



# Bulgaria operational plan 2022-2023

## Ex post evaluation report

Prepared by the EUAA's Quality Management and Evaluation Sector

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## Acronyms and definitions

Term	Definition
<b>AMIF</b>	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
<b>CEAS</b>	Common European Asylum System
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUAA</b>	European Union Agency for Asylum
<b>FORU</b>	First Operational Response Unit
<b>IPSN tool</b>	Tool for the identification of persons with special needs
<b>OP</b>	Operational plan
<b>OTAU</b>	Operational and Technical Assistance Unit
<b>SAR</b>	State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers (of Bulgaria)
<b>SSP</b>	Special support plan
<b>TP</b>	Temporary protection
<b>TPD</b>	Temporary Protection Directive
<b>UAMs</b>	Unaccompanied minors



## Executive summary

During 2021-2022, Bulgaria faced an influx of asylum and temporary protection seekers, which strained the country's response capacities. To address this, Bulgaria and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA or the Agency) signed an operational plan (OP), which ran from September 2022 to June 2023. The evaluation of this OP took place between April and July 2023 and assessed its effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and European Union added value.

Despite its short duration, the OP included numerous planned activities and outputs, making it ambitious. It initially focused on enhancing the Bulgarian authorities' capacity to implement the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) and the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Following an amendment, two measures were added to support reception and asylum processing. The intended results were relevant, with the exception of temporary protection (TP) activities which became redundant over time. The Agency tailored activities to specific needs, delivering training sessions, interpretation support, workshops, and a study visit. The provision of interpretation and training in Bulgarian were particularly appreciated by national counterparts.

Coordination of the OP faced efficiency challenges due to internal delays, limited capacity, language barriers, and national contextual changes. The deployment of external experts was particularly arduous due to a shortage of candidates proficient in Bulgarian. As a result, some activities could not be achieved by the end of the OP. Many aspects improved in comparison with the findings of the evaluation of the previous collaboration under the special support plan (SSP) running from 2015 to 2018. Simultaneously, some recommendations relating to internal planning, coordination, and resource allocation remain.

During its implementation, different Agency actors and national counterparts collaborated in a coherent way. From a wider EU perspective, the OP was timely in view of the enhanced efforts for Bulgaria to access the Schengen zone encompassing comprehensive migration management. Despite this, the OP's added value to Bulgaria's TP, asylum, and reception systems remained limited at varying degrees. The evaluation highlights that a longer-term presence is expected to bring additional benefits to Bulgaria.

The following recommendations are made:

1. Establish a **better coherence between the OP and its results framework** and ensure that it is accompanied by proportionate **monitoring practices at the required frequency**. This will allow for evidence-based decision making and enable future evaluations to better assess effectiveness;
2. Pursue **multiplier effects and leverage** through collaboration with Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF)-supported projects and multiple non-governmental organisations and international organisations on the ground. This includes reception of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) and training;
3. Establish **long-term, in-country presence of statutory staff** to coordinate the support provided;
4. Proactively reach out to the Bulgarian labour market to **advertise and promote calls for expression of interest in expert positions** capitalising on the multiple actors on the ground.



## 1. Introduction: purpose and scope

During 2021-2022, Bulgaria experienced a significant increase in arrivals of third-country nationals and asylum applications. In early 2022, the number of displaced persons from Ukraine generated additional pressure on the country's accommodation capacities. In response to this situation, Bulgaria and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) signed an operational plan (OP) which ran from 2 September 2022 until 30 June 2023, following an amendment in December 2022.

The main objective of this evaluation was to assess the results of the operational measures of the Agency's support to Bulgaria. To ensure proportionality with the actions undertaken, this evaluation was conducted internally and assessed five evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and added value; see Annex 1) in a balanced manner. The evaluation took place between April and July 2023 and was carried out by the Quality Management and Evaluation Sector in the Business Support and Security Unit of the Agency's Institutional and Horizontal Affairs Centre.

Multiple Agency actors were involved in the implementation of the OP. The coordination of these efforts was initiated by staff in the First Response Sector within the First Operational Response Unit (FORU) of the Operational Support Centre. As of March 2023, this responsibility was transferred to staff in the Operational and Technical Assistance Unit (OTAU) of the same centre.

This evaluation has multiple limitations. Its scope was limited to the operational measures as defined in the OP, which was short in duration and focused on the setting up of the cooperation. The results framework included a limited number of indicators and incorporated targets only as of March 2023. This challenged the assessment of the OP's effectiveness. The findings relied mainly on interviewees' perceptions and internal and secondary data, as direct observation was factored out in view of the short-term presence and action in-country.

## 2. Intended results of the action

This chapter describes the intended results under the OP and the situation before the intervention as points of comparison.

### 2.1. Description of the action and its intended results

The OP initially included one measure which had the aim of enhancing the capacity of the Bulgarian authorities to effectively implement the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) and the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). It comprised three result outputs, namely, to support:

1. implementation of procedures and activities regarding temporary protection (TP);
2. training and professional development, and
3. the administrative capacity of national authorities in the field of digitalisation.



Following the amendment of the OP, two measures were added to enhance the capacity of the Bulgarian authorities in reception and asylum respectively. The amended OP included the following results:

**Measure 1: Temporary protection support**

*Result outcome:* Enhanced capacity of the Bulgarian authorities to effectively implement the TPD and the CEAS.

