Report on EASO Consultative Forum Thematic Webinar:

"The Impact of COVID-19 on asylum in the EU"

23rd July 2020 14:00hrs – 16:00hrs CET

EASO organised a Consultative Forum thematic webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on asylum in the EU. The webinar was open to relevant civil society organisations, IGOs, academia, think tanks, representatives from Member State authorities, EU institutions and EASO staff. More than 140 registrations were recieved by the stipulated deadline and the event was actively followed by 88 participants who stayed connected until the end of the webinar.

The webinar was divided into three main sessions:

- **Session 1** focused on the impact of COVID-19 on EASO's activities as well as Member States' asylum and reception systems;

- **Session 2** discussed the impact of COVID-19 on civil society organisations, and;

- **Session 3** focused discussions on "What is next?" in terms of anticipated and emerging asylum trends as well as future developments of the CEAS.
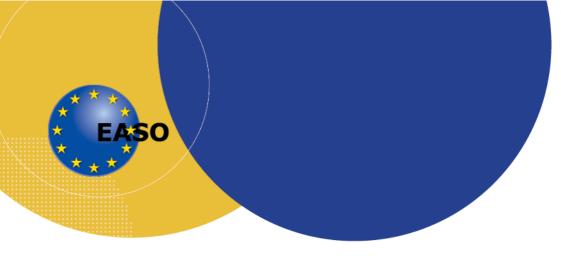
The below summary provides an overview of the main issues presented and discussed.

Session 1 - The impact of COVID-19 on EASO's activities as well as Member States' asylum and reception systems

Mark Camilleri, Head of the Executive Office at EASO, provided an overview of how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted EASO's main activities and explained how the Agency was providing specific support to Member States tailored to help them respond to the Covid challenges. He explained that EASO maintained operational presence in Greece, Cyprus, Italy and Malta, though certain adjustments were made in line with the COVID-19 related measures taken by the authorities of the Host Member States. In practice, this has meant that workflows requiring face to face contacts were suspended and that operations focused on back-office work. EASO had also stepped up its online training activities, and continued to organise various network meetings online, following which several practical recommendations were issued which helped provide targeted support to Member States in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic[1].

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[1] See for example the practical recommendations on conducting personal interviews remotely as well as practical recommendations on conducting remote/online registration (lodging). These practical recommendations have complemented the Commission's Guidance on Implementing EU rules on Asylum, Return procedures, and Resettlement, to which EASO also contributed.
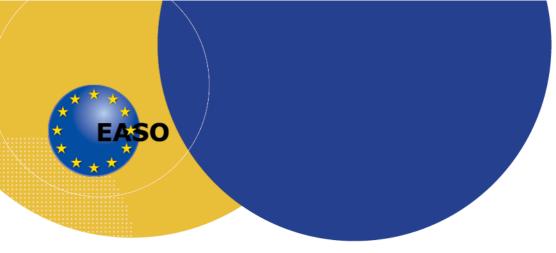
Subsequently, **Maria Papaioannou**, **Information and Analysis Officer at EASO,** provided more detailed information on the Covid emergency measures taken by Member States in their asylum and reception systems on the basis of two reports published by EASO (Issue 1 June 2 and Issue 2 July 15). She emphasised that initially Member States experienced difficulty to implement certain steps in the asylum procedure (e.g. suspension or restrictions of registration, personal interviews, Dublin transfers, judicial proceedings, reception, etc). However, following the introduction of e-solutions, some Member States were able to quickly resume asylum procedures. Examples of e-solutions included e.g. electronic tools and portals that allowed asylum applications to be lodged and documents to be submitted remotely, remote personal interviews, provision of information via digital tools, etc. She emphasised that such measures seem to no longer represent just a short-term solution for EU+ countries to mitigate COVID-19 challenges, but that these appeared to be emerging as part of the 'new normal' in European societies and legal systems with likely long-lasting effects on the implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).

Session 2 - discussing the impact of COVID-19 on civil society organisations

During this session, ECRE and several operational NGOs presented and discussed about the challenges that the pandemic has brought to their work, including good practices in responding to these.

