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7.2 Access to information

Persons seeking international protection need information regarding their situation in order to be able to fully communicate their protection needs and personal circumstances and to have them comprehensively and fairly assessed. Under the recast Asylum Procedures Directive, Member States need to ensure that relevant information is made available to applicants, for example where and how applications for international protection may be lodged. Obligations also include the provision of information to potential applicants who are in detention facilities and at border crossing points.

Effective access to information is a primary constituent of procedural fairness.[xliii] Applicants have the right to be informed so that: a) they understand the different stages of the process; b) they know their rights and obligations in each of these stages; and c) they are aware of the means available to them to exercise their rights and fulfil their duties. Accordingly, having effective access to information enables them to make informed decisions throughout the process, being aware of the consequences of each decision.

During each procedure, applicants are to be informed of:

- Their rights and obligations and the possible consequences of not complying with their obligations and not cooperating with the authorities;
- The timeframe for each stage of the procedure; and
- Consequences of withdrawing an application.

For persons with pending cases, it is crucial to receive information about their situation, because a lack of clarity can be a contributing factor to absconding and secondary movement.

In 2019, EU+ countries continued to expand the methods of information provision to both asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, at times through joint projects with NGOs or international organisations. Information was typically provided in various languages through information platforms, leaflets, brochures, video clips or smartphone applications. The information currently provided by countries includes not only aspects of the asylum procedure but also everyday life situations in the host country, integration, return and resettlement. As in 2018, projects in EU+ countries focused on providing information to vulnerable groups.

7.2.1 Information on rights and obligations in the asylum procedure

In 2019, EU+ countries continued to develop and revise guides, information leaflets and videos on the asylum procedure to provide information to both asylum applicants and protected persons. The information is often made available in several languages, for example in Finland,

France and Luxembourg.

New legislation entered into force in March 2019 in Switzerland which improved the information provided to applicants. Under the new procedure, all applicants for international protection are provided with information on the asylum procedure through a short film, followed by question with counsellors.[348]

In Belgium, Fedasil launched a multi-lingual information platform, www.fedasilinfo.be, which is accessible only from Belgium and available in 12 languages (Albanian, Arabic, Dutch, English, Farsi, French, Pashto, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Tigrinya and Turkish). The platform also has an audio version for 8 of these 12 languages. The website provides information on procedures for international protection, accommodation, living in Belgium, return of rejected applicants, employment, unaccompanied minors, health and learning.[349]

In 2019, Lithuania introduced recordings (video and audio) during the initial interview. Applicants must be properly informed of the recording.

While countries made great strides in 2019 to provide information on the rights and obligations of applicants, civil society organisations underlined that information provision should be comprehensive and tailored to the needs of different groups. For example, they found that information was lacking on the procedural steps for Dublin cases in Hungary.[350]

Similarly, a lack of information was noted in Malta concerning applicants in detention, with information being delivered by UNHCR Malta or NGOs on a case-by-case basis.[351] Maltese authorities clarified that all applicants for international protection, irrespective of their place of residence (e.g. detention, open centres or the community) are provided with information on their rights and obligations as asylum applicants during the lodging of the application.

7.2.2 Information on rights and obligations in the context of everyday life, protection and integration

Information on the conditions in the country of asylum are fundamental, not only to foster the applicant's prospects for integration in a new society but also for the overall well-being of the person during and after the asylum procedure. With this goal in mind, new measures were introduced in some EU+ countries.

Czechia organised a seminar for beneficiaries of international protection on their rights and obligations and everyday situations. Within the same project, a book, *The Czech Republic – Your New Home*, was translated into seven languages and provides information on housing, employment, business, the social welfare system and social security, health care, the education system, leisure time, shopping, finance, transport and basic facts about the country.

France published an information note in April 2019 on the mission and functioning of temporary accommodation centres (CPH), describing the conditions of admission into the centres and their relationships with integration schemes.[352] The CPHs host newly-arrived vulnerable refugees and provide enhanced support to facilitate access to rights (such as work, housing, language and

health) and integration. Other information notes were published in France on housing for refugees and promoting national and local projects to help integrate refugees into all sectors. In addition, France supports global projects on accommodation, professional training and employment (such as the ex-HOPE Project).

In Lithuania, the Refugee Reception Centre launched lectures for refugees and asylum applicants on the differences in status, rights and responsibilities, as well as general information on Lithuania (history, geography, education labour law, domestic violence, medical services, etc). With the use of new technologies, the Rukla Refugee Reception Centre also provided similar information through its new Facebook social network account.

Latvia developed two video tutorials with information for applicants on everyday issues at the Asylum Accommodation Centre (internal rules on fire safety, room cleaning, prohibitions, etc.), funded within the AMIF project "Support Measures for the Reception and Accommodation of Persons in Need of International Protection in Latvia (Phase 2)". A booklet, entitled "A Guide for Asylum Seekers in Latvia",[353] already available in ten languages, was translated into Azerbaijani and Georgian.

