



TEXTS ADOPTED

P9_TA(2021)0220

Review of the European Union Solidarity Fund

European Parliament resolution of 18 May 2021 on the review of the European Union Solidarity Fund (2020/2087(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Articles 174, 175, 212(2) and 349 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),
- having regard to Council Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 of 11 November 2002 establishing the European Union Solidarity Fund¹ ('EUSF Regulation') and its subsequent amendments of 15 May 2014 and 20 March 2020,
- having regard to all the reports published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and, more specifically, to its report of 31 March 2014 entitled 'Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability',
- having regard to the Paris Agreement, signed on 22 April 2016,
- having regard to its resolution of 15 January 2013 on the European Union Solidarity Fund, implementation and application²,
- having regard to its resolution of 1 December 2016 entitled 'the European Union Solidarity Fund: an assessment'³,
- having regard to the Commission Staff Working Document of 15 May 2019 entitled 'Evaluation of the European Union Solidarity Fund 2002-2017' (SWD(2019)0186),
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2020/461 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 March 2020 amending Council Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 in order to provide financial assistance to Member States and to countries negotiating their accession to the Union that are seriously affected by a major public health emergency⁴,

¹ OJ L 311, 14.11.2002, p. 3.

² OJ C 440, 30.12.2015, p. 13.

³ OJ C 224, 27.6.2018, p. 140.

⁴ OJ L 99, 31.3.2020, p. 9.

- having regard to its resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences¹,
 - having regard to the position paper of the European Economic and Social Committee of 25 March 2020 on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Council Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 in order to provide financial assistance to Member States and countries negotiating their accession to the Union seriously affected by a major public health emergency (COM(2020)0114),
 - having regard to the Commission communication on the European Green Deal (COM(2019)0640),
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the opinion of the Committee on Budgets,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Regional Development (A9-0052/2021),
- A. whereas the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF) established by the EUSF Regulation following the major floods that hit central Europe in 2002 provides financial assistance to Member States and accession countries struck by major or regional natural disasters or major public health emergencies; whereas the EUSF represents true EU added value and the materialisation of a will to demonstrate solidarity with the people living in the EU regions affected by such disasters;
- B. whereas in its resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, the European Parliament pointed out that solidarity among the Member States is not an option, but is in fact an obligation stemming inter alia from Articles 2 and 21 of the Treaty on European Union, as well as a pillar of our EU values, as set out in Article 3 of the aforementioned treaty; whereas, in the same resolution, the European Parliament urges the Commission to strengthen all components of its crisis management and disaster response mechanisms;
- C. noting with interest that, according to a recent survey, two thirds of EU citizens believe that the European Union should have more competences to deal with unexpected crises such as COVID-19, and more than half believe that the EU should have more financial means to deal with these crises²; whereas the current health crisis has a very significant human dimension and whereas the EU and the Member States should accordingly act in a spirit of solidarity;
- D. whereas, so far, assistance from the EUSF has concerned around a hundred natural disasters in 23 Member States and one accession country, totalling some EUR 6,6 billion³;

¹ Texts adopted P9_TA(2020)0054.

² <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20201113IPR91602/eu-survey-confirms-citizens-call-for-eu-to-have-more-powers-to-tackle-pandemic>

³ <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/An-overview-of-the-EU-Solidarity-Fund-2002-2019/qpif-qzyn>

- E. whereas in 2017 and 2018, flooding disasters made up some two thirds of all EUSF applications, despite the reporting period also being marked by significant storms, forest fires and earthquakes;
- F. noting the usefulness of the EUSF, as highlighted by the Commission's evaluation, in particular as regards reducing the burden on all national, regional and local authorities of supporting the recovery effort in the aftermath of major national or regional natural disasters or major public health emergencies, as defined in the EUSF Regulation (as amended);
- G. whereas the EUSF's regulatory framework was revised in 2014 through the amending Regulation (EU) No 661/2014¹, in particular with a view to simplifying procedures, shortening the time frame for replying after the submission of applications, clarifying the eligibility criteria of requests for assistance in the event of regional disasters, extending the implementation period and introducing advance payments, as called for by Parliament on several occasions; whereas further progress was achieved through the March 2020 amendment of the regulation, especially as regards the increase of the level of advance payments and the simplification of the EUSF allocation process;
- H. whereas the rate of approval of requests for assistance in the event of major disasters is 100 %, while that of requests for assistance in the event of regional disasters, the most common category, rose from 32 % to 85 % following the 2014 revision of the EUSF Regulation;
- I. whereas although the reform of the regulation in 2014 contributed to the extension of the time frame for preparing and submitting an application for a financial contribution from the EUSF from 10 to 12 weeks, a substantial proportion of cases still require updates, resulting in delays in accessing the grants; whereas, for this reason, the Commission should give simplified guidance on the application requirements and in so doing reduce the administrative burden;
- J. whereas the time taken for the full grant to be deployed could be further reduced to fulfil the urgent need for EU solidarity;
- K. whereas EUSF assistance only covers the restoration of the status quo ante of infrastructure in the fields of energy, water and waste water, telecommunications, transport, health and education, and not the additional costs of rebuilding more disaster-resilient and climate-resilient infrastructure, as called for in the European Green Deal, which has to be financed by the beneficiary state from own resources and other EU funds, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund;
- L. noting with interest that, as illustrated by the COVID-19 crisis, there is a need for a higher level of synergies between cohesion policy instruments and the EUSF; acknowledging that the EUSF was created to respond to natural disasters in the short- and medium-term, while cohesion policy (the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund) is geared to longer-term planning for and investment in civil protection, preventive infrastructure, risk