The measure foresaw the provision of information material for beneficiaries of temporary protection and training and workshops on topics relevant to TP, as well as additional support in TPD-related activities.

**Measure 2: Reception support**

*Result outcome:* Enhanced capacity of Bulgarian authorities to provide first-line reception in the supported facilities.

This measure included information provision to international protection applicants, by means of the development of agreed content and training on reception. In addition, it foresaw support for the design and/or implementation of reception-related activities, including for unaccompanied children.

**Measure 3: Asylum support**

*Result outcome:* Enhanced capacity of Bulgarian authorities to process asylum applications.

This measure foresaw support in registration by means of enhancing the quality assurance mechanism at first instance and the provision of interpretation and information to applicants of international protection. It also foresaw support in capacity building of the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) via the rollout at national level of EUAA training and other relevant professional development activities, the development of a national pool of trainers, and organising a study visit on the digitalisation of case file management systems and mapping national practices.

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

## 2.2. Points of comparison

The Agency first supported Bulgaria between 2015 and 2018 with a special support plan (SSP)<sup>1</sup>. Its measures covered the following priority areas:

- compliance with the EU acquis;
- practical application of quality tools;
- identification and referral of vulnerable groups;
- reception and social activities;
- capacity building in country of origin information ;
- development of practical tools for interpreters and remote interpretation;

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<sup>1</sup> EUAA archive of operations, Bulgaria. Source: [https://euaa.europa.eu/archive-of-operations?field\\_operation\\_year\\_value=All&field\\_member\\_state\\_value=Bulgaria&field\\_operation\\_type\\_value=All](https://euaa.europa.eu/archive-of-operations?field_operation_year_value=All&field_member_state_value=Bulgaria&field_operation_type_value=All)



- support with contingency planning and with external funds.

The collaboration led to more than 100 national participations in 20 training sessions, the delivery of the tool for identification of persons with special needs (IPSN), and professional development of staff in reception and the country of origin information unit.

The evaluation of the SSP found that a stronger presence of the Agency in Bulgaria could have positively contributed to the achievement of intended results and facilitated liaison between the Agency and the SAR. The evaluation recommended that the operation take a more strategic, flexible, results-oriented, and sustainable approach, with measure-based costing and improved internal knowledge management systems (data gathering, analysis, and reporting), monitoring, and evaluation. It also proposed that the Agency ensures sufficient internal contingency planning, allocation of resources, and internal coordination, as well as an adequate presence in Bulgaria. Finally, it recommended an enhanced design of capacity-building programmes and the establishment of an evaluative approach to assess learning and needs. However, there was no continued follow-up to these recommendations as the SSP ended at the time of the evaluation.

In the period 2017-2020, the number of asylum applications averaged under 3 000 per year<sup>2</sup>. This allowed the Bulgarian authorities to keep the volume of pending cases at first instance relatively stable. In 2021, the number of applications for international protection tripled, reaching 11 000. In the first half of 2022, close to 9 000 applications were lodged resulting in a backlog of more than 10 000 pending cases at the end of June 2022. This increase in asylum requests since 2021 coupled with the influx of displaced persons from Ukraine in February 2022 substantially challenged Bulgaria's asylum and reception systems. In March 2022, Bulgaria started registering applications for TP. During the first month, there were around 2 000 beneficiaries of TP daily. The numbers declined with time but remained high (600 daily registrations in May and 200 from June onwards). More than 130 000 persons had registered for TP by the end of August 2022<sup>3</sup>.

The reception system in Bulgaria comprises three registration and reception centres in Sofia (in three locations), Banya, and Harmanli, and a transit centre in Pastrogor. Initially, the reported total capacity of these facilities was 5 130 places, but the SAR revised it to 4 126 places in mid-2022<sup>4</sup>. The occupancy rate at the national level increased from 18 % in March 2021 to 49 % in May 2022, with the majority of residents in reception facilities being Syrians and Afghans. In 2021, 29 % of asylum applications were lodged by unaccompanied minors (UAMs) – the highest share in the EU<sup>5</sup>. This number increased significantly, with more than 3 000 UAMs in accommodations since 2021. This challenged the reception capacity of the two existing safe zones in Sofia. The International Organisation for Migration is an important partner of the SAR, implementing projects in these safe zones<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Eurostat. Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR\\_ASYAPPCTZA/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYAPPCTZA/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat. Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR\\_ASYTPSM\\_custom\\_6226931/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYTPSM_custom_6226931/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>4</sup> Information disclosed by the Bulgarian authorities in their letter of request for support by the EUAA.

<sup>5</sup> EUAA, data on unaccompanied minors, Asylum Report 2022. Source: <https://euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2022/561-data-unaccompanied-minors>

<sup>6</sup> International Organisation for Migration, ongoing projects. Source: <https://bulgaria.iom.int/ongoing-projects>



With a view to increasing its readiness to implement the TPD and the CEAS, Bulgaria requested the support of the Agency in May 2022. The Agency conducted a rapid needs assessment in June 2022 to identify the needs of the Member State in TP, asylum, and reception. The assessment confirmed the needs expressed by Bulgaria in the respective three areas. It underlined the importance of prioritising information provision to TP beneficiaries, TPD-related activities, and capacity building. In the time preceding the OP, i.e., January 2020 to August 2022, there were 51 participations in EUAA training modules, including five in TP.

