Lithuania operating plan 2021-2022

Ex post evaluation report

Period: July 2021 - June 2022

Prepared by the EUAA's Quality Management and Evaluation Sector

EUAA/EVAL/2022/09/FR; Final

August 2022

IS-013.02.01

Contents

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Acronyms and definitions

Term	Definition
C1	Operational Support Centre (of the EUAA)
C2	Training and Professional Development Centre (of the EUAA)
C3	Asylum Knowledge Centre (of the EUAA)
C4	Corporate Management Centre (of the EUAA)
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
COI	Country-of-origin information
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EUOS	EU Operations Sector (within the Operational and Technical Assistance Unit of C1)
FORU	First Operational Response Unit (within C1)
FRC	Foreigners' Registration Centre (of the State Border Guard Service of Lithuania)
FRS	First Response Sector (within the FORU of C1)
IP	International protection
IT	Information technology
MD	Migration Department (under the Ministry of the Interior of Lithuania)
MoI	Ministry of the Interior
MoSSL	Ministry of Social Security and Labour (of Lithuania)
OP	Operating plan
RRC	Refugees Reception Centre (under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania)
SBGS	State Border Guard Service (of the Ministry of the Interior of Lithuania)
SOP	Standard operating procedure

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1. Introduction: purpose and scope

Since mid-2021, the Republic of Lithuania has seen a sharp increase in the number irregular migrants arriving across the border with Belarus. In response to this situation, Lithuania and the European Union Agency for Asylum[1] (EUAA or the Agency) signed an operating plan (OP) which ran from mid-July 2021 until 30 June 2022.

The main objective of this evaluation was to assess the results of the operational measures of the Agency's support to Lithuania[2]. 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 previously agreed priority questions (refer to Annexes 1 and 2).

The scope of the evaluation was limited to the operational measures as defined in the OP.

The internal evaluation took place between May and August 2022 and was carried out by the Quality Management and Evaluation Sector in the Governance Support and Systems Unit of the Corporate Management Centre (C4). Multiple Agency actors were involved in the implementation of the OP. The coordination of these efforts was ensured mainly by staff in the Greece Office before a dedicated coordination function for Lithuania 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 (C1). As of May 2022, this responsibility has been transferred to the EU Operations Sector (EUOS) in the Operational and Technical Assistance Unit of C1.

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

2.1. Description of the action and its intended results

The OP 2021-2022 for Lithuania[3] included the following two operational measures:

Measure 1: Asylum Support

Result Outcome: Effectiveness and efficiency of access to asylum procedures for applicants of international protection and in processing of asylum applications are improved.

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[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] Amended Operating Plan 2021, signed on 14 September 2021 until 30 June 2022, replacing the OP signed on 15 July 2021.

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Result Outputs:
- 1.0 Enhanced capacity of the State Border Guard Service (SBGS) under the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) to register applications for international protection.
- 1.1 Enhanced capacity of the Migration Department (MD) under the MoI to process asylum applications at first instance.

This measure included support to the registration of applications for international protection, asylum interviews and opinion drafting, country-of-origin information (COI) (e.g., COI helpdesk service) and country guidance support activities. It also entailed training and coaching sessions.

Measure 2: Reception Support

Result Outcome: Effectiveness and efficiency in managing reception facilities is improved.

Result Outputs:
- 2.0 Enhanced capacity of the MoI and the SBGS under the MoI to manage reception facilities.
- 2.1 Enhanced capacity of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (MoSSL) and Refugees Reception Centre (RRC) to manage dedicated reception facilities for vulnerable asylum seekers.

The measure included support and technical assistance for reception facility management such as on-site management, communication, information provision and vulnerability procedures. It supported workflows and procedures as well for the implementation of an information desk, the conduct of vulnerability pre-screening procedures, the design of a mapping tool and the undertaking of a resident satisfaction survey. In addition, it foresaw technical assistance for the design and planning of new reception facilities, training and exchange visits.

The intervention logic of the OP is in Annex 3 to this report.

2.2. Points of comparison

Since the beginning of 2021, irregular migration flows to Lithuania increased sharply. In the first eight months of 2021, over 4,000 third country nationals reached Lithuania from Belarus as a result of the instrumentalization of migration by the Belarusian regime[4]. This was an important increase compared to 2018, 2019, and 2020 when 101, 37, and 74 irregular migrants respectively entered the country[5]. There was in particular a sharp rise in June and July 2021 with 474 and 2,892 irregular entries, respectively.

