



Final Evaluation EASO Operating Plan to Bulgaria



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Executive Summary

From 16-25 September 2014, a team of three Member State experts with the support of Bulgarian and EASO officials carried out the final evaluation of the EASO Operating Plan to Bulgaria. The objective was to assess the performance of EASO support to Bulgaria (1 November 2013 – 30 September 2014), especially in the areas of the asylum registration process, the asylum determination procedure, and reception capacity. The evaluators aimed to identify key lessons learned and good practices of the current Operating Plan as well as to propose recommendations for possible future EASO support to Bulgaria.

This evaluation took place within the framework of the Operating Plan (Measure 3.17). The evaluation team, including Bulgarian officials, Member State-nominated EASO experts and EASO staff, conducted desk review in addition to four days of field visits and face-to-face with key informants of the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) and the Ministry of Interior. In addition to the SAR Headquarters in Sofia, the team visited three Registration and Reception Centres, three Accommodation Centres as well as the Transit Centre and Distribution Centre. Through these consultations, onsite visits, desk review and a caseworker survey, the experts were able to assess the EASO support to Bulgaria provided over the past eleven months. At the end of the evaluation mission, a discussion group meeting was held to present the findings and recommendations of the evaluation and receive further feedback from all actors involved in the Operating Plan.

This report identifies both the main achievements and lessons learned during the implementation of the EASO Operating Plan as well as outlines recommendations for both EASO and Bulgaria.

In the area of **asylum registration**, EASO provided technical support and capacity building measures, including the development of improved procedures, strategies, a manual and guidelines for the identification and registration of mixed migration flows. EASO support measures contributed to enhancing and accelerating the workflow in the registration procedure. Several factors contributed to this improvement, including the decentralization of the Dublin process and the establishment of a registration unit in the regional Distribution Centre Elhovo.

EASO support measures contributed to the following results:

- A registration team was set up in the Distribution Centre Elhovo, allowing for immediate and decentralized registration conducted by SAR officials;
- Bulgarian authorities were better able to manage the existing backlog and prevent any further backlogs in the area of registration;
- Improved tools were developed and implemented, including a SAR registration manual, to help enhance skills and knowledge of registration officials;
- Eurodac and DubliNet workstations were installed in all Centres, contributing to improved capacity of SAR to efficiently carry out Dublin procedures onsite within a reduced period of time;
- The Dublin procedure was decentralised and is conducted in the regional centres.

Several proposals for EASO support in the area of registration were made:

- Continued training for registration officers in several areas
- Interlinking of existing databases for registering all aliens and asylum seekers

- Support in enhanced screening, identification and referral as well as procedural safeguards and specialized attention for vulnerable groups
- Development of official guidelines on Dublin related matters

In the area of **asylum determination**, EASO provided support in capacity building of SAR in the field of COI, 1st and 2nd instance decisions and quality management. In particular, EASO trainings were highlighted as essential to providing newly hired SAR staff with the basic knowledge and skills necessary in their daily work. The caseworkers interviewed during the evaluation noted that after these trainings they felt more confident and motivated in their work and “proud to be part of the Common European Asylum System.” Managers in the regional centres as well as the Quality Unit in Sofia noted significant improvements in the quality of the work of newly-hired, EASO-trained caseworkers.

EASO support measures in this area also contributed to enhancing quality standards within the asylum determination process, including updated guidelines and checklists for interviews as well as new templates for the general procedure. Another important measure was the assistance provided in establishing a COI Unit as well as developing and implementing COI factsheets for top countries of origin. Many caseworkers expressed that these tools facilitated the preparation for interviews as well as their evidence assessments.

EASO support measures in the area of asylum determination contributed to the following results:

- Support in the establishment and enhanced knowledge and skills of the COI Unit was provided; COI factsheets on Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq and Syria were developed and are used by caseworkers in their daily work; skills and knowledge in the field of COI have increased through COI workshops and training
- Tools to ensure quality in the asylum procedures were developed, including updated guidelines and checklists for interviews and new templates for the general procedure and decision process
- Newly hired staff acquired basic skills necessary for their daily work via ‘core trainings’; caseworkers increased their knowledge in drafting and decision making; and seven SAR staff were trained as trainers in the EASO Curriculum and are able to carry out national trainings
- Interpreters increased knowledge about their role and received tools

Several proposals for future efforts of Bulgaria (possibly with EASO support) were recommended:

- In order to ensure long-term sustainability of training and professional development of SAR staff, SAR should further develop a national training plan, including national trainings in Bulgarian in the core modules of the EASO Training Curriculum.
- SAR has several national trainers, who have been trained by EASO in Malta. This pool could be expanded in order to guarantee the availability of qualified trainers in the long term.
- Further capacity building in the strategic management and professional development of the COI Unit would be beneficial to allow the Unit to focus on their core tasks and improve their knowledge and skills.
- Improvements to the existing national COI portal would be beneficial to improve research capacities.

In the area of **reception**, Bulgaria has made significant progress in increasing its reception capacity (to a total capacity of 5940 beds) and in improving conditions. The EASO support actions provided tools to assist SAR staff in planning and making a number of strategic decisions in this area. EASO also contributed to efforts to address the needs of vulnerable groups through the development of a manual for the identification of vulnerable groups and the translation of the EASO age assessment report into Bulgarian.

Given the priorities of SAR at the time of implementation, not all of the expected outputs of EASO support in this area could be achieved. For example, the development of SOPs or other quality standards was not feasible at the time. Instead, the support focused primarily on an exchange of views, experience and practices between the Bulgarian officials and the deployed experts, which assisted SAR officials in making a number of strategic choices.

Several lessons learned were identified. For instance, the support measures agreed on in the Plan could have been more relevant after the reception capacity was expanded, basic conditions improved and newly hired staff was in place. Alternatively, EASO could have also worked with Bulgarian officials at the time of implementation to adjust the support to more relevant outputs that would respond to the needs at that time.

The following recommendations for future efforts of Bulgaria (possibly with EASO support) were proposed:

- Further development of strategic planning and policy development (including SOPs and quality standards)
- Improvements in the identification and referral mechanism for vulnerable groups (including collaboration agreements with institutions and organisations for referral)
- Increase in the number of social workers in the centres
- Enhance access to education and local schools as well as attention to special needs in Reception Centres
- Support with improving integration opportunities for refugees with status
- Support to improve the formalized appointment of guardians

The results of this evaluation can assist both the Bulgarian authorities and EASO in their continued efforts to enhance the Bulgarian asylum and reception system. In particular, the teams identified areas in which complementary and/or follow up actions by Bulgaria (possibly with EASO support) would be beneficial. These include for example improvements in the provision of specialized attention to vulnerable groups, including children and UAMs, throughout the registration, asylum, reception and integration process; a national training plan for sustainable staff development; and additional measures for quality management. In the case of continued support, EASO and Bulgaria should focus on sustainability of support measures as well as long-term quality management of the asylum and reception system.

In addition to particular proposals related to EASO support in Bulgaria, the evaluation identified ways in which EASO can improve its operational support in other Member States in the future based on lessons learned from the Operating Plan to Bulgaria. Most significantly, these recommendations relate to the development of a results-based management system as well as improved tools for coherent and systematic planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting of EASO operational support.

As this is EASO's first full-fledged evaluation of an Operating Plan, it served as an important learning experience for EASO. The lessons from the evaluation process facilitated the development of mechanisms and tools for planning, monitoring, reporting as well as evaluating Support Plans.

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List of abbreviations

AIS Bezhantsi	Automated Information System Bezhantsi
AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
ASTs	Asylum Support Teams
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
COI	Country of Origin Information
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EBF	External Borders Fund
EC	European Commission
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EM (ERF2013)	Emergency Measures (of the ERF Annual Programme 2013)
ENARO	European Network of Asylum Reception Organisations
EPRA	European Platform of Reception Agencies
ERF	European Refugee Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
ICT	Information and communications technology
MoI	Ministry of Interior
MS	(EU) Member State
NIJ	National Institute of Justice
RF	European Return Fund
RRC	Registration and Reception Centre
SAR	State Agency for Refugees (with the Council of Ministers)
SCTAF	Special Centre for the Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
TC	Transit Centre
TCN	Third country national
ToT	Training of trainers
UAMs	Unaccompanied minors
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Background

On 14 October 2013, due to a sudden influx of mixed migration flows, Bulgaria requested support from EASO to enhance its asylum and reception system in order to cope with this situation. The EASO Operating Plan (EASO/COS/2013/336) for the support and deployment of EASO Asylum Support Teams (ASTs) and the provision of technical and operational assistance to Bulgaria was signed on 17 October 2013.

The EASO measures to support Bulgaria fall under three categories, namely: operational support, institutional support and horizontal support. Joint ASTs as well as special expert teams composed of experts from Member States and Bulgarian officials have been set-up and deployed in Bulgaria after the kick off on 5 November 2013 until 30 September 2014. The technical support and capacity building has been carried out in close cooperation with the main Bulgarian stakeholders (State Agency for Refugees, Ministry for Interior - Chief Directorate Border Police and Migration Directorate, as well as the National Institute of Justice). The support included the organisation of trainings, workshops as well as the development of recommended procedures, strategies, manuals and guidelines in relevant areas, including identification and registration of mixed migration flows. Furthermore, support was offered in the field of Country of Origin Information, 1st instance decision-making, Dublin processing, reception, referral of vulnerable persons and unaccompanied minors, backlog 1st instance, EU-funding and others.

