Please cite as: EUAA, '7.10 Country of origin information' in *Asylum Report 2020*, Enero 2022.

7.10 Country of origin information

Up-to-date, quality information on countries of origin is an essential component to make well-informed, fair decisions on international protection and to develop evidence-based asylum policy. EASO and countries alike continuously gather well-founded information on a wide range of topics covering various third countries.

The recast Qualification Directive, Article 4(3a) specifies that the assessment of an application for international protection must take account of all relevant facts about the applicant's country of origin. Along the same lines, the recast Asylum Procedures Directive, Article 10(3b) stipulates that precise and up-to-date information about the general situation in the countries of origin of applicants and, where necessary, in countries through which they have transited is to be obtained from various sources, such as EASO, UNHCR, the Council of Europe and other relevant international organisations.

Facing a high influx of applicants for international protection from diverse countries of origin over recent years, EU+ countries have taken concrete steps to enhance both the range and the quality of the information they produce. A trend seen in 2019 was the increase in collaboration and sharing of expertise between EU+ countries, frequently coordinated by EASO through specialised networks. Through the networks, best practices are shared and coherent, integrated work programmes are developed among all partners. Such collaboration in 2019 included joint production of COI reports on specific countries and joint development of training curricula on COI.

While cooperation among asylum authorities in EU+ countries was strengthened, so was collaboration between authorities and research institutions and civil society organisations. For example, German authorities had exchanges of information with human rights organisations working in the field, while Sweden laid the groundwork to initiate a project with an academic institution with the aim of enhancing the methodology to create a more harmonised and academic approach to the information cycle.

7.10.1 Institutional changes and human resources

In Sweden in 2019, the COI unit merged with other offices managing migration intelligence and coordinating the Swedish Asylum Agency’s involvement with national security and organised crime, to form a newly-established Section for Information Analysis.

In Malta, plans are underway to establish a COI unit within the Office of the Refugee Commissioner by the end of 2020. Currently, case workers are responsible for carrying out their own COI research by using a variety of reliable, open sources.

Mixed trends were noted on staffing within national COI units. Some asylum administrations, like in Germany and Slovenia, increased the number of staff working on COI, while others, such as Finland and Lithuania, reduced staff.

Many countries invested in staff training to increase knowledge on the methodology of COI research in order to enhance capacity in conducting and reporting on COI research and foster informed use of COI research products. In addition, general, background knowledge of key countries of origin was strengthened among asylum officials, so that they can better understand and contextualise information reported through new COI products and use this knowledge for informed decision-making. This was coupled with a new approach to reporting, focused on the incremental provision of updates on new developments in countries of origin and building on already-existing repositories of knowledge.

7.10.1 Publications



Austria: 58 country reports were uploaded to the national database (www.staatendokumentation.at). Two analytical reports – on Afghanistan (socio-economic situation in Herat) and Iraq (socio-economic dynamics in Baghdad) – were published. In addition, a report on Somalia/Ethiopia focusing on youth migration was produced.



Belgium: 365 COI reports were produced. Cedoca invested heavily in publishing more reports and 103 COI reports were published on the CGRS website. Belgium also contributed to several EASO reports.



Denmark: 23 short COI reports were produced through desk research and Skype meetings to update the findings of previous fact-finding missions.



Germany: 22 country reports were produced, including a report on Venezuela and one on the situation of LGBTI individuals in Chechnya.



France: 133 COI reports were published on the OFPRA website by the Division of Information, Documentation and Research.



Sweden: A number of reports were published, including on Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Georgia, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan and Syria.



Slovakia: 445 COI queries related to 88 applications were processed, mainly covering Afghanistan, Iran and the Ukraine.



United Kingdom: New and updated country policy and information products were published on the government’s website.

7.10.3 Fact-finding missions

Fact-finding missions continued to be a primary tool for collecting information and gathering detailed knowledge about the situation in a particular country of origin or transit. To this end, EU+ countries conducted a number of fact-finding missions in 2019.

Austria conducted two fact-finding missions to Afghanistan (in cooperation with Landinfo) and Nigeria (in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Administrative Court). The aim of these missions were to gather information about specific issues and to find and establish for future information-gathering.

