



Latvia operating plan 2021-2022

Ex post evaluation report

Period: September 2021 - March 2022

Prepared by the EUAA's Quality Management and Evaluation Sector

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Contents

Contents	2
Acronyms and definitions.....	3
1. Introduction: purpose and scope	4
2. Intended results of the action	4
3. Implementation of the action: current state of play	5
4. Evaluation findings	6
4.1. To what extent was the action successful and why?	6
4.2. How did the Agency make a difference through the action?	9
4.3. Is the action relevant?	9
5. Conclusions, lessons learnt and recommendations	10
5.1. Conclusions.....	10
5.2. Good practices.....	11
5.3. Recommendations	12
Annex 1: Methodology and analytical models used	14
Annex 2: Evaluation matrix	15
Annex 3: Intervention logic	16



Acronyms and definitions

Term	Definition
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EU	European Union
FORU	First Operational Response Unit
FRS	First Response Sector
EUOS	EU Operations Sector
OCMA	Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (of the Ministry of Interior of Latvia)
OP	Operating plan



1. Introduction: purpose and scope

Latvia and the European Union Agency for Asylum¹ (EUAA or the Agency) signed an operating plan (OP) on 8 September 2021 in a context of increased inflows of asylum seekers. The plan, which focused mainly on interpretation support for asylum and reception processes, ended on 31 March 2022 following an extension in December 2021.

The main objective of this evaluation was to assess the results of the operational measures of the Agency's support to Latvia². To ensure proportionality with the actions undertaken, this evaluation was conducted internally and assessed the five standard evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and added value; refer to Annex 1) in a light manner. In addition, the evaluation considered targeted questions as described in Annexes 1 and 2.

The scope of this evaluation is limited to the operational measures of the Agency as defined in the OP. This evaluation took place between May and August 2022 and was carried out by the Quality Management and Evaluation Sector of the Corporate Management Centre. The OP was implemented by the Greece Office before a dedicated coordination function for Latvia was set up as part of the Agency's First Response Sector (FRS) within the First Operational Response Unit (FORU) of the Operational Support Centre. The responsibility for the subsequent OP 2022 was transferred to the EU Operations Sector (EUOS) in March 2022.

This evaluation has benefitted from a comprehensive monitoring and reporting framework. It was also preceded by an extensive transition exercise undertaken by FORU and EUOS in March 2022. This evaluation should therefore be considered as a complementary exercise building on these solid operational monitoring and reporting efforts.

2. Intended results of the action

The OP 2021-2022 for Latvia includes a single operational measure relating to both asylum and reception support. Its result outcome³ entails the provision of interpretation for asylum processing and information provision, as well as the delivery of tailor-made workshops on interviewing specific nationalities. The intervention logic of the OP is presented in Annex 3 to this report.

In 2021, Latvia experienced a sharp increase in irregular migration flows from Belarus, leading to a surge in the number of asylum applications. In total, over 450 applications were received in the first thirty-two weeks of 2021 against an average of 170 asylum applications between 2018-2020. The changed pattern of the migration flows to Latvia was reflected in the nationality of asylum seekers: 69% were Iraqi nationals, while previously these were Belarusians, Russians, and Syrians. The country was also not prepared for the arrival of unaccompanied minors (none registered in 2020).

¹ Formerly the European Asylum Support Office (until 18 January 2022).

² The sole responsibility of this publication lies with the author. The EUAA is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

³ "Effectiveness and efficiency in processing asylum applications and in the provision of reception services for applicants of international protection are improved", OP 2021.



Latvia declared a state of emergency on 10 August 2021⁴ as the country's asylum and reception systems reached their capacity limit. This foresaw the suspension of asylum applications, the immediate return of all persons crossing the borders and the creation of accommodation structures for irregular migrants. On 11 August 2021, Latvia activated its contingency plan in response to the mass influx of asylum seekers.

The main reception facility, the Accommodation Centre for Asylum Seekers, is managed by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) of the Ministry of Interior and consists of two units situated in the Mucenieki region (Ropaži Municipality), with an additional temporary facility in Jūrmala⁵. In August 2021, there were no emergency structures nor initial reception centres at the border. By mid-August 2021, the Accommodation Centre reached about 80% occupancy.