In 2020, most irregular entries concerned migrants from the Russian Federation, Belarus and to a lesser extent Iraq. As of 2021, the majority of the irregular arrivals were originating from Iraq (2,799), followed by the Republic of Congo (204), Cameroon (134), and Syria (130). In August 2021, a total of 44 citizenships were recorded, with some nationalities (e.g., Gambian, Guinean, and Congolese) observed for the first time. This has resulted in a significant increase in the number of asylum

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[4] 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
[5] Source of information for this section: Eurostat and OP.

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applications, with approximately 2,000 applications for international protection pending at the end of August 2021.

The situation in 2021 impacted the national capacity of the reception system. In July 2021, Lithuania had four main reception facilities: the Foreigners' Registration Centre (FRC) of the SGBS in Pabradė, the reception sites of Medininkai and Rūdininkai and the RRC in Rukla. In addition to these centres, asylum seekers were also accommodated in the frontier stations, as well as in municipalities' *ad hoc* accommodation sites. An additional temporary tented accommodation facility was erected in the FRC of the SBGS to respond to the growing needs. A dormitory belonging to the SGBS was also used to temporarily house vulnerable asylum seekers during the quarantine period.

The Agency conducted a rapid needs assessment in the last week of June 2021. This exercise recommended immediate support to the Lithuanian asylum and reception systems. It also recommended a second phase focusing on capacity building. The proposed actions of the needs assessment were included in the OP.

On 2 July 2021, Lithuania declared a state of emergency in response to the unpredicted and increased number of arrivals. On 13 July 2021, an amendment to the Law on the Legal Status of Aliens introduced the possibility to limit the rights of irregular migrants and asylum seekers in a situation of war, in an emergency situation, or following the mass influx of aliens in the country.

The signed OP included preconditions relating to standard operating procedures, a jointly agreed training plan, office space and equipment, focal points for coordination, quality assurance and implementation, and a bi-directional data sharing procedure.

3. Implementation of the action: current state of play

In July and August 2021, the number of asylum applicants peaked with 985 and 1,460 applications, respectively. These applications dropped to an average of 159 between September and March 2022[6]. In 2021, asylum applications included 120 unaccompanied minors[7]. The backlog of first instance asylum applications peaked in September 2021 with 2,140 cases and progressively decreased to 370 cases in March 2022.

Lithuania declared two extraordinary states of emergency on 2 July and 10 November 2021 respectively (ending on 15 January 2022) and amended its Law on the Legal Status of Aliens[8].

On 24 February 2022, the country also declared a state of emergency following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which lasted until 21 April 2022.

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[6] Respectively 300, 355, 105, 90, 40, 50 and 170 from September to March. Refer to:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00189/default/table?lang=en
[7] Source of section: Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00194/default/table?lang=en
[8] Law "On the Legal Status of Aliens" No. IX-2206 Amendment of multiple Articles. Refer to:
https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAP/09a21850624b11ecb2fe9975f8a9e52e

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The sudden arrivals in mid-2021 resulted in an increased need for provision of support in reception. In July 2021, Lithuania had two permanent reception centres: the FRC in Pabradė, under the management of the SBGS, and the RRC in Rukla, under the management of the MoSSL. By the end of 2021, the country managed three additional permanent centres (FRC in Medininkai, FRC in Kybartai, and the RRC in Naujininkai) and had increased the capacity of the previously existing centres.

The agency began support on 26 July 2021, eleven days after the OP was signed. In the field of asylum, support was provided to the SBGS and the MD. Support in the area of reception was provided to the SBGS and extended to the RRC under the MoSSL with an amendment to the OP signed on 14 September 2021.

In the field of **asylum** (measure 1), the Agency result outcome aimed at contributing to an increase in registrations, interviews, and decisions. By June 2022, the majority of the 4,447 persons that arrived irregularly since 2021 via the border with Belarus applied for international protection. While most applications were processed, there remained about 1,000 asylum applications at various stages of the asylum procedure[9].

The Agency achieved most of its planned result outputs, which included a train-the-trainer session (100%), 73 remote interviews (100%) and the drafting of 69 opinions (101%). The COI helpdesk provided support with 30 COI products (27 COI queries and three other COI products) over the duration of the OP. Moreover, the Agency remotely supported 85 registrations (86 planned) and provided seven of the eight planned training sessions on asylum processing. A country guidance workshop on Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan was organised in December 2021, and a COI briefing session on Somalia and Iran took place in May and June 2022, respectively. The OP foresaw the organisation of info-sessions for 100 SBGS staff on access to the asylum procedure but these did not take place.