The main expected outcome of the EASO operational support was to improve the ability of the Bulgarian asylum and reception system to respond to the sudden influx of migration flows as well as to enhance the asylum and reception capacity in a sustainable way.

This evaluation was agreed on with Bulgaria partners as part of the EASO Operating Plan (Measure 3.17).

Purpose and potential users

The purpose of this evaluation is to assist both the Bulgarian authorities and EASO in their continued efforts to enhance the Bulgarian asylum and reception system. In particular, the evaluation aimed to identify areas in which complementary and/or follow up actions would be beneficial.

In addition to the lessons learned pertaining to the Operating Plan to Bulgaria, the EASO final evaluation also provides several concrete recommendations that can help EASO improve its support to all Member States in responding to particular pressures on their asylum and reception systems as well as in achieving high standards in line with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the new EU asylum acquis. EASO plans to integrate these lessons into the planning and implementation phases of subsequent support plans.

Evaluation criteria

EASO conducted the final evaluation of the Operating Plan to Bulgaria (November 2013 – September 2014) in an effort to learn from the implementation of the support measures through assessing its performance based on the following criteria:

- **Relevance** – the extent to which the objectives or results of the operational support remain consistent with beneficiaries' needs
- **Effectiveness** – the extent to which the operational support achieved the expected results or achieved its objective
- **Efficiency** – refers to sound management and value for money – how well the available resources (funds, expertise and time) were converted into the intended results in terms of quantity, quality, and timeliness
- **Impact** – the extent to which the objective of the operational support have been achieved as intended; effects produced by the operational support, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally
- **Sustainability** – whether the positive outcomes of the project and flow of benefits are like to continue after EASO support ends

Methodology

The evaluation was carried out over a period of ten calendar days (16 - 25 September 2014) in Bulgaria through a team of three EASO Member State experts with the support of Bulgarian and EASO officials.

The evaluation methodology relied on a mixture of data collection and analysis methods, including:

- **Desk review** – of background information and existing documentation (both quantitative and qualitative) about the EASO Operating Plan and its outputs – develop evaluation questions, indicators and analysis strategy; develop evaluation tools
- **Questionnaires** – to gather descriptive data on a range of topics from a diversity of stakeholders to obtain information on their level of satisfaction and opinions on the operations and its outputs
- **Key informant interviews** – with stakeholders having first-hand knowledge about the operations and its outputs to obtain more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the operations, including its successes and challenges and potential solutions (requires means to verify or corroborate)
- **Focus group** – small group discussion to explore stakeholders assessment of the operations
- **Discussion workshop** – to present the draft report to the main stakeholders to check the factual basis of the evaluation and to discuss the findings and recommendations

For further details on the evaluation methodology please see [Annex 2](#).

Evaluation Findings and Recommendations

Asylum Registration

Due to a sudden increased influx of persons seeking protection in 2013, Bulgaria asked EASO for support in enhancing its asylum and reception system. After signing the Operating Plan, EASO deployed the first Asylum Support Team to Bulgaria on 5 November 2013.

In 2013, 7144 applications for international protection were submitted, mostly by Syrians, Algerians, Iraqis and stateless persons. The highest numbers were registered in October (1255 persons) and November (1262 persons). At this time, the Bulgarian asylum system was prepared to receive no more than approx. 1000 asylum applicants per year. Therefore, the sudden influx put high pressure on the Bulgarian asylum system, including the asylum registration process and the Dublin procedure. The State Agency for Refugees experienced a shortage of experienced and trained staff and limitations in their methods and capacity to identify and register the increasing number of asylum seekers entering the country.

In the period from January to September 2014, 5556 persons applied for international protection. The applicants were mostly of Syrian (3337), Afghan (1209) and Iraqi (201) origin. Since the start of the EASO Operating Plan to Bulgaria, the registration process has improved significantly partially due to the contributions of the EASO support measures. The Dublin procedure has been decentralized and is running more smoothly, and Bulgarian officials are better equipped to handle the registration and interviews of asylum applicants due to both improvements in knowledge and the proper use of technical equipment.

EASO Measure 3.1 and 3.2 – Support with identification and pre-registration of mixed flows and referral of beneficiaries of international protection

The objectives of both measures were to support the Bulgarian authorities with the identification and pre-registration of mixed flows and the referral of beneficiaries of international protection. The expected deliverables included EASO expert teams to support with the identification and pre-registration of mixed migratory flows at the borders and the pre-registration of asylum seekers as well as trainings on nationality establishment, technical advice in optimizing the identification and registration processes, and assistance with interpretation of rare languages.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Results

Through these support measures, experts assisted with the registration of approx. 70 asylum applicants in the Distribution Centre Elhovo and 23 persons in the Special Centre for the Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAF) in Busmantsi. In addition, the EASO experts developed a Registration Manual in collaboration with the Bulgarian officials, which was translated into Bulgarian. The manual is currently in use by the staff and considered useful along with the internal guidelines of the centres.

An important result of these measures was contributing to the acceleration of the registration process. EASO supported Bulgarian authorities in the set-up of a registration Unit in the newly opened Distribution Centre Elhovo, where persons traveling in mixed flows are accommodated before being referred to the asylum or migration system. The newly established registration unit

now consists of two registration officials and two supporting staff, who are registering applicants for international protection prior to their arrival in the SAR-run Registration and Reception Centres. This has assisted SAR in its capacity of SAR to accelerate the registration procedure and to eliminate the registration backlog at the time of increased pressure. This Unit has been permanently established and will continue to contribute to the optimization of the registration process in the future.

In addition to the above, EASO provided technical advice and training on the registration process of asylum applicants. Registration officials expressed that they have improved knowledge on the identification and registration process, as well as enhanced tools (manual) necessary to carry out the work.

Due to lack of available trainers (EASO-FRONTEx specialized training team) at the time, trainings on nationality establishment could not be implemented. In addition, assistance with interpretation of rare languages was not provided by EASO given that such support was financed by the European Commission as per the BG Annual Programme 2013 of the ERF Emergency Measures (Measure 6).

Lessons learned

During the evaluation, several challenges and lessons learned were identified regarding the implementation of EASO measures 3.1 and 3.2:

- Due to the language barrier and insufficient number of staff at SAR, the expert teams faced difficulties in providing efficient and effective support in registering persons seeking protection (93 persons pre-registered by EASO experts). Given that the national registration system is solely in Bulgarian, it quickly became clear that sending expert teams to carry out pre-registration was not of added value, but rather can slow down and even burden the registration process given interpretation needs of experts. Support with registration would, therefore, in the future require relevant software tools or templates to make such assistance effective.
- As noted above, the limited access to interpreters with the relevant skills, and language knowledge, caused a situation where interpreters were initially assisting the expert teams until EASO identified an interpretation company to avoid creating an additional burden during the crisis period. In the future, EASO will strive to clarify available resources ahead of time and to provide, if possible, additional interpreters and explore relevant software solutions when possible.

In addition, several continuing needs not addressed through EASO support were identified regarding the registration process:

- Training and capacity building in the area of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) and vulnerable groups is necessary, especially for the minors' legal representatives (social workers provided by the Child Protection Services).
- There has been a lack of coordination and coherence between different databases and files during the registration process, which results in multiple registrations of the same persons, sometimes with multiple identities registered for the same person.

Key recommendations

Short-term recommendations:

- Further training for registration officials in the regional centres (Harmanli, Pastrogor, Banya and Sofia) and the Distribution Centre Elhovo would be beneficial to strengthen their knowledge and clarify open questions. The course could include an update of the registration manual and a training of trainers element to ensure sustainability.
- Common European brochures under Regulation 118/2014 should immediately be made available in all centres and appropriate training on how to use them should be provided for registration officials and legal guardians.
- In-depth training regarding the identification and assistance of UAMs and vulnerable groups applying for international protection based on their special needs should be provided to registration officials and legal guardians working at the Registration and Reception Centres, especially in Banya.

Medium and long term recommendations

- Clear procedures for legal guardians should be available regarding their responsibilities in relation to the UAMs they represent during the entire asylum procedure from registration to integration (in line with national law and EU asylum acquis). Such procedures should be developed in cooperation between SAR, the Migration Directorate within the Chief Directorate Border Police and the State Agency for Child Protection and apply as well to local municipalities.
- A platform interlinking all existing databases registering aliens and asylum seekers could be put in place in order to ensure a smooth registration process for all BG authorities involved in the asylum and registration procedure (with involvement of the ICT department of the Ministry of Interior).
- Statistics of incoming applicants and flow charts could be more regularly used for analysis as a management tool for SAR in order to have a basis for planning and decision-making in case of a massive influx of applicants for international protection.

EASO Measure 3.5 – Support to the Bulgarian Dublin Unit

The objective of the measure was to enhance the knowledge of the central and regional offices on the management and implementation of the Dublin procedures, inter alia by providing support to the BG Dublin Unit. The expected deliverables of the measure were technical advice to relevant stakeholders to optimize the Dublin procedure and promote effective inter-institutional relations in this area as well as to provide two thematic workshops. This support included technical advice relating to infrastructure, staff, resources and the Eurodac/DubliNet systems.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Results

Based partially on the recommendations provided by EASO experts, SAR decentralized the Dublin procedure and installed Eurodac and DublinNet stations at all centres, ensuring improved capacity of SAR to efficiently and effectively carry out Dublin procedures onsite within a reduced period of time.

