



Situational Update

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Resumption of resettlement and humanitarian admissions activities in 2021

Background

Health measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic had a direct impact on the functioning of asylum and reception systems, in particular for the resettlement of refugees to EU+ countries. Operations were paused both in the countries of first asylum and in receiving countries. In most cases, selection missions and face-to-face activities, such as pre-departure orientations and selection interviews, were temporarily halted, while new methods to process files were developed.

While emergency solutions initially addressed specific and extraordinary needs, many of them have now been incorporated into national resettlement procedures on a more permanent basis as the ‘new normal’. This Situational Update explores the new approaches which have been adopted by countries and how resettlement and humanitarian admissions were carried out in 2021.

Highlights

- The COVID-19 pandemic had a direct impact on various steps of the resettlement procedure:
 - Remote selection missions were used to select refugees to be resettled to EU+ countries during 2021. However, moving to online settings came with additional challenges, such as technical issues (poor Internet connection, interruptions, etc.) and a possible loss of trust during the interview phase. A plausible alternative for the coming years could be to use other modalities, such as selection based on dossiers and increasing the quote of refugees through dossier selection.
 - Pre-departure orientation and cultural orientation programmes were mostly carried out online, but at times there were long delays before providing them. The content of the programmes was adapted to include COVID-19-related topics, in particular information on the health measures in place in the country of resettlement. Remote modalities brought new challenges and required adaptation.

- Additional health checks related to COVID-19 were included in travel arrangements in most countries, as well as other measures such as isolation periods, protective equipment, etc. This resulted in increased costs and logistics challenges.
- Compulsory testing and isolation periods had an impact on arrivals and reception, including delays in transfers and in pre-integration activities. In some countries, social distancing requirements resulted in decreased capacity in reception centres and new solutions and partnerships were set up.
- Various stakeholders needed to work together during the COVID-19 measures. There was active coordination at the national level (between different national ministries, including consulates and health authorities) and with UNHCR, the IOM and local authorities in the countries of first asylum. These procedures were developed ad hoc during 2021 but may become part of the regular procedure through signed agreements.
- Many EU+ countries granted humanitarian admissions to evacuees from Afghanistan during the second half of 2021. Activities related to this specific situation are out of the scope of this document, although were mentioned by several countries.

1.1. Resettlement and humanitarian admissions in 2021

Resettlement involves the selection and transfer of refugees from a country in which they have sought protection to a third country which has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status.¹

One-half of EU+ countries (BE, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, IT, LU, NL, NO, PT, RO, SE, and CH) resumed resettlement and humanitarian admission activities in 2021, although some of them (for example LU) received refugees only under humanitarian admissions programmes, including evacuees from Afghanistan.

In contrast, 11 EU+ countries (AT, BG, CY, CZ, EE, HR, HU, LV, MT, PL, and SI) did not implement any resettlement and humanitarian activities during the year.

Most changes involved practical aspects in 2021, but there were some relevant

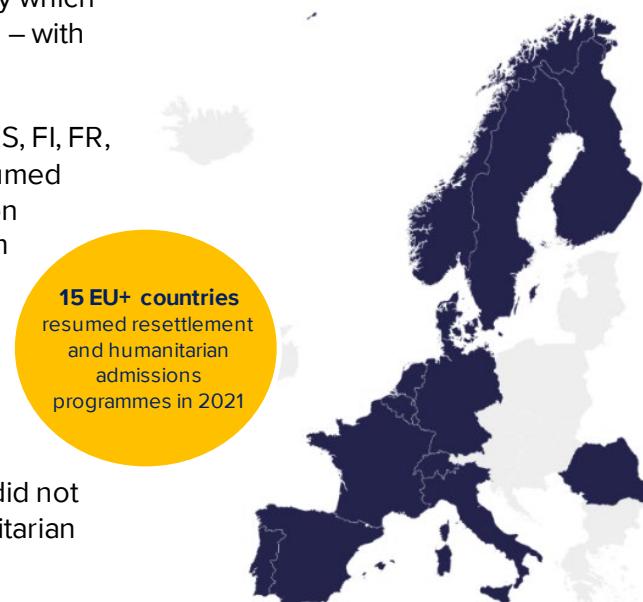
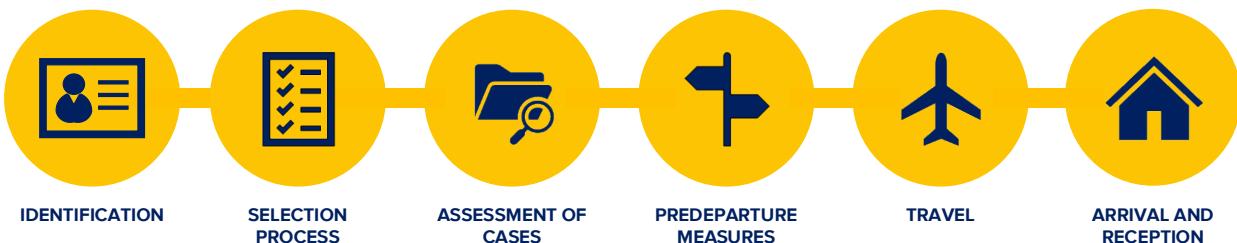