The first OP was signed in September 2022 and lasted until the end of the year. In December 2022, in a context of continued pressure and at the request of Bulgaria, the OP was extended to the end of June 2023. The Agency reassessed the needs and proposed the inclusion of two additional results, relating to respectively the provision of first-line reception in the supported facilities and the processing of asylum applications.

### 3. Implementation of the action: current state of play

This chapter describes how the situation in Bulgaria evolved during the implementation of the OP and gives an overview of the main results achieved by the Agency.

The OP had a total duration of ten months and was in effect from 2 September 2022 to 30 June 2023. The main partner of the Agency in Bulgaria has been the SAR (at the Council of Ministers). It is the authority responsible for the processing of applications for international protection and holds executive and financial responsibility over reception facilities<sup>7</sup>. Within a month from the signature of the OP, the Agency deployed a field coordinator and a field support officer at the SAR headquarters in Sofia who undertook field visits in the other supported locations.

The backlog of pending asylum applications for international protection, which was 7 770 in August 2022, steadily increased to around 11 200 at the end of the year<sup>8</sup>. In total, more than 20 000 applications were submitted in 2022 – a record number of applications Bulgaria received in a year. By the end of 2022, more than 147 000 beneficiaries of TP had been registered in Bulgaria, which was the fifth highest among EU Member States<sup>9</sup>.

The initial four-month OP consisted of one measure with three outputs but without targets (see Annex 3). Under output 1.1, the Agency adapted its vulnerability screening tool to assist the SAR in screening vulnerable Ukrainians. The foreseen deployment of two vulnerability experts did not materialise. Under output 1.2, the Agency developed an information leaflet in Bulgarian to support TP procedures for further dissemination to SAR offices. Five training sessions were foreseen in the Agency's training plan, three of which (or 60 %) were delivered between October and November 2022. These were a webinar on TP policy and legal framework, and two face-to-face sessions on Communication and

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<sup>7</sup> OP 2022, EUAA and Bulgaria. Source: [https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/BG\\_OP\\_2022\\_0.pdf](https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/BG_OP_2022_0.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> This concerns cases at all instances. Eurostat. Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00190/default/table?lang=en>

<sup>9</sup> After Germany, Poland, Czechia, and Spain. Eurostat. Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR\\_ASYTPSM\\_custom\\_6268343/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYTPSM_custom_6268343/default/table?lang=en)





information provision, and Communication with specific audiences (children, survivors of traumatic events). 29 individuals participated in these sessions, representing 47 participations in total. The remaining training activities (i.e., on Age assessment and Conflict management) were postponed to 2023. Under output 1.3, a preliminary assessment was undertaken to support the SAR with the digitalisation of file management for Dublin procedures. This resulted in the drafting of an action plan in December 2022, but no further progress was reported.

Since early 2023, at the time of implementation of the OP amendment, Bulgaria experienced a reduction of border crossings in parallel with enhanced border monitoring<sup>10</sup>. The backlog of applications for international protection stood at 11 500 in January 2023 and steadily decreased to 10 500 by April 2023<sup>11</sup>. By June 2023, some 10 000 beneficiaries of TP were registered<sup>12</sup>. In late 2022, the new SAR management disclosed that the capacity of reception centres was up to 3 900 places. This number was lower than in previous years after the closing of unsuitable places to house applicants<sup>13</sup>. At the end of March 2023, around 1 600 persons were living in reception sites, a quarter of whom had been granted protection<sup>14</sup>. During the period of implementation of the OP, more than 2 200 UAMs applied for asylum in Bulgaria<sup>15</sup>.

Within the Agency, there was a gradual handover of the operation from FORU to personnel in the Greece Sector in OTAU. This was formalised at a workshop held on 13 February 2023. Field support continued until the end of the OP. As of the handover, the Agency deprioritised its support to measure 1 (TP) and focused its efforts on reception and asylum matters (measures 2 and 3 respectively). No deliverables were foreseen<sup>16</sup> or achieved under measure 1.

In the field of reception (measure 2), in March 2023, the Agency deployed 11 interpreters, including a coordinator, in five reception sites (of the six planned<sup>17</sup>). As of April 2023, all six sites were supported with interpretation. The interpreters were deployed under measure 2 but also supported in activities related to asylum such as registration, information provision, and interviewing. In April and June 2023, the Agency conducted the two planned face-to-face training sessions on Conflict management and Age assessment<sup>18</sup>. The latter was a horizontal training with participants from different measures and was delivered twice: in Sofia and Harmanli. 25 individuals participated in the sessions. The overall satisfaction rate for these training activities was 100 %.

In the area of asylum (measure 3), the amended OP foresaw the organisation of two workshops and a study visit. Four workshops were delivered in total. In April and May 2023, a few Bulgarian stakeholders

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<sup>10</sup> Infomigrants.net, 21 March 2023, Source: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/47634/eu-helps-bulgaria-and-romania-to-protect-borders-against-migrants>

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat. Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00190/default/table?lang=en>

<sup>12</sup> Eurostat. Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR\\_ASYTPFM/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYTPFM/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>13</sup> Asylum Information Database Country Report: Bulgaria. Source: [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AIDA-BG\\_2022update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AIDA-BG_2022update.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Internal operational monitoring.