¹ Regulation (EU) No 661/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 amending Council Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 establishing the European Union Solidarity Fund (OJ L 189, 27.6.2014, p. 143).

management infrastructure and resilience measures, thereby contributing to the objectives of the European Green Deal;

- M. welcoming the Commission's proposal to extend the scope of the EUSF to include major public health emergencies, and the subsequent entering into force of Regulation (EU) 2020/461;
- N. whereas natural disasters are likely to intensify and multiply because of climate change; highlighting, therefore, the usefulness of the budgetary mechanism of dynamic allocation, introduced in 2014, which enabled the EUSF, among other things, to provide a record EUSF contribution of EUR 1,2 billion for the earthquakes in Italy in 2016 and 2017;
- O. whereas, as laid down in Article 7 of the EUSF Regulation, operations financed by the fund should be compatible with the provisions of the TFEU and instruments adopted under it, and with EU policies and measures, in particular in the fields of environmental protection, natural disaster risk prevention and management, and climate change adaptation, including, where appropriate, eco-system-based approaches;
- P. whereas the new multiannual financial framework (MFF) provides for a new budgetary package called the Solidarity and Emergency Aid Reserve (SEAR), which brings together the EUSF and the Emergency Aid Reserve (EAR) and is designed to respond, on the one hand, to emergencies arising from major disasters in Member States or accession countries (EUSF) and, on the other, to specific urgent needs in the EU or in non-EU countries, in particular in the event of humanitarian crises (EAR);
- Q. whereas, as recognised in Article 349 TFEU, the difficult climate situation is one of the persistent factors that seriously hamper the development of the outermost regions (ORs); whereas specific measures laying down the conditions for the application of the treaties, including common policies, should therefore be adopted;
- R. whereas special attention should be paid to ORs, islands, mountainous regions, sparsely populated regions and all areas that are particularly at risk of natural disasters;
- S. regretting that the EUSF Regulation does not currently allow for the submission of aid applications on a cross-border basis, even though certain areas that are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, such as mountainous regions, often span borders;
- 1. Expresses its concern that extreme weather events and natural disasters will only increase and intensify alongside climate change; considers that investing in prevention and climate mitigation in line with the European Green Deal is of utmost importance; stresses the need for Member States to make further efforts to invest in climate impact alleviation measures, bearing in mind that many natural disasters are the direct consequence of human activities and that floods, earthquakes, forest fires, droughts and other natural disasters can get out of hand, which calls for the adoption of adequate measures;
- 2. Notes that the EUSF is one of the most concrete expressions of EU solidarity, and that all EU citizens expect it to be shown when disasters or serious public health emergencies occur;
- 3. Stresses its concern that in recent years, people in the EU have had to face multiple disasters that have devastated human lives, property, the environment and cultural heritage;

