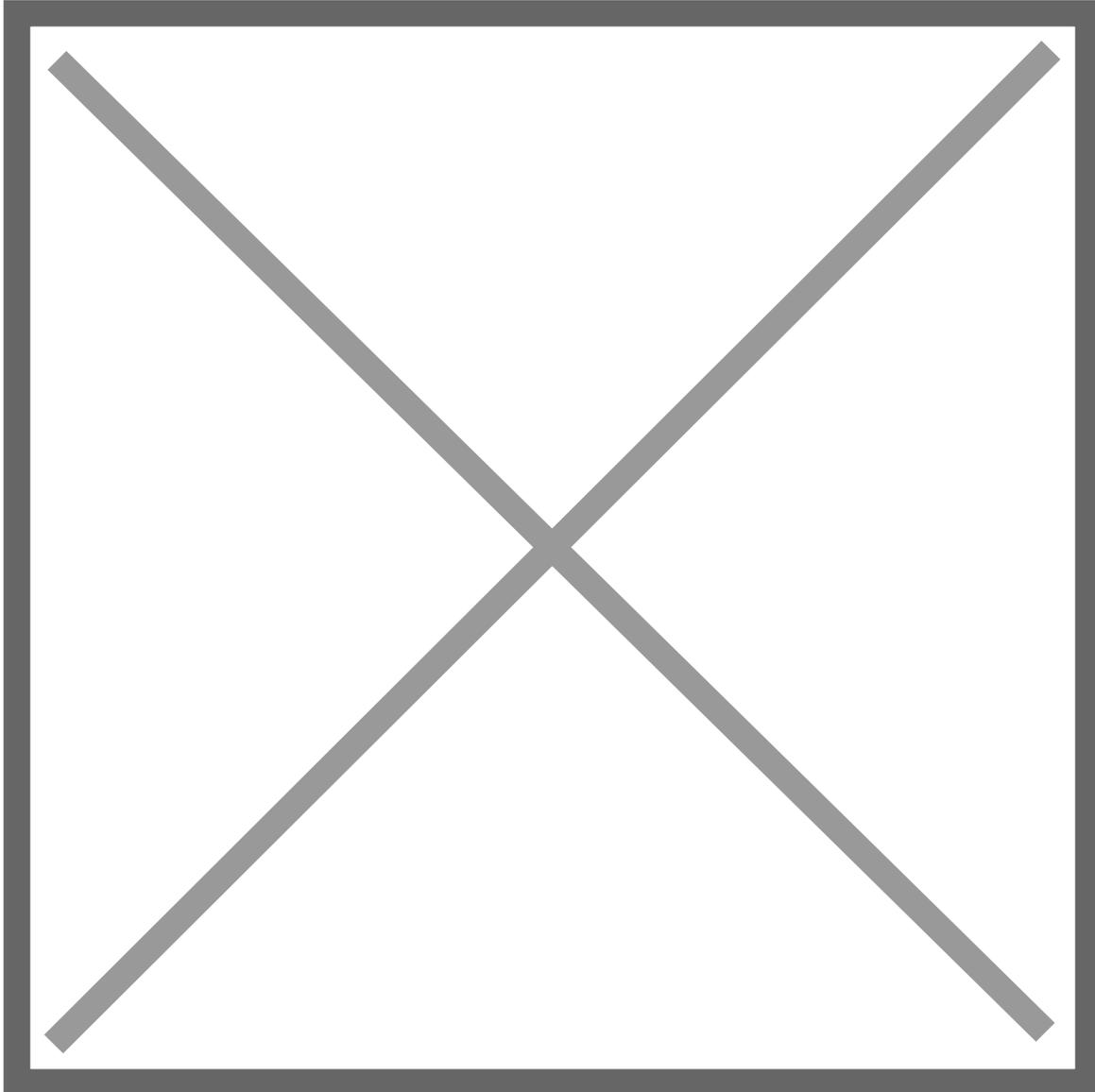


Interview: Meet Stathis and Maria from the EASO Country Guidance team

Can you present yourself and explain your roles with EASO?



Maria: My name is Maria Kontogianni and I have been an EASO Country Guidance Officer since April 2020.

My role is to support the work of the EASO Country Guidance Network and the Country Guidance Drafting Teams. So far, I was responsible for the update of the country guidance on Iraq and

soon we will start the update process on Nigeria.



