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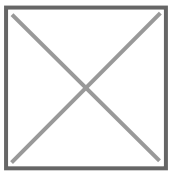
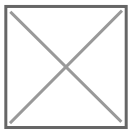
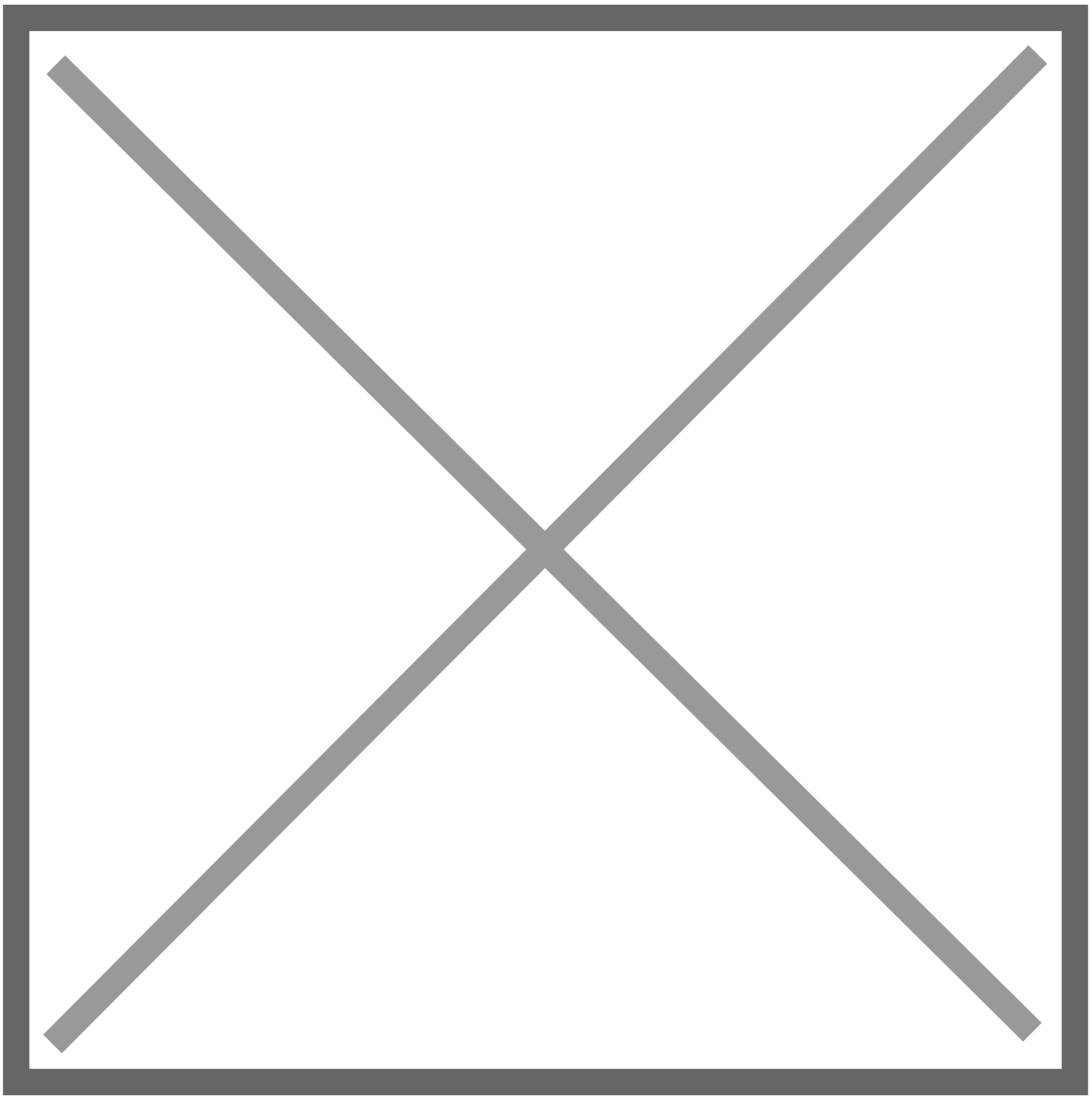
Section 4.14 Content of protection

The recast Qualification Directive outlines the content of international protection. Its provisions shape the integration of beneficiaries of international protection through standards on residence permits, employment, education, social welfare and health care. Relevant articles of the directive also outline the criteria for the cessation and revocation of refugee status.

