travel within the same autonomous region. It operates exclusively through a reimbursement system, requiring residents to pay the full ticket price upfront and receive compensation only afterwards.

This model may create financial barriers for residents with limited liquidity and result in unequal treatment compared with citizens in mainland regions. By contrast, other outermost regions, such as the Canary Islands, apply systems that reduce travel costs directly at the time of purchase. This raises concerns in the light of Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union regarding economic, social and territorial cohesion.

In this context, the Commission is asked:

1. Does the current SSM model comply with EU law and the principles of cohesion and equal treatment?
2. Does it consider that a reimbursement-only model acts as a de facto obstacle to free movement in the outermost regions?
3. When assessing national mobility schemes, has the Commission examined alternative or more harmonised approaches to supporting mobility in the outermost regions?

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Answer given by Mr Tzitzikostas on behalf of the European Commission
(22 May 2026)

1. It corresponds to Member States to formulate and execute their social aid programmes ⁽¹⁾. Portugal (and its autonomous regions of Azores/Madeira) can legislate on transport subsidies, passenger benefits, and territorial schemes, provided they respect EU law. In particular, Article 51 of the General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER) ⁽²⁾ specifies the conditions for compatibility of national aid measures for air transport benefiting residents of remote regions. This regulation exempts this type of social aid from the obligation of prior notification to the Commission, provided that the conditions laid down in the GBER are fulfilled. Therefore, the Commission has not assessed the Portuguese Social Mobility Subsidy (SSM) scheme.
2. Member States are responsible for designing, implementing and evaluating efficiency of their social aid programmes and may determine the method by which aid is delivered. EU law does not prescribe a specific disbursement mechanism: both direct price reductions applied at the point of sale and post-purchase reimbursement systems may be used. The choice between these approaches is therefore a matter of national policy.
3. EU law permits Member States to impose a public service obligation (PSO) for scheduled air services between an airport in the Union and an airport serving a peripheral or development region ⁽³⁾. Member States may use either PSOs or social aid granted under Article 51 GBER or both mechanisms to address the connectivity needs of residents of remote and outermost regions, depending on their specific circumstances.

⁽¹⁾ Art. 153 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) specifies that the EU role in this area is only that of supporting and complementing the activities of the Member States in this field, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12016ME%2FTXT>.

⁽²⁾ 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, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:02014R0651-20230701>.

⁽³⁾ Art. 16 of Regulation (EC) No 1008/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 September 2008 on common rules for the operation of air services in the Community, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2008/1008/oj/eng>.