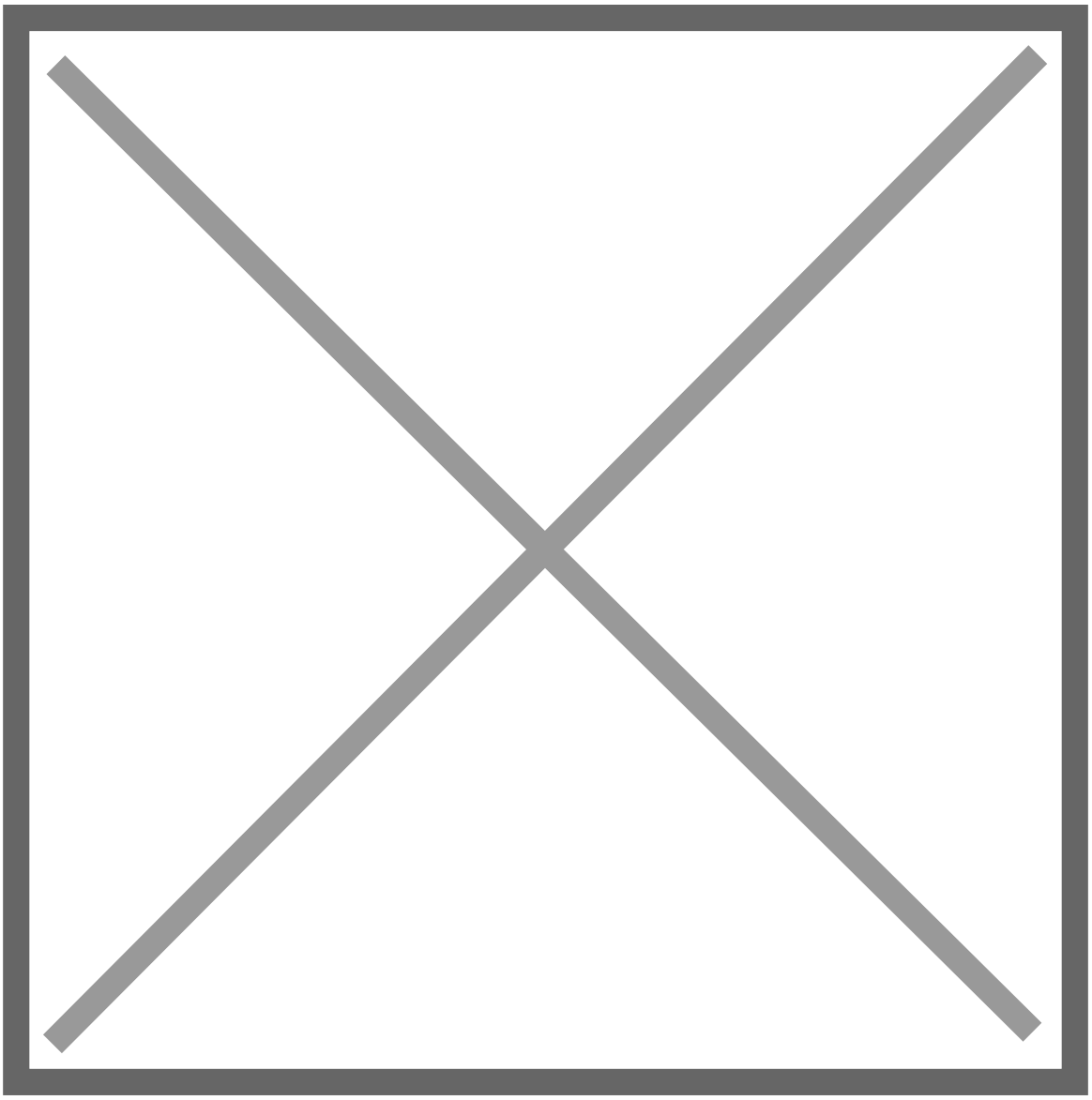
Please cite as: EUAA, 'Section 4.12 Country of origin information' in *EASO Asylum Report 2021*, January 2022.

Section 4.12 Country of origin information

Up-to-date, quality information on countries of origin is an essential component to make well-informed, fair decisions on international protection and to develop evidence-based asylum policy. The recast Qualification Directive, Article 4(3a) specifies that the assessment of ar application for international protection must take account of all relevant facts about the applicant country of origin. Along the same lines, the recast Asylum Procedures Directive, Article 10(3b) stipulates that precise and timely information on the general situation in countries of origin of applicants and, where necessary, in countries through which they have transited is to be obtaine from various sources, such as EASO, UNHCR, the Council of Europe and other relevant internatio organisations.