From December 2021 onwards, the Agency's support under asylum continued on interpretation, COI helpdesk support and training activities. The deployment of interpreters decreased progressively from 21 in September 2021 to five in January, one in February and one in March 2022.

In terms of asylum support (measure 1), the following training activities were delivered:
- A train-the-trainer session and a tailor-made session on Registration of Applications for International Protection, delivered to SBGS in 2021 and 2022, respectively;
- EUAA modules on Inclusion and Interview Techniques, delivered to MD personnel in 2021;
- EUAA modules on Evidence Assessment, delivered to MD personnel in 2022.

The overall average satisfaction rate[10] for the 2021 training activities on asylum reached 85%[11].

In the area of **reception** (measure 2), the Agency planned at result outcome level to support Lithuania with vulnerability procedures and information provision procedures in all five reception centres by

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[9] *Source:* Request for support letter, MoI and MoSSL Lithuania, 15 June 2022, ID-3278.
[10] The notion "satisfaction rates" represents the aggregated percentage of the highest two scores in the five-point Likert scale ("strongly *agree"* and *"agree")* reported in the training session feedback forms.
[11] Data for 2022 were not available at the time of writing.

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early 2022. In practice, it provided vulnerability and information provision support in three (60%) and four (80%) centres, respectively.

Selected deliverables in the field of reception included:
- Standard operating procedures (SOPs) for vulnerability pre-screening in collaboration with the SBGS (December 2021) and MoSSL (March 2022);
- Support for pre-screening procedures to the Naujininkai RRC (previously only in Pabradė FRC) for 150 residents (December 2021), which was extended to Medininkai FRC in April 2022;
- The preparation of a tailored guide on vulnerability (February 2022).

The Agency achieved the majority of its planned result outputs aimed at providing support with first-line reception training, development of workflows, procedures, tools, and exchange visits for the SBGS and MoSSL. For example, a session on the emergency assessment of special needs and vulnerabilities through available tools took place in September 2021. Until March 2022, 6,348 information desk activities (covering 1,277 distinct participants)[12] took place in the FRCs of Medininkai and Pabrade and the RRCs of Rukla and Naujininkai. In the same period, 996 vulnerability pre-screening activities took place in FRC Pabrade and RRC Naujininkai[13].

The following training activities were delivered on reception:
- Operational training on Communication and Information Provision to Asylum Seekers, delivered to SGBS (2021);
- Train-the-trainer sessions on reception-related topics (Reception and Management in the reception context), delivered to MoSSL senior officials (2021);
- Modules on Reception of Vulnerable Persons – Block A, delivered to MoSSL and SBGS personnel (2022);
- Three sessions on the module on Reception, delivered to MoSSL (2022).

The aggregated satisfaction rates[14] for the training delivered in 2021 reached 81%[15] and included the translation into Lithuanian of all requested modules. Additional training was provided under both measures to EUAA deployed staff and interpreters (e.g., module on Interpreting in an Asylum and Reception Context).

The Agency supported the design and planning of reception centres with the preparation of technical advice reports, overview reports of Member States' practices, and replies to technical queries.

During the period under review, Lithuania faced a significant influx of Ukrainian refugees following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By the end of March 2022, a total of 55,800 persons[16] had been registered by the national authorities. While support in this area was offered by the Agency, arrivals were channelled to a different procedure and housed in private facilities.

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[12] Internal monitoring documents.
[13] *Idem*. Data available until March; pre-screenings in Medininkai are therefore not included.
[14] Satisfaction rates represent the percentage of agree and strongly agree answers in the training session feedback forms, aggregating across questions about the session and combining the responses from different learners in a given session.
[15] Internal training plan data.
[16] https://www.diena.lt/naujienos/verslas/ekonomika/lietuvoje-idarbinta-115-tukst-ukrainos-pabegeliu-1081962

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4. Evaluation findings

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

Albeit beyond the scope of this evaluation, the OP was implemented in a geopolitical context involving the instrumentalisation of irregular migration that saw an unprecedented level of arrivals into Lithuania[17]. The OP 2021-2022 was part of the European Union's (EU) solidarity (emergency) support to Lithuania[18]. Other supporting agencies were the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol). Also, emergency funds from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund were granted with a budget of EUR 42 million[19]. Additional actors were United Nations agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Health Organisation and the International Organisation for Migration. Non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross and Doctors without Borders also provided support. The Agency contributed to external coherence by means of coordination meetings at varying levels. In the framework of the Blueprint Network, the European Commission (EC) ensured coherence at EU level by convening regular meetings including EC actors, EU agencies, the European External Action Service, and Member States bordering Belarus.