<sup>15</sup> Eurostat. Source:

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR\\_ASYUMACTM\\_custom\\_6875193/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYUMACTM_custom_6875193/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>16</sup> The results framework was revised to reflect the results foreseen in the amended OP in 2023 and did not include indicators for measure 1 (TP).

<sup>17</sup> These were: Voenna Rampa, Ovcha Kupel, Vrazhdebna (in Sofia); Banya; Harmanli; and transit centre Pastrogor.

<sup>18</sup> These were foreseen in the Agency's training plan and were postponed.



participated in two joint online workshops (with other Member States) on the quality assurance tool and guidance on military service. Two additional workshops were delivered in May on country guidance (Syria and Afghanistan). The study visit took place in the third week of June 2023 in Greece and focused on digitalisation of case file management<sup>19</sup>. No progress was reported on any of the remaining deliverables of measure 3. For instance, under the activity relating to the development of a national pool of trainers, four sessions<sup>20</sup> were organised by the Agency at EU+ country level but no SAR participation was registered. The OP foresaw the deployment of up to four asylum and four reception experts in 2023<sup>21</sup>. Just one of these eight deployments (13 %) materialised a few weeks before the end of the OP.

## 4. Evaluation findings

Building on the above, this chapter provides an analysis on the evaluation questions. It triangulates evidence from different data sources such as desk research, interviews, and focus group discussions.

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

Despite its short duration, the OP included a significant number of intended inputs and outputs. This discrepancy between planned deliverables and duration rendered both the OP and its amendment ambitious. Nonetheless, in terms of **effectiveness**, the Agency delivered several intended outputs during the ten-month implementation period.

During the four-month inception period (September-December 2022), the main achievements concerned capacity building of the national counterparts (output 1.2). The three training sessions achieved fair participation (29 individuals; 85 % of those enrolled) and high satisfaction rates (96 %). The other planned activities (under outputs 1.1 and 1.2), namely the IPSN tool and the information leaflet for TP, were reported to have limited uptake due to timing challenges. In this period, there was limited progress on the planned work on digitalisation (output 1.3).

Following the OP amendment, the Agency prioritised certain activities and deprioritised measure 1. The revised results framework included four output indicators namely referring to the provision of two training sessions and interpretation to six reception sites (measure 2), and two workshops and one study visit (measure 3). From this perspective, all results were achieved. The training that was delivered was adequate and fit-for-purpose: all sessions were supported by interpretation to accommodate national field staff. The Agency was successful in providing interpretation by deploying 11 interpreters (of the 12 planned, or 92 %) to six reception facilities from April 2023 onwards. They primarily supported the registration of asylum seekers, information provision, and camp management in procedural aspects. However, quantitative data on the cases supported by interpretation was not collected, which does not allow for an assessment of the extent of the support provided. The study

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<sup>19</sup> Greek counterparts showcased the use of an updated IT tool for case management ('Alkyoni 2') focusing on the strategic benefits it can bring to the Bulgarian system.

<sup>20</sup> These were: becoming an EUAA trainer and assessor, evidence assessment, inclusion, and asylum interviewing methods.

<sup>21</sup> Under measure 2: two reception experts and two experts in respectively information provision and child protection. Under measure 3: four experts in respectively: asylum quality assurance, vulnerability, registration, and information provision.



visit on digitalisation and the two online workshops, i.e., on the quality assurance tool and guidance on military service, were delivered. The remote nature of the workshops led to lower-than-expected participation, raising concerns about their effectiveness.

However, the OP included many more activities than those reflected in the results framework (see Annex 3). Several of these (e.g., support to activities related to information provision, reception (including UAMs), vulnerability, and registration) were not achieved mainly due to the Agency's inability to deploy experts on time (see below). One of the eight planned experts was deployed just before the end of the OP<sup>22</sup>.

The Agency managed the OP while dealing with multiple structural **efficiency** challenges. As none of the Agency's personnel assigned to the operation were fluent in Bulgarian, they often faced a language barrier in field locations. Some interpreters were replaced due to insufficient Bulgarian language skills. In terms of the planned deployment of experts, there was a shortage of candidates proficient in Bulgarian<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, the short duration of the experts' contracts (until end of June 2023) was unappealing. Internal Agency delays and limited capacity hindered a timely identification of suitable candidates. This may indicate that the approach to the deployment of external experts may not be optimal for short or start-up OPs. In addition, internal national organisational changes led to shifting needs and priorities in a context where the SAR was faced with budget constraints. This led to the postponement of some activities such as training.

The Agency ensured efficient organisation of training activities, tailoring them to the needs. The Agency's field personnel in Bulgaria provided logistical support for training sessions so they could be held in a suitable environment. The workshops were designed (contrary to the Agency's permanent support programme) to ensure that their contents and deliverables were tailor-made to the authorities' needs. This also allowed for direct organisation, a reduction in the number of consultations and enhanced efficiency.

The planned budget for the ten-month OP was 613 809 EUR. By the end of the OP, internal financial monitoring data indicated that 34 %<sup>24</sup> of the planned budget was committed, mostly on interpretation (77 %). The amount not committed largely corresponded to interpretation and the deployment of experts. Despite consumption being relatively low, the number of deployed interpreters was sufficient to cover the needs. With 92 % of interpreters deployed as planned (11 of the planned 12, see above), the cost efficiency of the OP seems adequate.