EASO advice also contributed to SAR relocating three Eurodac stations from the Migration Directorate to the newly opened Registration and Reception Centres. In addition, procurement is ongoing for another six working stations – three to be returned to the Migration Directorate, two to be installed in the Registration and Reception Centre Harmanli. EASO measures have also helped to raise awareness on the specific needs regarding updating facilities and improving processes (flowchart provided by expert team).

Furthermore, EASO has also assisted SAR in identifying its concrete training needs regarding the Dublin III Regulation, the new Eurodac Regulation, and related issues involving family tracing, unaccompanied minors, vulnerable persons, interview techniques and new forms.

Through a questionnaire and face-to-face interview during the evaluation visits, caseworkers and registration officials as well as their supervisors expressed that the EASO trainings on Dublin procedures had helped them to improve the skills and knowledge. Specifically, the training on the specific terminology and comitology of the Dublin III Regulation was useful for SAR officials working in the Dublin Unit in Sofia. Furthermore, the Dublin trainings for managers (one day) and for legal advisors from the Dublin Unit of SAR (two days) as well as the three-day training at regional centres (Pastrogor, Harmanli and Sofia) were mentioned as useful in informing their day-to-day work.

Lessons learned

During the evaluation, several challenges and lessons learned were identified regarding the implementation of EASO Measures 3.5:

- Originally, an internal plan to train staff in all responsible authorities on the DubliNet system, Dublin procedures and best handling of vulnerable cases should have been provided. However, due to time constraints, two tailor-made agendas were delivered and used as a basis for the workshops held. The content of the workshops was adapted to Bulgaria's needs. In the future, a comprehensive training plan could be developed to promote regular and more sustainable capacity building and knowledge transfer for all staff dealing with Dublin procedures.
- EASO experts, who implemented the support measures, noted that a major challenge in improving the registration and Dublin workflow relates to the need for an interlinked and coherent database for all stakeholders involved in these processes (Ministry of Interior and State Agency for Refugees) allowing quicker access for the Dublin Unit. The success of further support on improving the asylum registration and Dublin workflow depends on the establishment of an interlinked platform of existing databases enabling different access levels on a need-to-know basis, especially given the high increase applicants for international protection and incoming Dublin cases in 2014 (currently approximately 5000 requests).

Key recommendations

- Further training on the Dublin procedures for the Dublin Unit and caseworkers of the regional centres, dealing with registrations and Dublin interviews, would be beneficial.
- Official guidelines and procedures on Dublin related matters could be developed and disseminated by SAR with the support of EASO.
- SAR officials from the Dublin Unit should be trained in the EASO Training Curriculum - Dublin III Module with the aim to act as a future trainer for all relevant stakeholders in

Bulgaria. The translation of the Dublin Module of the EASO Training Curriculum into Bulgarian will be useful for subsequent national trainings.

- In the longer term, a modification in the Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR) is necessary to change the mandatory obligation to conduct a Dublin interview, even in cases where there is no Dublin-related information or only circumstantial evidence. If it is reasonably established that an applicant has not been in another EU Member State before, the formal decision to initiate the procedure for status determination in Bulgaria should not be delayed through the Dublin procedure.

Asylum Determination

In October 2013, 14 caseworkers were responsible for processing incoming applications for international protection in Bulgaria. The caseworkers were conducting the Dublin interview, the accelerated procedure interview, the general procedure interview as well as drafting decisions, often without specific guidelines, checklists or templates.

Due to the high influx of asylum applicants in the fall of 2013, caseworkers were unable to meet the non-mandatory three-month deadline provided for in the Bulgarian Law on Asylum and Refugees for issuing an asylum determination decision. At this time, asylum application files were not pre-screened, but rather distributed randomly to caseworkers who, due to the workload, had little or no time to prepare for interviews. Caseworkers handled all types of requests with no specialisation, and most often they did not receive adequate and official country of origin information (there were only two part-time SAR COI researchers at the time).

Due to increased number of applications and related work pressure, SAR faced significant challenges in handling the inflow in an efficient way without creating delays and backlog in the asylum determination procedure.

With the support of the ERF emergency measures, SAR hired in total 160 new staff members at the beginning of 2014. As part of its Operating Plan to Bulgaria, EASO in coordination with SAR provided all caseworkers, registration officers and legal advisors with core training (adapted from the EASO Training Curriculum), and several caseworkers were also trained as trainers in Malta and Sofia. In addition, SAR established a COI Unit and could in this way secure the provision of timely and up-to-date COI for the asylum determination process.

EASO Measure 3.10 and 3.11 – Support with core training of newly hired staff members and training in modules of the EASO Training Curriculum

Both training measures aimed to increase the skills and knowledge of SAR officials in the field of inclusion, interview techniques, evidence assessment, decision-making and country of origin information. In particular the newly hired staff members were provided with basic training and an introduction to practical tools and background information necessary for their new tasks as caseworkers or registration officers. The train-the-trainer methodology of the EASO Training Curriculum mainly aimed to sustainably build up the capacity of SAR to implement national trainings in several EASO Training Modules, which were translated into Bulgarian.

Achieved results and lessons learned

The main achieved results include improved skills and knowledge of SAR employees in January and February 2014. The EASO core trainings were specifically developed based on the existing

needs at the time and used to train all newly hired SAR employees during their first weeks on the job. The core training provided the participants with hands-on information and tools on how to conduct interviews and draft decisions. During information interviews and a survey of all caseworkers (several months later, September 2014), participants expressed that the training led to concrete improvements in their skills and knowledge and the ability to apply them in their daily work. Many caseworkers also expressed increased confidence and motivation after these workshops. Prior to the trainings, they knew little or nothing about international protection and felt nervous about conducting interviews and making decisions. The Directors of two regional centres (outside of Sofia) as well as senior colleagues in another centre expressed having noted clear improvements in the performance and confidence of the newly-hired SAR staff after attending the EASO training.

With the support of the EASO Training Curriculum's train-the-trainer (ToT) methodology, SAR built up its capacity with 7 national trainers (some of them being trainers for more than one Module). In addition, the EASO Core Modules Inclusion, Interview Techniques and Evidence Assessment have been translated into Bulgarian and uploaded on the Training Platform. The translation of the Dublin Module has been rescheduled until the update of the module in line with the recast Dublin III regulation is completed. A tailor-made training on the process of drafting and decision making has been provided as well.

Key lessons learned during the implementation of the training measures include the following:

- Due to the high workload, the implementation of national trainings (based on EASO ToT methodology) was postponed to a later stage in 2014. The national training in the Module Interviewing Vulnerable Persons is planned for January 2015. In order to achieve a sustainable capacity building, it is of outmost importance to further develop a national training plan and increase the number of national trainers.
- National trainers as well as trainees need sufficient time to follow the training and to apply the newly acquired skills in practice. It is essential to inform middle and upper management of the importance of allowing for such time within working hours to increase motivation and effectiveness of training. During possible future training activities, it would be beneficial to secure venues outside of the regular offices as participants are more able to concentrate and remain uninterrupted.

Key recommendations

In order to ensure long-term sustainability of training and professional development of SAR staff, SAR should continue working on a national training plan, including national trainings in Bulgarian in the core modules of the EASO Training Curriculum (Inclusion, Interview Techniques and Evidence Assessment) and others. SAR has several national trainers, who have been trained by EASO in Malta. However, this pool could be expanded in order to guarantee the availability of qualified trainers in the long term.

EASO Measure 3.3 and 3.12 – Support with top 3 countries of origin and capacity building in the field of COI

Both EASO measures aimed at providing capacity building support on country of origin information, inter alia through strategic recommendations, training and the development of COI factsheets for top countries of origin. These measures strived to enhance the knowledge and skills of all staff members involved in the asylum determination procedure (caseworkers,

registration officers, legal advisors and COI researchers) and to improve standards in the examination of the asylum application.

Achieved results and lessons learned

One of the main achieved results includes the establishment of a COI Unit at the end of February 2014, which enabled SAR to provide timely and comprehensive COI information and replies to COI queries from caseworkers. The COI Unit was supported in enhancing its capacity in several ways including training on EASO COI portal, technical advice on workflow management and the participation in EASO COI networks and practical cooperation workshops.

A significant contribution to enhancing the skills and knowledge of the staff was furthermore achieved through the development and dissemination of four COI factsheets (Algeria, Iraq and Syria; Afghanistan was added upon request) as well as the organisation of two COI workshops in Sofia and in the region to provide basic information on COI standards and discuss specific questions on the top counties in more detail. In face-to-face interviews and the survey carried out as part of this evaluation, SAR caseworkers expressed that the factsheets facilitate their daily work especially in preparing for interviews as well as for the evidence and credibility assessment. Several of them in different regional centres mentioned specific examples from the COI workshops that helped them concretely in assessing asylum claims from Afghanistan.

Several **lessons learned** were identified during the implementation of these support measures:

- According to the Law on Asylum and Refugees, all COI used in the asylum determination procedure has to be in Bulgarian and officially approved by the COI Unit. This means that caseworkers cannot use COI information independently researched in their decisions and are depending on the COI Unit. For this reason, it was important that the COI Unit was able to get the factsheets officially approved and disseminated to caseworkers. Without this official procedure, the factsheets could not have been used or referenced in decisions.
- In case a COI factsheet is used for a decision, the entire factsheet has to be attached as a proof of reference. In the future, possible new factsheets could be split into various sections/topics (each approved as a separate document) to ease the reference and simplify possible updates.
- Specific needs and demands of the caseworkers during the asylum determination process were not always that clearly communicated, which made it difficult for the COI Unit to provide tailor-made and comprehensive information in case of emerging needs. During the COI workshops organised by EASO, more general COI was provided as well in order to transfer basic knowledge about the situation in the countries. In the future, the COI Unit may wish to further develop ways of regularly communicating and coordinating with the caseworkers to obtain feedback and understand their COI needs.
- Sustainable capacity building for the COI Unit is required. Currently, the COI unit is involved in several additional duties (translation of documents, political analysis for SAR management as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, etc.) that often limit their ability to focus on their core tasks.
- The caseworkers are not always familiar with all functions of the in-house COI database. Increasing the search options and training caseworkers on existing ones might have a positive impact on reducing the workload of the COI Unit and the broader availability of specific COI for the end-user.

