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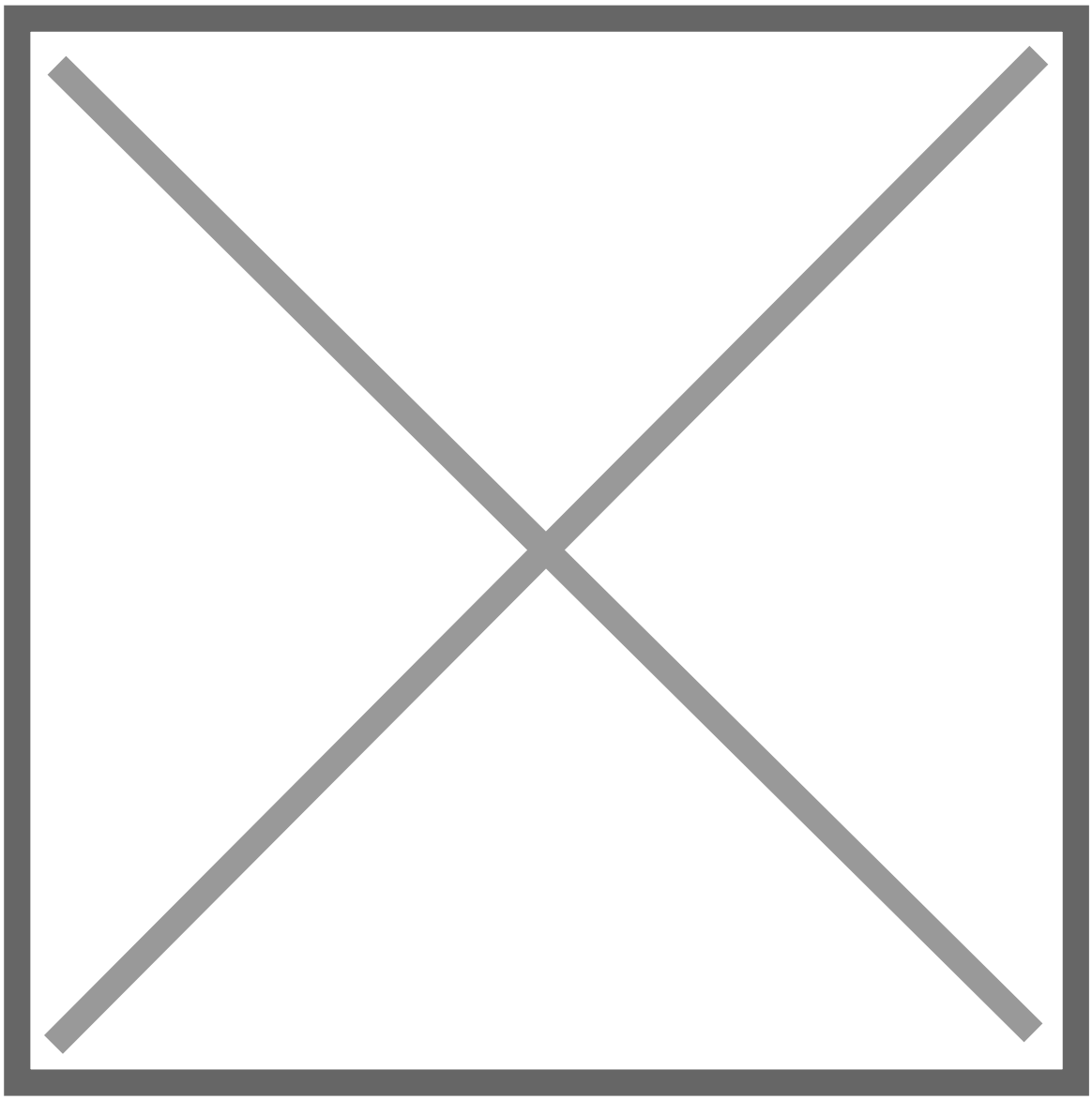
COVID-19 and digitalisation

COVID-19



Travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the chances of asylum seekers reaching the EU's territory. National authorities were compelled to swiftly adjust to the new circumstances by suspending or limiting registrations for a short period during the first wave of the pandemic. During this time, EU+ countries re-organised processes and the working environment.

Fewer asylum seekers were channelled into the Dublin procedure, while the process for transfers had to be adjusted to adhere to strict health requirements. Case law in 2020 suggested that

pressure on health systems became an additional factor to consider when determining the Member State responsible for an asylum application.

