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Concluding remarks

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In 2024, asylum remained at the heart of many public discussions and policies in Europe, with the adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum standing out as a major milestone in the evolution of the Common European Asylum System. While the number of applications declined by 11% in 2024, EU+ countries still received over 1 million applications for international protection for the second year in a row. In addition, 4.4 million displaced persons from Ukraine were under temporary protection in Europe, resulting in continued pressure on national asylum and reception systems.

Key efforts by national authorities focused on streamlining asylum procedures to make the processing of applications more efficient and introducing strategic changes in national reception systems to optimise the use of resources. Despite these efforts, instances of delayed access to the procedure, overcrowding, increased safety risks and suboptimal access to services kept occurring. In parallel, important resources were allocated by EU+ countries to plan and implement the reforms required by the Pact on Migration and Asylum.

The continued inflow of applicants further instigated discussions around effectively managing irregular migration, while ensuring access to protection for those in need. Over the past years, discussions and policies on asylum seem to be becoming more restrictive among policymakers, also as a result of political pressure by domestic constituencies. An eagerness to increase effectiveness in border controls, including internal borders, has at times led to practices that have inhibited effective access to protection on the one hand or the smooth functioning of the Schengen system on the other. Efforts to reduce costs and optimise the use of human and financial resources have at times resulted in deteriorating reception conditions and benefits or access to services being reduced for applicants in reception.

Judicial institutions, both at the European and national levels, have scrutinised such policies, illustrating that they are part and parcel of the effective functioning of asylum systems, they hold a decisive role in interpreting the EU asylum acquis and they guide its practical implementation. As the practical implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum progresses, it is important for judicial authorities to invest in training and professional development to further develop expertise among judges on issues which are specific to asylum and migration.

It is undeniable that European countries have allocated important resources in order to provide protection to people in need. To put these efforts into perspective, in addition to receiving over 1 million applications for international protection in 2024, EU+ countries issued around 746,000 decisions granting temporary protection to persons fleeing the war in Ukraine. The future of Ukraine is highly unpredictable, with a key parameter being the direction of US foreign policy in the region. Protection needs will continue to exist, especially in the integration of displaced persons from Ukraine. European countries have repeatedly expressed their commitment to continue catering to the needs of displaced Ukrainians while supporting the reconstruction of Ukraine. At the same time, this population is not available to the Ukrainian labour market and for the possible reconstruction of the country.

The Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in 2024, reflects a compromise between countries that have varying experiences with migratory pressures and, accordingly, diverging needs. As such, during its implementation, one of the testing grounds will be the capacity to address the diverging needs and not to be perceived either as too strict and not being protection-oriented enough or as too lax and not designed to significantly address irregular migration. Nonetheless, the political importance of the Pact should not be underestimated. It reflects European countries working together to identify and embrace a common framework, based on common values, toward a common end: to stay true to the fundamental principles of the EU by creating a framework that offers the tools to protect those in need and return in dignity those not in need of protection. To achieve this major breakthrough in the evolution of CEAS, the culture of cooperation the EU has built over the decades was catalytic, and while this may be characteristic of the Union, it should not be taken for granted.

The practical value and functionality of the Pact will fully unfold in the years to come. As EU Member States are preparing for its implementation, it should be highlighted that no matter how advanced or comprehensive a framework is, the most essential question concerns its practical and effective use. The Pact must also prove in practice that it helps Member States solve pressing challenges at the national level. It presents a unique opportunity to provide the catalyst for the convergence of policies and practices of EU countries in the area of asylum. Intensive work by national authorities, as well as support and guidance from the European Commission and EU Agencies, will be required. This is not a question of material and administrative resources alone; qualified human resources are of essence too for the successful functioning of the European asylum system. It is, therefore, imperative to continue investing in expertise-sharing, training and professional development, and effective and clear interpretation of the practical provisions of the Pact to guide its implementation. While the primary actors driving the implementation of the Pact are EU and national institutions, close cooperation with civil society, grassroot organisations and local authorities is equally important to ensure that all stakeholders in the field pull toward the same direction. Apart from key sources of operational experience and expertise in asylum, these actors at regional and local levels can provide insightful feedback on the impact of the Pact on the ground and offer informed suggestions to tackle practical challenges, such as addressing safeguards for applicants with special needs.

The coming years will require EU+ countries to exceed themselves in putting into place the arrangements for the implementation of the Pact, while receiving a steadily high number of incoming applications for protection and while operating two parallel systems, processing old

and new applications under a different set of rules. The EUAA, as the EU's centre of expertise on asylum, will continue to provide technical, operational and training support to EU+ countries, throughout this transitional period and beyond. The Agency's dedicated Pact Programme has made a key contribution by developing and providing quality tools and services to assist with the implementation of the Pact. The Agency will monitor the operational and technical application of the EU asylum acquis and will work with EU+ countries to identify and address possible shortcomings in the functioning of their asylum and reception systems, with the first pilot exercises taking place in 2025. In a collective effort to address migratory pressures in Europe in a constructive, protection-oriented approach, a well-equipped EUAA will play an integral role.

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Painting created by Jamil Khan, who travelled from Afghanistan to Greece to seek international protection. He now works as an EUAA Mentor for Unaccompanied Minors for the General Secretariat for Vulnerable Persons and Institutional Protection, helping children during the asylum process.

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