Catherine Woollard, Director at the European Council on Refugee Exiles, discussed the impact that COVID-19 has had on CSOs working in the field of asylum in the EU. In her presentation, she addressed a multitude of challenges that CSOs were facing, including operational, financial, as well as political and legal. For example, operationally, many projects were put on hold due to the restrictive measures which also brought about financial challenges to CSOs (following a discontinuation of funding). The pandemic had further led to increased vulnerability of asylum seekers, which in some instances were brought about by deliberate policy choices (widespread use of detention, suspension of search and rescue activities, etc). Future challenges included financial uncertainty, rise of xenophobia, likely increased displacement, etc. On the other hand, the pandemic had also brought about some positive changes and opportunities; for example, the pandemic had shown the added-value of migrants and refugees in European societies, and has made clear to many citizens that migrants and refugees are not the greatest security threat. She finally shared her thoughts on priorities going forward, by calling for a change of direction. At the same time, she expressed her concerns about the forthcoming Pact in particular related to the expected proposals on borders, detention, pre-screening of asylum seekers, etc.

Successively, **Inês Carreirinho**, representing **the Portuguese Refugee Council (CPR)** spoke about the main impacts of the coronavirus outbreak in the Portuguese national asylum system, the challenges faced by her organisation, and the measures adopted to ensure continuity of assistance (legal, social and integration-related). Among the main measures adopted by CPR were the suspension of group activities; the provision of assistance through telephone and email, with in-person counselling held in urgent situations that could not be adequately handled remotely; and wide dissemination of Covid-related information and distribution of hygiene items.

The provision of housing to asylum seekers was quickly flagged by CPR as a concern, both due to the communitarian setting of most accommodations available (shared kitchens, rooms, sanitary facilities and living spaces), and to systematic instances of overcrowding. An integrated plan to address the impact of Covid-19 and the provision of accommodation to asylum seekers was discussed under a recently created Crisis Working Group, gathering an array of relevant stakeholders. She emphasised that maintaining the dialogue between all stakeholders has proved to be critical to address the challenges posed by the outbreak.
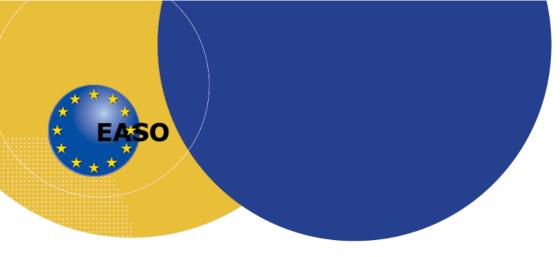
Gizem Dinc from Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen explained the main changes in the Belgian asylum and reception system following the outbreak of COVID-19, including how her organisation had adjusted their activities in line with these. The main change in Belgium included the closure of the arrival centre and the introduction of an online appointment system to register asylum applications. Consequently, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen adjusted its activities to be able to support asylum seekers to complete the required online forms. On the basis of their experiences, the online registration system presented many obstacles to asylum seekers, insofar as it did not always secure the applicant with immediate access to reception services including accommodation. As a result, a total of 125 asylum seekers ended up living in the streets.

In her presentation, **Sara Fridlund** from **the Swedish Red Cross** explained how her organization was able to continue to provide **health and care work** to asylum seekers and migrants during the pandemic. The following services were developed: digital solutions for meetings with patients in treatment centers; a psychosocial support hotline for the public; a digital platform focused on mental health, plus communication efforts and local response. She stated that such solutions have both presented opportunities as well as challenges. She emphasized that, from her experience, digital meetings were considered an acceptable alternative during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to maintain services for vulnerable persons who cannot physically come to their centers. However, she stressed that certain challenges and limitations needed to be considered, such as patient security, confidentiality and technical aspects. Further evaluations on the use of e-solutions for the provision of health and care work were therefore recommended.

Session 3 – focussing on What is next? in terms of anticipated and emerging asylum trends as well as future developments of the CEAS

During this session, EASO, the Commission and UNHCR discussed on what is next, in terms of anticipated and emerging asylum trends and how to respond to these, as well as further developments of the CEAS in the wake of covid-19.
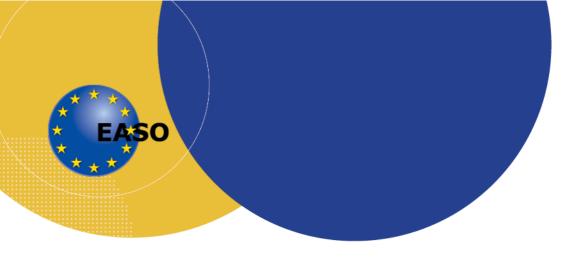
Teddy Wilkin, EASO's Head of Analysis and Data Research Sector, provided an overview of anticipated and emerging asylum trends on the basis of two Special Reports published by EASO. He explained that in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, asylum systems in the EU+ have been affected considerably due to the imposed mobility restrictions and partial closure of asylum services. This had affected both the number of applications lodged (which dropped significantly in the months March, April, May 2020), as well as the number of decisions that were issued (which increased in the same time period, as case-workers redirected efforts and focused on back-office workflows, thereby using the pandemic as an opportunity to process a high number of pending cases). In terms of prognosis for the