Stathis: My name is Efsthios (Stathis) Poularakis and I also joined the agency as a Country Guidance Officer, in April 2020.

I have been working mainly on supporting and facilitating the work of the EASO Country Guidance Network and respective Drafting Team, with a focus on Afghanistan.

EASO published the first country guidance document not so long ago, in 2018. How would you explain EASO's work on country guidance to the public that is perhaps less familiar with its specifics?

Stathis: Country guidance is the assessment of the situation in key countries of origin. It is important to underline that we are talking about a joint assessment conducted by a network of senior-level policy officials from EU+ countries. EASO's role is to organise and coordinate this process. The aim of this joint assessment is to foster convergence in asylum decision-making across the EU. In other words, the aim of country guidance is for similar applications for international protection from the same country of origin to be examined and decided on in a similar manner.

Each country guidance document is based on common country of origin information (COI). The information is analysed in accordance with international and EU law, relevant jurisprudence and general EASO guidance on the examination of applications for international protection.

Who is country guidance for? What is its intended use?

Maria: Country guidance is mainly for caseworkers, decision-makers and policymakers in national asylum authorities and we really hope they find it useful, as its primary aim is to assist them in their everyday work. It should be noted that country guidance is not binding. Still, it is something EU+ countries develop together, and they are invited to take it into account when examining applications for international protection from the particular country of origin.

What would a reader find in the country guidance documents?

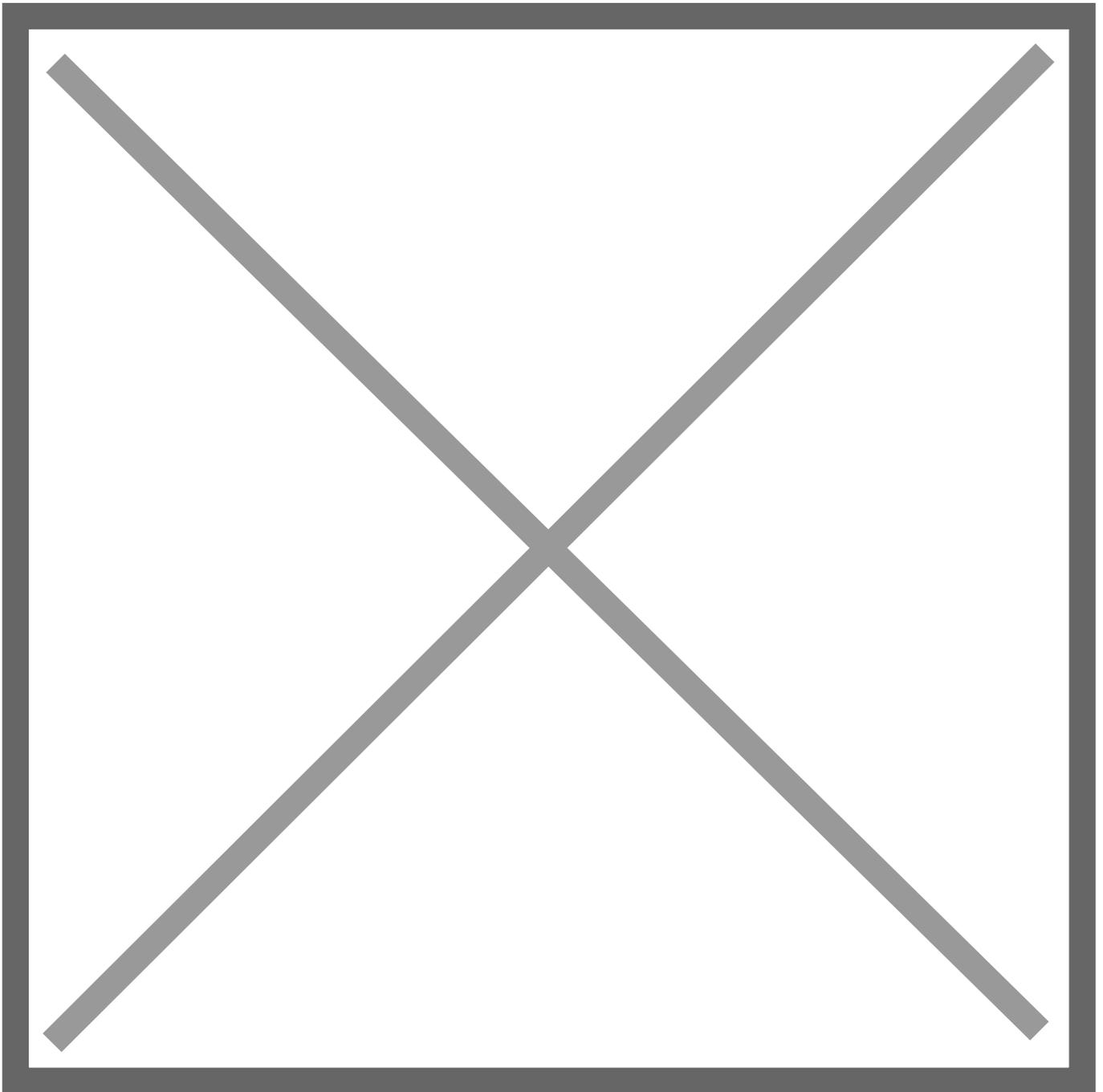
Maria: Each country guidance document is divided into two main parts: a common analysis and a guidance note. The guidance note is the summary of the assessment. In the common analysis, the reader can find more details about this assessment and its basis. In both parts, the structure and scope mirror each other and follow the underlying logic of the examination of an application for international protection. So, we have different sections on actors of persecution or serious harm, refugee status, subsidiary protection, actors of protection, internal protection alternatives, and exclusion. With regard to refugee status, there is a list of the most commonly encountered profiles and their situation is analysed in relation to the criteria for granting refugee status. For