The OP implementation was quite **coherent** with other Agency actions. Cooperation among the various actors involved was productive. However, the need for an earlier collaborative approach in the needs assessment phase was highlighted. The transition from FORU to OTAU was done at a time of limited implementation and changing priorities (early 2023). The coordination of asylum and reception measures was transferred to the corresponding measure coordinators of the Greece OP. While this transfer allowed new internal synergies, it was also associated with a period of reduced activity and changes. The planning and monitoring functions, as well as field support, remained under the

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<sup>22</sup> The expert was identified in May 2023 and their deployment occurred in June.

<sup>23</sup> National processes take place only in Bulgarian and national employees in the field do not speak English fluently.

<sup>24</sup> Non-validated data.



responsibility of the same actors, which contributed to a coherent transition. However, it could be argued that internal procedures could have been more efficient as the entire transition process lasted two months, which constituted a significant portion of the OP timeline.

At the wider EU-policy level, the Agency's support was in alignment with efforts of the EU to prioritise border management in preparation of Bulgaria's possible accession to the Schengen area<sup>25</sup>. The SAR ensured coherence with the planning of the AMIF envelope which entails over 100 deployments in Bulgaria. The Agency maintained a collaborative relationship with the SAR. Regular exchanges ensured alignment and complementarity with the actions undertaken by national counterparts, the International Organisation for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and non-governmental organisations. This evaluation did not identify similar training sessions conducted by other partners during the OP. There are perspectives for complementarity and synergies with training financed by AMIF and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism<sup>26</sup>.

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

The OPs added value to Bulgaria's TP, asylum, and reception systems remained limited at varying degrees. The site assessments contributed to better mutual understanding and cooperation perspectives. This laid the groundwork for sustained support in the medium term.

In terms of specific deliverables, the provision of interpretation in March 2023 was of significant added-value, as it followed a disruption to the SAR national contract. It allowed the SAR to continue with asylum determination and activities in reception. The training was also appreciated by the national counterparts owing to the face-to-face delivery and customisation in Bulgarian. Such features are in addition to what is offered through the Agency's permanent support. The session on Conflict management held in Harmanli was of particular value as many staff in the facility had been recently recruited. The workshop on the quality assurance tool enabled the Agency to promote the tool's usage. However, the added value of the workshops would have been higher, had those gone beyond collecting feedback and, for instance, had been followed by more practical support and outreach activities.

In the area of digitalisation, support was limited. It can however be considered a small contribution towards the enhancement of the national system's efficiency in the long term<sup>27</sup>. On the other hand, some support activities (e.g., the information leaflet on TP) were perceived to be of lower value. Similarly, although the IPSN tool was adapted to the local context, minimal use was reported until the end of the OP. This contrasted with the growing emphasis placed on vulnerability support.

It is foreseen that a longer-term presence in Bulgaria will bring about additional benefits both from a qualitative and an operational perspective. This was corroborated by the various identified needs during implementation, exceeding the ones expressed initially.

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<sup>25</sup> Making Schengen stronger: Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia are ready to fully participate in the Schengen area. 16 November 2022. Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_6945](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6945)

<sup>26</sup> State Agency for Refugees trainings are launched within the framework of the project 'increasing the administrative capacity of the competent authorities in the area of asylum', 14 April 2023. Source: <https://aref.government.bg/en/node/650>

<sup>27</sup> Asylum case management in Bulgaria relies on drafting and reviewing paper files which is an arduous process with implications on the timeliness and quality of procedures, especially in Dublin.



### 4.3. Is the action relevant?

In general terms, the intended results of the OP were relevant, with measure 1 of the amendment (TP) being the most evident exception. By September 2022 the coordination realised that these TP needs were less relevant than originally expected. The OP amendment however continued to include TP as one of its three main result areas. In retrospect, this was not relevant. Already in the first needs assessment, the Agency had identified additional needs beyond TP pertaining to the Bulgarian asylum and reception systems. Throughout the OP implementation, the SAR continued to identify gaps and express needs. Most of these needs, considered to be medium- to longer-term, were incorporated in the amendment in late 2022 and corroborated during consultations and visits that took place in January and February 2023.

In 2023, the Agency's support in both asylum and reception became more important from a wider EU policy perspective. Since the end of March 2023, the Agency has been engaged in discussions with the European Commission as part of a pilot project focused on implementing an accelerated procedure at the Bulgaria-Türkiye border<sup>28</sup>. This is particularly noteworthy considering Bulgaria's potential accession to the Schengen area.

In terms of specific areas of support, interpretation was considered very relevant in both the asylum and the reception contexts. The training aligned with the counterparts' needs at the time of delivery. The decision to postpone two modules to 2023, i.e., on Conflict management and Age assessment, ensured their increased relevance to stakeholders upon delivery. These modules were particularly important in Harmanli, a volatile environment with a reported high resident turnover. The relevance of some planned outputs remains despite their non-completion. Examples include support to quality assurance, vulnerability, and the management of Dublin processes. Moreover, despite being very broad in scope, the OP did not sufficiently underline the need for prioritised support for UAMs.

While direct links with the support provided under the SSP 2015-2018 cannot be drawn, the experience gained from it proved valuable to shape the Agency's expectations of this renewed collaboration. Most recommendations from the evaluation of the SSP were addressed at the time of this evaluation. Interviewees confirmed that this showcased Bulgaria's preparedness to accept the Agency's support. However, as this evaluation points out, there is still room for improvement in internal Agency contingency planning, coordination, and resource allocation.