EASO and countries alike, at times in cooperation with research institutions and civil society organisations, continuously gather well-founded information on a wide range of topics covering various third countries.

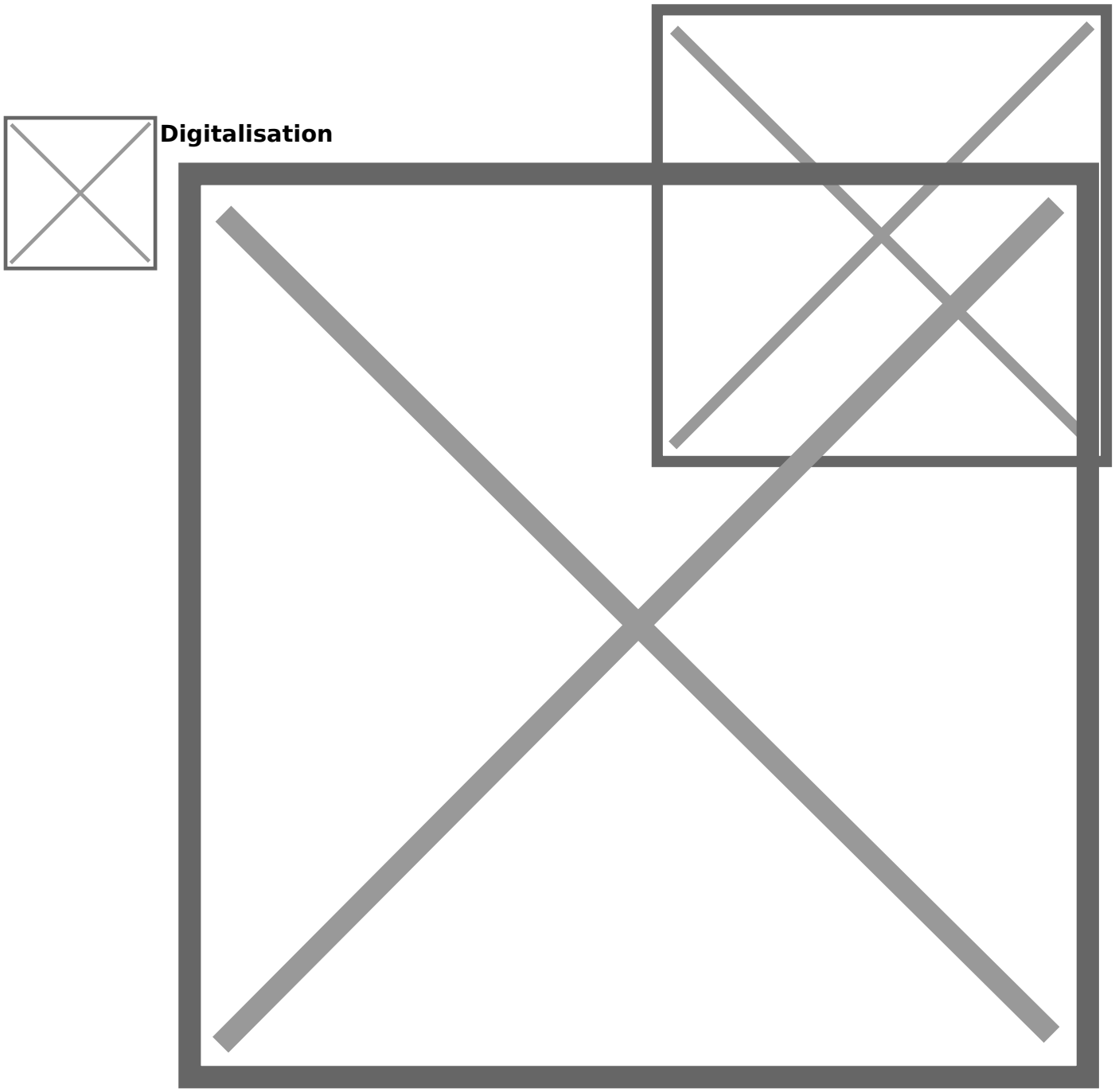
COVID-19



The pandemic curtailed the ability to conduct fact-finding missions in countries of origin or neighbouring countries in 2020. Most fact-finding missions took place in the first quarter of the year and only a very limited number were undertaken after March 2020. In response, EU+ countries focused on other methods to collect country of origin information (COI) and maintain contact with their sources. Most face-to-face activities, such as training on COI research, were suspended. Some COI units took advantage of the confinement to carry out in-depth work to improve the information available and to cover a wider range of themes.