In Croatia, the Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities updated its "Guide for Integration – Basic Information for the Integration of Foreigners into Croatian Society". The guide is translated into English,[354] French, Arabic, Farsi, Urdu and Ukrainian.

The UK Home Office published two new information guides on rights, expectations[355] and support offered[356] to applicants staying in temporary accommodation.

To raise awareness and facilitate integration, in 2019 several EU+ countries launched campaigns to connect refugees with communities through integration and cultural activities. The initiatives included open day events and training on discrimination and equality, taking place in schools, police academies and offices (Croatia, Cyprus, France and Latvia). As in previous years, Malta and Poland[357] organised awareness-raising campaigns on modern slavery and human trafficking and launched new applications for smartphones to inform the public and victims about different types of exploitation, how to recognise such situations and how to support victims (Portugal[358]) In addition, Croatia produced materials on family reunification.

France provided pre-departure information in the country of origin of refugees on practical, administrative and legal aspects. The guide, entitled "Living in France", was drafted by *La direction de l'accueil, de l'accompagnement des étrangers et de la nationalité* and is available in seven languages. Following the renewal of the French integration policy which came into effect on 1 March 2019, the guide is currently being updated.

7.2.3 Information on return, relocation and resettlement

In 2019, EU+ countries continued their efforts to provide adequate information in order to ease the return of rejected applications, relocation and resettlement. The Ministry of the Interior in Croatia provided Syrian refugees in Turkey with information about life in Croatia and rights and obligations of refugees in the country. The Ministry also provided support for a Cultural

Orientation Programme that all accepted refugees must attend. The three-day programme provides information on rights, obligations and cultural values.

In Portugal, the Immigration and Borders Service, in collaboration with the IOM, implemented the
ARVoRe VII project, co-funded by AMIF, to assist in safe and dignified returns of rejected applicants and sustainable reintegration by providing information, counselling and operational support.

7.2.4 Information for vulnerable groups

Applicants for international protection are themselves vulnerable persons who are faced with the challenges of navigating a complex process and integrating into a new society. Yet among them, there are those with particular vulnerabilities (children, victims of violence, victims of trafficking in human beings, etc.) which may impact the way a person processes information. Vulnerable groups require tailored support and a specific means of communication so that they are not disadvantaged within the asylum process. In order to provide this, countries need trained staff to recognise vulnerabilities and properly handle these cases.

Over the course of 2019, many EU+ countries developed new procedures to provide information as early as possible in the asylum procedure.

The CGRS in Belgium published two brochures in 2019, both available in Albanian, Arabic, Dari, Dutch, English, French, Pashto and Russian. The brochures are distributed at the Immigration Office. The “Guide for Accompanied Children in the Asylum Procedure in Belgium”[359] provides information to children accompanying their parents or a guardian about their right to be heard during the asylum procedure and their right to file their own application in exceptional cases. The “Guide for Parents or Guardians Accompanied by Minor Children” informs parents and guardians about the right of children to be heard.[360] The CGRS also updated the **“**Guide for Unaccompanied Minors who Apply for Asylum in Belgium” which explains the stages of the asylum procedures to unaccompanied minors. The brochure is available in Albanian, Arabic, Dari, Dutch, English, French, Pashto, Pular, Somali and Tigrinya.[361] In addition, the Federal Public Service Interior launched a video on unaccompanied minors applying for international protection in Belgium, explaining the steps of the application and the role of different institutions, including the Immigration Office, Fedasil and the CGRS.[362]

Luxembourg started to distribute a leaflet for unaccompanied minors, providing specific information in a child-friendly language. Norway created a new website, asylbarn.no, with the aim of informing asylum-seeking children about the process in a language they understand. The website includes input from children who have already been through the asylum process.

In November 2019, the Spanish Ombudsman, in collaboration with UNHCR and Save the Children, published a child-friendly video and leaflet in four languages (Arabic, English, French and Spanish) in order to inform unaccompanied and separated children about their right to asylum.[363]

[xliii] The right of access to information for applicants for international protection is well established in EU legislation. Among others, the Asylum Procedures Directive (Directive 2013/32/EU) stipulates that all applicants shall be informed of their rights and obligations in a language which they understand or are reasonably supposed to understand. They shall be informed of the timeframe, the means at their disposal for fulfilling the obligation to submit the elements as referred to in the recast Qualification Directive, Article 4, as well as of the consequences of an explicit or implicit withdrawal of the application. That information shall be given in time to enable them to exercise the rights guaranteed in this directive and to comply with the obligations described in Article 13 (recast Application Procedures Directive, Article 12, Guarantees for Applicants). Similar stipulations are also made in the Eurodac Regulation, Article 29 and the Dublin III Regulation, Article 4.

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