future, he informed participants that EASO analysis suggests that two diametrically opposed forces are at work: on the one hand interrelated effects of the pandemic – such as contracting economies, food insecurity, social unrest, political tensions, hardening societies and deepening divisions between population groups – could result in massive displacements and possibly onward movement towards Europe, including many persons with international protection needs. On the other hand, he stated that migration patterns would likely remain highly disrupted due to restrictions on mobility, possibly coupled with increased digital surveillance. Combined, he concluded that these two forces make it difficult to estimate the number of people likely to be in need of international protection, and their ability to access to protection whether or not this occurs in Europe or elsewhere.

Ioana Pelin-Raducu from the European Commission's Migration and Home Affairs, addressed the **New Pact on Migration and Asylum**, which is expected to be presented soon. She explained that the **Pact** would consist of a 'chapeau' communication and a series of legislative and non-legislative initiatives and that it would address all aspects of migration in a comprehensive approach, both legal and irregular migration, protection of the external borders, the Schengen area, asylum and return rules, crisis management, fighting smuggling of migrants, cooperation with third countries, and fostering integration of migrants into our societies. Concerning the **CEAS proposals**, she noted that these would notably aim at identifying common ground to move forward on the difficult pending issues in the asylum reform, by placing the reform in the broader context of the comprehensive approach on migration and underpinned by the principles of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility. In addition, Ms Pelin-Raducu stated that the Commission was reflecting on other procedural efficiencies that could be included to make asylum procedures efficient and crisis resilient by drawing on lessons learnt from the Covid pandemic while at the same time fully respecting fundamental rights.

Nina Schrepfer from UNHCR presented several recommendations for EU asylum policy in the wake of COVID-19. She explained that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted asylum systems across Europe and the world and that UNHCR too felt the impact on its operations which had required quick adaptation. She referred to a set of practical suggestions that UNHCR had offered to Governments in Europe to enable an effective response to the pandemic while respecting international refugee law, notably regarding access to territory, registration and documentation, adequate reception, and asylum procedures - drawn from UNHCR's own operational experience in coping with emergencies and adapting to them. She noted that the measures introduced by Member States in response to Covid could present risks but also opportunities, insofar as they may contribute to building more resilient asylum systems for the future. It was stressed that while the COVID-19 situation had impacted on the functionality of asylum systems across Europe, the multitude of good practices could be used for building more robust asylum systems now and in the future (e.g. through the use of digital means for registration and interviews). She concluded that flexibility and adaptation in times of crisis would not need to come at the expense of access to protection and safeguards in the asylum procedures, and that this experience could serve as an important lesson for any forthcoming crisis that may affect Europe.

A question and answer session followed the presentations, with several clarifying questions asked about the content of some of the presentations.

At the end of the meeting, **Sheila Maas**, **Civil Society Officer at EASO**, summarised the main take-aways of the meeting that had emerged from discussions. These included the following:

- The pandemic has forced a rethink of the traditional functioning of EU+ countries' asylum and reception systems. Physical distancing measures, including the inability to carry out tasks requiring face-to-face contacts, initially made it difficult for asylum authorities to perform certain steps in the asylum procedure. Member States consequently resorted to e-solutions (such as electronic tools and portals for lodging asylum applications, e-services for information

  provision, remote interviewing, and digital case-management) as a means to resume asylum procedures. Although these new tools and procedures were meant as short-term emergency solutions, they now appear to be emerging as part of the "new normal" with likely long-lasting effects on the CEAS.
- Similar to Member States, many CSOs have equally resorted to e-solutions to be able to continue to implement their activities and provide support to asylum seekers. Examples included e-counselling meetings, provision of information through digital tools and the creation of digital platforms and hotlines.
- The trend of digitalisation in the field of asylum has presented opportunities as well as new challenges. CSOs emphasised certain gaps in the implementation of new tools/procedures which have challenged asylum seekers' access to effective and fair procedures. For example, they emphasised the need in this regard to improve the link between online registration and access to reception. They also stressed the need to further look into some of the new tools and procedures, calling upon Member States to implement practices in line with the EU legal framework.

  As to what is next, participants agreed that the asylum situation in the EU remains volatile with possible increased migratory pressure following the Covid-19 pandemic. CSOs expressed concerns as to the direction for the future EU policy on asylum and called for change; a comprehensive EU approach to migration and asylum is urgently needed – one which should be efficient and crisis resilient but most importantly characterised by more intra-EU solidarity, including solidarity towards asylum seekers and refugees.

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