The COI unit of the Danish Immigration Service undertook five fact-finding missions during the year, three of which focused on stateless Palestinians. Three of these five missions were undertaken with partners like the Danish National ID Centre, Danish Refugee Council and Norwegian Landinfo.

In France, OFPRA – with participation from the National Court for Right of Asylum – organised two fact-finding missions in 2019 to Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and Côte d'Ivoire. Sweden carried out fact-finding missions to Ethiopia, Georgia, the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.

In Finland, the FAKTA project continued, aiming to develop a more resource-efficient model for planning and executing fact-finding missions. This model enables researchers to collect more specific and detailed data on countries of origin, which is increasingly utilised by the asylum unit. In 2019, missions were conducted to Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Iraq.

7.10.4 Innovations

To better align COI products with evolving user needs and to improve information provision to end users (usually first and second instance decision-makers), EU+ countries introduced a number of innovations in the area of COI production and management.

In Germany, COI experts contributed to the pilot of the Support System for Interviews (*ASA, Assistenzsystem für Anhörungen*), which was first introduced in late 2018. The system supports case officers during interviews in clarifying facts by providing case-specific COI and additional case-specific questions. The time required for information collection is thus considerably reduced. ASA also facilitates the comparison of applicant statements with statements presented in country guidance notes. A rule-based examination will replace the previous manual search in the guidance notes. The system is currently available for Georgia, Iraq, Iran, Togo and Turkey.

In October 2019, the Country Information Service of the Finnish Immigration Service introduced the Sopu project, which aims at developing a new reporting model on COI based on a more continuous, regularly-updated reporting model. The process will lighten the workload of COI researchers. Finland also continued developing a new, user-friendly COI database, set to be launched in 2020. The database will improve the quality of COI services and increase access to relevant COI, thus enhancing support to other units.

In Lithuania, a three-year project to update the information portal of the Asylum Division of the Migration Department was completed in September 2019. Staff gained easy access to up-to-date newsletters, international news agency services, a platform through which to cooperate and exchange information on countries of origin with relevant authorities in other European Union countries, access to Factiva's global news database, and information from the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation. These sources are used to prepare notes on countries of origin of applicants for international protection.

In Belgium, the COI unit invested in the innovation of training methods and developed to this

aim several tutorials. In order to increase the harmonization of products they developed several COI thematic templates which are shared with international partners. The New Media Unit continued to develop their expertise by testing new software and following OSINT training in specialised organisations. They answered 250 specific queries for resettlement cases and for normal procedures.

Existing challenges reported by national authorities and civil society organisations



In the context of these advances, a number of challenges were reported by national authorities and civil society organisations alike, including a lack of sources in the national language, lack of detailed information on some countries of origin or applicant profiles, and challenges in accessing updated information on countries in which the situation changes rapidly.

For example, the Danish Immigration Service reported difficulties in accessing the Syrian territory and thus having updated information on the situation. Likewise, Germany reported that meeting the requests and expectations of case officers for fast and comprehensive COI remained a challenge. Alternative measures of collecting information and international corporation have proven to be valuable in this regard.

Apart from insufficient COI resources in respective national languages, civil society organisations reported that existing databases were not user-friendly and there was great disparity in a high volume of reports on some countries and a shortage on others.[539] They also noted that COI information on SOGI was scarce. It was suggested that COI on SOGI minorities should cover a range of legal and social aspects beyond generalisations. Data could be collected, for example, by involving relevant NGOs in the countries of origin of the profile of applicants.[540]

Similarly, civil society organisations reported that existing COI resources on issues related to statelessness are insufficient.[541] It was also noted that, at times, COI was not shared with applicants or their representatives prior to issuing a first instance decision. Therefore, it was not possible to provide comments or feedback about the COI before the appeal phase.[542]

In general, the inaccessibility of COI reports produced at a national level, but not made public, has been raised as an issue by civil society groups.[543] At the same time, such reports include information that may be deemed confidential by national authorities.

Finally, the Asylum Research Centre, together with the Dutch Council for Refugees, provided feedback to EASO COI reports on Eritrea, Iraq and Pakistan, which were published in 2019.[544]

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