As described above, the Agency operated in a rapidly changing environment, where arrivals through Belarus decreased after an initial peak in the months of July and August 2021. The government took rapid actions to respond to the emergency situation. The Agency was able to quickly adjust to the changing needs which evolved from registration and asylum support to reception-related support.

As of October 2021, support in the field of asylum was redirected towards training and COI helpdesk support[20]. While the management of support in the field of asylum determination was organised quickly initially, it was affected by the following challenges:

- The urgency of the request for support was not conducive for the Agency to rapidly mobilise experienced case workers;
- Issues with remote support for interviews: poor internet connection (generally affecting remote interpreters), delays in the uploading of submitted documents and technical difficulties of remote interpretation;
- Divergent expectations between the Agency and the national counterparts on collaboration mechanisms:
  - discussions on SOPs affected productivity and were considered disproportionate in a context of high pressure on national staff;
  - differing perceptions of quality of asylum determination and productivity were similarly not conducive to a harmonised working approach, such as, contrasting points of view on asylum determination opinions that hampered the effectiveness of the Agency's support.

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[17] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_5867
[18] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2021-003882-ASW_EN.html
[19] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-001127-ASW_EN.html
[20] All registrations were stopped on 22 September 2021 as the backlog was cleared. By October 2021, all five caseworkers remained on standby. By 1 December, they were re-allocated to other operations.

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- divergent approaches that resulted from the different legal frameworks in which the two parties were operating, i.e., EUAA's operational support in line with the CEAS versus the Lithuanian authorities following the amended Law on the Legal Status of Aliens in view of the declared state of emergency.

The COI support was considered to be very useful, but in a context of short deadlines in an emergency situation, faster responsiveness (average about ten days response time exceeding the indicative deadlines given of five days) would have been even more instrumental for the national urgent needs.

The Agency managed to provide most of the planned support to reception related activities. The coordination function was efficient dealing with structural inefficiencies, such as:

- Deployment challenges: low nominations of Member State experts and limited possibilities for attracting available long-term external experts;
- Limitations of the interpretation contract (e.g., reopening of competition leading to delays and inefficiencies);
- Some national measures introduced in the emergency were raised as concerns by the Agency in several meetings conducted on a technical and higher level (between the Agency and the Lithuanian authorities) and also with the Commission (Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs) during the implementation of the OP[21]. Although beyond the scope of this evaluation, it should be noted that in June 2022, the Court of Justice of the European Union[22] held that EU law precludes Lithuanian legislation on limiting access to the asylum procedure and detention of asylum seekers (including vulnerable groups).

Much of the support involved the deployment of interpreters. This was often delivered through relay interpretation; a practice needed in view of the scarcity of Lithuanian-speaking interpreters[23]. This meant that an activity which would be more efficiently conducted by one interpreter required the simultaneous presence of two interpreters. This practice was likely affecting the efficiency and quality of the deliverables. In selected cases, some interpreters' skills were considered inadequate and led to the termination of their deployment.

The Agency provided vulnerability and information provision support in three and four of the five centres, respectively. The Agency's concerns with regard to national emergency practices limited the extent and type of reception support that was provided. Support actions on site management and

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[21] The meetings took place on 8 September 2021 (with the Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs) and 8 October 2021 (Between the Executive Director and the Lithuanian Minister for the Interior).

[22] The CJEU ruled under the urgent preliminary ruling procedure, that the recast Asylum Procedures Directive precludes legislation that precludes access to the procedure for examining an application for international protection to illegally staying third-country nationals in the event of a declaration of the state of war or the state of emergency or in the event of a declaration of an emergency situation due to a mass influx of foreigners. Moreover, the CJEU held that the recast Asylum Reception Conditions Directive precludes legislation under which, in the case of such a declaration or proclamation, an asylum seeker may be detained on the sole ground that he/she is staying illegally. Refer to https://caselaw.euaa.europa.eu/pages/viewcaselaw.aspx?CaseLawID=2597&returnurl=/pages/searchresults.aspx and https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:62022CJ0072&from=en

[23] Interpretation from the applicants' languages to English was succeeded by interpretation from English to Lithuanian and vice versa.

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information provision, for example, were not implemented in all reception centres as originally planned.

The implementation of the OP during the COVID-19[24] pandemic also led to inefficiencies and limitations as many human resources were involved. The Agency was flexible in providing remote support where possible.

