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In 2022, the elimination of backlogs remained a priority,411 while the number of applications for international protection increased in several EU+ countries. The arrival of displaced persons from Ukraine brought further challenges to national asylum systems.

In Ireland, the Economic and Social Research Institute identified COVID-19, conflicts and the war in Ukraine as key drivers for the surge in asylum applications.412 The latter was an additional pressure on the asylum system, which meant that first instance resources were diverted from processing asylum applications to registering displaced persons from Ukraine for temporary protection *(see EUAA Situational Analysis on Providing Temporary Protection to Displaced Persons from Ukraine. A Year in Review, March 2023)*.

Some EU+ countries took additional measures to address the high influx of cases, such as introducing prioritisation policies for certain profiles, extending time limits to issue a decision at first instance, shortening or omitting certain steps in the procedure when the outcome would be favourable to the applicant and recruiting additional staff. Furthermore, UNHCR published a paper compiling good practices to guide asylum authorities in effectively processing applications through robust structures, close cooperation between relevant actors, and the involvement of legal aid providers and civil society organisations to address systemic issues.413

In Austria, the number of decisions taken in the fast-track procedure increased significantly in 2022. The practice of fast-track processing focused on applicants from safe countries of origin and applicants who had already been sentenced by a criminal court.414

Belgium prioritised certain categories of applicants who were in the reception system. Targeted action was taken for countries with high recognition rates, which made it possible to take a decision granting an international protection status for certain profiles without the organisation of a personal interview and only based on the information in the file (including the interview at registration) (for example for applicants from Eritrea, Somalia and Syria).

The Immigration Service in Denmark extended processing time limits and reallocated personnel to prioritise applications submitted under the Special Act on Residence Permits for Displaced

Persons from Ukraine.415

Similarly, due to the large number of cases received over the last year and the arrival of a large number of asylum seekers from Afghanistan and people fleeing from Ukraine, in September 2022 the IND in the Netherlands decided to extend the time limit for a decision by 9 months for all cases where the 6-month time limit had not yet expired on 27 September 2022. In addition, for all asylum applications lodged after 27 September 2022, the time limit was pre-emptively extended by 9 months, meaning that the IND could take a maximum of 15 months to decide on an asylum application lodged after 27 September and before 1 January 2023. At the start of January 2023, it was uncertain whether this general extension of the decision-making period would be prolonged for asylum applications lodged after 1 January 2023.

On 23 November 2022, the Regional Court of Den Bosch ruled in favour of the general extension of the time limit. In contrast, on 6 January 2023, the Regional Court of Amsterdam issued a judgment declaring the time limit extension to be unlawful. The court maintained that, even though there was an increase in the number of asylum applications, it was not of such magnitude that the threshold included in the Aliens Act, Article 42(4b) was reached.416

In Ireland, the International Protection Office (IPO) introduced a new case load management system to improve the efficiency of the asylum procedure by channelling specific cases to different procedures. For example, cases related to minors were prioritised (see Section 5.6). In addition, Ireland omitted asylum interviews for certain profiles of applicants to speed up processes (this was the case for applicants from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Somalia).417 In November 2022, the IPO introduced a revised asylum application procedure. In accordance with the European Communities (International Protection Procedures) Regulations 2022, an applicant making an application at the IPO would be required to complete the International Protection Questionnaire onsite at the IPO, in addition to completing their preliminary interview. The questionnaire was reduced significantly to 24 questions in order to enable applicants to complete the questionnaire at the time of making their application.418

UNHCR reported that the Spanish Asylum and Refugee Office (OAR) created a unit focusing on cases of vulnerable applicants, and it improved its practices on the assessment of cases related to gender-based persecution. The two organisations worked together to improve prioritisation procedures and the quality of assessments of international protection cases.

In June 2022, the IND in the Netherlands published its first Performance Update, concluding that deciding quickly on applications was becoming more difficult due to the migration flows and complex laws and regulations. Cases involving religious conversion or LGBTIQ applicants, in particular, led to longer processing times and more time spent on training staff. 419 Another report published in the Netherlands by the investigation agency Anderson Elffers Felix (AEF) concluded that a project-based approach to eliminate backlogs or process applications by a specific group proved valuable in order to provide legal certainty to a large number of asylum applicants.420

Overall, the capacity of the IND to examine asylum cases was considered insufficient in 2022 and measures were taken to mitigate the lack of capacity and limit waiting times. Measures included the ongoing recruitment of case officers in various locations, shorter interviews for

applicants likely to be provided international protection and further acceleration of applications if applicants already requested protection in another EU Member State or came from a safe country of origin.421

Furthermore, from 26 September 2022, the Netherlands increased the time limit for deciding on applications for international protection from 6 months to 15 months for first asylum applications submitted until 1 January 2023, subsequent applications and family reunification cases for which the statutory decision period did not expire on 27 September 2022.422 On 8 February 2023, the Advisory Division of the Dutch Council of State issued advice on the bill extending decision periods in asylum and family reunification cases *(see Section 4.14.2.4)*.423

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