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<sup>28</sup> European Commission. The European Commission launches a pilot project with Bulgaria. Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_23\\_1787](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_1787)



## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1. Conclusions

The EUAA started supporting Bulgaria at the latter's request in the area of TP as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The initial four-month OP was extended until June 2023. The OP amendment foresaw the expansion of the focus of the Agency's support beyond temporary protection, encompassing results in asylum and reception.

The OP was **relevant** at its inception. The needs for support evolved during implementation, prompting their continuous reassessment by the Agency in collaboration with its partners. Components of the OP were reviewed and put on hold whilst others were added to its amendment. Over time, the relevance of TP activities decreased, rendering their inclusion in the amended OP unnecessary. Conversely, the vast needs in asylum and reception indicate the need for continued support by the Agency. The relevance of the OP was supported by a wider EU policy context. In 2023, the European Commission stepped up its support to Bulgaria in the areas of asylum and border management in view of its possible accession to the Schengen zone<sup>29</sup>.

In terms of **effectiveness**, the OP had a short duration and ambitious goals, leading to a discrepancy between planned deliverables and the implementation timeline. The Agency's counterparts expressed satisfaction with what was eventually achieved, recognising the contextual challenges faced and acknowledging the Agency's ability to prioritise support accordingly. The Agency delivered the training plan (five sessions), four workshops, the study visit, and interpretation (11 interpreters in six locations), although some were achieved later than projected. The deployment of interpreters bridged the gap after the SAR's own contract ended. The remote nature of the workshops was considered less adequate for the national learning culture.

The main **efficiency** challenges during implementation were linked to language barriers, the evolving national context, and the Agency's difficulty in deploying experts. The latter proved to be particularly challenging since the available pool of experts did not match the language requirements. It resulted in only one of the eight positions being fulfilled, just before the end of the OP. The Agency underestimated the time needed to deploy external remunerated experts in the field. This illustrates that existing expert deployment modalities are not adequate for short or start-up OPs. The Agency was cost-efficient by tailoring the training sessions and facilitating workshops through the OP, but ambitious in the area of digitalisation in terms of timing.

The implementation of the OP demonstrated **coherence** with other Agency actions and cooperation among different actors within the Agency was overall satisfactory. The internal transition from FORU to OTAU was associated with a period of limited to no activities. This process lasted about two months, which remains significant in the context of a ten-month OP consisting of an ambitious set of activities. During implementation, a collaborative relationship with national counterparts and other partners was maintained. This ensured alignment and complementarity.

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<sup>29</sup> European Commission. Progress on Bulgaria and Romania's pilot project with the Commission for fast asylum and return procedures. Source: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/progress-bulgaria-and-romania-pilot-project-commission-fast-asylum-and-return-procedures-2023-06-07\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/progress-bulgaria-and-romania-pilot-project-commission-fast-asylum-and-return-procedures-2023-06-07_en)



The **added value** of the OP was limited to some deliverables. The provision of interpretation services was particularly valuable, as it allowed the SAR to continue asylum determination and reception activities without delays. Training activities were delivered in person and were tailored to the partner’s needs. In the area of digitalisation, the study visit was a small contribution towards longer-term efforts to improve case management in Bulgaria.

Overall, the Agency's support in Bulgaria may gain relevance over time in quality assurance in asylum, vulnerability, and the Dublin procedure. Both the support provided, and communication were highly valued. The challenges to mobilisation of experts are likely to be improved over time, in view of the ongoing work of the Agency to identify and deploy candidates with adequate skills and knowledge of Bulgarian.

Table 1 gives an overview of the assessment of the evaluation criteria by result, based on the evaluation team’s judgements derived from the analysis and the triangulation of available data sources.

Table 1. Evaluation criteria by result<sup>30</sup>

	Initial OP (2 Sep – 31 Dec 2022)	Amendment (1 Jan – 30 Jun 2023)		
		Measure 1. Effective implementation of the TPD and the CEAS	Measure 2. Reception	Measure 3. Asylum
Relevance	Good	Insufficient	Very good	Very good
Effectiveness	Fair	Insufficient	Fair/Good	Fair/Good
Efficiency	Good	N/A	Fair/Good	Fair
Coherence	Good	N/A	Very good	Very good
EU added value	Good	N/A	Good	Good

## 5.2. Good practices and lessons learnt

The implementation period of the OP was relatively short. Despite this, some good practices emerged, which could be continued or replicated in similar operations. These include:

- The original needs assessment covered a wide range of areas, surpassing those initially expressed by the Bulgarian authorities. It was followed by continued consultations until the amendment was signed. This contributed to mutual understanding and priority setting;
- The training component was flexible to address arising needs of the Bulgarian authorities;
- The availability and use of the remote contract for interpretation services during workshops;

<sup>30</sup> The five evaluation criteria were rated using a four-point scale (insufficient, fair, good, very good). These ratings are judgements based on the triangulation of different information sources, such as interviews and internal data.



- Interpretation support was provided at a crucial time in Bulgaria. It is expected that the Agency may withdraw from the provision of interpretation services upon renewal of the national contract;
- Synergies with the EUAA's Greece operations (upon the transition), a context with similar experiences at its borders;
- The study visit allowed Bulgarian representatives to appreciate recent digital innovations of the Greek case management system ('Alkyoni').