As seen in Table 1, the intervention was relatively cost-efficient. The first measure implemented less support than initially foreseen but also consumed 72% of the planned budget. The second measure achieved most of the deliverables (involving the majority of the reception centres) with about 64% of the planned budget.

There is a fair consumption of other OP direct costs which included expert and interim staff, related mission costs, training costs and equipment. The budget however does not include the different Agency staff involved in the coordination, management, and support to the Lithuania operations. While there is no exhaustive full-time equivalent estimation of the involved human resources, it may be assumed that overhead and indirect costs were substantial in view of the start-up context and the overall financial value of the intervention.

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

Result Outcome	Planned budget	Estimated consumption	Estimated consumption rate
Measure 1 (Asylum)	€ 540,409	€ 388,706	72%
Measure 2 (Reception)	€ 2,949,347	€ 1,888,688	64%
Other OP direct costs	€ 527,954	€ 463,446	88%
Total OP budget	€ 4,017,710	€ 2,740,840	68%

Source: internal financial monitoring

Targeted questions:

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

Lithuania requested the support of the Agency on 15 June 2021. Following the implementation of a rapid needs assessment, the OP was signed on 15 July 2021. Reception support began on 27 July with the deployment of Agency personnel in both Pabradė and Medininkai. The Agency supported registrations and interviews remotely respectively as of 10 and 12 August 2021. It delivered three training modules to caseworkers of the MD, as well as a study visit for Lithuanian officials to the Netherlands and Greece by the end of August. By September, reception support extended to Rukla and Naujininkai (Vilnius) and the vulnerability pre-screening procedure was piloted in Pabradė. On 14 September 2021, an amendment to the OP was signed to extend the support to the MoSSL.

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[24] Coronavirus disease 2019.

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In this context, the Agency responded quickly to the request for support. This was partially due to the reassignment of operational staff from the Greece, Italy and Malta operations to step in rapidly. A March 2022 survey in the field of reception confirmed this perception by responding authorities[25]. More details on efficiency are provided above.

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

The OP for Lithuania was able to benefit from existing staff and contracts covering other operations (Greece, Italy and Malta). While there is no one size fits all approach, the Agency needs to ensure a number of minimum elements. These include existing good practices such as:

- Budget: before committing to specific inputs in an OP, a costing needs to be made and the budget should be made available under a dedicated budget line;
- Human resources:
  - A longer-term, single point of contact as coordinator;
  - Supported by a multidisciplinary team:
    - Staff appointed to ensure financial and contractual workflows;
    - Planning, monitoring and reporting staff;
    - Security and information technology (IT) support;
    - Field officers to ensure presence and local coordination;
    - Focal points in the relevant Agency centres for stand-by support;
  - 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 flexible provision of IT and related hardware;
  - Security clearance for occupational safety and health purposes.

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 Lithuania was set up as part of the FRS of the FORU. This responsibility for OP management was transferred to the EUOS in April 2022.

The experience highlighted the need to ensure a number of conditions prior to the transfer. These include:

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[25] Feedback collected from SBGS and RRC on the support on reception by means of a survey. *Source:* internal monitoring documents.

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- 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. In practice, therefore, at the time of the evaluation (June 2022), FRS staff was still ensuring local coordination and support in a hybrid collaborative setting with EUOS;
- Proportional and harmonised working approaches and workflows (e.g., monitoring, reporting, administrative and financial 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. In this context, the current OP demonstrated that the Agency's operational support can be of benefit to Member States across the EU.

With regards to the asylum measure, the Agency supported the authorities with training of new staff and COI know-how. This support will likely be continued under the Agency's permanent support, albeit under different modalities. The Agency had a more limited qualitative and quantitative contribution to registration and asylum determination.

The support was of higher added value in the field of reception, where the Agency was able to support the national counterparts on the job with technical expertise on vulnerability assessments, reception planning, information provision and capacity building (training). The constructive collaboration is likely to contribute to future initiatives such as the planned reception reform, albeit depending on a number of policy uncertainties. Mindful of the limited mandate of the Agency and the context at hand, this support was provided at practitioners' but not policy level.

An end-of-measure survey collected feedback from SBGS and RRC staff. Respondents reported high satisfaction (63%) and satisfaction (38%) with the overall cooperation and provision of reception support[26].

4.3.   Is the action relevant?

The request for support from the authorities in 2021 included the following areas:

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[26] Internal monitoring documents.

