European Union Solidarity Fund: assessment

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted an own-initiative report by Salvatore CICU (EPP, IT) on the European Union Solidarity Fund: an assessment.

Members recalled that since it was established, the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF) has served a very useful purpose, having mobilised, in total, **EUR 3.8 billion in connection with more than 70 disasters within 24 beneficiary states and accession countries**, and has been used in response to a wide range of natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, flooding, forest fires, storms and, more recently, drought.

The instrument was **comprehensively overhauled in 2014** with a view to improving and simplifying the procedures, and ensuring more rapid response, in line with the numerous requests made over the years by Parliament. A new revision of the Fund is foreseen in the proposed Omnibus Regulation proposed by the Commission on 14 September 2016 with a view to improving the readiness and effectiveness of emergency relief funding.

Improve rapid reaction: while emphasising the importance of the 2014 revision, Members emphasised that, in spite of the introduction of an advance payment mechanism upstream of the standard procedure, beneficiaries still face problems as a result of the **length of the overall process** from application to payment of the final contribution.

The report stated, in this context, the need to put forward the application as soon as possible after a disaster, as well as for **further improvements in the assessment phase, and in subsequent phases**, in order to facilitate the execution of payments.

Transparency and cooperation: Member States should improve their means of communication and cooperation with **local and regional authorities**, both when assessing eligible damage for which EUSF financial support is requested and when preparing applications, as well as when implementing projects to counter the effects of natural disasters.

Members called on the Commission and the Members States to improve transparency, and to **guarantee public access to information** throughout the assistance mobilisation process, from the submission of an application to project closure.

Prevention and complementarity: the report called on the Member States to optimise the use of existing EU funding, in particular the five European Structural Investment Funds, for investments to prevent natural disasters from occurring. It pointed to the importance of **developing synergies between the various Union funds and policies** with a view to **preventing the impact of natural disasters** and, in cases where the EUSF is activated, to guaranteeing the consolidation, and long-term sustainable development of reconstruction projects.

Whenever the EUSF is to be used, the Member State concerned should formally undertake to carry out all measures necessary for disaster prevention and the sustainable reconstruction of the areas affected.

Members stressed that efforts to invest in climate change mitigation and adaptation must be stepped up, taking into account **preventive measures** when supporting reconstruction and reforestation under the EUSF. They called on the Member States to establish risk prevention and risk management strategies.

In the light of future reforms, the Commission is called upon to:

- allow single applications to be allowed to be submitted jointly by several eligible states affected by a natural disaster at cross-border level, whereby the cause of the disaster is the same and the effects occur at the same time, and that indirect damages be taken into consideration in the assessment of the applications;
- consider: taking into account the possibility of **increasing the advance payments threshold from 10 % to 15 %,** as well as of shortening deadlines for the processing of applications from six to four weeks; (ii) the possibility of setting the eligibility threshold for regional natural disasters at **1 % of regional GDP**, and of taking into account, when assessing the requests, the level of socio-economic development of the regions affected.

Members deplored the fact that the procedures for **assessing implementation and closure reports** took so long under the old regulation, and expected closures to be carried out more efficiently and transparently under the amended regulation, and in a manner which ensures that the Union’s financial interests are protected.