The OP included several preconditions, namely nomination of national focal points to ensure effective operational coordination, quality assurance and implementation, office space for deployed personnel, and data sharing. The Agency would deploy up to one Field Support Officer, up to one Member State expert, and up to 20 interpreters to support both or either asylum or reception procedures. Moreover, the Agency would provide the necessary equipment and materials for the delivery of the agreed actions.

3. Implementation of the action: current state of play

The state of emergency, declared by Latvia on 10 August 2021⁶ and extended until 10 August 2022, limits access to the asylum procedure for third country nationals crossing the border as a result of the instrumentalisation of migration by the Belarusian regime⁷. The rate of asylum applications, which saw a peak of 390 in August 2021, reduced significantly in the months that followed (average of 34 applications monthly between October 2021 and March 2022)⁸. In 2021, these included 15 unprecedented applications by unaccompanied minors. The backlog of first instance asylum applications was at its highest in September 2021 with 485 applications and progressively decreased to 155 in March 2022.

By the end of the OP (i.e., March 2022), most of the agreed deliverables were achieved.

In the area of asylum, more than two thirds (68%) of all asylum applications (218 out of 319) were processed with support from the Agency (outcome level), exceeding the planned intention to support 65%. 61% (or 118) of the interviews, 81% (or 64) of the notifications, and 76% (or 38) of the legal aid sessions were supported by Agency interpretation. The Agency provided a total of 43 interpreter-months (of the 42 planned) in the course of the OP, averaging 6 per month. In January 2022, when

⁴ The state of emergency was limited to the administrative territories bordering Belarus.

⁵ The Agency did not support the temporary facility in Jūrmala; it was in place until December but with no staff permanently present.

⁶ Order of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 518 on the declaration of Emergency Situation (10 August).

⁷ Refer to the statement by President von der Leyen on the situation at the border between Poland and Belarus: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_5867

⁸ 50, 25, 30, 25, 10 30 and 70 registrations between October 2021 and March 2022. Data from this section, refer to Eurostat <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00189/default/table?lang=en>



pending applications fell to 255 (47% of which were from Iraqis), the Agency's interpretation support focused on notifications and legal aid. For this reason, remote interpretation was suspended in February. The tailor-made workshop on interviewing specific nationalities (mainly Iraqis) foreseen in the OP, did not take place.

In the field of reception, the Agency intended to support all reception sites where reception procedures are implemented with interpretation (outcome level). This support to the single reception centre (Mucenieki) was effectively provided during each month of implementation. Reception support foresaw a total of 21 interpreter-months (average of 3 monthly) to support communication between applicants and reception authorities (including medical personnel). 81% of the target (i.e., 17 interpreters) was achieved by the end of the OP.

On 23 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. In view of the uncertainty of additional pressure on the Latvian asylum and reception systems caused by the influx of Ukrainian asylum seekers, the EUAA conducted a rapid needs assessment on 28 February 2022. Subsequently, the Minister of Interior of Latvia requested the continuation of EUAA support on 10 March 2022, resulting in a new OP being signed on 30 March 2022.

4. Evaluation findings

4.1. To what extent was the action successful and why?

The OP was implemented in a geopolitical context involving the instrumentalisation of irregular migration. The OP 2021-2022 was part of the EU solidarity (emergency) support to Latvia, including other agencies such as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol). Additional EU resources and medical support came in the form of emergency funds (3 million EUR)⁹ under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. Other actors, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration, were also present on the ground. The action was complementary to the support of these actors. The narrow scope of the OP limited the risk of overlaps.

The Agency ensured smooth communication with its national counterparts. The presence of a Field Support Officer ensured that daily activities, such as scheduling of interviews and notification drafting, were well-coordinated. In the end of implementation survey involving feedback from OCMA, respondents rated the Agency cooperation as very satisfactory (58%) and satisfactory (42%)¹⁰.

The support was considered complementary as the country had not been able to procure the specific languages under its existing interpretation framework contract. However, the possibility of transferring capacity of the Agency interpretation contract to the national interpretation contract could have been explored. This would have enhanced coherence and sustainability.

⁹ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-001127-ASW_EN.html

¹⁰ Internal monitoring documents. Sample size: 12.