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- Provision of interpretation services, potentially with remote setting, in the framework of both asylum, security and reception procedures;
- Determination of dialects and countries of origin;
- Remote casework support, mainly for carrying out interviews, transcriptions, and initial assessments on asylum applications;
- Training/capacity building/good practice sharing/expertise on core areas of asylum (inclusion, interview techniques, evidence assessment).

The rapid needs assessment qualified the evolution of the migratory trends as "particular pressure on the asylum and reception system" in line with Article 8 of the Founding Regulation of the European Asylum Support Office[27]. While the migration system was under pressure, it seems in retrospect that the Agency's needs assessment did not fully anticipate important changes impacting asylum support.

The changing emergency context resulted in frequent re-adjustments. When migration inflows reduced, the Agency discontinued its support to backlog management on registrations and interviews in September and October 2021, respectively.

The need for the Agency's support was particularly relevant in the field of reception, where the new reception centres and staff required support for information provision, interpretation, training and vulnerability screening. While not captured in the initial rapid needs assessment, the evolving role of the MoSSL was included in the OP in September 2021 by means of an addendum.

5. Conclusions, lessons learnt and recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

The Agency has supported Lithuania in a context of disproportionate migratory pressure. The country was in need of support for asylum and reception procedures, interpretation, COI, and training for its new staff. The presence of the Agency, together with other EU agencies contributed to the EU-wide solidarity approach in the country. The response was rapid as the operation was able to benefit from resources from other Agency operations. However, at the practical level, diverging working approaches, administrative processes ("red tape") and challenges with human resources limited the delivery of efficient asylum related deliverables.

The Agency was successful in its support to reception-related outputs, which were highly needed in view of the pressure of new arrivals. Selected reception centres benefitted from effective support in the field of interpretation, information provision, vulnerability assessment and flexible capacity building (training). Field support presence enhanced practical cooperation and contributed to influencing practitioners' perspectives towards institutional reform of reception management in the country. The efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation was challenged by limitations of interpretation contracts, relay interpretation, the COVID-19 pandemic and mandate-related questions

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[27] Regulation (EU) No 439/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 May 2010 establishing a European Asylum Support Office, (OJ L 132, 29.5.2010, p.11).

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resulting from the national state of emergency framework[28]. The Agency was able to successfully pool its technical expertise by enhancing cross-Agency collaboration.

Table 2. Evaluation criteria by measure[29]

	Asylum Measure 1	Reception Measure 2
Relevance	Good	Very good
Effectiveness	Fair/Good	Very good
Efficiency	Fair	Good
Coherence	Fair/Good	Good
EU added value	Fair/Good	Very good

While being mindful of the limited scope of this evaluation, there are a number of horizontal considerations of interest to the Agency at large.

The current OP has many deliverables through interpretation support. The Agency should explore if interpretation (now stronger 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 cooperation with Lithuania includes different types of support (such as emergency, longer-term, and permanent) the Agency can provide to the Member States. The Agency should strategically consider their articulation and complementarity to become more efficient and fit-for purpose.

OP support is comprehensive in nature and therefore, the Agency should strategically prioritise depth versus outreach in an evidence-based manner. Special attention should also be paid to possible risks before intervening.

With the organisational reform, the Agency has an opportunity to make emergency support (delivered through pilot OPs) administratively lighter, timely and concise (by cutting "red tape").

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. Some fields, such as COI, may have important potential for the provision of added value expert support services to member states.

The Agency should consider enhancing transition dynamics, in favour of justifications towards permanent support. In this context, the cross-Agency needs assessments should be more explicit in providing evidence for alternatives to the OP cooperation modality.

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[28] The following activities in the area of reception were modified to ensure EUAA compliance with the CEAS: support to site management was suspended in September 2021, information provision on asylum procedure was not delivered, and support to the Kybartai Foreigners' Registration Centre was limited to interpretation provision.

[29] 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.

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5.2. Good practices and lessons learnt

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) A strong project management strategy and tools implemented from the start and complemented by a comprehensive reporting and monitoring mechanism and adequate templates;
   c) Regular meetings with the SBGS (monthly) in the first period of implementation;
   d) Strong internal collaboration with other EUAA country operations, centres and sectors;
   e) Granting partner country staff access to the COI helpdesk function operated by the Agency (by the Asylum Knowledge Centre (C3) in collaboration with C1) instead of creating a new Lithuania-specific COI helpdesk. Ongoing plans to further pool resources to enhance COI support are promising;
   f) Flexibility of the Agency (through the Training and Professional Development Centre (C2)) to accommodate the frequently amended needs; training was delivered in both English and Lithuanian, allowing for larger participation.

