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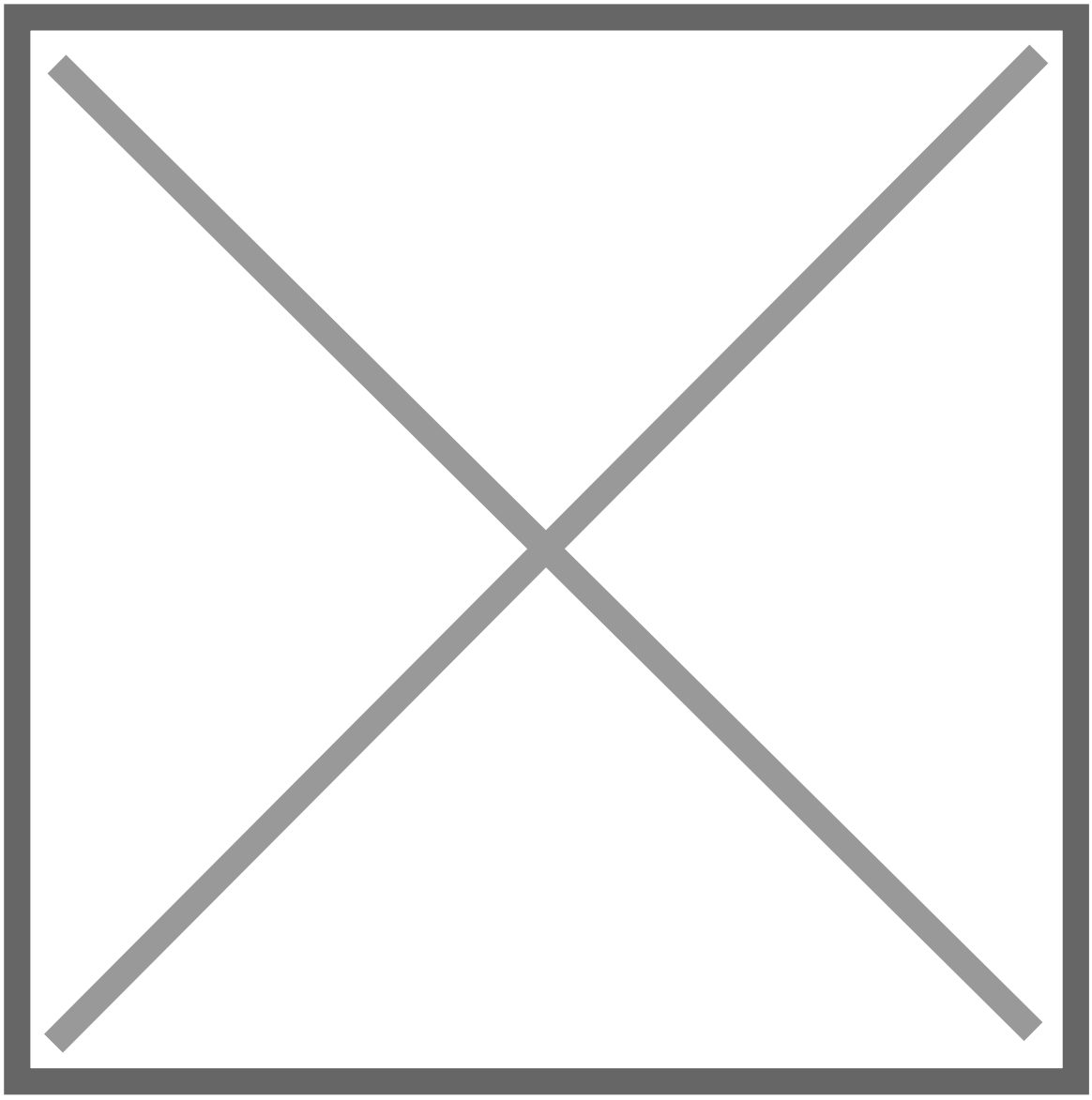
4.4.7 Organising personal interviews



