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4.9. Country of origin information

As a general observation, it can be stated that EU+ countries further heightened standards and quality assurance of their COI products in 2018. **Austria** is introducing a state-of-the-art COI-system for researchers, decision makers and second instance judges and lawyers. The COI-CMS system is designed in cooperation with various end users to directly and efficiently address their needs and it is tailored to keep COI constantly up-to-date and to provide information for asylum decisions and appeal procedures in a timely manner. The **Finnish** Country Information Service, for instance, created **new guidelines for referencing and peer reviewing** their COI products.621 In **Slovakia**, an internal *instruction* came into effect, specifying the procedure for processing the applicants' country of origin information, granting subsidiary protection in the territory of the Slovak Republic, and fostering mutual cooperation among relevant departments in the Ministry of Interior.

With regard to the overall scope and quality of COI, however, civil society indicated some specific shortcomings and opportunities for progress, such as the concern about a sufficient level of English language capacity in some national authorities when consulting COI, while risking a lack of balance and resp. or not quoting from more recent sources available.

In 2018, the trend of national COI Units engaging in a form of cooperation with their national counterparts - particularly within the EASO COI Specialist Networks, but also on bilateral level - continued. **France** sustained their bilateral cooperation with **Sweden**. **Romania** has engaged in an exchange of expertise with the **Belgian** CEDOCA.

Adding to a large spectrum of regular publications by established COI Units, some countries reported their new outputs in 2018. Among them, the **Greek** COI Unit generated around 150 COI products for internal use, with a focus on thematic overviews on the situation of specific groups in Iraq and on countries of origin with low recognition rates. In the **Czechia**, the COI unit produced brief reports on very specific issues strictly based on ad hoc queries. The Office of the Refugee Commissioner in **Malta** issued two internal Country Information and Guidance Notes on Venezuela and Sudan. **Germany** organised multiplier workshops on Afghanistan with lecturers from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and UNHCR which were attended by a total of 50 participants. Lifos, the **Swedish** Migration Agency's Country Information Service, published around 35 COI reports in the course of 2018. **Austria** released a Fact Finding Mission Report Afghanistan focusing on socio-economic issues together with the publication of an atlas which covers topographic overviews of issues like ethnic/religious groups, security situation (provinces and districts), oil and gas fields and satellite images of Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-e Sharif and Jalalabad. The gathered information also fed into EASO processes.

In the course of 2018, some COI Units expanded or reorganised their staff. The New Media Unit (NMU) in **Belgium** became fully operational, with two fully dedicated staff members who may receive support from four COI experts on a case-by-case basis. Apart from training other COI experts and protection officers in the use of social media, the NMU conducted specific research on social media, especially for resettlement, origin checks and cases of applying Article 1F of the Asylum Procedure Directive (APD). The Head of NMU was invited by international organisations and Member States to give presentations and training on the use of New Media for protection status determination. **Austria** is also planning to establish a so-called Social Media Unit in 2019 to further enhance its COI production and address the changing information needs of decision makers. **Estonia** amended their AMIF-funded project allowing for their two COI experts to join fact-finding missions in the future, and also joined the MedCOI project.

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Among several EU+ countries having conducted **fact-finding missions** in 2018, the following were reported: **Denmark** to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and (with **Norway**) to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; France to Georgia and Armenia [622] ; **Finland** to Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, and the Russian Federation[623]; Sweden to Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Somalia and Afghanistan.

Throughout 2018, some COI Units' databases for the provision of information to end users were redesigned or further developed: **Belgium** adapted their COI platform as a part of their relaunched intranet solution, the **Czechia** continued development works on their internal COI database pilot system. **Lithuania** initiated the process of connecting their platform to the EASO COI Portal, expected to be finalised in 2019. **Poland** further overhauled their COI database using EASO's connection guide as a standard.

As of 1 January 2019, UNHCR has decided to terminate providing COI on their platform Refworld and to endorse the well-established platform ecoi.net managed by the **Austrian** Red Cross (ACCORD) instead.[624] 'At the same time, UNHCR's Refworld will reinforce its law and policy collections in the course of 2019, relaunching its protection information platform in 2020.[625]

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[621] Finnish Immigration Service (MIGRI), Country of Origin Information Service, by e-mail on 17 December 2018.

[622] In cooperation with CNDA, see also the mission report: OFPRA and CNDA, Georgia mission report (in French).

[623] The fact-finding missions were carried out as part of an AMIF-funded project called FAKTA, aiming to develop effective and resource-efficient practices for planning and implementing fact-finding missions. The project was launched in 2017 and it will continue until 2020.

[624] ecoi.net, Joint Communication by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Austrian Red Cross.

[625] Refworld, UNHCR and Austrian Red Cross Partnership.

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