

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 as regards specific measures to provide additional assistance to Member States affected by natural disasters’

(COM(2016) 778 final — 2016/0384 (COD))

(2017/C 173/07)

Rapporteur: **Pietro Vittorio BARBIERI**

Consultation	Council of the European Union, 11.1.2017 European Parliament, 15.12.2016
Legal basis	Articles 177 and 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion
Adopted in section	2.2.2017
Adopted at plenary	22.2.2017
Plenary session No	523
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	183/0/2

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC endorses the Commission’s 2016/0384 proposal to amend Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 ⁽¹⁾ as regards specific measures to provide additional assistance to Member States affected by natural disasters.

1.2. The EESC welcomes the Commission’s proposal to institute support under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for Member States and regions affected by major natural disasters, complementing the resources available under the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF).

1.3. The EESC supports the introduction of a separate priority axis for reconstruction operations supported by the ERDF within an operational programme, without the need for national co-financing, in accordance with Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 establishing the European Union Solidarity Fund.

1.4. The EESC supports extending the eligibility period of expenditure so that it runs from the date of the natural disaster, even if this date precedes the entry into force of the present amendment to the regulation.

1.5. The EESC supports the proposal to allow a Member State which has already included operations it has carried out in a payment application to the Commission, to make the necessary adjustments for the next payment application.

1.6. In line with the position taken in previous opinions, the EESC supports the above-mentioned Commission initiatives intended to streamline and speed up the aid procedure, in order to respond to natural disasters in a more timely, effective and visible fashion.

1.7. At the same time, the EESC believes that the fund needs to be revised once again in order to further clarify its scope, which does not exclude disasters brought about by climate change and acts of terrorism, and to review the access thresholds, which the EESC considers to be overly high.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2016) 778 final — 2016/0384 (COD).

1.8. The EESC considers that the fund is an important demonstration of European solidarity and that Europeans should be made more familiar with it.

2. Arguments in support of the opinion and specific comments

2.1. Sadly, Europe has experienced a number of natural disasters and, unfortunately, many EU countries have suffered some form of major disaster over the years.

2.1.1. In 2002, central Europe, particularly Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, were hit by severe flooding. That same year, the EU decided to use the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF) to respond to major natural disasters and to demonstrate European solidarity for the regions affected. Since then, this fund has been used to respond to many and various disasters, including flooding, forest fires, earthquakes, storms and drought⁽²⁾.

2.2. The EESC considers that it is quite appropriate to use the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)⁽³⁾ to complement the EUSF in the event of major disasters. The two funds share the same ethical principles and certain programmatic criteria for action. Not only do both funds provide further evidence of European solidarity, the operations that they generally finance work towards the same goal: promoting economic growth and balanced and sustainable development in Europe's regions⁽⁴⁾.

2.3. The EESC has already pointed out that timely delivery of aid is key to ensuring that the aid will be effective and properly visible. More specifically, the EESC has already addressed the red tape involved in EUSF procedures⁽⁵⁾, along with the overly lengthy timeframe for delivering aid⁽⁶⁾.

2.4. The EESC reiterates the points it has made previously regarding the way that the fund operates:

- clarify the scope of the fund once and for all to avoid giving rise to unfounded expectations and ensure that it is not used tendentiously in political rhetoric;
- redefine the threshold of economic impact for a disaster to be assessed as sufficiently serious, so that the fund is used only in exceptional circumstances;
- continue to streamline operating mechanisms and timeframes so that the aid is indeed delivered immediately.

2.4.1. The EESC is also concerned about the rise in the number of disasters, both natural and otherwise, and stresses the need to step up prevention policies.

2.5. The EESC supports the addition of Article 120(8) to Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 creating a separate priority axis with an ERDF co-financing rate of up to 100 %, provided that the operations:

- are selected by managing authorities in response to major natural disasters;
- focus on reconstruction in the wake of a natural disaster;
- are supported under an ERDF investment priority.

⁽²⁾ For instance, aid granted by the Commission through the EUSF has been key to coping with the natural disasters which hit Bulgaria, Italy and Romania in 2014.

⁽³⁾ The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is one of the European Union's Structural Funds. It aims to bridge the development gap between European regions, taking into account the natural and demographic disadvantages of some regions. ERDF operations aim to spur on economic growth through the structural adjustment of developing regions.

⁽⁴⁾ In order to promote the resumption of economic activity in affected regions, it has been decided to focus on specific aspects of emergency and recovery, such as building temporary housing and reconstructing key infrastructure destroyed during the disaster.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 181, 21.6.2012, p. 52.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 170, 5.6.2014, p. 45.

2.6. The EESC supports the derogation to Article 65(9) of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, whereby expenditure for operations under this priority axis will be eligible from the date of the natural disaster.

3. The view of the EESC

3.1. The EESC considers that the proposal for a regulation must be read together with Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 with the subsequent changes, so that the proposal takes account of and amends the regulation. The proposed amendments are in line with the recommendations made in previous EESC opinions to speed up and streamline the fund's operating mechanisms. Some issues still need to be addressed.

3.2. The EESC therefore points out that the regulation is particularly important because it provides proof of European solidarity. It complies with the subsidiarity principle by factoring in Member-State policies and coordinates with other EU policies, such as other Structural Fund and European Investment Bank (EIB) programmes. The EESC considers that the regulation should take account of and be considered in the context of the Stability Pact derogations provided for Member States affected by natural or other disasters.

3.3. The regulation stipulates major natural disasters and does not stand in for the Member States in the event of disasters where the resulting damage is assessed below a figure which the EESC considers to be an excessively high threshold which should be revised.

3.4. Eligible operations do not include housing, with the exception of temporary emergency housing; the State or insurance companies must intervene here. Historic towns may rely on economic activities based on second-home tourism. The EESC considers that the dichotomy between housing and economic activities needs to be tackled.

3.5. The regulation also stipulates that there can be no overlap with other EU measures intended to overcome regional difficulties due to natural or other disasters. One key prerequisite for accessing the fund is a natural disaster risk prevention plan. The EESC considers that the European institutions and Member States place insufficient emphasis on prevention.

3.6. The regulation specifies that operations approved for financing must comply with the provisions of the Treaty and the legislative instruments adopted thereafter. It calls for sound financial management and transparent public procurement procedures, as well as environmental protection and climate change adaptation with investment in environmentally sound infrastructure projects. When the regulation was adopted, no specific directive on accessibility was in force⁽⁷⁾. Since the demand for accessible products and services has risen still further as the EU's population ages⁽⁸⁾, the EESC considers that key criteria should include accessibility of emergency and reconstruction initiatives.

Brussels, 22 February 2017.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Georges DASSIS

⁽⁷⁾ Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States as regards the accessibility requirements for products and services, COM(2015) 615 final — 2015/0278 (COD).

⁽⁸⁾ It is expected that in 2020 approximately 120 million persons in the European Union will have multiple and/or minor disabilities. It should also be pointed out that the residents of the rural and mountain towns hit by recent natural disasters are largely older people.