In the context of teleworking, cooperation and teamwork, methodologies for internal workflows were redesigned.

With regard to case law, the Higher Federal Administrative Court of Baden-Württemberg in Germany ruled that the deteriorating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the return of an applicant to the country of origin could be brought up during an appeal procedure, when the deterioration in the situation happened after the oral hearing but before the first instance judgment became final.



Digitalisation

Travel restrictions on fact-finding missions shifted the focus to other methods for collecting COI and maintaining contact with sources. This was done through remote data collection and the use of open source intelligence tools and techniques, often in cooperation with external contractors with relevant expertise. Most COI production in 2020 took place through desk research and through electronic communication between COI units and sources. The new techniques facilitated the production of new reports within shorter timeframes and made it possible to produce quick updates on previous fact-finding missions. New methods were also introduced to monitor security situations, including reviews of press and news media, by using coding systems that allow for automatic updating of information across indicators of interest to asylum authorities.

In addition, the provision of COI and COI-related training were given through tutorials, podcasts and webinars. Expert statements in courts and appeal authorities were provided through teleconferencing. Since the efficacy of the new working methods were proven, some of these solutions may remain in place once the pandemic is over.

COI plays an integral role in informing asylum-related legislation, policy and practices. Over the past years, EU+ countries have taken a number of concrete steps toward enhancing the range and the quality of the information they produce, and when necessary, adapting their methodologies for COI research, reporting and training. Key developments in COI production in 2020 centred around restructuring workflows, updating country information, collaboration and new practices.

Restructuring and enhancing capacity

While no major institutional changes occurred in 2020 in national COI units, some reorganisation of the internal structure took place to maintain a more efficient and harmonised workflow, for example in Belgium and France, and more resources were allocated to enhance COI production, methodology, language and overall quality of reporting, like in Czechia and Italy.

Countries with smaller asylum administrations took steps toward establishing COI units, for example in Malta, or creating a methodology to assign certain countries of origin to case workers who update them regularly, for example in Iceland. EU+ countries continued their efforts to enhance expertise by delivering regular training on COI to professionals involved in the asylum procedure, at times focused on specific countries of relevance for case officers, such as in Belgium, Czechia, France, Iceland, Norway and Romania).

Some national administrations had challenges with limited resources, in particular for targeted, specialised requests which may require detail and expertise. To make optimal use of the resources available while addressing existing COI needs, EU+ countries introduced new processes, for example by using questionnaires to seek input from case workers on their actual needs (such as in Romania).

Focus of content

In 2020, research and reporting focused on updating information on countries for which COI was already available, mainly on common countries of origin of applicants for international protection in Europe, such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Efforts were also made to gather information on less common countries of origin, for which limited or no COI existed, for example Colombia and Sri Lanka.

Production took the form of brief country reports, often in response to queries, country fact sheets, general country reports and thematic reports. National administrations also introduced or continued the practice of maintaining country files, comprising summary notes on each country related to history, geography, population and political life (for example in France). Emphasis was placed on increasing knowledge of the culture in key countries of origin, so that asylum officials can better understand and contextualise the information reported through COI products and use this knowledge for informed decision-making. Nonetheless, civil society organisations found there

was an imbalance between countries of origin for which a high volume of COI reports existed and those with little, outdated or no reported information.[929], [930]

To assist countries and foster convergence in decision-making, EASO continued in 2020 to publish COI and MedCOI reports, as well as country guidance. In 2020, the Asylum Research Centre (ARC) Foundation continued to produce COI reports and offer commentaries to COI products by national authorities and EASO.[931] The Dutch Council for Refugees also produced a number of publications including country of origin information.[932]

A common challenge faced by administrations was cross-checking information shared by interlocutors under the condition of anonymity and the refusal of potential sources to share information due to a fear of repercussions by authorities in countries of origin with authoritarian regimes.

Civil society organisations noted that many COI products were not accessible in national languages, which made them inaccessible to non-English speaking audiences.[933], [934] Likewise, COI products which are only available in national languages could not be accessed by international audiences.

