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4.9.1 Providing information on the asylum procedure

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ies developed new digital solutions or upgraded their digital communication channels to ensure that asylum seekers were provided not only with information on the asylum procedure but also on health guidelines to be followed during the processes and within the host country. New communication tools were used, such as posters, pictograms, YouTube videos, hotlines and online platforms, which supplemented or even replaced traditional face-to-face communication. Online pages with frequently asked questions on COVID-19 and updates on procedures were incorporated in government portals and official websites of national asylum administrations in Austria,[749] Belgium,[750] Cyprus,[751] France,[752] Germany,[753] Greece,[754] Iceland,[755] Ireland,[756], [757] Norway,[758] Romania [759] and Slovenia. The pages were regularly updated with information, legislative amendments and instructions on COVID-19 measures.

In Slovenia, the responsibility for the provision of information was handed to the asylum officers of the Ministry of the Interior in 2020, after the contract expired with an NGO which was previously given this task. The office launched a new video that informs applicants about their rights and obligations. Applicants receive information through a video before they lodge an asylum application.

Access to information for asylum seekers, including instructions and scheduling or rescheduling of appointments, was managed through remote communication channels, such as phone lines, hotlines, mobile phone applications, video calls or social media channels by Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal and Sweden.

The UNHCR office in Bulgaria launched a dedicated website, asylum.bg, with information on the international protection procedure in various languages. It includes a guide to refugee law, audio format and summaries of judicial decisions of national courts.[760]
Special leaflets on legal ways to migrate were produced in Lithuania and Poland[761] to specifically target Belarusian citizens. The leaflets are distributed at border crossing points.

Practical barriers and a lack of clear communication for asylum seekers placed in detention at the border were also reported by Portuguese civil society organisations.[762]
Germany limited the number of asylum seekers who can participate at the same time in group information sessions on the asylum procedure before lodging an asylum application. Group

sessions were held online and in specially-equipped rooms to ensure the protection of staff, interpreters and applicants.

Malta discontinued some information sessions which were organised at the reception premises at the beginning of 2020 to inform applicants about the rules of the centre and their rights and obligations due to the pandemic.[763] An information point was established by AWAS.[764] In addition, the status of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in Malta was confirmed by email while the premises of the International Protection Agency were closed between 13 March and 18 May.[765] Once the premises re-opened, the agency started to issue or renew documents and protection certificates for asylum seekers.

In Greece, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum launched a multidimensional platform for information provision, developed an e-service tool to digitalise asylum applications, updated materials and guidelines, and launched awareness-raising campaigns through its official social media channels.[766] The digitalisation of information provision raised concern on the use of online tools and platforms. Civil society organisations in Greece[767] expressed worries about data protection and information-sharing through the new information system for online applications which was developed by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum.[768] An insufficient provision of information was also observed by the Network of Children Rights in Greece with regards to unaccompanied minors.[769]

In Norway, information for asylum seekers was made available in 24 different languages by the official institute of public health, including through a smart phone application, Smittestopp app.[770] Guidance to applicants was provided to a greater extent online or by telephone.
The website, Information Sverige (Information Sweden), was launched in 2009 and was made available in ten languages in 2020. Among relevant information to people who are new to the country, it offers material about the asylum procedure. The website is funded by the Swedish government on a permanent basis as of 1 January 2021 with SEK 5 million yearly and it is run by the County Administrative Boards. Save the Children in Sweden commended the improvements made by the Swedish Migration Agency to adapt child-friendly information and communication in line with the best interests of children and their situation if they return to their country of origin.[771] However, it raised concerns that important and relevant information were not given in a timely and efficient manner, and information which can be understood by children remained a challenge.[772]

Invitation letters for an interview were revised in Belgium and Ireland[773] to include information on COVID-19 measures, instructions for the interview, administrative arrangements, and a request for the applicant not to attend the interview in case of illness.

In Ireland, the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) set up a helpline, managed by the JRS Ireland, for asylum seekers living in accommodation centres. The AIDA report for Ireland reported on a lack of transparency in the provision of information and legal assistance.[774]
In Italy, a national hotline number was made available in 36 languages and a digital capacity-building platform targeting refugee-led organisations was set up with the support of UNHCR and local NGOs.[775] A multi-lingual information portal, JUMA MAP,[776] provided refugees and asylum seekers with access to information on COVID-19 in 15 different languages, as well as health advice,

regulations on restrictions in movement, administrative procedures and services which are currently unavailable.

Austria launched the mobile application, uugot.it TV, which helped refugees and migrants to access real-time and updated news from the authorities. The application also offered translations of TV content through sub-titles in different languages, such as Arabic, Croatian, Dari/Farsi (Persian), English, French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Somali and Spanish, allowing for non-German speakers to follow Austrian TV and learn German. The app is supported by the Austrian government.

The UNHCR office in Cyprus incorporated a dedicated page on its official website which provides updates related to COVID-19 preventative measures and information material, translated into 13 languages such as (English, Somali, Bengali, Filipino, Georgian, Hindi, Kurmanji, Persian, Sorani, Turkish, Urdu, Vietnamese).[777]

Civil society organisations in France noted that an updated guide on the right to asylum for unaccompanied minors is not child-friendly and targets local authorities and practitioners working in children care instead of minors.[778] The guide describes the steps of the asylum procedure, appeals and the procedure at the border.[779]

Practical barriers and a lack of information, interpretation and legal assistance were reported by civil society organisations Spain,[780] specifically for new arrivals by sea to the Canary Islands. Migrants were not receiving legal assistance for an expulsion procedure, were not informed of their rights and collective expulsions were being carried out.

In Romania, a lack of interpretation was noted at border crossing points, hindering access to information.

In Norway, civil society organisations identified challenges in ensuring an effective and timely provision of information to asylum seekers who are detained shortly after registration, applicants in detention and asylum seekers staying in private residences.[781] The European Network of Statelessness (ENS) continued to note for the third year a significant gap in information and resources to statelessness people and those facing issues with nationality in general.[782] Some progress was made in providing additional material and translations on the Stateless Journeys website, but it was not clear if this information was being used to address statelessness in the asylum context.

To support EU+ countries, improve the quality of asylum processes and achieve common quality standards, EASO commenced the ‘Let’s Speak Asylum’ project to develop methodologies and tools to support the provision of information across all stages of the asylum procedure and reception pathway. Best practices and challenges across national asylum administration and reception authorities were identified through targeted surveys. The tool, which is set to be launched in 2021, will contain digital and audio-visual material catering to the needs of vulnerable persons and illiterate applicants.

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