COVID-19



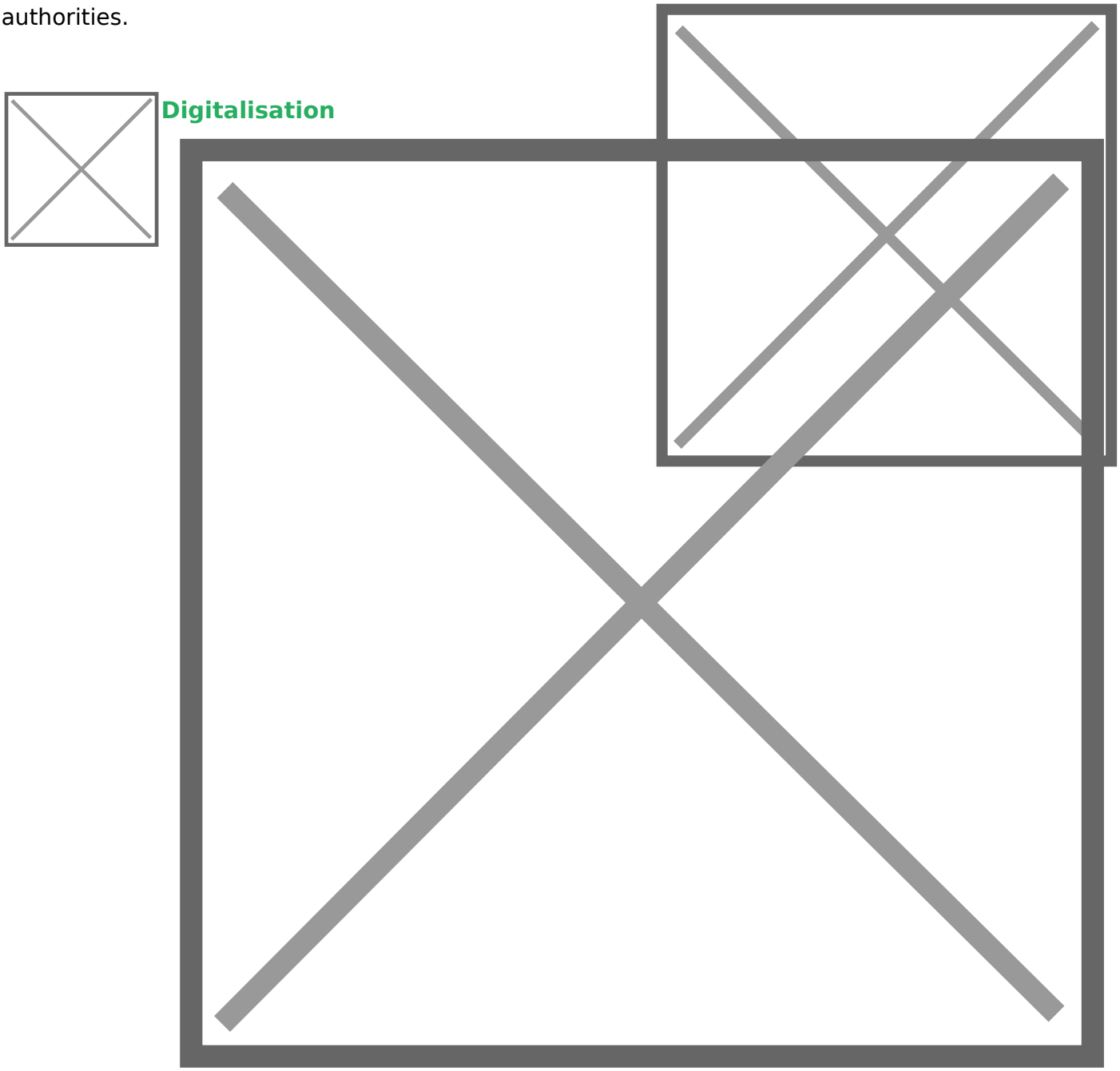
2020 was not a favourable year for the integration of beneficiaries of international protection. The COVID-19 pandemic isolated citizens from each other and decreased personal contact, which is crucial for integration. The long-term negative impact of the pandemic risks lingering on in all aspects of integration, from health to accommodation and employment opportunities.

National authorities needed to find solutions to extend residence permits which expired during the pandemic to avoid people falling through administrative cracks, but it still often led to legal uncertainty and delays in accessing other rights, such as housing, employment and health care. The COVID-19 pandemic might have left many applicants or former applicants in limbo, but this has been interpreted to date as a temporary impediment and did not seem to lead to the proliferation of other national, more temporary, forms of protection.