Figure 1. Map of EU+ countries with resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes in place during 2021

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (April 2018). UNHCR Resettlement Handbook and Country Chapters. <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/resettlement/4a2ccf4c6/unhcr-resettlement-handbook-countrychapters.html>. Practices at EU+ level may vary when it comes to granting refugee status and permanent residence in all resettlement cases

legislative developments as well. For example, Slovenia introduced a pre-departure orientation programme in November 2021 which replaced the 3-month introductory activities post-arrival.² In Germany the resettlement policy was amended to include some COVID-19 measures, for example compulsory testing upon arrival, self-isolation when coming from certain third countries, etc. In Spain, the Supreme Court [confirmed](#) that refugees resettled in Spain are beneficiaries of refugee status.³

1.2. The resettlement processes



1.2.1. Selection process and assessment of cases

As a result of COVID-19 measures, countries needed to adapt practices to continue resettlement programmes in 2021. EU+ countries used different methods to select refugees who would be resettled under a resettlement programme, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Method to select refugees for resettlement in 2021

	EU+ countries
Dossier selection	FR, NO, FI, ⁴ NL, IT, RO, SE
Selection missions	FR, NO, CH, NL, DE, RO, SE
Remote selection missions	ES, NO, FI, CH, IT, DK, DE, BE, SE
Hybrid modalities	NO, CH, NL, DE, RO

Countries where refugees may potentially be resettled participate in the selection process once the cases are submitted by UNHCR. The selection process can be done by only examining the documentation sent by UNHCR ('dossier selection') or by conducting a personal interview that can be done face-to face or remotely. Due to COVID-19 measures,

² [Decree](#) amending the Decree on the relocation of persons admitted to the Republic of Slovenia on the basis of a quota and burden-sharing among Member States. [Act](#) Amending the International Protection Act.

³ Spain, Supreme Court [Tribunal Supremo], [Applicants \(Syria\) v Spanish Public Administration \(Administracion General del Estado\)](#), 7923/2019, ECLI:ES:TS:2020:4479, 17 December 2020.

⁴ Selections on dossiers were only conducted for refugees in Zambia.

countries continued selections remotely in 2021. Hybrid solutions were also used to select refugees through combining the dossier examination with face-to face or virtual interviews.

When in-person selection missions and applicant interviews were halted, some countries continued to decide on cases through **selections based on dossiers**. In fact, this method has been used in France since 2008 prior to the pandemic, as part of a bilateral agreement between France and UNHCR by which 100 cases are submitted yearly. Each year, France selects a few refugees to resettle in their country based on the assessment of the file received from UNCHR.

There was a significant rise in dossier selections in Norway in 2021, as this was the method used to process evacuated Afghan nationals after their arrival in Norway, due to time constraints.

With the reassumption of **selection missions**, some changes were introduced to comply with COVID-19 health measures and minimise the risk of infection, namely:

- Use of digital tools for conducting selection interviews and related meetings, such as WebEx (DE), Microsoft Teams (BE, ES, FI, IT, NL, NO), Skype (DK, DE, IT), Zoom or Polycom (FI). Additionally, other tools were used to exchange documents, such as the SharePoint platform managed by UNHCR (BE).
- Risk assessment of the COVID-19 situation in the country of resettlement and country of first asylum prior the organisation of each face-to-face mission (BE, CH, FR, NL).
- Special preparatory arrangements done in coordination with UNHCR. For example, receiving all available documents of applicants in UNHCR's file a few weeks before the mission (BE).
- Reduction of delegation sizes (CH, NL⁵).
- Information meetings involving consular authorities in the country of first asylum (FR).

There were many challenges in selection processes in 2021. Some were directly linked to COVID-19 restrictions, such as delays in processing cases, postponing remote interviews and rescheduling of missions. Germany and Switzerland pointed out that constant flexibility in the planning of missions and quick adaptation to changing measures were one of the key challenges during 2021. Likewise, in the missions to the Resettlement Support Facility (RSF), the Netherlands adapted their protocol and work process to the health measures (social distancing, room capacity, etc.), resulting in a reduction in the number of personnel participating in selection interviews, including interview officers and medical doctors. France and Luxembourg found that COVID-19 testing and compulsory quarantines added an extra burden to the planning of missions and transfers of refugees.

Other challenges resulted from new work methods which had been implemented during the pandemic. For instance, Belgium reported challenges with using digital tools to carry out interviews. The poor Internet connections and inadequate sound and image quality resulted in communication barriers, including difficulties in creating bonds of trust with the applicant

⁵ The reduction only concerns the missions to Turkey.

and miscommunication. The language barrier was also reported by Spain where the applicant and interpreter are not in direct contact during the virtual interview. Norway states that there were difficulties in checking documents and biometrics during a remote interview. They found that online interviews were less effective and more time consuming than face-to-face interviews, and thus fewer cases were processed per day.

1.2.2. Pre-departure measures

Pre-departure orientation programmes and cultural orientation

Many countries experienced challenges with pre-departure orientation programmes due to COVID-19 restrictions. The programmes were moved online (BE, CH, NL, NO, RO, SE), carried out in person but in reduced groups (DE, FR) and sometimes were delivered after long delays (DK).

