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3.1 Operational support

To date, EASO has provided direct operational assistance to seven EU countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta, in addition to Luxembourg and Sweden also having received support for brief periods of time.

Currently, four of these Member States which are experiencing pressure on their asylum and reception systems receive direct support from EASO: Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta *(see Table 3.1)*. Indeed, data from Eurostat showed an 11 % increase in applications for international protection (about 740 000 applicants) in 2019, with frontline countries like Cyprus, Greece and Malta receiving more applications than during the migration crisis.

The assistance, which is provided upon request, is defined in an operating plan with the aim of immediate technical and operational support to national asylum and reception systems, generally including the deployment of personnel coordinated by EASO.

EASO Asylum Support Teams, which also comprise seconded experts from Member States, are deployed on the ground to provide rapid and direct support, for example, by assisting in asylum processes, clearing existing backlogs and training national staff. The needs in each country vary, but generally assistance with registration is provided to all countries requesting support. In fact, in 2019 more than one-half of all registrations in Cyprus, Greece and Italy were handled with EASO’s assistance.

EASO also provides assistance on the Dublin procedure, interviews, assessment of applications, vulnerability assessments, identification of persons with special needs, best interests of the child assessments, country of origin information, the appeal process and 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. To support EASO operations in Cyprus, Greece and Italy, EASO developed new practical tools and refined existing tools to address specific needs of the national asylum administrations in these three countries.

Box 3.1 EASO operational support in 2019



In 2019, EASO's operational assistance reached unprecedented levels, coordinating the deployment of over 900 persons (including EASO staff, experts from Member States, interpreters, cultural mediators and security personnel) in four Member States (Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta). Close to 40 % of the agency's annual budget was spent on rapid operational support in 2019. Responding to ever-growing needs in Member States, EASO announced in early 2020 that it would double the size of its operations in Greece in order to provide assistance with the critical situation in the reception centres.

In addition to national authorities, in the framework of direct operations EASO works closely with relevant EU agencies, including Frontex, Europol and the EU Judicial Cooperation Agency (Eurojust) to quickly identify, register and fingerprint migrants, with applicants for international protection falling under EASO's direct mandate. Through partnerships with international organisations, such as UNHCR and IOM, EASO plays a role in coordinating action and avoiding the duplication of work on the ground.

Cyprus

EASO has been providing special support to Cyprus since 2014. Technical and operational assistance was expanded in early 2019 due to increased pressure on the asylum and reception systems in the country. Specifically, EASO supported the registration of applications, processing at first instance (including implementing standard operating procedures for registration, providing registration assistants and interpreters, conducting interviews and issuing recommendations for decisions) and improving reception conditions in both Kofinou and Kokkinotrimithia. The support also focused on COI, reducing the backlog of pending cases, providing information to applicants, vulnerability assessments and enhancing data management and coordination. EASO has also started laying the groundwork for new areas of work, including its support to the newly- established International Protection Administrative Court. Finally, EASO also provided training to Cypriot staff and arranged study visits.

Greece

EASO has been deploying asylum support teams to Greece since 2011. Specifically, the experts have supported the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement on five Greek islands under the fast-track border procedure, by conducting interviews and giving recommendations to the asylum administration on the admissibility and eligibility of applications. EASO also provided support in the provision of information, registration, processing of outgoing Dublin take charge requests, COI, reception and second instance applications. Since the second half of 2019, EASO also supported the regular procedure, both in Lesvos and on the mainland, conducting interviews and drafting eligibility opinions.

Given the expanding pressures on the asylum system in Greece, EASO has continued to ramp up operational support to the country to help with the backlog of cases. At the beginning of 2020, EASO announced that it would double the number of persons deployed in Greece, from 500 to 1

000 over the year, including case workers, field support staff, reception staff, research officers for the Appeals Authority, interpreters and administrative staff.

Italy

Since 2013, EASO has provided technical and operational support to Italy. In 2019, EASO continued to register applicants, prepare case files to absorb the backlog, strengthen the Italian country of origin information unit and implement a process to support management of the reception system. EASO staff do not, however, conduct interviews in Italy. EASO also handled outgoing Dublin take charge requests and has helped to transfer in total more than 8 000 applicants from Italy to other EU countries since 2015, under both the regular relocation programme and disembarkations.

Malta

As disembarkations in Malta began to increase, the country requested EASO's support for the first time in 2019 and an operating plan was signed in June. EASO provided tailor-made assistance, including backlog management support, technical expertise, capacity building, COI support, quality control tools, information provision, registration and lodging of applications and enhancing the capacity of the Dublin Unit. Under the 2020 Operating Plan, EASO will double its support to the Maltese authorities and, for the first time, provide support in terms of reception, including age assessment procedures and vulnerability assessments.

Box 3.2 Planning, monitoring and evaluation of EASO operations



A more robust, results-based planning approach was applied to the implementation of the 2019 Operating Plans for Cyprus, Italy, Greece and, for the first time, Malta. This approach brought about greater transparency and accountability when assessing progress and achievements. Building on a comprehensive needs assessment and design phase for the development of new operating plans in 2018, a similar exercise was successfully carried out for the 2019 operating plans.

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Disembarkations

In the context of the Central Mediterranean route, EASO works in close coordination with the European Commission, other EU agencies and Member States after the disembarkations of migrants rescued at sea. The first coordinated operation took place in December 2018-January 2019 when efforts were pooled together to disembark migrants from the Sea-Watch-3 vessel.

Since then, EASO has taken a key role throughout 2019 to provide urgent assistance with voluntary relocations resulting from disembarkations of migrants rescued at sea. EASO specifically supported 24 such events in 2019, involving 2 716 applicants.

In cooperation with the European Commission, EASO developed the 'Messina Model' to establish clear procedures and protect the rights of asylum applicants during disembarkations. Under the model, EASO teams are dispatched immediately to carry out information provision, registration and pre-selection interviews; support unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups in terms of vulnerability assessments; and assist in relocation schemes to other Member States. In 2020, EASO will continue to be extensively involved in disembarkations and voluntary relocations based on Standard Operating Procedures which were agreed in the autumn of 2019.

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