

Review of the European Union Solidarity Fund

2020/2087(INI) - 24/03/2021 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Regional Development adopted an own-initiative report by Younous OMARJEE (GUE/NGL, FR) on the review of the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF).

The European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF), created in 2002, reflects the desire to show solidarity with people living in regions of the Union affected by major natural or regional disasters or major public health emergencies.

The regulatory framework of the EUSF was revised in 2014 to simplify procedures, shorten the response time after applications are submitted, clarify the eligibility criteria for applications for assistance in regional disasters, extend the implementation period and introduce advance payments, as requested by Parliament on various occasions. Further progress was made in March 2020, notably in increasing the level of advance payments and simplifying the EUSF allocation process.

Disaster management, damage assessment and simplification of procedures

Although the reform of the regulation in 2014 contributed to the extension of the time frame for preparing and submitting an application for an EUSF financial contribution from 10 to 12 weeks, a substantial proportion of cases still require updates, resulting in delays in accessing the grants. For this reason, Members considered that the Commission should provide simplified guidance on application requirements and, in so doing, reduce the administrative burden.

Members also considered it essential to invest in disaster risk prevention and management in the EU by building preventative infrastructure. In this respect, they recommended that Member States, together with the Commission, put in place disaster prevention and management plans that allow for accurate and rapid damage assessment.

Given that climate change and the increase in natural disasters are making territories and regions increasingly vulnerable, Members called on the Commission to consider revising the EUSF so as to take better account of regional disasters. They also stressed the role of ERDF programmes, in synergy with rural development programmes, in risk prevention and mitigation.

The report stressed the need for increased capacity building through technical and administrative support to beneficiary countries to help them develop long-term management strategies to reduce the impact of major and regional natural disasters and major public health emergencies.

The Commission is invited to devote particular attention in a future revision of the EUSF to the outermost regions, islands, mountainous or sparsely populated regions, and all territories particularly prone to the risks of natural disasters.

Financial resources and speed of allocation

Members expressed concern about the merger between the EUSF and the Emergency Aid Reserve (EAR), as it makes the funding possibilities from the EUSF, which are now linked to the needs of the EAR, uncertain, for a joint annual budget of EUR 1.2 billion (only slightly higher than the one proposed by the Commission in May 2020 for the Fund alone).

The report suggested that the management of the new reserve should be closely monitored to see whether the funding amount and allocation key provided for in this new financial instrument meet the needs of the EUSF, in view of the extension of its scope and the scale and proliferation of emergencies resulting, in particular, from major and regional natural disasters and major public health emergencies.

Risk prevention and quality of reconstruction

Members called for the criteria for determining projects that are ‘eligible’ for assistance from the fund to take greater account of the latest risk prevention principles and asks for the ‘Build Back Better’ principle to be fully integrated in Article 3 of the EUSF Regulation.

The Commission is called on to strengthen and simplify the synergies between the EUSF and the cohesion policy funds, as well as the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, with a view to ensuring effective and structured risk management for reconstruction projects in the short, medium and long term, not only through the construction of sustainable, energy-efficient and resource-efficient infrastructure, but also through the deployment of preventive measures.

Members also considered that extending the scope of the EUSF to combat the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic requires an increase in its budget.

Visibility of the Fund's financial assistance

The report stressed the importance of informing the public about the tangible benefits brought about by the EUSF in order to increase citizens’ trust in EU tools and programmes. It called on the Commission and the Member States to improve the visibility of the fund’s assistance through ad hoc, targeted communication activities, in parallel to making the rapid response and delivery of aid a priority.