The Latvia OP benefitted from support and expertise from the Agency’s operations in Greece and Italy in fields such as project and contract management, human resource planning, and information and communications technology. This was identified as a good practice and one of the reasons behind the smooth running of the operation.

The Agency provided 43 interpreter-months in the area of asylum, in line with the plan. This translated into interpretation support to 216 activities (about two-thirds of a total of 319 reported activities). Some interpreters spoke multiple languages which in turn led to efficiency gains. In reception, the Agency provided 17 interpreters, reaching 81% of the planned deployment (21 in number). The deployment included relay interpretation; a practice needed in view of the scarcity of Latvian-speaking interpreters. This meant that an activity which would be more efficiently conducted by one interpreter required the simultaneous presence of two interpreters. With the vast majority of the interpretation activities conducted in this mode, efficiency and quality of deliverable were likely affected. In the case of notifications and legal aid sessions, one interpreter was sufficient as most lawyers spoke English. In selected cases, some interpreters’ skills were considered inadequate and led to the termination of their deployment. The Agency replaced interpreters in a flexible manner to ensure a smooth conduct of interviews.

The COVID-19¹¹ pandemic challenged the efficiency and effectiveness of the operation as infections led to the occasional suspension of activities. This was most notable in October 2021, when the operations were suspended for two weeks. In February and March 2022, half of the interpretation team was on standby due to a high number of cases among national staff and applicants. The vaccination requirements in the country also led to staff turnover, which in turn resulted in delays.

As presented in Table 1, the intervention was relatively cost-efficient, having achieved most of the deliverables with about 74 percent of the planned budget. The postponed workshop would not have affected this situation.

Table 1. Estimated operational budget consumption for OP 2021-2022 Latvia

Result Outcome	Planned budget	Estimated consumption	Estimated consumption rate
Measure 1	€ 255,123	€ 189,843	74%
Other OP direct costs	€ 22,238	€ 16,006	72%
Total OP budget	€ 277,361	€ 205,849	74%

Source: internal financial monitoring

It is worth noting that the above budget does not include the different Agency staff that managed and supported the Latvia operations. While there is no full-time equivalent estimation of human resources involved, it may be assumed that indirect and overhead costs linked to the activities were relatively high in view of the low financial value of the intervention.

¹¹ Coronavirus disease 2019.



Targeted questions:

To what extent did the Agency respond quickly and efficiently to the request for support?

Latvia formally requested support on 18 August 2021. The Agency undertook a rapid needs assessment the following week. The two parties signed the OP on 8 September 2021 and, as of 22 September 2021, the Agency deployed interpretation support in reception. Two days later, on 24 September 2021, the Agency's staff and interpreters began supporting the asylum procedure. In summary, the Agency responded quickly in the intervention and mobilised efficiently. Details on the efficiency of operations are provided above.

What are the minimum inputs, including deployments, working space, equipment, services and contracts, needed to frontload an operation?

The Latvia coordination function built on the different operational inputs at hand. In terms of human resources, they benefitted from experienced staff who worked previously with the Greece Office. As a result, deployed staff were already provided with the necessary equipment, e.g., laptops and other hardware. This ensured a prompt start. The Greece project management office supported the monitoring and reporting of activities. The Italy Office provided administrative and financial management support.

The replicability of the frontloading experience in Latvia is difficult to assess as there is no one size fits all approach. The Agency needs however to ensure minimum elements building on its existing good practices such as:

- Budget: when the needs assessment includes targets (e.g., deployments, activities), costing and related feasibility check; ensuring budget is available on a dedicated budget line;
- Human resources:
 - A longer-term, single point of contact as coordinator supported by a multidisciplinary team;
 - Feasible modalities for deployment of field personnel and associated training requirements;
- Available service and supply contracts:
 - Available (framework) contracts preferably with flexible terms and conditions (e.g., order forms);
 - Agreement on workflows on different matters (e.g., initiators and verifiers; realistic timelines);
- Logistical support:
 - Clarity on adequate office space (external or agreed with authorities);
 - "Starter package kit" including information technology and related hardware;
 - Security clearance for occupational and health risks.

The OP preconditions and assumptions should realistically take into account the above elements in close consultation with the relevant Agency actors.

What parameters are needed for the transition of OPs from first response to technical assistance?

