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In focus 1: Digitalising asylum and reception systems in 2021

icon for digitalizing asylum procedure

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As anticipated in the EASO Asylum Report 2021,274 asylum and reception authorities continued to digitalise processes in 2021.275The COVID-19 pandemic spurred the need for technological solutions to ensure business continuity amidst movements restrictions and social distancing.

In 2021, national authorities assessed and adjusted procedures using the new digital tools, while civil society organisations and think tanks took stock of the new initiatives and made their recommendations.276 Courts also reviewed the impacts of the new modalities and delivered several judgements related to privacy and data protection, for example on the use of mobile data for identification *(see Section 4.4).*

Reinforcing and improving digital initiatives in 2021 were driven by specific national contexts or a specific step of the asylum process. Developments included:

- Countries with high numbers of applications for international protection continued to use self-registration tools in several languages *(see Section 4.4).*
- Remote interviews gained ground, and generally EU+ countries implemented them for specific groups of applicants, while in-person interviews were still considered to be the most preferred option *(see Section 4.4).*
- Information was provided increasingly through digital channels, with several new websites and applications launched or expanded in 2021. At the same time, some national authorities launched projects to ensure that those unfamiliar with the digital world can also obtain the information they require on their rights and responsibilities in the asylum procedure and in reception *(see Sections 4.7 and 4.9).*
- Face-to-face interactions remained important for providing legal assistance and representation, while remote support was provided when it was considered to be practical and in line with procedural safeguards *(see Section 4.10).*
- Videoconferencing systems for interpreters were purchased or expanded to facilitate interpretation when local interpreters were not available, either due to a rare language or a sudden increase in arrivals *(see Section 4.11).*

- With limited travel outside of the EU for fact-finding missions, remote data collection through online meetings and desk research were used to gather information for COI reports. The result was that reports could often be produced in a shorter timeframe *(see Section 4.12).*
- Selection missions and pre-departure and cultural orientation programmes for resettled refugees typically remained online, although some EU+ countries resumed them on-site when the health situation allowed it. On some occasions, online activities were considered less effective and more time-consuming than face-to-face interactions, resulting in less cases being processed per day
  (see Section 4.16).
- Activities and support in reception typically returned to in-person contexts *(see Section 4.7).*
- New and improved online platforms were developed to train staff, for example on COI *(see Section 4.12)* or on identifying and supporting applicants with special needs *(see Section 5).*
- National authorities focused on simplifying workflows. by digitalising paper-based processes. For example, an EMN study analysed the digitalisation of data collection on the asylum procedure.
- New apps were used to communicate efficiently with different units of an organisation; other authorities involved in asylum, reception and return; and stakeholders involved in certain stages of the overall asylum procedure.277
- New apps were also used to better document the profiles and needs of applicants in reception. This also facilitated the transfer of information when applicants moved from one reception facility to another or when they made the transition from reception to other support services.
- Digital solutions continued to facilitate the transfer of a file from first instance authorities to appeal and establish more efficient channels of communication between the different instances. According to an EMN-OECD inform, three Member States used blockchain technology to enable secure exchanges and connect different systems.278

Piloting and implementing digital initiatives often take several years, so in 2021 many EU+ countries reported on key outputs and milestones for ongoing projects which were implemented earlier.

Digital projects will likely be adapted based on guidance from international, European and national courts. While new technologies can be implemented rapidly, national authorities need to take caution, because court rulings indicate that there is a continued need for strict scrutiny on the compatibility of digital innovations with fundamental rights and data protection guidelines.

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