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4.7.1.2. Adjusting reception capacity

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icon for reception capacity

The increasing number of applicants for international protection *(see Section 4.1)* pushed reception capacity to its limits in many EU+ countries.

For example, Fedasil in Belgium signalled the need for more reception places in September 2021 due to the influx of applicants (especially unaccompanied minors), the loss of capacity due to flooding in Wallonia,625 the resettlement of Syrian refugees, an increase in the length of stay in reception, the evacuation of applicants from Afghanistan, and continued COVID-19 requirements.626 Pressure had already been building up in the Belgian reception system since 2018, and new procurement procedures were launched in 2019.627 However, with fewer applicants in reception in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic,628 reception places were closed in 2021 without knowing that the numbers would rapidly rise in the second-half of the year.629, 630

The situation was of particular concern in the arrival centre in Brussels, where employees held two trade union actions in 2021.631 In mid-November 2021, the centre's Information Point temporarily closed632 and single men were starting to be directed to homeless shelters since mid-October 2021. However, applicants with vulnerabilities (families with children, single women, and applicants with disabilities and health conditions) could still access, register their application and be provided reception.633

Ten civil society organisations published an open letter in November 2021, raising awareness about the reception crisis and the fact that several persons were unable to apply for international protection *(see Section 4.1)*.634 The Brussels Labour Court treated several urgent requests from applicants to be granted material reception conditions, noting that the status of applicant needs to be established before the court can order Fedasil to grant reception (see the case of a Palestinian applicant and the rejected cases of applicants from Turkey, Mauritania, Afghanistan and Cameroon). On 19 January 2022, the Brussels first instance tribunal condemned Fedasil for not having foreseen appropriate structures to accommodate an increasing number of applicants and ordered the treasury to pay a daily fine until the situation is resolved. Following the judgment, civil society organisations published joint statements to highlight that many applicants were still not accommodated and were sleeping outdoors.635

At the end of October 2021, the arrival centre hosted approximately 900 persons, while its maximum capacity is 800 places.636 To ease the pressure, in January 2022 Fedasil opened a night shelter637 and a temporary facility for unaccompanied minors 638 for those who could not be hosted immediately in the arrival centre. Due to COVID-19 measures and the increased number of applicants, Fedasil also encouraged applicants to move out of reception facilities and live with family and friends. The reception system surpassed the symbolic milestone of 30,000 places in January 2022.639 An operational plan was signed between the EUAA and Belgium in December 2021 to increase short- and medium-term reception capacity in line with CEAS reception standards.640

In summer 2021, both Latvia and Lithuania reached the capacity limits of their reception systems due to the increase in arrivals through Belarus *(see Section 4.1)*. Both countries declared a state of emergency, which impacted reception as well. For example, in Lithuania, all centres were transformed to provide accommodation to applicants under the accelerated procedure, with strict limitations on the freedom of movement *(see Section 4.8)*. Filming, photographing and sound recordings were prohibited in accommodation centres, access to the facilities was restricted, and gatherings in centres were limited.641

ECRE's legal analysis underlined that the amended law allowed restrictions on information provision *(see Section 4.8)*, hindered access to legal assistance and blocked UNHCR and other organisations from accessing detention and reception facilities *(see Section 4.10).* Interpretation services *(see Section 4.11)*, social and psychological assistance and access to employment were restricted.642 UNHCR stated that applicants must have access to these rights and support services even in an emergency situation.643

The tensions led to protests by migrants, for example in the temporary facility in Verebie.644 By October 2021, all applicants were moved from temporary sites to reception facilities.645 In November 2021, the renovation and extension works in the Foreigners' Registration Centre in Pabradė finished and capacity was expanded.646

To increase reception capacity in Latvia, an AMIF-funded project provided the possibility to use already-existing premises under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior for the temporary reception of 70 asylum seekers. In addition, project activities started under the AMIF emergency assistance instrument to create an additional 250 places. The EUAA signed an operating plan with Lithuania in July 2021 (amended in September 2021)647 and with Latvia in September 2021648 to deploy a team of interpreters providing support, for example, with reception services.

