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A key area of work for the EUAA is to provide operational and technical assistance to Member States experiencing disproportionate pressure on their asylum and reception systems. Since its foundation as EASO, the Agency has provided direct operational assistance to 11 Member States: Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Spain, in addition to Luxembourg and Sweden having received support for brief periods of time.

Upon request by a Member State, the EUAA undertakes a structured needs assessment exercise through consultations with the authorities of the Member State and other relevant stakeholders. Assistance measures are then jointly defined and detailed in a binding Operational Plan. The assistance given generally addresses immediate needs, including providing equipment and support personnel, and activities to enhance the capacities of national reception and asylum systems.

Asylum Support Teams, comprised of EUAA personnel and seconded national experts, are deployed on the ground to provide rapid and direct support, for example by assisting in asylum processes, clearing existing backlogs and training staff. The EUAA also provides assistance on the Dublin procedure, interviews, the assessment of applications, the appeal process and within the reception system in general. Furthermore, the Agency ensures that applicants are duly informed of the process and their rights, using a variety of media including in-person information provision, mobile apps, videos and leaflets in different languages.

Planning operational support can take a considerable amount of time, but the field of migration and asylum can be volatile and unpredictable. In the event of sudden surges in the influx of third-country nationals, as was the case in summer 2021 with Latvia and Lithuania, countries may request urgent support. The Agency adapted quickly to these situations by redistributing resources and using remote work modalities.

As of 2022, the Agency introduced the practice of multiannual operational plans which have allowed for more long-term programming. Currently, nine Member States receive direct support from the Agency through annual or multiannual plans: Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Spain. Discussions are also ongoing with countries neighbouring Ukraine in light of the Russian invasion of the country, which has led to the displacement of

more than 4.2 million people.

Across most countries receiving operational support, a key pillar of assistance has focused on capacity-building through EUAA training modules on topics catered to the context in the country.

For a detailed description of the Agency's operational support activities in 2021, see the *EUAA Annual General Report 2021*.

Table 3.1. List of operating plans between the EUAA and Member States, 2022		
Belgium	Belgium	Operating Plan 2022, agreed by EASO and Belgium
Cyprus	Cyprus	Operating Plan 2022-2024, agreed by EASO and the Republic of Cyprus
Greece	Greece	Operating Plan 2022-2024, agreed by EASO and Greece
Italy	Italy	Operating Plan 2022-2024, agreed by EASO and Italy
Latvia	Latvia	Operating Plan 2022, agreed by EASO and Latvia
Lithuania	Lithuania	Operating Plan 2022, agreed by EASO and Lithuania
Malta	Malta	Operating Plan 2022-2024, agreed by EASO and Malta
Romania	Romania	Operational Plan 2022, agreed by the EUAA and Romania
Spain	Spain	Operating Plan 2022-2023, agreed by EASO and Spain

Assessment of the Agency's operational support in 2021

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The Agency provided operational support to eight Member States in 2021, the scope of which was defined in the operating plans signed with the respective authorities of Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Spain. A cross-cutting external ex post evaluation was conducted at the beginning of 2022 to assess the implementation of the Agency's operational support to inform decision-making and to enhance the overall operational support framework. Operations in Belgium, Latvia and Lithuania were excluded, as the operating plans for these countries extended beyond the end of 2021.

Operational support to national asylum and reception systems covered a range of actions which were tailored to the specific context and needs in each country. For example, operations in Spain focused on reception, while support in Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta covered both asylum and reception. In Cyprus, actions focused on the quality of first instance asylum registration and processing, reception management and the processing of second instance appeals. Two specific measures in the area of relocations were implemented in Greece. Operations in Italy covered a wider scope, including access to the asylum procedure, the quality and standardisation of the Dublin procedure, and the management of judicial backlogs.

Through the Agency's assistance in the registration and processing of applications for international protection at first instance, more than 28,000 applicants in Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta were registered. Using a fit-for-purpose approach, support focused on the specific needs in each country. As such, 59% of registrations in Cyprus and Malta were carried out by the Agency, compared with 14% and 39% in Italy and Greece, respectively. In the case of Italy, 43 of

the registrations took place following search and rescue disembarkations, in response to specific needs in that area.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a common challenge across operations, with delays being encountered, for example, in Malta, where the time between entry and registration increased from a median of 84 days in 2020 to 124 in 2021, and in Cyprus, where outbreaks interrupted activities. Human resource constraints were encountered in Cyprus and Italy, where national legislations restricted the contract duration of temporary workers who were engaged to provide assistance.

Support for the management of backlogs at first instance was provided to varying degrees of effectiveness in Cyprus, Greece and Malta. Malta significantly decreased its first instance backlog from 5,100 pending cases at the end of 2020 to 3,265 cases at the end of 2021. In Greece, support from the islands shifted to the mainland due to the successful clearance of the backlog and the reduction in the number of arrivals. However, the backlog in Cyprus remained high with 18,805 pending cases at the end of 2021. This was due to external factors, including a high inflow of applicants.

The five Member States also received assistance in the area of reception. In Spain, support was focused solely on this area, leading to tangible results such as progress on the development of a draft reception model, delivery of professional development activities and training, and site assessments. In comparison, 408 and 580 information sessions were delivered in Cyprus and Malta, respectively, and 1,021 counselling sessions were provided in Cyprus. Reception assistance in Greece and Italy was more strategically focused on capacity-building and the development of tools.

Support at second instance was provided in Cyprus, Greece and Italy. Significant assistance was delivered to Italy to support judicial hearings, judicial research and research on country of origin information (COI). On the other hand, support at second instance was provided to a lesser extent in Cyprus and Greece. Activities in Cyprus focused on file preparation, COI research and data management capacity, whereas in Greece there was a shift towards capacity-building, with most support being centred on professional development and training.

Training was a common element of operating plans that benefitted 2,473 individuals in the five Member States in 2021. Operational support in Spain, which included a measure entirely dedicated to training, meant that a higher number of individuals were trained than in Cyprus, Italy or Malta, despite the smaller scale of operations. This was due to the focus of the operational support and the local context, with most training participants in Spain coming from civil society organisations given the central role they have within the reception system. This differed from the context, for example, in Cyprus, where most training was delivered to the Agency’s personnel working on first instance processing.

Significant achievements were made in producing tools and guidance in 2021. The tools covered different steps within the asylum and reception systems, in line with the nature of the support provided in each Member State. In the area of reception, for example, a tool for the assessment of reception conditions was launched in Greece, where it was piloted and rolled out in four

reception facilities. This marked a critical milestone in facilitating an operational national reception monitoring framework. Efforts are ongoing to roll out this tool in other operational settings. In Spain, the tool was tested in two sites in 2021. Other accomplishments in this area included tools on the quality of asylum processes, vulnerability identification, assessments and referrals, remote working and data collection.

Overall, the external evaluation concluded that the Agency's operational support during 2021 was highly relevant for the needs of Members States, including the notable flexibility to adapt to rapidly-changing contexts. While the effectiveness of the support was satisfactory throughout the year and across operations, albeit to varying levels, certain external factors posed a challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on existing external obstacles, such as challenges in human resources for the Agency and national counterparts.

The external evaluation recognised the extensive experience that the Agency has in providing operational support and training and sharing asylum knowledge and expertise, offering a clear added value. The long-term impact and sustainability of operational support depends on the context in which it is being provided. A gradual transition from operational to strategic activities in countries such as Greece, where support has been long-standing, will contribute to the sustainability of the operations and their long-term impact.

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