In 2020, the organisation of personal interviews was affected by COVID-19 measures so EU+ countries used remote interviews or introduced new rules for carrying out in-person interviews. The BFA in Austria conducted video interviews more frequently, with the applicant, legal advisor, interpreter and case manager attending from separate rooms. In the Netherlands, remote interviews were first introduced during the pandemic for nationals of Syria, Turkey and Yemen, an only later for other cases, as the authorities considered that not all cases are suitable for remote interviewing.[472] The IND combined videoconferencing with in-person interviews, using Skype with applicants connected from the reception centres, the case workers from the office and

the interpreters teleworking from home.[473]

Similarly, the UDI in Norway carried out personal interviews using Skype as of 1 April 2020, with applicants connected from the reception centre, the UDI staff connected from the office and the interpreter connected from another location.[474] Likewise, Sweden resumed interviews through videoconferencing by placing the applicant and the official in different rooms within the national authority's building. In addition, a pilot project was carried out to conduct personal interviews through Videolink, as Skype could not be used due to confidentiality-related reasons.

Switzerland restricted the number of people present in the same room and combined it with the use of technical communication tools. In Denmark, a project involving interviews by videoconference with applicants accommodated at the Sandholm reception centre was initiated by the Danish Immigration Service. The authority resumed asylum interviews in person as usual since then.

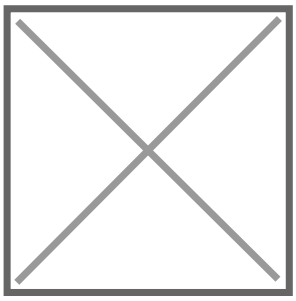
To compensate for the shortage of interview rooms as a result of the COVID-19 measures, the CGRS in Belgium collaborated with Fedasil to organise personal interviews by videoconference for a limited number of applicants, initially parallel to the system of face-to-face interviews at the CGRS. The project aims, in the longer term, to have a broadly-developed structural framework for hearings to replace hearings held at the CGRS, although physical hearings are preferred. Nonetheless, the Council of State in Belgium suspended personal interviews being carried out by videoconference because the decision to organise interviews through this method was not within the competence of the CGRS and it must be done by Royal Decree. As a result, courts sanctioned changes that were introduced in first instance procedures to continue services during the pandemic because they did not have an adequate legal basis.

To avoid contamination from the exchange of objects, rules and guidelines were also put in place to limit the exchange of papers and pens. In addition, any documents submitted in paper by the applicant were not to be opened for 24 hours. In Belgium, as of 1 August 2020, the normal procedure to make observations on the interview transcript (as foreseen in the Immigration Act, Article 57/5) was reinstated. Thereby any observations must reach the CGRS within 8 working days following the notification of the copy of the personal interview notes, and the CGRS has to take these into account before issuing a decision. During the lockdown period, between mid-March and the end of June 2020, the CGRS decided not to wait until the expiration of the 8-day period before issuing a decision. Remarks by the applicants could however be made at the appeal stage with CALL. In Italy, a pilot project was implemented in Rome for video and audio recording of the interview with the prior agreement of the applicants.

To provide support, EASO issued practical recommendations on conducting personal interviews remotely, following the guidance of the European Commission to EU Member States. The practical recommendations are based on best practices from across Europe and existing EASO practical guides and tools on personal interviews. In addition, UNHCR put forward practical considerations for European countries when using remote interviewing modalities and gathered examples from different countries.[475]

In Greece, civil society organisations raised concerns regarding the quality of and conditions in

which remote interviews are carried out in Lesvos, particularly due to delays in notifying the applicants about the interview.[476] In addition, NGOs providing legal aid on Lesvos were not adequately informed about practicalities of remote interviews with regard to accessing a lawyer to submit procedural documents.[477] Among the planned government projects for 2021, the consolidation and upgrading of electronic decision-making, tele-interviewing and tele-interpretation initiatives were foreseen.[478]



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