Key recommendations

- Further build the capacity of the COI Unit to regularly update top country of origin factsheets and develop new ones based on emerging needs.
- Further capacity building in the strategic management and professional development of the COI Unit would be beneficial to allow the Unit to focus on their core tasks and improve their knowledge and skills (including definition of mission statement, analysis of workflows, the creation of standard timeframes and templates for COI queries, practical COI research tasks, such as answering requests or drafting COI products, while fully applying the EU quality standards and engaging in high-quality source assessment.).
- Enhance the existing in-house COI database and train caseworkers on its use.

EASO Measure 3.4 – Support with decisions at 1st instance

The main objective of this measure was to support the decision making process at 1st instance by analysing first of all the existing workflow. Based on the results of this analysis and in view of the increasing influx of asylum applications in 2013, suggestions were made how the asylum determination process could be streamlined and accelerated. In addition, EASO experts provided support in developing tools for quality assurance within the asylum determination procedure.

Achieved results and lessons learned

The analysis of the workflow and suggestions how to adjust the procedure improved the knowledge of BG officials about bottlenecks which hampered a smooth processing of the asylum applications. Proposals without financial implications (e.g. decentralisation of the decisions, continued training for staff members) were implemented. With regard to the enhancement of quality, updated guidelines and checklists for the interviews as well as new templates for the general procedure and decision process were developed and introduced into the asylum determination process.

During the face-to-face interviews and focus groups as well as the survey, caseworkers expressed that these new quality assurance tools facilitate their daily work. They noted that these tools helped them to conduct better interviews and to structure their decisions based on the concrete steps and legal basis provided. One legal advisor noted that the decision template is also useful for reviewing caseworkers' decisions in a consistent and coherent manner.

Lessons learned identified during the implementation of this support measure include:

- Restrictions in view of the Law on Asylum and Refugees (including the pending revision) as well as limited financial resources to adjust and accelerate the procedure (e.g. administrative support for the caseworkers, improvement of the database AIS Refugees) hampered more significant improvements in the asylum procedure. Nonetheless, the commitment and willingness of SAR management to change some of the procedures within the existing legal framework enabled streamlined processes.
- Due to the absence of official templates and guidelines, new caseworkers were mainly trained on the job by senior colleagues and developed over the time their own structure, which in some cases did not fulfil basic requirements. After the official templates were developed in close cooperation with the SAR Quality Unit, SAR is now focusing on ensuring a consistent approach in applying the new templates in every regional centre as well as on further developing the tools based on arising needs.

Key recommendations

- Continued support in the systematic application and further development of quality management tools and methods would be necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of the SAR quality assurance activities.
- Further refinement of templates and checklists in line with the Asylum Procedures Directive and Qualification Directive and building on the relevant EASO Quality Tools would be beneficial. Once the LAR is revised, tools should also be updated accordingly.
- SAR is committed to the further development as well as systematic and practical application of quality tools and would benefit from support in this endeavor. This could also include the development and implementation of an improved quality management system (including relevant tools for monitoring, communication, feedback and casework).

EASO Measure 3.16 – Ad-hoc workshops - Case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union

This workshop supported SAR legal advisors in enhancing the skills and knowledge in the field of case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). The EASO tailor-made training focused on the application of specific CJEU case law.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Seven legal advisers, including staff of the Dublin Unit at SAR in Sofia and one representative from the Registration and Reception Centre Sofia, attended the workshop on CJEU case law. The participants expressed that they were satisfied with the training and that they were better able to apply the CJEU case law and to implement the Dublin Regulation after the workshop.

Key **lessons learned** included:

- The request of SAR to receive guidance on practices of other Member States in applying CJEU rulings could not be fully achieved by the EASO trainers during the implementation of the workshop, since this information is not publicly available. For this reason, it would be important to agree on a more clear description of the scope and content of the workshop prior to the implementation to assure that needs are met.
- In order to achieve enhanced quality of the decisions in the asylum procedure, it would have been advisable to also include the caseworkers in the training and not limit participation to legal advisers.
- The knowledge of the EU acquis in the field of international protection appeared to be rather limited among most participants to the workshop. Future work should pursue ensuring the use in practice of the EU case law when controlling the quality of decisions as well as during the litigation of asylum cases before the courts.

Key recommendations

- Training on case law of the CJEU and the European Court of Human Rights should be provided to both staff dealing with decision making (basic level) and legal advisers (advanced level).
- Steps could be taken to increase knowledge of the Common European Asylum System (both Directives and Regulations) and to increase the practical implementation of the

EU acquis into the drafting of decisions and appeal procedures. Possible measures could include training and coaching in these areas.

EASO Measure 3.16 – Ad-hoc workshops -Training of interpreters in the asylum process

This ad-hoc workshop was requested to improve the knowledge and skills of approximately 20 interpreters involved in the asylum determination process. EASO experts were asked to carry out a tailor-made training for interpreters working for the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, who had previously not received any guiding material or adequate preparation for their tasks in the asylum field. The training included information on the role and responsibilities of an interpreter in the asylum interview as well as guidance on a code of conduct and the provision of an asylum-related terminology list.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Results

The training helped to increase the interpreters knowledge about their role and responsibilities in the asylum procedure (e.g. to interpret everything without additions, omissions or modifications and to refrain from personal views and comments). In face-to-face interviews with several participants, interpreters expressed to the evaluators that they were very satisfied with the training and that it helped them to identify several of their own behaviors that were not professional. The participating interpreters also noted that the tools provided (lists of common words used in the asylum procedure, one practical hand out, and a presentation made by the experts) were useful, but that they require additional tools.

Lessons learned

Several interpreters recommended developing terminology lists in the most common languages of asylum applicants (Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Farsi and Kurdish). They noted this would be more useful than the list in Bulgarian. In addition, the short preparation time prevented the experts to share all materials in Bulgarian already during the training. Planning sufficient time to prepare the material as well as the exercises would support the success and impact of the key messages to be delivered. As requested by SAR, the training carried out was primarily tailored to newly employed interpreters, whereby more experienced interpreters participated as well. In the future, a two-step approach could be followed offering induction training on basic level for newly hired interpreters and a more targeted training for interpreters with a longer working experience on intermediate level.

All participants indicated that the one-day training period was too short to go into depth on several issues. When possible, a longer session could be foreseen in the future.

Key recommendations

- SAR could explore providing a longer training for interpreters at all levels as well as developing standard induction training for all newly hired interpreters. Such training should be available for interpreters working in all centres.
- The existing code of conduct for interpreters could be reviewed and updated if necessary. SAR should ensure that the code of conduct reaches all (newly) hired interpreters.

- A hand-out should be produced for caseworkers and interpreters describing their role in relation to the applicant and the interviewer.

EASO Measure 3.13 –Support with regard to 2nd instance

Prior to EASO support, Bulgarian judges had limited knowledge regarding case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and CJEU, COI research tools and other Member States practices. They required support in dealing with asylum-related cases in which decisions at the first instance had been appealed by the applicants for international protection. This measure aimed to assess the specific professional development needs of the Bulgarian judiciary involved in asylum appeals and to provide a tailor-made workshop based on topics identified.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Through this measure, Bulgarian judges and prosecutors gained knowledge on the implementation of the Common European Asylum System, the relevance of the jurisdiction of the national Member States Courts, updated jurisprudence of the ECtHR, CJEU and the Bulgarian Supreme Administrative Court.

Judges indicated that the knowledge and skills gained at the EASO workshop supported their daily work in several ways:

- enhanced capacity to apply the practice of the ECtHR
- enriched knowledge of the CJEU
- improved skills in the research and practical use of COI

In addition, EASO and the BG authorities together established a network of contacts of Bulgarian judges from Sofia and Regional Administrative Courts, the Supreme Administrative Court and supported the cooperation with the Bulgarian National Institute of Justice (NIJ).

Key recommendations

The NIJ and participants of the workshops indicated a need for continued tailor-made training workshops for judges, prosecutors and legal advisers to improve knowledge on the implementation of the Common European Asylum System, ECtHR and CJEU, national Member States and Bulgarian case-law.

EASO Measure 3.8 – Support in dealing with backlog at 1st instance

Given the increased influx of asylum applicants in 2013, this measure aimed to support SAR in handling backlog in the asylum determination procedure at 1st instance. This measure helped SAR to improve its capacity to optimise the use of human and financial resources in order to speed up the procedure. The deliverables were an assessment of the existing situation and a proposal to reduce the backlog to zero within 12 months based on two possible scenarios of asylum seekers inflows.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Through this measure, SAR is better prepared to prevent future backlogs and deal with existing backlogs. EASO experts worked together with SAR staff to develop proposals to reduce the backlog to zero within 12 months based on two different scenarios of possible asylum applicant

influxes. Although SAR has been able to implement some of the recommendations, others have not been possible given the financial and human resources constraints faced.