The situation at the border with Belarus *(see Section 4.1)* impacted reception in Poland to the extent that two centres from the Office for Foreigners were temporarily lent to the Border Guard due to the need for more capacity in detention *(see Section 4.9)*. Thus, the capacity in reception facilities temporarily decreased. One of these centres was returned to the Office for Foreigners in mid-June 2022. In addition, a special centre for single women and single mothers, operated by a contractor, was closed. The authorities were planning to construct a new, state-owned centre for women with AMIF funding.

In the Netherlands, challenges in swiftly increasing reception capacity came to the forefront in summer 2021. In January 2021, the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA, Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers) Board expressed the need to establish 31,000 reception places in total by January 2023.649 However in April 2021, the COA reported that fewer reception places were needed as there were fewer applicants in general due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) had reduced the number of applicants in reception by clearing up the backlog of cases, and the majority of expiring administrative contracts for reception facilities could be extended.650 In September 2021, the COA announced an urgent need for 4,000 places due to a sharp rise in applications, the fact that recognised beneficiaries of international protection stay longer in reception due to shortages on the housing market, and the arrival of evacuees from Afghanistan who were temporarily accommodated at emergency locations of the Ministry of Defence.651 The organisation managed to create 6,000 additional places by the beginning of November 2021, typically temporary places, with the duration of stay varying from 4 weeks to 6 months. In the medium-term, the urgent need to create more structural places remained.652 The issue was the most visible in the central reception centre in Ter Apel.

The capacity decision in November 2021 stated that 42,000 places would be necessary in 2022. At the end of 2021, the COA had 36,000 places fully occupied.653 The COA urgently needed extra places for unaccompanied children as well,654 and due to the shortage in places, the care for unaccompanied minors aged 17.5 years and over was taken over by the COA from Nidos, and the minors were accommodated in regular reception places, instead of specific ones for minors *(see Section 5).*655

Only about one-half of residents in the reception system were applicants, while the number of beneficiaries of international protection occupying a place at a COA location rose to 11,500, of which 7,400 had been waiting longer than the agreed period of 3 months. In order to support beneficiaries of international protection moving out of reception, the Hotel and Accommodation Regulation was adopted in November 2021. The regulation allows municipalities to arrange for temporary accommodation for beneficiaries of international protection who are still in reception and the municipality receives a one-time, fixed amount per person.656 The influx from family reunification for recognised beneficiaries of international protection also peaked throughout 2021.657

In order to facilitate the functioning of the COA and make adjustments to reception capacity more efficient, the Dutch coalition agreement of 15 December 2021 planned more stable financing to the organisation.658 As part of the Implementation Agenda for Making the Asylum Chain more flexible, the COA has also considered setting up multi-functional places, which could be used as student dormitories or as general emergency shelters when reception facilities can be scaled down.659

The reception system was under great stress in Luxembourg, where an emergency structure was activated in autumn 2021 as the occupancy rate of facilities continued at full capacity throughout 2021. A large part of new arrivals came through family reunification programmes and there was an important increase in the arrival of unaccompanied minors. Compared to previous years, more babies were born to families in reception in 2020 and 2021, requiring

accommodation and support to be swiftly adapted. As in previous years, only around one-half of reception residents were applicants, while many places were taken by recognised beneficiaries of international protection who were not able to make the transition to mainstream housing.

The influx of new applicants added a strain on the reception system in Bulgaria as well, where the occupancy rate increased to 50%, compared to 7% in 2019. Due to the high number of unaccompanied minors, mainly from Afghanistan, safe zones for unaccompanied children needed to be restructured. The Ombudsperson found poor living conditions, with a lack of adequate furniture and overcrowding. When the security zone was full, children were accommodated in the gym separately from adults[660] *(see Section 5).* The increase in residents required the State Agency for Refugees to rapidly adapt the provision of services in reception centres.

