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The Pact will bring several changes to applicants' rights and obligations. In 2024, discussions centred around the right to legal counselling and legal assistance and representation. The APR introduces the term legal counselling in EU asylum legislation without providing a definition, which – according to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) – risks leading to different interpretations.134

In recent years, some EU+ countries have reallocated the task of legal assistance and legal representation to public bodies instead of funding civil society organisations for this service. This change in Austria and the new agency's independence was scrutinised by the Constitutional Court at the end of 2023.135 The law was amended in June 2024 to ensure compliance with the ruling.136 Nonetheless, projects funded by the state and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) remained essential to ensure that applicants receive advice in the asylum procedure. These projects were implemented for example in Czechia,137 Croatia, Germany,138 Greece, Lithuania,139 Slovakia140 and Switzerland.141 At times, AMIF-funding or UNHCR support filled in gaps when legal assistance should be provided by law, but applicants faced issues in effectively accessing it.

Challenges remained in several areas, mainly concerning the possibility to receive advice and counselling at the very beginning of the procedure, especially at the borders and in detention, to receive advice following a negative decision and to appeal when the timelines are particularly short.142

While the new rules of the Pact will require information on the asylum procedure to be updated, in 2024 only a few authorities published new information material. These typically focused on practical tips for everyday life and integration.143 The International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) in Ireland launched a new video in 10 different languages to inform applicants about the appeal procedure.144 Some campaigns focused on the prevention of irregular migration, for example, in Cyprus, while others aimed at raising public awareness about asylum, like in Latvia.145

Several EU+ countries have launched mobile applications to support asylum seekers and this continued in 2024, for example Poland. To cater to applicants with different backgrounds, new hotlines were launched to provide information on the asylum procedure in Poland and the reception system in Spain, and authorities started to simplify the language of communication and information materials in the Netherlands[146] and Slovakia.

To ensure clear communication between applicants and the authorities, several countries undertook measures to have a sufficient number of quality interpreters. In Belgium, the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) worked in collaboration with the Immigration Office and the Council for Alien Law Litigation (CALL) on a new regulation on the recruitment and status of interpreters, including improved remuneration. The Italian National Commission for the Right to Asylum, in cooperation with UNHCR and the EUAA, produced a handbook for interpreters involved in the international protection procedure in territorial commissions.[147] The Finnish Immigration Service developed a specific training programme for interpreters.[148] In Ireland, a new contract was awarded to an external company to provide high-quality interpretation in the asylum procedure to give confidence in the procedure to both the applicant and the relevant authority. To address shortages,[149] new calls for interpreters were launched in Cyprus and Malta.

The relatively few developments concerning the organisation of personal interviews in 2024 focused on digitalisation and improving efficiency. The IPO in Ireland launched a pilot project in May 2024 to conduct online video interviews and established interview booths in the initial reception centre for families with children. The Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) continued with the pilot to inform applicants about the interview by a text message. The Finnish Immigration Service did a pre-study to explore the possibility of using speech-to-text software for interviews on the merits of the case and planned a follow up project in 2025 if AMIF support was secured.

Changes to EU law and new digital environments also require adjustments to national legislative frameworks regarding the transfer of personal data. In 2024, these rules were amended for example in France[150] and Switzerland.[151]

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