This measure has provided several **lessons learned**:

Several recommendations in the proposal developed with the EASO experts depend on financial and human resources not currently available to SAR. However, the proposal has helped SAR staff increase its knowledge on possible steps to take to prevent future backlogs in case of increased inflows. Some areas that do not require such resources were also identified such as the need for better cooperation with the regional centres in order to have a improved distribution of the asylum applicants. In addition, analysis of existing statistical data would assist SAR in taking measures to optimize its procedure.

SAR could not provide the EASO experts with data about the asylum applications on the borders, explaining that the regional centres do not report this situation. In addition, asylum seekers are not fingerprinted and photographed by the Border Police and this situation allows them to change their identity at SAR. Therefore, it is possible for an asylum seeker to have more applications on different identities (one identity on the border and another one at SAR).

Key recommendations

- The Quality Unit of SAR now has relevant tools to prepare for and deal with possible backlogs. Several proposals have been developed in coordination with the EASO experts, which SAR can consider for subsequent implementation. This includes, for example, the need to ensure that caseworkers are able to focus on their tasks (preparing interview, conducting interview, evidence assessment and drafting decisions), rather than on administrative and logistical preparations. In addition, all interview rooms should be properly equipped.
- Backlog controllers could be appointed by SAR and the regional centres to monitor on a weekly basis the relevant data on pending cases, inflows and outflows, capacity (e.g. human resources available, interpreters, social workers, logistics);
- Consequently, backlog controllers could analyse the above-mentioned data and prepare reports for the head of SAR or the head of the regional centres on the stage of implementation of the plan to reduce the backlog and also on the possible risks/threats that may affect the implementation.
- Since there is currently no screening of the files prior to assigning them, a system could be developed on how to prioritize and distribute cases among caseworkers according to their specialisation for specific countries of origin or reasons for persecution.

Reception Capacity

In early autumn 2013, when the inflows of Syrian asylum seekers increased dramatically, Bulgaria's asylum and reception system came under severe pressure, leading to an extreme shortage of reception capacity and the set-up of ad-hoc shelters (below minimum EU standards). The reception conditions were very poor, freedom of movement was restricted pending registration which had a backlog. There were no meals provided or just one meal a day, there was limited access to medical care, no vulnerability screening, unsafe and unsanitary living conditions and no access to education and limited access to the asylum procedure. SAR was severely understaffed and had limited institutional capacity as well as limited funds. There was

limited capacity for crisis management and strategic planning, the organisational structure was not appropriate and there was neither data analysis nor a good understanding of the situation.

Presently, there is sufficient reception capacity to manage current flows, as well as some emergency capacity. Basic reception conditions improved drastically, Reception Centres were renovated, applicants stay in rooms of maximum 8 persons, have two hot meals a day, can do their laundry, are registered in a timely manner and have improved access to health care. Internal rules for Reception Centres as well as rights and obligations of asylum seekers were developed and put in place. SAR staff increased substantially, and institutional capacity is enhanced. Some contingency planning is carried out and some strategic choices are made, data is collected, and funds were made available through European funds, bilateral agreements and the national budget. Identification of some vulnerable groups takes place, and there are some specific reception places and referral mechanisms.

Improvements in reception are still necessary, such as strategic planning, quality management, special assistance for vulnerable groups as well as access to education and psychosocial support and subsequent integration opportunities.

EASO Measure 3.6 - Support with the enhancement of a reception system

The main objective of this measure was to contribute to enhancing the capacity of SAR related to strategic planning and the development and implementation of uniform procedures and quality standards. Expected deliverables were: an assessment of the situation in November 2013, definition of a set of quality standards for reception, support in strategic planning, development of Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) and assistance in drafting a blueprint of a referral system.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Results

Through discussions with SAR and on-site visits, EASO experts proposed elements for strategic planning, SOPs, and Quality Standards for SAR to consider in the area of reception. Given the reality at the time of implementation, the EASO support resulted primarily in an exchange of views, experience and practices between the Bulgarian officials and the deployed experts. This exchange as well as the various reports and documentation provided has assisted SAR staff in better understanding the situation and their needs and in making a number of strategic choices. According to feedback from the relevant Bulgarian officials, the EASO support exposed them to new knowledge, skills and standards which were of added value and formed a basis for the further enhancement of the reception system, in combination, of course, with other factors, such as additional SAR efforts and support through funding and donations by local, EU and international organizations, bilateral agreements, etc.

One unexpected result of this measure was the participation of Bulgarian reception authorities in existing European networks on reception, including ENARO and EPRA. These contacts and attendance of meetings has led to increased exchange of ideas and practices for Bulgarian officials.

Lessons learned

During the evaluation, Bulgarian officials noted that given the reality they were facing with the high influx of applicants and the establishment of new Reception Centres, support with the drafting of common guidelines for all Centres – rather than SOPs or other quality standards – would have been more useful and feasible at the time of EASO support.

All improvements and renovations, as well as staff hiring and staff training, had to take place while the inflows remained high and while asylum seekers were accommodated in the various Centres to be renovated. A high level of planning, coordination, determination and commitment on the part of SAR made this possible. This, however, also implied that priorities had to be set and choices had to be made. Hence efforts went into providing sufficient decent accommodation for asylum seekers, whereas social assistance or education for children will be further developed and supported later on. In addition, this meant that the EASO support in areas such as quality standards and SOPs may not have been timely as the focus of efforts was on increasing capacity and basic conditions as quickly as possible. The EASO measures could have been more relevant after the reception capacity was expanded, basic conditions improved and newly hired staff was in place. Alternatively, EASO could have also worked with Bulgarian officials at the time of implementation to adjust the support to more relevant outputs to respond to the needs at that time.

Key recommendations

- In the future, EASO should attempt to work with the Member State to focus support measures in the area of reception on those tasks deemed of priority during a period of crisis and to be flexible to adjusting support measures or postponing them when necessary. EASO operational support on some areas of reception, such as quality standards and strategic planning, should be offered at a later stage when such support can be more effective. When EASO consults with the hosting Member State and realizes that the support is not a priority at the time, either the support could be adjusted in collaboration with the MS or it could be planned for a later period within the Operating or Special Support Plan.
- Further development of strategic planning and policy development for SAR, including instructions and SOPs for reception and maintaining and improving quality standards would be beneficial. Coordination between the various units of SAR HQ as well as the regional centres can still be improved, as all units should work towards common goals.
- SAR should continue its efforts to improve the access to education and attendance of children in school. In addition, there is a need to increase the number of social workers in Reception Centres.
- Given the high level of occupancy of Reception Centres by recognized refugees, improving their integration possibilities through the new BG integration programme will be crucial.
- SAR may require assistance with human resources management to minimise turnover, improve training opportunities, exchange experiences (e.g. senior to junior on the job training) and manage temporary absence of key collaborators (e.g. when psychologist or social worker are on long leave).
- A complaints procedure to allow residents to complain to management about reception conditions should be developed. This procedure not only will allow compliance with EU

minimum standards, but can also be a management tool for SAR management to receive feedback on aspects of reception that are not adequate and may assist SAR in identifying priorities for future activities.

EASO Measure 3.7 - Support with referral of UAM and vulnerable persons

This measure aimed at providing improved understanding of the existing referral procedures for UAM, vulnerable groups and persons with special procedural and reception needs; developing a manual and guidelines for identification of vulnerable groups; providing expertise on the appointment of guardians of UAMs; and finally providing a proposal to improve the current referral system and development of a strategic action plan.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Results

- A mapping exercise of existing identification and referral procedures for UAM and other vulnerable groups was undertaken. This led to a better understanding of gaps that need to be addressed. To simplify and assist with identification of the vulnerable groups provided for in the EU directive, a fact sheet was also delivered.
- An extensive manual for identification of vulnerable groups was developed. SAR opted not have the manual translated into Bulgarian and does not plan to use this tool, given that it is working with UNHCR in the context of the Response to Vulnerability in Asylum” (RVA) project and the ongoing EASO work on the quality tool on the identification of persons with special needs which will tackle both reception and the asylum procedure.
- Access was furthermore given to the EASO age assessment publication (translated into Bulgarian) in order to initiate the discussions in this field to set up an age assessment system and offer an overview of existing methods in the Member States.

Lessons learned

- As identification of vulnerable groups and referral mechanisms require the involvement of several stakeholders from various competent authorities, an early buy-in of these stakeholders should be achieved. Given that SAR requested EASO to develop the manual, both EASO and SAR could have jointly increased their efforts to make this a more participatory and collaborative process aiming to increase ownership of the relevant actors in this area. Such an approach would have significantly improved the chances for future take-up.
- Despite the mapping exercise, EASO and SAR did not properly coordinate to identify how EASO support could contribute to ongoing efforts in this area to avoid possible duplicated efforts and lack of take-up by Bulgarian authorities. In addition, improved coordination with UNHCR could have increased the effectiveness of this measure, especially given the RVA project and other UNHCR efforts.

Key recommendations

- In future support measures, EASO should adopt participatory and collaborative approaches that help to ensure the ownership and take-up of the support provided. In addition, better coordination with additional stakeholders like UNHCR could help to ensure the effectiveness of support and avoid duplication of efforts.