In Austria, nine temporarily-closed federal reception facilities were reopened to address increased capacity needs due to COVID-19 measures and an increase in the number of applicants. Asylkoordination Österreich observed that facilities both at federal and regional levels reached the limit of their capacity.[661] Germany also faced a steadily increasing number of arrivals *(see Section 4.1.5),* resulting in the number of people allocated to initial reception exceeding those being further distributed to second-line reception in many federal states. The situation was similar in Switzerland, where capacity in federal asylum centres was used as a buffer for cantons, which could not absorb new arrivals. Plans were published to construct new federal asylum centres in the cantons of Zurich[662] and Saint-Gall.[663]

Initiatives to increase reception capacity and open new centres continued, for example in Cyprus, France, Italy and Portugal. In Cyprus, a Collective Reception and Accommodation Centre was being established in Limnes. The site started operating with 80 pre-fabricated housing units donated by the Polish government, which accommodated mainly applicants from a safe country of origin. The new centre is planned to have a capacity of 800-1,000 persons.[664] At the end of 2021, due to the high number of COVID-19 infections in the First Reception Centre Pournara, the facility in Limnes was temporarily used as a quarantine facility for newly-arrived persons, prior to lodging their application.

The implementation of the French “National plan for the reception of asylum applicants and the integration of refugees” started in 2021, with the creation of 4,500 places for applicants and 408 places for recognised beneficiaries of international protection with vulnerabilities *(see Section 4.14).*[665] The increase of places was accompanied by the implementation of the “regional orientation scheme”, which led to the transfer of 16,000 asylum seekers from the Ile-de-France region, where accommodation places were lacking, to the rest of the country in 2021. These actions led to the accommodation of 65% of all applicants at the end of 2021, compared to 53% in the beginning of 2021.[666]

In Italy, Decree Law No 139 provides for the creation of 3,000 new places for families in the System for Reception and Integration (SAI). The increase was necessary due to legislative changes from 2020 that opened SAI again for applicants and extended the scope of beneficiaries of protection who can be accommodated there,[667] in addition to the increased arrival of Afghans.[668]

The Portuguese Ministry of Home Affairs announced the financing of the construction of a new reception centre in Vendas Novas, in the Alentejo region, to be managed by the Jesuit Refugee Service Portugal.669 In Romania, the regional centres in Timisoara and Bucharest were in the process of renovations. In addition, the General Inspectorate for Immigration had ongoing AMIF-funded projects to expand reception capacity by 500 places: 300 in Galati, 100 in Radăuți, and 100 in Timișoara.

New facilities were opened or the number of places were increased specifically for unaccompanied children and applicants with special needs, for example, in Belgium, Cyprus, France and Italy. In Croatia, renovations started with AMIF funding in the reception facility for applicants with special needs in Kutina.670 In contrast, the Danish Immigration Service closed a facility for unaccompanied minors in Østrup due to the decreasing number of unaccompanied children over time *(see Section 5)*.671

Due to a low number of asylum applications, the Finnish Immigration Agency, the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration (UDI) and the Swedish Migration Agency continued to reduce reception capacity.672 However, the UDI had to find solutions to accommodate Afghan applicants, who numbered more than anticipated.

With a low number of applicants as well, the Vägeva Accommodation Centre in Estonia was temporarily closed at the beginning of 2021, while the Vao Accommodation Centre remained operational.673 Due to the special conditions to submit asylum applications in Hungary *(see Section 4.1),* the number of applicants remained low and approximately 10 persons were accommodated at the end of 2021. An AMIF-funded project was set up to provide apartments for Afghan evacuees as part of an integration programme.

The number of places available under the ESTIA scheme in Greece were substantially reduced to 16,948 places at the end of 2021. Applicants were directed to other inland structures.674 The Ministry of Migration and Asylum announced that the number of places will be further decreased to 10,000 in 2022.675

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