Physical distancing, the closure of facilities, remote working and health protocols had an impact on all steps involved in processing applications both at first instance and at second, including personal interviews, provision of interpretation, the notification of decisions, case load management, training and quality assessments. When possible, these tasks were performed remotely with the help of digital technologies, such as videoconferencing. Internal working arrangements in first and second instance administrations were adjusted to minimise the disruption of services, while adhering to public health measures. In consequence, procedural time limits were extended accordingly.

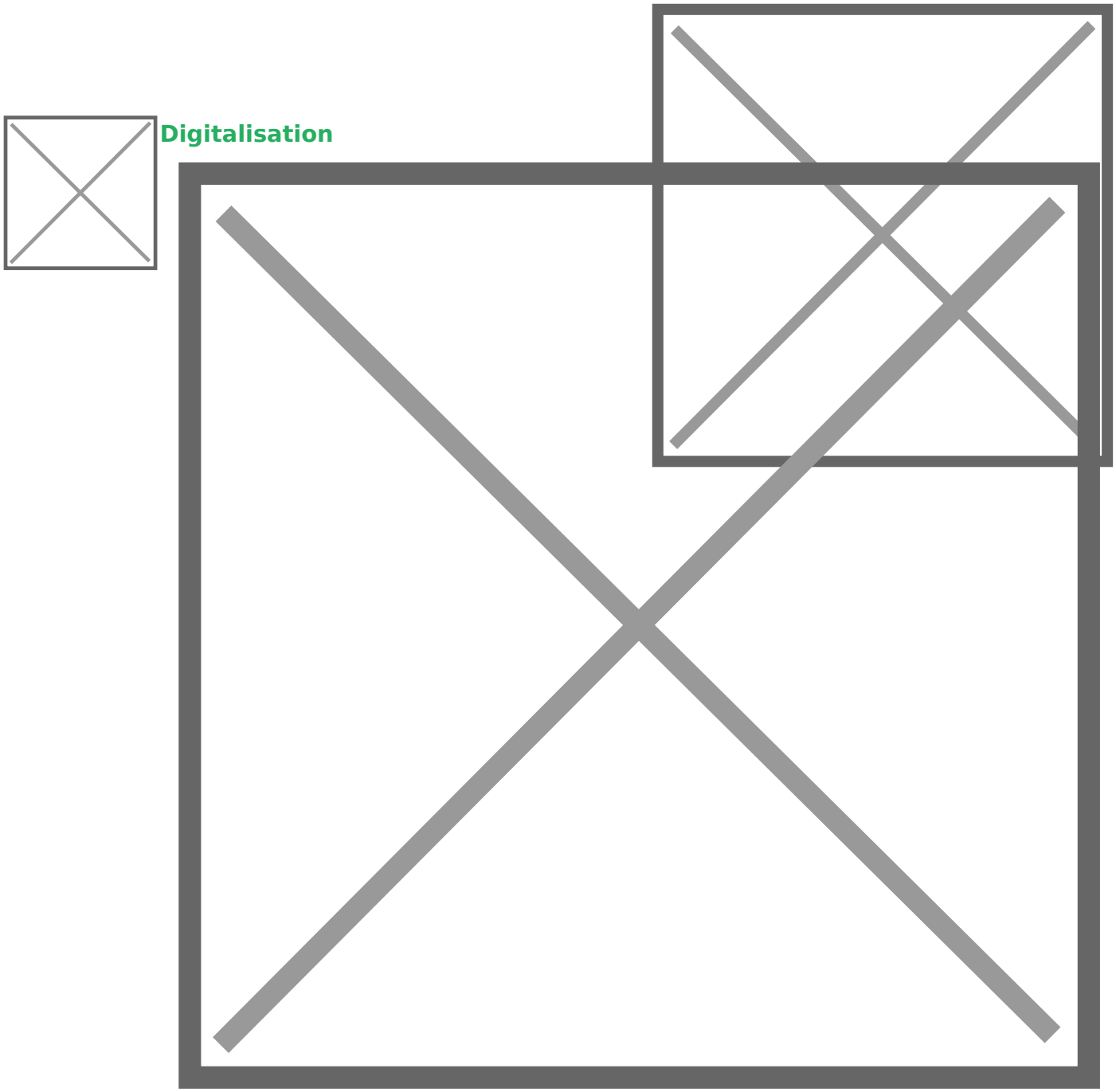
The format for information provision shifted into small group sessions, by phone or through online sessions or video tutorials, while additional efforts focused especially on protection, hygiene measures, protocols to be followed, medical support and instructions to avoid contagion. Legal assistance and representation were provided remotely or with limited face-to-face interactions. As a direct result of restrictive COVID-19-related measures, limitation in access to legal assistance at the borders and in reception and detention facilities were reported in several countries. In view of the curtailed ability to conduct fact-finding missions in countries of origin, EU+ countries focused on other methods to collect country of origin information (COI) and maintain contact with their sources.