- SAR should continue its effort to improve its identification and referral system for vulnerable groups, based on the UNHCR RVA-project and the EASO quality tool, in collaboration with the Migration Directorate and Border Police. This could include the review of the identification, age assessment and referral system of UAM, as well as the system of appointment of guardians and custodians, starting with a proper definition of UAMs. The foster care programme of the Child Protection Agency might be a good step forward;
- SAR would benefit from developing collaboration agreements with institutions and organisations to whom certain vulnerable cases would be referred (e.g. hospitals, homes for the elderly, child protection etc.) including when such persons receive status and would have to integrate into society;
- SAR could increase its efforts to adapt reception for those vulnerable groups who would remain in Reception Centres in order to meet their special needs (e.g. adapted infrastructure for wheelchairs, effective access to psychological care, specialised and separate centres or floors for UAM);
- Access to education and local schools is a crucial issue for Bulgarian authorities to address. Though there are Bulgarian language classes in all centres, attendance is poor as motivation is low. Social workers need to be able to invest time in their clients, hence sufficient social workers should be available in each centre, with additional specially trained social workers for UAM;
- All staff should be trained in caring for vulnerable groups in reception.

EASO Measure 3.15 – Support with developing an Electronic Card System

This measure aimed at providing assistance in the introduction of an Electronic Card System for the reception centres in Bulgaria, as a tool for producing statistics, keeping track of the accommodation and whereabouts of the asylum seekers, as well as the provision of meals and various services provided to them. The measure sought to provide technical support and expertise to the Communication and Information System Directorate of the Ministry of Interior and SAR with developing the Electronic Card System software requirements and the technical specifications for the hardware needs of such as system. Finally, this measure aimed at providing technical support with developing a communication link between this system and the SAR refugee database - Automated Information System (AIS) Bezhantsi.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Results

At the time of this evaluation, the following had been achieved in this area:

Technical support and expertise was provided to SAR, leading to increased knowledge about the technical functioning and requirements of the electronic card system. The example of the Hungarian electronic card system, including software and system plan, was used to demonstrate what the final product could look like. The Bulgarian requirements along with the technical requirements were discussed and advice was provided. During the evaluation face-to-face interviews, BG officials expressed satisfaction with the EASO technical support and advice as well as the hands-on demonstration of the Hungarian model. They noted it led to improved knowledge of SAR officials and supported them in drafting the Terms of Reference (TORs) for their own system.

Based on the technical advice received, SAR has finalized the TORs for a procurement contract. The tender provides for three lots: one for the software components, one for the hardware components, and one for security hardware. There are five software components to be developed by the contracted software company:

1. component for a one-way interface between the AIS Bezhantsi and the new system with personal information and status of the asylum seeker,
2. component to monitor the movements of the asylum seeker and the bed management,
3. component regarding subsistence and meals,
4. component regarding monthly benefits and
5. component related to social work and special needs.

All relevant processes are described in the TORs, including access levels per work station and training of staff for the use of the e-card system.

Lessons learned

- As all components of this new system are interconnected, they would all have to be tested and implemented at the same time, which will prove a huge task.
- In order to ensure effective implementation it is important for Bulgarian authorities to clearly assign responsibilities of the involved actors. As this was not the case at the beginning of the measure, some delays were experienced.

Key recommendations

- EASO should aim to continue using the approach of hands-on demonstration of functioning systems when appropriate as this type of support was effective and appreciated by the supported Member State.
- The new system should ensure an adequate balance between SAR's management and statistical information needs, and the privacy and confidentiality of information regarding asylum seekers (e.g. to what extent is it essential to know which room or building the applicant has visited, to what extent is it necessary to log sensitive vulnerability information in a centralised database etc.).
- Once the tender will be effectively implemented, sufficient and permanent training of all the users would have to be ensured, as well as user manuals and other tools for the effective use of the system would have to be developed. The internal rules and rights and obligations of asylum seekers would also have to be adapted to the new system.
- A thorough data security risk analysis would be important – procedures to prevent and respond to the database being hacked; procedures and back-up to ensure that operations continue working in case the system crashes etc. – and a data security risk management plan should be developed.

Horizontal Measures

EASO Measure 3.9 – Support in absorption of the emergency financial support to Bulgaria provided by the EU Funds under SOLID Programme

This measure aimed at supporting the Responsible Authorities for implementation and reporting of the measures under the European Refugee Fund (ERF), the External Borders Fund (EBF) and the European Return Fund (RF); providing support and expertise to maximize the use of funding

under the Annual programmes 2012 and 2013 for ERF, EBF and RF; to deliver assistance in designing an effective management structure of the new funds - Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), and Internal Security Fund (ISF); and finally to deliver assistance in the elaboration of the national programmes for AMIF and ISF.

Achieved results and lessons learned

Results

- Templates for redrafting of the national programmes for AMIF and ISF were produced and partially filled out. Updated versions of proposals for actions to be included in the draft National Programme AMIF were submitted by the responsible institutions after consultations with the EASO expert and the redrafted NP was submitted to the EC.
- A blueprint for the management control system for the multiannual financial framework funds was developed, enabling the Responsible Authority to further design such a system.
- An information manual for the RA on AMIF for compliance with EU regulations was developed, which supported them in enhancing their capacity in this area.
- Assistance was given in producing the final reports for the RF 2011 and EBF 2011.
- Assistance was given to maximise the absorption in AP 2012 and 2013 for EBF and RF. The AP 2012, revised ERF had a high absorption of 97,05 % and 100% of the sub-actions were implemented. The AP 2013 ERF (eligibility up to 30.6.2015) has an absorption rate of about 50% (by the end of 2014). The absorption of the Emergency measures as a part of the ERF AP 2013, revised is 98,63%.
- An analysis of the progress of the implementation of the ERF Emergency Measures (EM) between 1.11.2013 and 19.3.2014 was developed.
- A sustainability report was produced to assist with the reporting on ERF EM.
- EASO experts carried out an evaluation of ERF AP 2013 EM and shared it with SAR, proposing steps for the future programming and implementation of EU funds in the area of asylum and integration of beneficiaries of protection. This includes ongoing consultations with EC regarding additional funding opportunities under AMIF, an analysis of staff distribution with a focus on social and psychological sectors and contingency planning to be better prepared in the event of a future massive and sudden influx of asylum seekers.

Lessons learned

- There were a number of challenges faced by the EASO experts while executing this measure, including communication and coordination between the various units in the Ministry of Interior as well as with the beneficiaries of the funds; time and capacity limitation of certain responsible teams; misunderstandings about advisory and support of EASO experts; limited consultations with relevant stakeholders to assess needs, funding priorities and strategy; and finally the pending elections.
- An established working plan for the long-term experts and regular meetings between EASO and the Responsible Authority on the state of play of implementation could have promoted commitment and ownership on the Bulgarian side.

Key recommendations

- MoI could use the blueprint provided by EASO support to conclude and implement the management control system for the multiannual financial framework funds.

- The RA requires additional assistance in improving its understanding of the eligibility of costs for the funds. In addition, exchange of experiences with the new payment and disbursement system would be beneficial.
- Support could be provided to improve transfer of knowledge between the current RA for ERF and EIF and the new RA for AMIF, given that this fund covers all areas of asylum, migration and integration.

EASO Measure 3.14 - Support with the collection and analysis of statistical asylum data

Data collection in the area of asylum is carried out by two main stakeholders: the State Agency for Refugees and the Chief Directorate Border Police including the Migration Directorate. Data collection and analysis is carried out primarily by SAR with the Automated Information System (AIS) Bezhantsi.

The EASO support measure aimed to enhance the capacity of Bulgarian officials to collect, analyse and report statistical data within the Common European Asylum System. The expected deliverables included a flowchart and a general structure of an IT-statistical platform, operative guidelines on asylum data collection, training, a set of indicators to qualify coherency of operational data, definition of qualitative and quantitative indicators of efficiency of the asylum process at 1st instance, a monitoring system of comparability for validated data processing.

As a pre-condition, a needs assessment of the statistical system was foreseen.

Achieved results and lessons learned

At the time of the evaluation, this support measure had been in the initial stages of implementation. Preliminary results achieved include:

- Nomination of two representatives in the EASO Group for the Provision of asylum Statistics (GPS) and attended the 3rd meeting in June 2014. This had led to increased exchange of ideas and practices as well as knowledge of these officials.
- Based on the expert discussions and meetings, Bulgaria provides EASO regularly with monthly data, including estimated EPS indicators (applicants, pending cases, decisions and withdrawals) according to GPS lines. In this regard, Bulgarian authorities are now more involved in the CEAS;
- An initial draft of the mapping report of data sources has been completed and will soon be shared with Bulgarian authorities, including a flowchart and a general structure of an IT-statistical platform and operative guides on collecting asylum information.

These tools will allow Bulgarian authorities to take steps to interconnect various data sources allowing for an improved information system; validate the existing data to provide it to relevant EU bodies and enhance their data systems to automatically extrapolate data required.

Lessons learned

EASO faced serious difficulties in identifying suitable Member State experts for implementing the measure. Despite all efforts (re-launching call for experts, contacting the members of the GPS and National Contact Points of the Members States) only one Member State expert was

nominated for a limited period of time, leading to a postponement of the measure. In-house resources and expertise were not sufficient to balance the lack of experts, which resulted in a low level of implementation.

In case of measures requiring particular expertise that may not be available through Member State nominations, EASO should continue to explore additional -possible external- options for guaranteeing experts for the provision of support. Having backup solutions would allow EASO to be more effective and flexible in such situations.

Key recommendations

A continued participation of Bulgaria in the EASO Group for the Provision of asylum Statistics (GPS) and ongoing networking would be beneficial to exchange of ideas and practices and increasing knowledge and skills.

Based on the initial tools provided through this measure, the various Bulgarian stakeholders working on data collection, analysis and reporting should continue their efforts and increase their coordination. Eventually an integrated information management system could be jointly developed.