The OP coordination function was initially performed by reassigned staff from the Greece Office before a dedicated coordination function for Latvia was set up as part of the FRS of the FORU. The



responsibility for management of the subsequent OP 2022 was transferred to the EUOS in March 2022. This transition highlighted several good practices (refer to section 5.2.) as well as the need for certain preconditions to be in place prior to the transfer, including:

- Internal preparedness and capacity to take over: the EUOS, already occupied with coordinating multiple OPs was not able to assign a dedicated team to ensure take over at all levels;
- Proportional and harmonised working approaches (e.g., monitoring, reporting, administrative or financial workflows and tasks).

In this context, the transition from first response to longer term operations is best undertaken when:

- Time: the operation has completed an initial inception phase and demands a longer-term collaboration perspective needing a longer-term project cycle (2-3 years). If shorter, upon completion of an OP;
- Volume and complexity: the intervention is large enough in nature and involves complex project management processes.

4.2. How did the Agency make a difference through the action?

From a macro policy perspective, the contribution of the Agency to a wider diversified EU solidarity response to a country under pressure was meaningful. Similar to the Lithuania OP 2021-2022, the Latvia OP 2021-2022 demonstrated that the Agency's operational support can be of benefit to Member States across the EU.

The Latvia OP was limited in scope, resources, and types of activities since support was mainly related to interpretation. The Agency has a comprehensive interpretation contract which, in comparison with the Latvian national interpretation framework contractor, has a wider outreach to languages of countries of origin. As interpretation was urgent in view of the emergency situation and the Agency had the ability to procure this support, there was a level of added value. In the absence of the Agency's intervention, it could be assumed that the national authorities would not have processed cases as rapidly. Interpretation also contributed to information provision activities in reception centres.

From a programming perspective, however, the Agency's added value remains fair. It would have been higher if it engaged more knowledge sharing and training in view of its technical expertise on the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Sustainable support on interpretation could have been achieved by exploring support to a better use of existing or new national interpretation contracts.

4.3. Is the action relevant?

The geopolitical situation in the country, combined with an EU-wide response of solidarity and an explicit request from the authorities justified the Agency's support. During the rapid needs assessment in August 2021, the Agency identified immediate needs in both asylum and reception: asylum processing of specific nationalities (new third country nationals); support with country-of-origin information; workshop on interviewing techniques and interpretation needs, mostly in Kurdish/Arabic-English, for asylum and reception processing.



After consultation with the authorities, the Agency’s support to Latvia prioritised provision of interpretation services for asylum interviews, notification of decision, and legal aid, delivery of tailor-made workshops on interviewing specific nationalities, and the provision of interpretation for information provision in reception facilities.

Since the beginning of the OP, the situation in Latvia has evolved. The reduction in migration flows from Belarus, the emergency context, and the considerable reduction in the backlog of pending asylum cases led to a decreased need for interpretation support.

The need for a workshop on interviewing Iraqi nationals was identified during the needs assessment. Initially, the workshop was postponed due to reported heavy workload of the targeted participants. Its relevance has reduced over time since the number of pending Iraqi cases decreased. In an emergency context, where the national focus is on processing cases quickly, there is a need for flexible training paths and training modules in collaboration with national authorities.

5. Conclusions, lessons learnt and recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

The Agency supported Latvia in a context of disproportionate migratory pressure linked to geopolitical pressures involving instrumentalisation of migration at the border with Belarus¹². The country was in need of interpretation services for asylum interviews, notifications of decisions, legal aid, and for information provision in reception facilities. These needs were mainly for Kurdish/Arabic-English, as the relevant resources could not be mobilised under the national interpretation contracts. The relevance of the support in asylum reduced over time when the backlog of these nationalities decreased. The need for a tailor-made workshop remained, though its timing and format should be reassessed.

Table 2. Evaluation criteria¹³

	Result
Relevance	Good
Effectiveness	Good
Efficiency	Fair/Good
Coherence	Good/Very good
EU added value	Fair

The Agency delivered most of the planned deliverables, with the exception of a workshop. The support was cost-efficient, using a relatively low budget while delivering the planned results. There were, however, a number of inefficiencies related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the mobilising of the Agency’s

¹² European Council, Conclusions 21-22 October 2021, EUCO 17/21, paras 19-20.