every country of origin this list is different, but there are some profiles that are common in every country guidance, for example women, children, profiles related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

**What are the countries that are currently covered by country guidance documents?
How often are these documents updated?**

Maria: So far, we have guidance on four countries, Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria and Syria. In 2022, we expect to publish a new country guidance document on Somalia. The situation on the ground in these countries of origin could be very volatile. So, country guidance is time-sensitive and we try to make sure that the documents are reviewed regularly and updated as needed. The timing of the updates is decided on together with the Country Guidance Network, as is the scope of each update. These decisions depend on the situation on the ground and how likely it is for certain aspects of the assessment to change based on new information.

Stathis: In practice, this has resulted in updates of different periodicity for the different countries. The country guidance on Afghanistan was the first document published originally in June 2018, it was updated in June 2019 and again in December 2020, and we will soon embark on its 2021 update, which we expect to publish later in the year. The guidance on Iraq was first published in June 2019 and its first update became available in January 2021. For Nigeria, on the other hand, the current country guidance dates back to February 2019 and we expect to publish an update in autumn 2021.



What is the difference between country guidance and country of origin information?

Stathis: Country of origin information (COI) refers to information about the country of origin of an applicant, which is used in the examination of his or her international protection needs. On the other hand, country guidance is the assessment of the situation in a particular country of origin in accordance with the applicable EU legislation, relevant case law and EASO horizontal guidance. While the country guidance is based on COI, it is certainly not COI itself. In a nutshell, COI is the factual basis on which country guidance provides an assessment in the form of common analysis and guidance.

You joined the agency last April, in the midst of measures related to COVID-19, what has your experience of working with EASO been so far? Has there been anything that surprised you in the country guidance work?

Stathis: It has indeed been a very challenging period, but we have managed to find our stepping. We were lucky enough to receive a lot of support from the existing team and, even though we have not yet had a chance to work together from the same office, we still feel that we are part of a solid team.

Maria: I fully agree. So, in general we can say that it has been a very positive experience.

If you are asked to share one important message about country guidance, what would it be?

Maria: EASO's message is 'Support is our mission' and I will not deviate far from that. So, I would like to say that our mission is to support people working in the asylum field. We know the challenges and sometimes the confusion when deciding on a particular case, and we really hope that country guidance documents can be helpful in this regard.

Stathis: Indeed, as Maria has eloquently put it, our mission is to support our colleagues in Europe working in the field. We hope that the country guidance documents are as practical and as helpful as possible. Not only for policy-making across the EU, but also for everyday casework, and we trust that these documents can really contribute to a common European asylum system, in which similar cases are decided on in a similar manner.

[Learn more](#) about EASO's work on country guidance and read the available country guidance documents.

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