

General programme "Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows": European Return Fund 2008-2013

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The Commission presents an ex post evaluation reports for the period 2011 to 2013 of actions co-financed under the framework programme 'Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows'.

This consists of four instruments (the 'SOLID Funds'): the **European Return Fund** (RF), the European Fund for the Integration of third-country nationals (EIF), the European Refugee Fund (ERF), the External Borders Fund (EBF). The aim of the SOLID General Programme was to provide financial support to Member States to help them better manage the Union's external borders, and better implement the common policies on asylum and migration.

This summary concerns the **European Return Fund**, which aimed to develop an integrated return management and enhanced cooperation between Member States, providing assistance with the implementation of return operations to countries of origin and making information available to returnees on relevant procedures. It also sought to encourage the use of voluntary return over forced return.

The RF was allocated EUR 463 million under the SOLID funds and had an average absorption rate of 81%, which was higher in 2011-13 than in 2008-10 (70%), which suggests that stakeholders developed **greater expertise over the period studied**. For both periods, the **largest allocations** were granted to the four Member States with the highest influxes of irregular migrants and number of returnees, namely Greece, the United Kingdom, Spain and France.

The evaluation shows that the RF was particularly **effective** in contributing towards the development of national integrated return management systems by encouraging voluntary rather than forced returns and enhancing Member States return capacity in general. The majority of Member States found that the objectives of the Fund corresponded to their needs in the field of return management, but some Member States indicated that the Fund could have been more relevant if the target group had also included **migrants residing legally** in the Member States but wishing to return to their country of origin.

The RF also made a positive contribution to the provision of support to Member States in emergency situations. However, the Fund had **only a moderate impact on enhancing cooperation** between Member States and with third-countries and on implementing EU standards due to the low number of projects implemented in that respect. The report notes that:

- projects were generally found to have been implemented at a **reasonable cost** in terms of financial and human resources. The unit costs of return varied greatly across Member States, depending on the number of returnees, the accessibility of the destination country of return, the number of countries collaborating in return operations and the amount of financial assistance provided to returnees. **Voluntary return** was found to be generally more cost-efficient than forced return;
- there was no strong evidence to demonstrate the **long-term impact of the actions** as many Member States highlighted that further funding was required to be able to continue return activities launched with RF funding. The most sustainable type of actions were those which had structural effects, such as improvements to the infrastructure of detention facilities and actions which improved cooperation between Member States or Member States and third countries;

- whilst the evaluation concluded that actions funded by the RF were generally coherent with and complementary to other EU Funds in the area of return, **only limited complementarity** was found with reintegration policies funded by other EU instruments, such as the European Social Fund, with a potential risk for overlaps;
- Member States reported that the RF had the effect of **developing their assisted voluntary return system** to an extent which would have not been possible in its absence, by implementing systematic reintegration grants, monitoring the return to third-countries, building supporting networks for reintegration and disseminating information and by raising awareness on return-related issues. However, most Member States reported that forced returns would probably have been carried out in the absence of the RF to the same scale;
- the Fund allowed for different and **innovative approaches in return management**, and facilitated the involvement of new stakeholders and contributed to the achievement of EU standards and requirements.

The report makes certain observation common to all four funds. In the case of the RF, most of the main findings have already been taken into consideration under the [asylum, migration and integration fund \(AMIF\)](#), which succeeded the ERF, EIF and RF, while others are given due consideration in the preparation of the next generation of Funds.

The report notes particularly that the absence of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, common to all Member States, was a critical issue for the evaluation of the SOLID Funds. This problem was addressed for the AMIF and the ISF (which succeeded the EBF), with a first list of common indicators included in the legal base and a common monitoring and evaluation framework. In addition, the Commission notes issues relating to administrative burden, the allocation mechanism and the steering of funding to EU priorities, most of which have been considered under the AMIF.