On the other hand, there were also some lessons learnt:

- The Agency did not have the capacity to deploy the foreseen experts on time. This should have been factored in during negotiations and OP drafting;
- Offering short-duration deployment opportunities of a few weeks is not sufficient to attract candidates with the required expertise;
- Deploying Agency personnel speaking the national language (as was done in other OPs) would have improved communication and understanding of the local context, improving efficiency;
- The deployment of external experts without the presence of statutory staff in Bulgaria may lead to multiple organisational and reputational risks;
- The evaluation faced challenges in assessing the operation's effectiveness due to an inadequate results framework.

This evaluation has also identified several challenges (and recommendations) that go beyond the scope of the Bulgarian context but should be considered in future Agency-wide horizontal or meta-evaluations. These include:

- Strengthening the Agency's preparedness for the start-up of new country operations, by:
  - Defining a minimum duration for their inception with strategic deliverables, particularly in contexts with projected changes in the political spectrum;
  - Utilising the inception period to define baselines and articulate specific results and targets to ensure feasibility and in preparation for mandatory evaluations;
  - Conducting a better assessment of internal capacity before committing to activities, ensuring prior consultation and coordination between centres and sectors;
  - Defining minimum parameters for the transition between Agency units. Despite mitigating factors in the Bulgaria experience, a transition in the middle of a short-term (inception) OP does not allow for optimal relationship building, ownership, and continuity;
- Embedding stronger complementarity with AMIF support as a baseline and target, in particular when:
  - Certain elements can be more cost-efficient under AMIF (e.g., recruitment);
  - The Agency's support can have a multiplier effect (e.g., in training and support to workflows);
- Optimising the mechanism for deployments, including a review of selection procedures for remunerated experts and exploring alternative methods to encourage expressions of interest;
- Enhancing the data collection of the results of training activities, allowing better understanding of their effectiveness, relevance, and added value.





### 5.3. Recommendations

Drawing from the findings, this evaluation proposes the following recommendations directed at the actors involved in the implementation of the Bulgaria OP.

1. Establish a better **coherence between the OP and its results framework** and ensure that it is accompanied by proportionate **monitoring practices at the required frequency**. This will allow for evidence-based decision making and enable future evaluations to better assess effectiveness.
2. Pursue **multiplier effects and leverage** through collaboration with AMIF-supported projects and the multiple non-governmental organisations and international organisations on the ground. This includes reception of UAMs and training.
3. Establish **long-term, in-country presence of statutory staff** to coordinate the support provided.
4. Proactively reach out to the Bulgarian labour market to **advertise and promote calls for expressions of interest in expert positions** capitalising on the multiple actors on the ground.



## Annex 1: Methodology

The aim of this exercise was to answer the following evaluation questions, covering the European Commission’s Better Regulation standard criteria.

Criteria	Evaluation questions
Relevance	How well has the action been able to respond to stakeholders’ needs?
Effectiveness	How successful has the action been in achieving (or progressing towards) the intended results?
Efficiency	To what extent are the costs (including inputs and deployments) of the support justified given the results?
Coherence	To what extent is the action coherent internally and externally?
EU added value	What is the added value resulting from the action compared to what could have been expected from Bulgaria acting alone?

To answer the above questions, the evaluation team triangulated information from a number of sources, starting with desk research. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders were conducted. This included Agency staff and national counterparts, i.e., the SAR. In total, five group discussions and four individual interviews were conducted with 18 individuals. As the implementation of the OP was underway during the evaluation, documentation referring to the last month of implementation was not available on time.

The evaluation took into account good practices and lessons learnt in light of the continuation of the Agency’s support in Bulgaria. This also considered findings of the evaluation of the Bulgaria SSP 2015-2018. Elements such as environmental and social impacts were not addressed in this evaluation.



## Annex 2: Evaluation matrix

Sub-questions	Indicators/descriptors	Norms/judgement criteria	Sources of evidence
<b>Relevance:</b> How well has the action been able to respond to stakeholders' needs?			
<p>To what extent were the needs correctly identified?</p> <p>How well has the Agency been able to adapt to changes?</p> <p>To what extent were the stakeholders' expectations matching these needs?</p>	Needs identified as part of the rapid needs assessment and expected results outlined in OP	Comparison between rapid needs assessment and OP with achievements and expectations recorded via interviews	Planning documentation; interviews and discussions with stakeholders
<b>Effectiveness:</b> How successful has the action been in achieving (or progressing towards) the intended results?			
<p>To what extent were the results achieved?</p> <p>Were there any unexpected factors, internal or external, that affected the progress towards the achievement of results?</p>	Results indicators and qualitative information from monitoring reports	Comparison of achievements with targets; contextual challenges	Monitoring data and reports; interviews
<b>Efficiency:</b> To what extent are the costs (including inputs and deployments) of the support justified given the results?			