An area of further improvement concerned the lack of comprehensive information on statelessness and nationality rights in countries of origin, even though some progress had been made in this regard. [935] At times, it was reported that COI was not always shared with legal representatives prior to issuing a first instance decision, which made it harder for representatives to prepare accordingly.[936] Other concerns were expressed regarding the lack of variety or sufficiency in the number of COI sources that some national administrations use to support the reasoning of their decisions.[937], [938]

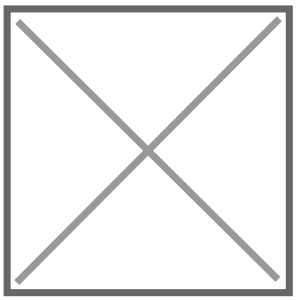
In Applicant *(Afghanistan)* v *Federal Administrative Court (Bundesverwaltungsgericht, BVwG)*, the Constitutional Court of Austria ruled that up-to-date country reports, such as those produced by EASO and UNHCR, must be used to assess the conditions in a country of origin, especially for places where the security situation changes rapidly.

In July 2020, upon a request by the Minister of Migration in the Netherlands, the Advisory Committee on Migration Affairs (ACVZ) published a report on how public sources other than the official country reports produced by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs can be used in the asylum process. The ACVZ concluded that COI should be collected, used and published in a more systematic manner. It also highlighted that further investment in European cooperation clearly contributed to an improved and common use of COI within the EU.[939]

Collaboration



Asylum authorities in EU+ countries continued to cooperate and exchange expertise in the area of COI through joint research projects and peer review, often under the coordination of EASO through its specialised networks. In parallel, cooperation also continued between authorities and research institutions and civil society organisations in a number of areas, including identification of COI sources, peer review of COI products and fact-finding missions.



[929] Foundation Cepaim | Fundación Cepaim. (2021). *Input to the EASO Asylum Report 2021*. https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Cepaim.pdf
[930] AsyLex Legal Advisory. (2021). *Input to the EASO Asylum Report 2021*. https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/AsyLex.docx
[931] See for example: Asylum Research Centre, & Dutch Council for Refugees | VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. (July 2020). *Commentary on the EASO Country of Origin Information Reports on Syria (December 2019 – May 2020)* . https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2032701/Commentary-EASO-COI-on-Syria_July2020.pdf
[932] See for example: Dutch Council for Refugees | VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. (March 2020). *Veelgestelde vragen – Afghanistan ontheemden, terugkeerders en personen zonder netwerk [Frequently asked questions - Afghanistan displaced persons, returnees and persons without network]*; Dutch Council for Refugees | VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. (August 2020). *Veelgestelde vragen – Positie sjiieten en Hazara's in Afghanistan algemeen en Ghazni [Frequently asked questions - The situation of Shiites and Hazara in Afghanistan in general and in Ghazni]* ; *Dutch Council for Refugees | VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. (2020, September 21). Veelgestelde vragen – Venezuela – Positie demonstranten en opposanten [Frequently asked questions - Venezuela - The situation of demonstrators and opponents].*
[933] Abogacía Española. (2021). *Input to the EASO Asylum Report 2021*. https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Abogac%C3%ADa%20Espa%C3%B1ola%20-%20CGAE.pdf
[934]??????? Foundation Cepaim | Fundación Cepaim. (2021). *Input to the EASO Asylum Report 2021*. https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Cepaim.pdf
[935]??????? European Network on Statelessness. (2021). *Input to the EASO Asylum Report 2021*. https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/European-Network-on-Statelessness.pdf
[936]??????? Hungarian Helsinki Committee | Magyar Helsinki Bizottság. (2021). *Input to the EASO Asylum Report 2021*. https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Hungarian-Helsinki-Committee_0.pdf
[937]??????? Organization for Aid to Refugees | Organizace pro Promoc Uprchlík ?m, & Forum for Human Rights | Fórum pro Lidská Práva. (2021). *Input to the EASO Asylum Report 2021*. https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/OPU-Forum-for-Human-Rights.pdf
[938]??????? Danish Refugee Council. (2021). *Input to the EASO Asylum Report 2021*. https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/DRC-Danish-Refugee-Council.pdf
[939]??????? Advisory Committee on Migration Affairs | Adviescommissie voor Vreemdelingenzaken. (May 2020). *Information Assessment: Advice on the use of country of origin information in the asylum procedure* . https://www.adviescommissievoorvreemdelingenzaken.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2020/07/17/information-and-assessment





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