2. The **presence of Agency staff** in the different reception facilities allowed close collaboration on the job with the local counterparts.

3. 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.

4. The "**workflow guide**" aimed at preparing Agency staff prior to taking up duty promoted efficiency and harmonisation of working processes.

5. FORU is preparing promising work such as:
   a) a "catalogue of services" which will clarify to the authorities the types of support that can be provided;
   b) in collaboration with centre C4, an assessment of good practices from other EU and international agencies for the rapid procurement of emergency-related services.

6. The early establishment and implementation of a **reporting framework**, including operational data collection and guidelines ensured that reporting and monitoring was robust from the first week of implementation.

7. On interpretation:
   a) Some interpreters were competent in multiple languages which led to efficiency gains.

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b) Preparedness to provide remote interpretation and ensure continuity of work when face-to-face support could not be provided due to COVID-19 restrictions. This also had environmental advantages.

8. The Agency's training activities in Lithuania embed **co-presenting contributions** by representatives of national authorities enhancing ownership and learning.

9. The **cross-Agency collaboration** around the OP was very good, in particular between the centres C1, C2 and C3, starting with the needs assessment and involving smooth collaboration and consultation during the implementation, in particular in the field of reception. The collaboration between the different C1 operational offices that stepped in, and shared resources was also instrumental. Plans to embed C4 staff (beyond security and IT) further in the operational country offices is also a promising perspective.

The internal transition review also highlighted a number of **challenges**. **External** challenges included the emergency context and the availability of dedicated staff in reception centres and the COVID-19 pandemic leading to quarantine measures and staff turnover. **Internal** challenges were administrative in nature and related to deployment of good-quality interpreters, dedicated working space and achieving realistic deliverables in reception. In asylum, the deployed asylum support team had limited experience and availability for the processing of asylum applications and diverging expectations around SOPs creating additional workload. The colleagues also reported challenges around limited infrastructure for remote interviews, internet connection, finding interpreters with Lithuanian as a relay language and the translation requirements for reports.

5.3. Recommendations

This evaluation puts forward recommendations building on findings and inputs from the different interviewed stakeholders.

1. Implement the **proposed recommendations of the transition exercise**, including:
   a) Human resources:
      i) Ensure a core stable team able to remain through the entire duration of the OP, which could be complemented by Member State experts or other experts;
      ii) Provide training to interpreters who are new to the context;
      iii) Ensure that deliverables of staff are established before deployment;
   b) Reporting workflows: merging field tools with reporting tools;
   c) Planning:
      i) Realistic planning regarding deployment of personnel and implementation of activities and training;
      ii) A training plan to ensure the availability of trainers, trainees and possibly translation of the material;
   d) Ensure coordination meetings to receive feedback timely and be able to discuss complex cases and different practices.

2. Ensure **minimum conditions** before committing **to new operational plans** and document these minimum elements in a practical tool:

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a) Inputs:
   i) Embed a check together with centre C4 on the main essential input elements such as budget, human resources, office space, IT support, logistics, legal aspects (where relevant), governance matters and contractual space;
   ii) Align the findings from the needs assessment with realistic OP preconditions and planning assumptions;

b) Timing: Foresee an inception period in planning and minimum duration OPs. The length of an OP also discourages contractual arrangements (e.g., attracting human resources or renting office spaces);
   i) Processes: apply light and simple collaborative processes under a pilot inception phase (to seek aligned approaches before committing to more detailed SOPs, plans and reporting);
   ii) Ensure that support staff tasks are shared with authorities;

c) "Starter packages": building on good practices with the Information and Communications Technology Unit, enhance preparedness by designing starter packages in the different intervention fields.

3. Apply **proportionality, diligence and a phased approach** when implementing operations:
a) Ensure that the mobilisation of resources is proportional to the size of the intervention;
b) Carefully balance simplified planning, monitoring, reporting and working processes with the Agency's minimum harmonised practices (as per user guides);
c) Clarify when the inception phase of an OP ends (relevant for target setting and accountability);
d) In line with Articles 16(2) and 18(6) of the EUAA Regulation, the support measures should be undertaken in a manner that fully respects fundamental rights: the Agency should ensure it has a documented escalation mechanism in place to guide its response should it consider to suspend or terminate its support, in whole or in part; in this context, the relevant Agency workflows will need to be updated to take into account, *inter alia*, the tasks of the Fundamental Rights Officer, including their observations on evaluation reports (Article 16(4) of EUAA Regulation);
e) When transferring the OP between sectors, ensure preconditions such as the availability of dedicated intervention teams and clarity on workflows and reporting practices.