In the area of reception, EU+ countries adapted both the organisation and the infrastructure of reception to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, introducing measures such as an initial period of quarantine after arrival, physical distancing within and limited mobility across reception facilities, restrictions in visitations, and additional hygiene measures and protective equipment. Requirements for additional space put a further strain on reception authorities, management and reception staff, while support services were often reduced to maintain physical distancing or moved online. This had a particularly adverse impact on applicants with special needs, who were at times devoid of the full range of needed support services. In the majority of EU+ countries, detention centres became less occupied due to COVID-19 restrictions as the removal of rejected applicants was suspended and third-country nationals were released.

One of the areas heavily affected by the pandemic was the content of protection and integration of beneficiaries of protection. Delays in the extension of residence permits due to disrupted services often led to legal uncertainty and impeded access to other rights, such as housing, employment and health care. Family reunification procedures were halted or severely delayed, and employment opportunities shrank. Adequate support through online schooling for children was often a challenge due to a lack of computers, Internet connection or the precarious housing situation, which did not provide for a separate quiet place for studying. Support programmes and individual integration plans for beneficiaries were extended or adapted to the new circumstances. Nevertheless, the impacts of the pandemic may have long-term effects on integration, from health to accommodation and employment opportunities.
Travel restrictions naturally affected the implementation of returns. The number of forced returns dropped significantly, while voluntary returns continued under the required health protocols and precautions. Many countries suspended not only return procedures but also the issuance of return

decisions, thus extending the period of voluntary departure.

Overall, EU+ countries made remarkable efforts to ensure a continuity of services, demonstrating the resilience and flexibility of national asylum and reception systems in the face of the unexpected. In parallel, judicial authorities reviewed the new measures to ensure they held up to legal standards and guarantees.



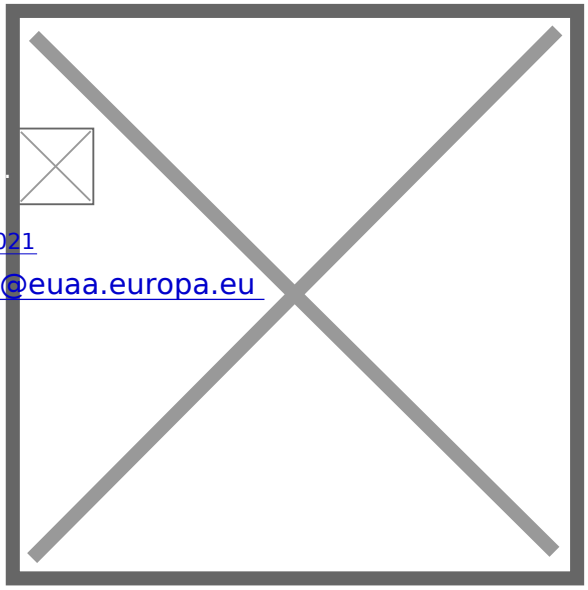
Digitalisation

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a new impetus to continue or accelerate the use of digital technologies in the field of asylum. In 2020, EU+ countries developed and implemented new electronic systems throughout the stages of the asylum procedure. Digital solutions were used for the registration of applications online; verification of an applicant’s identity; document submission; remote interviewing; provision of information, legal assistance and interpretation services; linguistic analysis; notification of decisions and information on the status of a case; submission of appeals and digital signatures to issue decisions; and provision of integration support, including language learning, social orientation and employment coaching. A number of countries also

enhanced their electronic reception management systems and IT infrastructure and invested in more IT equipment in reception facilities.

In the area of return, EU+ countries turned to remote communication procedures and reintegration counselling, while online tools facilitated communication with third countries on the identification procedures of returnees and the issuance of travel documents. Digital technologies were also used in the context of resettlement, such as remote interviews and virtual pre-departure orientation, in an effort to ensure a continuity of services.

While there are many benefits to digitalisation, attention has been drawn to potential risks as well, including consent to use personal data; accessibility issues for certain profiles of applicants who may not have digital literacy skills or may not have access to equipment and connectivity; the lack of human interaction in the provision of services (for example in catering to individuals with special needs); and increasing trust among targeted groups to encourage meaningful use. As work toward digitalisation progresses, these concerns must be taken into consideration and addressed accordingly.



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