4. Draws attention to the fact that major and regional natural disasters and major public health emergencies are now occurring on a regular basis, with recent examples including the COVID-19 pandemic – which is severely impacting the lives of all Europeans and the European economy – forest fires across the continent, including in unusual places such as the Arctic, and a series of violent earthquakes in Europe, particularly in Italy in 2016 and 2017, which caused hundreds of deaths and some EUR 22 billion in damage, and in Croatia in March 2020 and December 2020; points out, moreover, that storms, extreme rainfall and flooding have caused considerable damage in many cities and valleys, and that increasingly violent hurricanes have caused devastation in the ORs, such as Hurricane Irma in 2017 in Saint Martin, and Hurricane Lorenzo in 2019 in the Azores, which were particularly destructive; recalls in this context that fragile territories, such as islands and mountainous, sparsely populated and outermost regions are often the most affected by the impact of climate change;
5. Points out that it is vital for aid and funds to be sent as quickly, easily and flexibly as possible to the affected regions and underlines that synergies between the EUSF and the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, the ERDF climate change adaptation component and territorial cooperation programmes are essential in order to create a comprehensive response and resilience package; calls on the Commission to continue its work on the guidance for the EUSF's simplified usage in order to facilitate the actions of national, regional and local authorities; insists that synergies between the EUSF and the aforementioned EU funding instruments, among others, should be used flexibly and to their fullest extent; recalls that the implementation report by each beneficiary country should detail the preventive measures – including the use of EU structural funds – taken or proposed to limit future damage and to avoid, to the extent possible, a recurrence of similar natural disasters;
6. Points out that according to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, there have been 7 348 major natural disasters over the last 20 years (2000-2019), which claimed 1,23 million lives, affected 4,2 billion people and resulted in USD 2,97 trillion in global economic losses;
7. Points out that according to the European Environment Agency (EEA), climate-related extreme weather events caused economic losses totalling an estimated EUR 446 billion in the EEA member countries between 1980 and 2019;
8. Is of the view that major and regional natural disasters and major public health emergencies have deeper economic and social impacts in the least developed and most fragile territories, such as islands, mountainous areas and sparsely populated regions, and that more adequate measures in these territories should therefore be taken under the EUSF;

Disaster management, damage assessment and simplification of procedures

9. Takes note of the different kinds of disaster risks that the EU faces and highlights that the severity of some natural disasters is not exclusively determined by climate change, but is in some cases influenced by human-induced factors, including incautious spatial planning; considers it vital to invest in disaster risk prevention and management in the EU by building preventive infrastructure; recommends, in this regard, that Member States put in place, together with the Commission, disaster prevention and management plans for accurate and rapid damage assessment; stresses that the EUSF is meant to be a

straightforward instrument that the EU can make available to national, regional and local authorities;

10. Invites the Commission, in the context of a future reform of the EUSF, to continue its work to simplify and speed up the application procedure for Member States, for example by paying particular attention to simplifying applications for activation of the EUSF across several regions in the context of cross-border disasters, so as to ensure a swifter response to the intensification of major and regional natural disasters and major public health emergencies;
11. Is of the opinion that climate change and the intensification of natural disasters are making territories and regions increasingly vulnerable; calls on the Commission, accordingly, to consider revising the EUSF in order to better take into account disasters on a regional scale; underlines, moreover, the role of ERDF programmes, in synergy with rural development programmes, in the prevention and mitigation of risks, such as tectonic and hydrogeological risks; acknowledges, furthermore, that droughts were included in the scope of the EUSF Regulation during the 2014 revision, but notes that they represent a recurrent feature of EU climate developments and that their economic impact is difficult to assess; calls on the Commission to assess the specific impacts of droughts and to address them appropriately in the context of a future reform of the EUSF;
12. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to strengthen research and education with a view to putting in place a system to ensure better preparedness to prevent and manage disasters and to minimise the impact of such crises;
13. Calls for increased coordination and cooperation between the research and development institutions of the Member States, especially those facing similar risks; calls for enhanced early warning systems in Member States and the creation and strengthening of links between the various early warning systems;
14. Suggests that the Member States identify investments, projects and tools in their national recovery and resilience plans in order to prevent and limit damage from natural and health disasters;
15. Calls on the Commission to ensure the dissemination of good practices with regard to governance and the use of institutional coordination structures in disaster situations;
16. Points to the difficulties faced by beneficiary countries when it comes to determining precise amounts of damage in very short periods of time and suggests that the Commission prepare guidance on simplified methods to be used for determining the amount of aid provided through the EUSF, also in order to minimise the potential for errors and further delays;
17. Highlights the fact that the use of the EUSF has fostered a learning process among national, regional and local authorities, which has led them to assess their broader disaster risk management policies; stresses the necessity of reducing the bureaucratic burden and increasing capacity-building through technical and administrative support for beneficiary countries, to help them to develop management and long-term strategies aiming at reducing the impact of major and regional natural disasters and major public health emergencies; calls on the Member States to improve communication with local and