4. In a national context under a state of emergency where the national focus is on processing cases quickly, there is need for **flexible training solutions and learning paths**, in close collaboration with the national authorities:
a) Include this in the training component of the needs assessment and the OP;
b) Enhance the communication to authorities on the training options the Agency offers;
c) Promote a flexible and mutually agreed and co-owned training plan, with the centre C2.

5. Enhance **interpretation support approaches.** The Agency should consider the following:
a) Prepare gradual phasing-out of interpretation support, e.g., by exploring the transfer to existing or new interpretation framework contracts managed by national stakeholders;
b) When providing remote interpretation, ensure preparedness of the interpreters with the context and mitigate possible technical difficulties;
c) Limit as much as possible relay interpretation practices;
d) Adapt the interpretation contracts to time-bound operational realities and needs.

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Annex 1: Methodology and analytical models used

The aim of the exercise was to answer the following evaluation questions.

Criteria	Questions to be answered
Relevance	Was the action adapted to the capacities of the partner government? How well has the action been able to respond to the stakeholders' needs? Did all key stakeholders demonstrate effective commitment (ownership)?
Effectiveness	Can the observed results be accredited to the operation? Was the progress of each result conforming to plan (both quality and quantity)? Were there other (unexpected) factors that influenced the results?
Efficiency	To what extent are the costs of the support justified given the results? *Targeted questions:* • 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?
EU Added value	What is the added value resulting from the EUAA's operation, compared to what could have been expected from Lithuania acting at national level? What would be the most likely consequences of withdrawing operations from Lithuania?

The evaluation took into account good practices and lessons learnt, while considering the possible challenges relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Special attention was paid to good practices and lessons learned in the setting up of the first response operation, with a focus on replicability. Elements such as environmental and social impacts were not addressed as a priority

The evaluation triangulated information from a number of sources, including interviews, internal reporting and monitoring documentation, and publicly available data sources. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders were conducted. The evaluation team undertook a short mission to Vilnius and Medininkai from 13 to 14 June 2022 to carry out face-to-face interviews and better understand the situation on the ground through direct observation.

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Annex 2: Evaluation matrix

Evaluation criteria	Operationalised questions	Interviews (individual/ group)	Desk review	Direct observation
Relevance	How well has the action been able to respond to the stakeholders' needs?	X	X	
	Was the action adapted to the capacities of the partner stakeholders?	X		
	Did all key stakeholders demonstrate effective commitment (ownership)?	X		X
Effectiveness	Was the progress of each result conforming to plan (both quality and quantity)?	X	X	X
	Can the observed results be accredited to the operation?	X		X
	Were there other (unexpected) factors that influenced the results?	X		X
Efficiency	To what extent are the resources of the support justified given the results?	X	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	X
	Targeted question: What parameters are needed for the transition of OPs from the 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 Lithuania acting at national level?	X	X	X

Evaluation criteria	Operationalised questions	Interviews (individual/ group)	Desk review	Direct observation
	What would be the most likely consequences of withdrawing operations from Lithuania?	X	X	X

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Annex 3: Intervention logic

Needs/problems	Expected objectives
Sudden rapid increase of irregular arrivals and international protection (IP) applications; significant pressures on the reception system.	Support following request of Lithuania 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

1. Improved effectiveness and efficiency of access to asylum procedures for IP applicants and in processing of asylum applications are improved;

2. Improved effectiveness and efficiency in managing reception facilities.

Result outputs

1.0 Enhanced capacity to register IP applications;

1.1 Enhanced capacity to process asylum applications at first instance;

2.0 Enhanced capacity to manage reception facilities;

2.1 Enhanced capacity to manage dedicated reception facilities for vulnerable asylum seekers.

Activities

Provide support for:

Registrations for IP, interviews and drafting of opinions, COI support, tools and training;

Managing first line reception (e.g., site management, information provision and vulnerability);

Strengthening workflows and procedures (e.g., tools);

Reception-related training, exchange visits in other Member States and technical expertise.

Inputs

Financial resources; human resources (caseworkers, team leaders, site management assistants, information providers, reception assistants, interpreters/cultural mediators);

Material resources (including communication materials, infrastructure items, IT equipment, office supplies).

External factors

Migratory emergency context; European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs perspectives, national and international laws, policies and practices; availability of financial and human resources; COVID-19 pandemic; actions by national counterparts and international organisations and civil organisations.

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