¹³ The five evaluation criteria were rated using a four-point scale (unsatisfactory, fair, good, very good). These ratings are judgements based on inputs triangulating different information sources such as interviews and monitoring data.



interpretation contract and the need to use two relay languages. The overhead costs of managing such a small intervention were also relatively high.

The intervention contributed to an EU-wide solidarity response to support Latvia and was justified in view of the emergency situation declared as a consequence of the sudden rise in arrivals. The coordination with the national authorities was considered excellent. Whilst the Agency delivered on its promised support, its added value was limited mostly to the benefits of interpretation provision. While the interpretation support was of added value in practical settings, the OP did not substantially support the country with the Agency's technical expertise on CEAS.

Being mindful of the limited scope of this evaluation (undertaken simultaneously with the Lithuania OP 2021-2022 evaluation), there are a number of horizontal considerations of interest to the Agency at large.

The current OP is mainly focused on interpretation support. The Agency should explore if **interpretation** (now more strongly articulated in its new mandate) constitutes an area of expertise it wishes to strategically invest in. Interpretation has not received full attention as a strand for EUAA support despite the high volume of financial commitments and its important effect on the quality of the asylum and reception procedures.

The Agency should agree on the **minimum volume** (and added value) to engage in the comprehensive OP modality. Simultaneously, the Agency should invest in improving its permanent support by making it more efficient and service-oriented for *ad hoc* requests and more attractive in terms of country-specific Agency visibility.

5.2. Good practices

This evaluation has identified several good practices. These include:

1. Good practices identified by the **transition exercise**, including:
 - a) The deployment of experienced personnel from other EUAA operations in the process of setting up a new operation;
 - b) Remote support was provided by various teams;
 - c) Close communication with other agencies allowed for reciprocal information provision on the situation and context, national framework, actions and plans;
 - d) The establishment of coordination mechanisms between the Agency and national stakeholders (OCMA) ensured regular communication, feedback and updates.
2. With the current OP, the Agency has shown maturity in the application of project management approaches. The development of specific operational **user guides** is a good practice for harmonised project management. These ensure harmonisation of the needs assessment, design, planning and monitoring of its operations. These will be further disseminated through training in the form of workshops, support and review processes to ensure that instructions and minimum standards are applied correctly to each context.



3. The “**workflow guide**” aimed at preparing Agency staff prior to taking up duty promoted efficiency and harmonisation of working processes.
4. FORU is preparing **promising work** such as a ‘catalogue of services’ (possible operational support interventions) and an assessment of good practices from other EU and international agencies for the rapid procurement of emergency-related services.
5. The **physical presence** of Agency staff in Latvia allowed for a smooth coordination, a close relationship and flexibility with the local authorities (OCMA).
6. The early establishment and implementation of a **reporting framework**, including operational data collection and guidelines.
7. On interpretation:
 - a) Some interpreters were competent in multiple languages which led to efficiency gains, in particular in relation to the reception activities and counterbalanced some of the inefficiencies brought about by the contractual limitations;
 - b) Interpreters were divided into two teams on asylum and reception, respectively. This ensured that the same interpreter was not used for the **same applicant in different procedures** (e.g., supporting notification procedure and psychological services);
 - c) Preparedness to provide **remote interpretation** and ensure continuity of work when face-to-face support could not be provided due to COVID-19 restrictions.

5.3. Recommendations

This evaluation puts forward recommendations building on findings and inputs from the different consulted stakeholders involved in the Latvia OP¹⁴.

1. Implement the **proposed recommendations of the transition exercise**, including:
 - a) Ensure the deployment of experienced Agency personnel, especially at the start of the operations. This contributes to the building of trust with the host MS and harmonisation of approaches;
 - b) For interpretation provision contracts, conduct market research prior to formally agreeing on deployments and review legal obligations related to long term residency of non-EU citizens;
 - c) Establish a data collection, reporting, and monitoring structure from the beginning of an operation and ensure that the reporting system complements existing practices in-country (instead of additional to);
 - d) Devise a training plan from the beginning to ensure availability of trainers, potential participants, and potential needs for translation of the material.

