

(English version)

Question for written answer E-002030/24
to the Commission
Lefteris Nikolaou-Alavanos (NI)
(11 October 2024)

Subject: Firefighter cuts and the wildfire in Xylokaastro

The recent wildfire in Xylokaastro has highlighted the tragic state of fire protection and firefighting infrastructure in Greece, as well as the tragic shortage of staff and protective equipment. Two more people have lost their lives. The government cannot keep wheeling out the same old excuses of high temperatures and having to deal with ‘other simultaneous fires’.

According to Eurostat, between 2022 and 2023, ten EU Member States saw a decrease in their firefighter numbers, despite an increase in the number of fires, floods and other emergencies. Among them are countries that experienced huge wildfires in 2023, such as Greece, Italy and Cyprus, where the number of firefighters decreased by 13.5%, 10.2% and 28.6% respectively. At a time when — even with the outdated staffing plans — there are already thousands of unfilled vacancies, the firefighter cuts in Greece present a challenge.

In light of the above:

1. How does the Commission view the call for full compensation from the EU Solidarity Fund for those affected in Xylokaastro?
2. How does the Commission view the fact that although it keeps making reference to the ‘climate crisis’, at the same time, critical civil protection services keep getting weaker, as demonstrated by the above data?
3. How does the Commission view the need to fully staff and equip the fire brigade and forest services and set up specialised forest firefighting agencies with appropriate resources and with dedicated full-time staff employed based on actual needs rather than outdated staffing plans, also making good use of Recovery Fund resources, which have been proven to line the pockets of business groups?

Submitted: 11.10.2024

Answer given by Executive Vice-President Fitto on behalf of the European Commission
(20 December 2024)

1. and 3. The EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF) can only be activated at the request of Greece within 12 weeks as from when the first damage occurred, demonstrating that the total direct damage exceeds the thresholds specified in Article 2 of Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 ⁽¹⁾. The EUSF may cover part of the costs for emergency and recovery operations incurred by public authorities ⁽²⁾. So far, Greece has not requested EUSF assistance for this disaster ⁽³⁾. As for the flexibilities proposed under the legislative proposal ‘RESTORE — Regional Emergency Support to Reconstruction’ ⁽⁴⁾, currently under co-legislative negotiations, they could be requested within four months of the entry into force of the regulation. The date of entry into force depends on the co-legislative process.; there is strong commitment to make progress on both co-legislators’ side. The flexibilities proposed would apply for natural disasters that occurred as from 1 January 2024, but also for future natural disasters. This would provide a structural solution to natural disasters and avoid recurring changes to the regulatory framework for the same type of interventions. This would result in accelerating the access to support in the future and reducing administrative burden.

2. Meanwhile, based on Article 196 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the EU has been encouraging cooperation between Member States under the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) ⁽⁵⁾ to improve systems’ effectiveness for preventing and protecting against disasters.

⁽¹⁾ Council Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 of 11 November 2002 establishing the European Union Solidarity Fund (OJ L 311, 14.11.2002, p. 3) as amended by Regulation (EU) No 661/2014 of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 May 2014 (OJ L 189, 27.6.2014, p. 143) and by Regulation (EU) 2020/461 of the European Parliament and the Council of 30 March 2020 (OJ L 99, 31.3.2020, p. 9). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32002R2012>

⁽²⁾ This includes, for example, the recovery of essential infrastructure, provision of temporary accommodation to the population, cleaning-up operations, and protection of cultural heritage.

⁽³⁾ Following Greece’s application, the Budget authority approved the mobilisation of EUR 101.5 million of EUSF assistance for Greece following the floods in September 2023.

⁽⁴⁾ This is a proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund and Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

⁽⁵⁾ https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism_en