- regional authorities in the successive phases of evaluation, preparation of applications and project implementation, with a view to speeding up administrative procedures;
18. Calls on the Commission to focus, as far as possible, in a future revision of the EUSF, on the regions that are the most at risk of major or regional natural disasters or major public health emergencies, particularly the ORs, islands, mountainous regions, and regions that are prone to intense seismic or volcanic activity or future public health crises;
 19. Believes that stock needs to be taken from the past hurricanes that struck overseas countries and territories (OCTs); is of the opinion that EAR and other external aid instruments should be fully used to alleviate the damage incurred; is furthermore convinced that adequate financial means need to be allocated to these external aid instruments to help OCTs;
- Funding resources and swift allocation of appropriations***
20. Points out that in its revised proposal of 27 May 2020 on the 2021-2027 MFF, the Commission provided for a maximum annual budget of EUR 1 billion for the EUSF (in 2018 prices), but notes that under the agreement on the new MFF, the EUSF has been merged with EAR into the new SEAR package, with an overall annual budgetary allocation of EUR 1.2 billion;
 21. Considers that the establishment of SEAR may have the advantage of increasing flexibility; points out, nevertheless, that in its current form, the allocation of the EUSF remains uncertain, since it depends on the amounts allocated under EAR; considers it necessary to closely monitor the management of SEAR in order 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;
 22. Welcomes the fact that the revised EUSF adopted in March 2020 increased the value of advance payments from 10 % to 25 % of the anticipated financial contribution and the upper limit from EUR 30 million to EUR 100 million; points out, in this context, the importance of advance payments for increasing the effectiveness of aid programmes, in particular in regions and local communities with limited alternative funding sources; asks the Commission to reflect on additional ways to promote this option and calls for increased operational efforts to be made in order to reduce the average time for the release of advanced payments, while ensuring the EU budget is protected;
 23. Points out that most large buildings located in the ORs (such as ports, airports and hospitals) are public buildings, and despite being essential for the functioning of these small territories, are very exposed to environmental disasters; consequently believes that financial support from the EUSF for the ORs should be higher than 2,5 % of the amount received to remedy past disasters, in order to allow them to quickly return to and improve upon their status quo ante;
 24. Notes that the average time needed to make advance payments is five months and calls on the Commission to consider some more reactive solutions;

25. Notes, moreover, that it takes an average of one year for the full amount of an EUSF grant to reach the beneficiary; calls on the Commission to explore ways of simplifying and making the allocation of the fund as flexible as possible in the context of a future reform, in order to ensure rapid action and prompt relief for disaster-stricken regions and/or countries;
26. Believes, taking into consideration the above and the broadening of the scope of the fund, that an assessment of the EUSF budget might be necessary in the future, and could be followed, if necessary, by a corresponding adjustment of the funding, in order to provide what is required of a real tool for EU solidarity and to guarantee that there is a large enough budget to deal effectively with major and regional natural disasters and major public health emergencies, not only in order to repair damage but also to build up resilience to climate change;
27. Stresses that the award, management and implementation of the EUSF grants should be as transparent as possible, and that the grants need to be used in line with the principles of sound financial management;

Risk prevention and quality of reconstruction

28. Calls 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 in a future revision, with a view to contributing to the improvement of the quality of these regions’ infrastructure during reconstruction and to better prepare them to avoid future disasters by building preventive infrastructure;
29. Takes the view that instruments such as ‘framework loans’, implemented by the European Investment Bank, could also be used to finance the reconstruction of more resilient, safer and greener infrastructure;
30. Calls on the Commission 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; also calls on the Commission to demonstrate flexibility with regard to programming and the amending of national or regional programmes when it comes to dealing with major and regional natural disasters and major public health emergencies; reiterates, in this regard, that EUSF financial assistance should focus on stronger resilience and the sustainability of the investments in the affected areas;

Health emergencies

31. Welcomes the fact that, following the revision of the EUSF Regulation proposed by the Commission on 13 March 2020, operations which can be covered by the fund have now been extended to major public health emergencies, covering not only medical assistance but also measures to prevent, monitor or control the spread of diseases;
32. Highlights that the extension of the scope of the fund to fight the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that the EUSF has the capacity to be more flexible, both in its

scope and its eligibility, having the ability to provide assistance not only during major natural disasters, but also rapid assistance during other types of major disasters, such as pandemics;

33. Takes the view that this broadening of the scope of the EUSF requires a larger budget;
34. Suggests that the Commission and the Member States increase their cooperation with the relevant World Health Organization emergency preparedness services in order to develop rapid response plans for health emergencies;

Visibility of the fund's financial assistance

35. Reiterates the importance of communicating to the public the tangible benefits brought about by the EUSF, in order to further increase citizens' trust in EU tools and programmes; calls 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, specifically in order to highlight the EU's added value in the event of major and regional natural disasters and major public health emergencies, which is a concrete expression of EU solidarity and the Union's ability to put genuine mutual assistance into practice by providing significant budgetary resources; also asks the Commission, as part of the future revision of the regulation, to oblige beneficiary countries to inform their citizens about the EU's financial support for the implemented operations;

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36. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the Member States.