<p>What were the main efficiency challenges? What could have increased the operation's efficiency?</p>	<p>Output indicators and inputs; human resources and finance process monitoring indicators</p>	<p>Relationship between achieved outputs and inputs; qualitative challenges (processes and related indicators)</p>	<p>Monitoring data; financial records; human resources records; nature of underlying processes needed to achieve the planned results; interviews with stakeholders</p>
<p><b>Coherence:</b> To what extent is the action coherent internally and externally?</p>			
<p>To what extent was the operation coherent with other Agency actions? To what extent did the operation support and supplement other actions in Bulgaria with similar objectives?</p>	<p>Qualitative feedback from stakeholders; nature of activities and coordination processes</p>	<p>Level of coordination and synergies with other national actors/internal Agency actors with similar objectives</p>	<p>Discussions and interviews with stakeholders</p>
<p><b>EU added value:</b> What is the added value resulting from the action compared to what could have been expected from Bulgaria acting alone?</p>			
<p>Was this added value more apparent in a certain area of support over others?</p>	<p>Identification of elements that added value to stakeholders</p>	<p>Number and level of added value elements related to financial, technical and material support</p>	<p>Discussions and interviews with stakeholders</p>



## Annex 3: Intervention logic

<b>Needs/problems</b>		<b>Expected objectives</b>	
<p>Persistent pressure on the asylum and reception systems; increased number of arrivals further exacerbating the challenges encountered by national authorities – need for support in TPD-related activities, training, and interpretation provision</p>		<p>Provision of effective and flexible support through the deployment of EUAA personnel for enhancing TPD-related implementation actions, the overall reception capacity, and the provision and quality of services related to international protection</p>	
<b>Result impact</b>			
<p>Provision of effective operational, technical and emergency support in line with the Agency’s mandate to enable Bulgaria to implement its obligations under the TPD and the CEAS</p>			
<b>Result outcomes</b>			
<p>Enhanced capacity of the Bulgarian authorities to:</p>			
<u>Initial OP (2 Sep 2022 – 31 Dec 2022)</u>		<u>Amendment (1 Jan 2023 – 30 Jun 2023)</u>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. implementing effectively the TPD and the CEAS</li> </ol>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. implementing effectively the TPD and the CEAS</li> <li>2. providing first-line reception in the supported facilities</li> <li>3. processing asylum applications</li> </ol>	
<b>Result outputs</b>			
<u>Initial OP (2 Sep 2022 – 31 Dec 2022)</u>		<u>Amendment (1 Jan 2023 – 30 Jun 2023)</u>	
<p>Support to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1 Implementing procedures and activities regarding temporary protection (TP)</li> <li>1.2 Training and professional development</li> <li>1.3 The administrative capacity of national authorities in the field of digitalisation</li> </ol>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. TP</li> <li>2. Reception</li> <li>3. Asylum</li> </ol>	
<b>Activities</b>			
<u>Initial OP (2 Sep 2022 – 31 Dec 2022)</u>		<u>Amendment (1 Jan 2023 – 30 Jun 2023)</u>	
<p>Under output 1.1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support in communication and information provision to beneficiaries of TP;</li> <li>• Additional support for the implementation of TPD-related activities.</li> </ul> <p>Under output 1.2:</p>		<p>Under output 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of communication and information material for beneficiaries of TP;</li> <li>• Additional support for the implementation of TPD-related activities;</li> <li>• Provision of training on topics relevant to TP.</li> </ul>	



- Provision of training on TP legal and policy framework and topics relevant to TP/asylum. These may include, without being limited to: communication and info provision, conflict management, communication with specific categories;
- Provision of training/workshops on topics relevant to the implementation of the CEAS, including identification and assessment of vulnerability and age assessment;
- Translation of EUAA information provision products to Bulgarian, including country-specific leaflets on TP and information provision methodology in the context of asylum procedures.

Under output 1.3:

Relating to the digitalisation of case file management systems:

- Support in mapping national practices;
- Support in organising a study visit to an EU+ country to familiarise with national practices;
- Participation in EUAA activities, such as thematic meetings.

Under output 2:

- Support in communication and information provision to international protection applicants;
- Additional support for the design and/or implementation of reception-related activities, including for unaccompanied children;
- Provision of training on reception.

Under output 3:

- Support in enhancing: the quality assurance mechanism at first instance; the capacity of the SAR via the rollout at national level of EUAA training; information provision to applicants of international protection, including through the development of information provision material;
- Support to registration and in the design and/or implementation of vulnerability-related activities;
- Provision of interpretation services;
- Support the development of a national pool of trainers, through SAR participation in train the trainers on key EUAA modules;
- Relating to the digitalisation of case file management systems: support in organising a study visit to an EU+ country to familiarise with national practices and in mapping national practices.

### Inputs

All inputs were conditional on the Agency's budget availability:

Initial OP (2 Sep 2022 – 31 Dec 2022)

Under output 1.1:

- up to 2 information provision and vulnerability experts;
- up to 10 interpreters.

Under output 1.2:

- 2 training support officers/ training experts.

Amendment (1 Jan 2023 – 30 Jun 2023)

Under output 1:

- Organisation of training and workshops.

Under output 2:

- 1 information provision expert;
- up to 2 reception experts;
- 1 child protection expert;
- up to 7 interpreters.

Under output 3:



- 1 asylum quality assurance expert;
- 1 information provision expert;
- 1 vulnerability expert;
- 1 registration expert;
- up to 5 interpreters.

Material and operational support by the Agency could include *inter alia* provision of equipment for asylum support teams, works, services, communication/promotional materials, costs for training/meetings/workshops (including translation of material and interpretation for training), infrastructure costs, IT equipment, office supplies, and others where required

#### External factors

Migratory pressure, national and international laws, policies and practices; availability of financial and human resources; actions by national counterparts, international, and non-governmental organisations