When the Netherlands could not deliver full in-person training, other options were offered, such as remote training, an in-person session where the trainer connects remotely, a combined physical/remote training (hybrid) or a fully digital information training provided through WhatsApp, where content and assignments were shared. A hybrid model was also developed, in which a part of the family attended the physical session and other family members participated in the remote session simultaneously. The Netherlands reported that remote pre-departure training resulted in additional challenges, such as technical issues and loss of the interactive character of in-person training. This caused a loss in efficiency and some resettled refugees were not well prepared before their departure.

Arrangements were generally dependent on the guidelines and restrictions in place in the country of origin or transit. To adapt, France carried out pre-departure orientation in person but in smaller groups, when possible, but in some countries, information had to be provided through digital tools. Interactive plays and activities that formed part of the training had to be replaced by other alternative activities, even when face-to-face sessions were held.

Spain and France noted that the IOM was responsible for the content of the training, which had to be adapted also by including COVID-19-related topics in the sessions, such as information concerning the health measures in place in the country of resettlement.

Health checks and travel arrangements

Some countries (CH, ES, FR, IT, NL) reported increased costs and organisational efforts to carry out both pre-departure programmes and health checks in order to comply with travel requirements. Increased costs were related to COVID-19 testing, protective equipment, procedures in smaller groups, compulsory isolation periods and other measures.

Often trips had to be postponed due to participants testing positive for COVID-19 (ES, NO), and there were considerably less options for travel (LU). Romania and Norway reported that local lockdowns in the country of origin or transit caused limitations to movement, causing delays in attending required pre-departure appointments and obtaining travel documentation.



The Netherlands reported difficulties in understanding whether health checks were carried out before the interviews, resulting in missing information to arrange travel requirements and to be sent to medical practitioners in the arrival country.

Due to the difficulties of carrying out pre-departure medical screening online, Belgium mentioned that some checks were outsourced to the IOM, which carried them out in the country of origin. Sometimes this resulted in gaps in information about the participant's medical history, mental health, mobility, etc.

Information on COVID-19 prevention measures and the benefits of the vaccine were provided to applicants before departure.

1.2.3. Arrival and reception

Countries reported many challenges connected to the arrival and reception of resettled refugees due to COVID-19 restrictions. Similar to pre-departure arrangements, among the most common challenges on arrival was the requirement to test or quarantine people, which resulted in delays in integration activities and transfers due to positive cases (BE, NL), while increasing the workload and expenses (DE, FR, NO).

In most countries (BE, CH, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, IT, LU, NL, NO, PT, RO), the procedures applied to resettled refugees were the same as established by law for any arrival from abroad, which included compulsory testing and/or self-isolation depending on the country of departure. In the Netherlands, the procedure for resettled refugees is to quarantine for 5 days and have two tests prior to departure, and in some cases an additional quarantine of 10 days on arrival.

Some countries (BE, CH, DE, DK, FI) noted that the vaccine was always offered to resettled refugees on arrival, however it was not compulsory.

Difficulties were reported in the need to maintain social distancing and avoid overcrowded centres, affecting the capacity of transportation means (BE) and places in reception centres (BE, CH, DE). Several approaches were taken to maintain the continuity of services.

Switzerland established new partnerships with providers for the reception of resettled refugees, while in Italy hotels were used for the compulsory quarantine period of resettled refugees. In Germany, the existing reception centre was not operational for a short time due to COVID-19 measures, but it has since been reopened. One additional reception centre was used for resettlement arrivals. Finally, Norway encountered difficulties in the provision of information to resettled refugees who tested positive to COVID-19 upon arrival and had to be isolated in a quarantine hotel, while this was not an issue for resettled refugees who could spend the quarantine period in their assigned homes in the receiving municipalities.

Flight bans meant that there were less travel options. Belgium and Germany noted that some departures needed to be rearranged, but using chartered flights for large groups was a solution. At the same time, Germany had more scheduled commercial flights which made it possible to transfer refugees.

Norway and Romania worked closely with the IOM to solve these challenges, such as issuing travel documents from the resettlement country.



Other countries (CH, DK, ES, FI, FR, IT and NL) had difficulties with flight bans only in 2020, while this was not a problem in 2021 as restrictions did not apply to resettled refugees.

Methodological note

The information in this situational update was collected through an exchange with the EUAA Resettlement and Humanitarian Admissions Network and the EUAA IDS Advisory Group. In total, 16 EU+ countries⁶ responded on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on resettlement and humanitarian admissions in 2021, namely, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Slovenia, and Switzerland.

The report covers general practices and challenges in EU+ countries but does not include resettlement and humanitarian admission activities related to Afghan evacuees during August-October 2021.

The EUAA expresses its gratitude to asylum and reception authorities in EU+ countries for the continued cooperation and information exchange. The contributions of national asylum experts are invaluable in helping EUAA to maintain an accurate and up-to-date overview of asylum-related developments in Europe and beyond.

⁶ EU+ countries include EU Member States, Iceland, Norway and Switzerland