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Key developments in 2021 shaped national legislation, policies and practices in the field of asylum in EU+ countries. Three horizontal themes with an impact across most steps of the asylum procedure were the digitalisation of asylum systems, the impact of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic and the new protection needs of Afghan nationals following developments in Afghanistan.

In focus 1: Digitalising asylum and reception systems in 2021

icon on digitalisation

National asylum and reception authorities in EU+ countries continued to digitalise processes. The COVID-19 pandemic spurred the need for technological solutions to ensure business continuity amidst movement restrictions and social distancing. To varying degrees and based on national contexts, digital innovations were introduced for the self-registration of applications; remote interviews; information provision; interpretation; country of origin information (COI) collection; training; information management systems and communications across authorities; and the simplification of workflows.

Digitalised processes 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 as court rulings indicate that there is a continued need for strict scrutiny of the compatibility of digital innovations with fundamental rights and personal data protection guidelines.

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In focus 2: The impact of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic on asylum and reception systems

icon for measures against covid in asylum

Since the outbreak in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions have continued to strongly affect asylum and reception systems globally. EU+ countries employed a variety of methods to ensure access to protection and efficient processing of new and pending applications amidst public health measures which aimed to curb infection. Access to COVID-19 vaccinations and the rollout of national inoculation campaigns were fundamental in limiting the number of infections.

With the gradual rollout of vaccines, COVID-19 restrictions were eased but many arrangements which were introduced to mitigate the pandemic continued throughout 2021. These practices included: the use of disinfecting products, distancing, plexiglass barriers and face masks; the provision of services at staggered hours and through remote modalities; limitations on the number of people present at authorities' premises at the same time; regular medical screenings and rapid testing; quarantine measures; and revised maximum occupancy rates in reception. Resettlement activities resumed, again with the use of mixed modalities, including remote selection missions based on dossiers, online pre-departure orientations and additional health checks in travel arrangements.

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In focus 3: Responses by EU+ countries to new protection needs of Afghan nationals

icon on protection needs

The deterioration of the security and human rights situation in Afghanistan in 2021 created waves of displacement for the general population, in addition to increased risks for particular groups. An immediate consideration was to provide quick access to safety, so EU+ countries organised rapid evacuations and adapted processing of applications submitted by Afghans. Dedicated information campaigns focused on providing information to Afghan nationals on matters related to asylum.

Due to the volatility in the country of origin and the difficulty in accessing up-to-date country of origin information (COI), many EU+ countries suspended the processing of applications by Afghans at both first and second instances, with the exception of cases where protection needs were clearly evident. Efforts were also made to bring Afghan families together, while special arrangements were made for the provision of material reception conditions and the integration of Afghan evacuees. The large number of pending cases by Afghan nationals, as well as the status of those who do not qualify for protection but cannot be returned, are issues that remain to be tackled and require constructive and realistic approaches by EU+ countries.

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