Family reunification procedures were halted or severely delayed, and were often still lagging behind at the end of 2020. Employment opportunities shrank in general, leaving many beneficiaries of international protection without a job and without perspectives to find one soon. Without a stable income, many risked homelessness and destitution. The OECD noted that: “New arrivals tend to be particularly hard hit during the crisis, with lasting negative impact on their long-term employment prospects. This holds true especially for those who did not yet manage to find

employment, which is still the case for many refugees who arrived during the 2015/2016 refugee crisis”.[997]

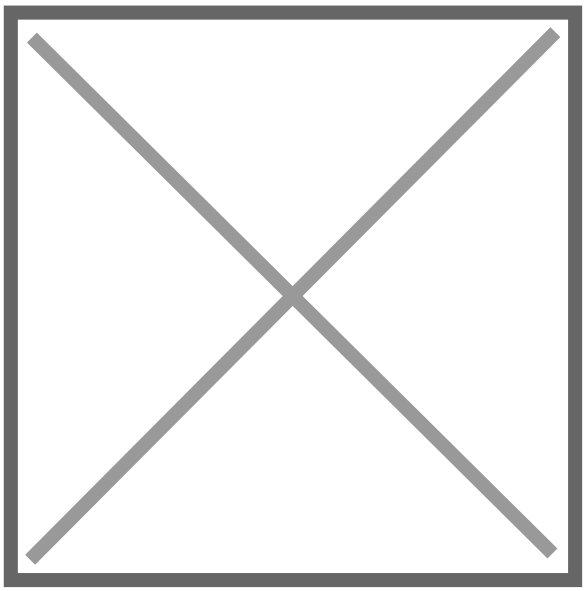
Beneficiaries of international protection were also less likely to be able to provide their children with educational support through online schooling due to a lack of computers or stable Internet connection or because parents did not speak the new country’s language. Their often precarious housing situation also meant that children were less likely to have a separate quite place for studying. In some countries, the support programmes and individual integration plans were extended or adapted to the new circumstances, to provide strengthened support for beneficiaries of international protection, but this was not the case everywhere. In a few cases, the pandemic has led to greater cooperation among different authorities and stakeholders, especially with health care authorities.



Digitalisation

Digitalisation efforts affected various aspects of the content of protection differently. National authorities in recent years have focused on gathering and exchanging information to review and eventually withdraw protection, or to grant family reunification. Many integration support services

moved online due to the pandemic, including language learning, social orientation and employment coaching. However, following these services was often difficult for newcomers, who were beginners in learning the language and could not properly understand or follow the instructions.
Initiatives at the global level tried to address the issue that beneficiaries of international protection typically lose their documents while fleeing the country of origin, which often delays and hampers their access to residence permits, family reunification, employment, education and health (see Section 1).

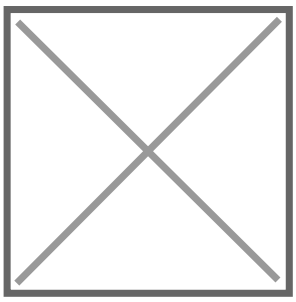


Important developments happened also outside of the COVID-19 context. The European Commission presented its new EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027) as part of the comprehensive response to the challenges which were presented in the new Pact on Migration and Asylum.[998] Consequently, many Member States launched the process to review and adjust their integration plans or draft a new one.

The EU Action Plan presents actions in four main thematic areas: education and training, employment and skills, health, and housing. Horizontal actions within these four sectors are organised around: building strong partnerships for a more effective integration process, increased opportunities for EU funding under the 2021-2017 Multi-Annual Financial Framework, fostering participation and encounters with the host society, enhancing the use of new technologies and digital tools for integration and inclusion, and monitoring progress.

Specifically mentioning applicants or beneficiaries of international protection, the plan encourages Member States, for example, to:

- Develop support programmes for unaccompanied minors who arrive past the age of compulsory schooling and are in transition to adulthood;
- Make use of the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third-Country Nationals at an early stage, especially for applicants for international protection; and
- Provide adapted and autonomous housing solutions as early as possible for refugees and applicants who are likely to be granted international protection.



[997] Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. (2020, October 19). *What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrants and their children?* https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/what-is-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-immigrants-and-their-children-e7cbb7de/

[998] European Web Site on Integration. (2020, November 24). *The EC reveals its new EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027)* . https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/the-ec-presents-its-eu-action-plan-on-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027 ; European Web Site on Integration. (17 December 2020). *Watch: The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027) explained* . https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/watch-the-eu-action-plan-on-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027-explained

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