Conclusions and key recommendations

Over the past 11 months, 17 support measures have been implemented until the end of September 2014, contributing to significant progress achieved by the Bulgarian government in improving its asylum and reception system. In total, these measures included over 50 activities, implemented by 64 experts. More than half of the EU Member States (15) and Norway contributed to the success of the Operating Plan through valuable expertise and know-how.

The commitment of the Bulgarian authorities, especially those staff dedicating their time and efforts to the cooperation with EASO and the Member State experts, was the driving force in achieving the results of the Plan. Together MoI, SAR and EASO staff members working on the implementation of the Operating Plan were able to establish an open and trustful collaboration that greatly facilitated the efficiency and effectiveness of the support operations. In particular, the high level of political support and backing on the part of MoI and SAR was crucial to the continued close cooperation between EASO and Bulgarian partners.

Thanks to this strong willingness and active contribution of the SAR and MoI management, the work of EASO was greatly facilitated. These managers ensured the strategic direction of the support measures, helped to secure the involvement of the responsible stakeholders at different levels and finally took steps to achieve ownership and take up of the deliverables. EASO did, however, experience some challenges in implementing the Plan due to gaps between the needs and expectations expressed at different levels of the Bulgarian national administration. For this reason, some EASO support measures did not fully respond to the context at the working level. However, the willingness and ability of EASO to be flexible was important to adjust the support in such situations. Currently, EASO is exploring ways to include more in-depth operational needs analysis into the preparation of Support Plans despite the time constraints faced in emergency situations. In addition, it is essential for the Host Member State receiving support to understand their needs at all levels and communicate them to EASO.

Main achievements of the EASO Operating Plan to Bulgaria include support with the following:

1. *Set-up of a Registration Unit in the Distribution Centre Elhovo and development of a registration manual;*
2. *Installation of Eurodac and DublinNet workstations as well as decentralization of the Dublin procedure, implementation of Dublin training;*
3. *Establishment of a COI Unit, development of COI factsheets on Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq and Syria, increased skills and knowledge of the COI Unit and caseworkers in the field of COI by COI workshops and training;*
4. *Development of new templates for the general procedure and decision process, updated guidelines and checklists;*
5. *Newly hired staff acquired basic skills necessary for their daily work via 'core trainings', caseworkers increased knowledge in drafting and decision making, capacity building of 7 national trainers in different EASO Training Modules;*
6. *Interpreters increased knowledge about their role and responsibilities in the interview*
7. *Evaluation of the ERF emergency measures highlighting achievements and recommendations for future programming;*
8. *Improved implementation and absorption capacity of ERF, EBF and RF, support in developing a management and control system for MFF;*
9. *Design of Terms of Reference for the development of an electronic barcode card system in order to procure hardware and software components.*

Some of the expected results of the Support Plan could not be fully achieved due to lack of available experts to meet the requested needs in the particular period in which they were required. This led to incomplete implementation of some measures and delays in others. Furthermore, emergency situations in Bulgaria required long-term deployments of experts to give strategic management advice and support in coordinating efforts from different stakeholders. This support was planned for Bulgaria, but could not be implemented because of there were no such experts available for such long periods.

In addition, limited resources on the Bulgarian side posed constraints on the timely implementation of the support measures. For example, in several cases EASO measures were coordinated by the same persons in SAR, who had to balance their time between the implementation of the EASO support measures and their regular tasks. The planned revision of the Law on Asylum and Refugees as well as upcoming elections also led to some limitations regarding the extent some measures could be implemented. In this sense, it would be important for EASO to work on including risk management strategies in future Support Plans.

Based on the above conclusions, the following **overall recommendations** can be proposed.

For Bulgaria

- In the future, the efforts of the Bulgarian authorities could place greater focus on achieving sustainability through institutionalizing and integrating available knowledge and tools into daily work and processes. Specific suggestions are outlined throughout this report in each area of EASO support.
- While the Bulgarian efforts to improve their asylum and reception system have until now primarily focused on accelerating existing processes and procedures as well as increasing capacities, there is currently a need to develop further quality assurance methodologies and tools in several areas. First steps have been taken in the asylum

determination process, but could be further developed and extended to other fields like registration and reception.

- Further increasing the capacity in various areas (COI, statistics, EU funding and training) is essential to ensuring sustainability and quality. A key element to this process would be continued work on a national training plan as well as augmenting the number of national trainers in the EASO Training Curriculum.
- The success of enhancing the asylum registration and Dublin workflow depends on the establishment of an shared platform linking existing database and enabling different access levels on a need-to-know basis and increased cooperation amongst all actors involved.
- Further development of strategic planning and policy development in the area of reception, including SOPs and quality standards, would be beneficial to ensuring a stable system that can adapt to varying flows and provide high standards.
- Additional attention to vulnerable groups throughout the asylum and reception system is necessary. This includes improvements in the screening, identification and referral mechanism (including collaboration agreements with institutions and organisations for referral) as well as procedural safeguards and specialised attention for such groups. For example increased numbers of social workers, access to education as well as formalized appointments of guardians are important.
- Given the high number of beneficiaries of international protection, both within and outside the Reception Centres, integration opportunities must be improved and for certain groups be part of the early asylum process.
- There is a strong need for contingency planning, i.e. including the practical preparation in case of large influx of applicants for international protection, setting up a national preparedness framework in which reception conditions and access to the asylum procedure should be made available as soon as possible, avoiding delays and creation of backlog.

For **EASO** in general

The Operating Plan to Bulgaria was agreed upon and signed in a very short time to respond quickly to the emerging needs on the Bulgarian side and to pave the way for the Member States to render solidarity to Bulgaria in dealing with the significantly increasing influx of people seeking protection, arriving mainly from Syria. Within a short timeframe, EASO and Bulgaria were able to prepare and agree on the practical details of the support measures included in the Plan. During the first months of operation, EASO learned more detailed facts about the Bulgarian asylum and reception system, which led to the need for certain adjustments in the implementation of the Plan (related to the structure of the system as well as available resources).

While it is natural to align the support in time according to the operational situation on the ground, more in-depth information on the functioning of the Bulgarian asylum and reception authorities and their mid-term operational objectives would have enabled a more tailor-made support from the beginning of the implementation. However, it is often a challenge for the Member State under particular pressure to define these needs at the moment that emergency arises and support is requested. This fact can be mitigated in the future as EASO learns more and more in detail about the Member States asylum and reception systems.

Since EASO is a relatively newly established EU Agency, knowledge about EASO's work and mandate is still limited in certain Member States and administrations. In case of an EASO Support Plan, an information flyer about the tasks of EASO in general and the structure of EASO operational support in particular could be distributed in the respective working language at all levels involved. This would facilitate EASO's work and set the operations in the right context. In the case of Bulgaria, a certain understanding was achieved after the first months of operation.

Retrospectively, the support offered to Bulgaria was very dynamic and implemented according to the original Operating Plan as well as arising needs. Until now, EASO has focused primarily on monitoring and reporting on the inputs and activities of the Plan, rather than looking at what results have been achieved. Currently, EASO is in the process of developing a system that will include aspects of such results-based monitoring and evaluation into all stages of the support measures so that the changes achieved through its support can be better measured compared to the situation prior to the intervention. This will include, for example, collecting baseline information to facilitate the implementation, reporting and also evaluation of the EASO support.

This evaluation also underlined the importance of a participatory approach on all levels and stages of EASO support. This requires that the stakeholders involved in the Plan are aware of the existing needs as well as expected results they wish to achieve together with EASO support. Only in this way can a high level of ownership and take-up be achieved. For example, in this support plan those measures with the highest participation and collaboration were the most successful as all the products developed (procedures, guidelines, templates, etc.) together with EASO experts were incorporated into the national system and used to facilitate the daily work of SAR staff. However, some measures with less participation led to the development of products that are not fully integrated or useful for those they were intended to support. EASO continuously encourages close cooperation of EASO experts with Bulgarian officials, but also depends on the Host Member State to take up the products to improve the asylum and reception system. In some cases, EASO should consider certain requirements in terms of participation and results prior continuing with certain activities.

In addition, EASO should promote and facilitate that whenever necessary the outputs of support, such as proposals or reports, are available in the language of the host Member States, in this case Bulgarian, to increase the dissemination of information and incorporation in the daily work. Although this was previously agreed with Bulgarian authorities, the resources were not always available. Ensuring translations could have made some proposals by EASO experts more useful for SAR. An agreement on translation should be reached at the start of each measure.

Finally, based on the feedback received by EASO experts deployed in Bulgaria (and other support operations), EASO is also working on tools to assist them in delivering their support and communicating with the host Member State. In particular, a handbook is being developed with tips to help improve their ability to transfer their expertise and to collaborate with their colleagues in the host MS. EASO is also exploring other ways to enhance the preparation and briefing of experts and to link experts who have been deployed in the same MS to facilitate exchange of information that could be useful for the support to be provided. Several tools are under development in this sense.