¹⁴ This evaluation was undertaken simultaneously with the Lithuania OP evaluation which led to a number of synergies. In this context, it supports its recommendation on minimum conditions before committing to new OPs.



2. Apply **proportionality and a phased approach** when implementing small volume operations:
 - a) Ensure that the mobilisation of resources is proportional to the size of the intervention;
 - b) Carefully balance simplified working processes with Agency minimum harmonised practices (as per operational manual);
 - c) Clarify when the inception phase of an OP ends (relevant for target setting and accountability);
 - d) When transferring the OP between sectors, ensure preconditions such as the availability of dedicated intervention teams and clarity on workflows and reporting practices.

3. Enhance **interpretation support**. The Agency should consider the following:
 - a) When providing remote interpretation, ensure preparedness of the interpreters with the context and mitigate possible technical difficulties;
 - b) Enhance longer term assignments and take into account gender sensitive needs;
 - c) Limit as much as possible relay interpretation practices;
 - d) Adapt the interpretation contracts to operational realities and needs;
 - e) Prepare gradual phasing-out of interpretation support, by exploring the transfer to existing or new Latvian interpretation framework contracts.



Annex 1: Methodology and analytical models used

The exercise aimed to answer the following evaluation questions:

Criteria	Questions to be answered
Relevance	How well has the action been able to respond to the stakeholders' needs?
Effectiveness	Was the progress of each result conforming to plan (both quality and quantity)?
Efficiency	To what extent are the resources of the support justified given the results? <i>Targeted questions:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent did the Agency respond quickly and efficiently to the request for support? • What are the minimum inputs, including deployments, working space, equipment, services and contracts, needed to frontload an operation? • What parameters are needed for the transition of OPs from first response to technical assistance?
Coherence	To what extent is the operation coherent internally and externally? To what extent is the operation coherent externally with other actors?
EU Added value	What is the added value resulting from the EUAA operation, compared to what could have been expected from Latvia acting at national level?

The evaluation takes into account good practices and lessons learnt in the setting up of the first response operation, with a focus on replicability. In this regard, elements such as environmental and social impacts were not addressed.

The evaluation triangulated information from a number of sources, starting with desk research based on existing documentation. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders were conducted. This included Agency staff and national counterparts, i.e., OCMA.



Annex 2: Evaluation matrix

Evaluation criteria	Operationalised questions	Interviews (individual/group)	Desk review
Relevance	How well has the action been able to respond to the stakeholders' needs?	X	X
Effectiveness	Was the progress of each result conforming to plan (both quality and quantity)?	X	X
Efficiency	To what extent are the resources of the support justified given the results?	X	X
	Targeted question: To what extent did the Agency respond quickly and efficiently to the request for support?	X	X
	Targeted question: What are the minimum inputs, including deployments, working space, equipment, services and contracts, needed to frontload an operation?	X	X
	Targeted question: What parameters are needed for the transition of OPs from first response to technical assistance?	X	X
Coherence	To what extent is the operation coherent internally and externally?	X	X
Added value	What is the added value resulting from the EUAA operation, compared to what could have been expected from Latvia acting at national level?	X	X



Annex 3: Intervention logic

Needs/problems	Expected objectives
Increasing migratory pressure and international protection applications; changed pattern in arrivals.	Support following request of Latvia in response to disproportionate pressure to national asylum and reception systems.
Result impact	
The Agency fulfils its mandate, to provide effective operational and technical assistance to Member States, in particular when their asylum and reception systems are subject to disproportionate pressure (Article 2(1)(i) of the EUAA Regulation).	
Result outcomes	
Improved effectiveness and efficiency in processing asylum applications and improved provision of reception services for applicants of international protection.	
Result outputs	
1.0 Enhanced capacity to manage asylum applications; 1.1 Enhanced capacity to manage reception facilities.	
Activities	
Provide support in managing asylum procedures (conducting asylum interviews, notification of decision, provision of legal aid); Provide support through the delivery of training to new and experienced case officers; Provide support in managing reception procedures (info provision).	
Inputs	
Financial resources; Human resources (up to 1 member state expert, up to 1 field support officer, up to 20 interpreters to support asylum and reception procedures); Material resources.	
External factors	
National emergency context; European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs policies; national and international practices and policies; availability of financial and human resources; COVID-19 pandemic.	