Annexes

Annex 1: Evaluation criteria per EASO measure

EASO Measure 3.1 and 3.2 - Support with identification and pre-registration of mixed flows and referral of beneficiaries of international protection

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>Given the significant increase in the influx of persons requesting international protection and the pressure on the BG asylum and reception system, EASO support in this area addressed the existing needs.</i>	<i>EASO support was effective as it contributed to eliminating the registration backlog and ensuring long-term improvements in optimizing the registration process and building the capacity of SAR to carry out these tasks in an efficient and effective manner. Based on EASO support and technical advice, SAR has improved its processes and equipped its staff with relevant tools, such as the registration manual and more interpreters. The number of SAR staff performing registration was also increased, and SAR has created a mechanism to allow for flexibility in placement of staff according to the needs of each regional centre.</i>	<i>BG officials perceive the impact of the Operating Plan as positive. SAR officials and managers value the tools, knowledge and skills gained and have requested further training.</i> <i>Another positive impact is that there is a single procedure for registration in place in all regional centres. In addition, EASO has raised increased awareness within SAR and the Migration Directorate about the issue of different IT systems storing personal data of aliens and asylum seekers, which are not interlinked, and how this can hamper a smooth process of identification and registration, especially in case of a high influx.</i>	<i>As a result of the operational support, increased capacities of registration officials and the new registration team in the Distribution Centre Elhovo has been put in place, which is an indicator that BG is now prepared to face a situation similar to the one in 2013.</i> <i>However, with regards to the EASO training and newly acquired knowledge and skills, there is currently no plan by BG authorities on how knowledge achieved can be kept, multiplied and updated within the organization as well as passed on to new employees.</i>

EASO Measures 3.3 – Support with top 3 countries of origin

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>The provision of COI factsheets responded to the lack of up-to-date information on the top countries of origin of asylum seekers, namely Syria, Afghanistan, Algeria and Iraq.</i> <i>At the time when the factsheets</i>	<i>Caseworkers expressed that the factsheets facilitate their daily work especially in preparing for interviews as well as for the evidence and credibility assessment. Caseworkers noted that COI factsheets were useful as they compiled necessary information in one document, which is easy to use. Several caseworkers</i>	<i>The factsheets help to increase the efficiency of the COI Unit as requests for general information were reduced and COI staff could focus on more specific requests. Caseworkers expressed that they were better prepared for interviews and the quality of their decisions has improved</i>	<i>The COI Unit was closely involved in the development of the factsheets, which were officially included in the in-house COI database (including official reference number, date and signature of the Director of the International Cooperation Directorate). The factsheets are institutionalized as official sources used in</i>

were finalized, the number of applicants from Algeria had dropped significantly, so that the factsheet for this country was less relevant. In the future, better communication would be necessary to ensure that measures are tailored to the needs existing at this very moment. The COI workshops responded to the need for improved knowledge and skills of caseworkers on COI in general and the top countries of origin. Most caseworkers had received little or no training in the area previously.	mentioned specific information they received in the COI workshops that have helped them in assessing asylum claims, especially from Afghanistan.	through the availability of official and reliable COI information. The caseworkers expressed that the training workshops helped them to improve the quality of their asylum decisions in the long run.	the preparation of interviews, evidence and credibility assessment and cited in asylum determination decisions. For sustainability, the capacity of the COI Unit should be further developed in order to ensure that the existing factsheets can be updated regularly and that new factsheets can be developed according to arising needs.
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EASO Measure 3.4 – Support with decisions at 1st instance

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
This measure responded to the need for quality guidance and assurance given that there were no available standardized checklists or templates to assist (newly hired) staff in their work prior to EASO support.	Caseworkers expressed that these new quality assurance tools facilitate their work and are consistently used in their daily work. Caseworkers noted that these tools helped them to conduct better interviews and to structure their decisions based on the concrete steps and legal basis provided. A legal advisor noted that the decision template is a useful tool to review decision in a consistent and coherent manner.	As the introduction of these tools is very recent (approximately one month prior to the evaluation), it is too early to assess if they have led to improved quality of first instance decisions – and if therefore less cases are overturned in court. Caseworker expressed that however they feel supported in their work through these templates and more confident in their interviews and decisions. In case of need, they continue to contact the Quality Unit in Sofia directly for any additional support necessary on complicated issues.	The tools provided have been officially implemented into the national asylum determination procedure and are being used by SAR caseworkers. The process was carried out in close collaboration between EASO and SAR experts, ensuring that EU and national quality standards were integrated. The SAR Quality Unit remains committed to using these tools and continuously improving them.

EASO Measure 3.5 - Support to the Bulgarian Dublin Unit

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>The support measure responded to an existing need given the increased influx of asylum applicants and the challenges BG stakeholders faced in carrying out the Dublin procedure in an efficient and effective manner.</i>	<i>Based on EASO experts' recommendations, the BG Dublin process was decentralized and Eurodac stations were installed at all Centres, DublinNet improvements have been made and training of caseworkers, managers and other BG stakeholders involved in Dublin related matters has been provided. The level of knowledge and skills on the Dublin Procedure has been enhanced.</i>	<i>The impact of the measure was positive: the overall registration process and Dublin procedure was accelerated and enhanced through the results of the EASO support. The decentralization of the Dublin procedure and the installation of Eurodac and DublinNet workstations, for example, helped to facilitate the improvements in these processes. The manager of one Registration and Reception Centre (receiving a significant number of applicants) reported that trainings also helped to decrease the number of mistakes made in the files. It was furthermore noted that the visits from the Dublin Unit in Sofia to the regional centres for support and training have increased. Officials and managers in the regional centres noted that EASO has assisted SAR in Sofia to provide better support to the regions, for example through written guidelines. Staff from the regional centres expressed that they now have a better understanding of the Dublin procedure and on how to work with Dublin cases and that they are able to share their knowledge to colleagues.</i>	<i>The decentralization of the Dublin process has enabled BG to improve its long-term capacity to deal with higher inflows. However, in the long term, a manual on Dublin related matters with clearly outlined guidelines and procedures would be of benefit. There is a need for a continued regular knowledge sharing between SAR HQ and regional centres on Dublin related matters.</i>

EASO Measure 3.6 – Support with the enhancement of a reception system

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>- Inflow of asylum seekers increased dramatically as from Aug 2013, reaching nearly 6 times the number of applications as compared to previous years. Reception capacity stood then at 1220 places. Capacity was quickly increased by the use of tents and dilapidated buildings, leading to a humanitarian crisis. Hence, to provide support in planning to increase reception capacity was obviously relevant.</i>	<i>- Various discussions and proposals of EASO experts led to better understanding of the situation and the gaps, and gave ideas and suggestions for further actions. For example, the decision to make Banya a specialised centre for UAM and single mothers was taken after an EASO expert had made this suggestion</i> <i>- Uniform internal rules, rights and obligations, finalised in June 2014, do now exist in all Reception Centres, ensuring greater harmonisation and basic</i>	<i>One unexpected result of this measure was the participation of Bulgarian reception authorities in existing European networks on reception, including ENARO and EPRA. These contacts and attendance of meetings has led to increased exchange of ideas and practices for Bulgarian officials.</i>	<i>- Documentation or factsheets that were translated in Bulgarian, either directly or through minutes produced by Bulgarian participants, are likely to be continued to be used</i> <i>- Internal rules may be adapted in the future but will remain in place as the main guideline for reception</i> <i>- The transposition of the EU</i>

- Reception quality standards were not met in Oct 2013. A proposal for quality standards for reception was delivered. - As reception capacity and institutional capacity were at such a basic level in Oct 2013, and as funds were limited, it may have been a relevant but somewhat ambitious plan to already intend to draft SOPs and a referral system for vulnerable groups at this stage.	rights and information of all applicants. Minimum standards as developed with the help of EASO are not put in place as a policy document but are largely adhered to; - EASO support did raise some awareness on the need for improved data – currently understanding of migration flows and reception needs has increased, data management improved significantly - The development and implementation of SOPs was not achieved. It may be more appropriate to the Bulgarian context to apply the concept of 'instructions' to achieve more standardisation on the one hand, and on the other to continue training specifically regarding reception which will permit further exchange of experiences, good practices and will improve the required attitude for working in reception with a vulnerable public with specific needs. - The proposals EASO developed together with SAR should have been made available in Bulgaria in order to make them more useful for SAR - The EASO training for strategic planning at basic, intermediate and advanced level that was proposed by an EASO expert was not yet taken up but is considered by SAR a relevant training that would be very useful for newly-hired staff in the regional centres.		directives in the BG Refugee Act, which is planned after the upcoming elections, will further ensure sustainability - It is not clear which unit of SAR is meant to develop SOPs or reception policies. The legal unit has drafted the internal rules. This must be clarified; - Turnover of staff is high and some contracts are temporary, which may lead to loss of expertise; freelance contracts for essential tasks should be made permanent - Sustainability will largely depend on continued funding and political support to enhance provisions through the national budget. Outcome of the upcoming elections may have an impact; - Collaboration with other relevant bodies such as education, health care and social services needs to continue and further be enhanced - Employment creation might ensure sustainability of measures taken e.g. increase of staff, provided there are sufficient funds
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EASO Measure 3.7 – Support with referral of UAM and vulnerable persons

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
- The need for identification and referral of vulnerable groups was certainly relevant during the implementation of the EASO support. BG processes did not sufficiently	- Direct results achieved in this measure are limited. The manual developed is not used, nor translated into BG.	- Few intended impacts of this measure were achieved as the manual is not used and	- Lack of coordination with ongoing initiatives and limited ownership led to an unsustainable result. The annual should have been

comply with the EU directives. However, some attention should have been given to the complementarity of this measure with ongoing initiatives such as the RVA project. - As the measure was not really fully taken up by the authorities, further measures would be required. At present a distinction is made between accompanied UAMs and UAMs that are not considered accompanied. The former are UAMs, who are accompanied by a relative, a sibling, or a person they know, and hence they are not perceived to be UAMs. Only 'isolated' UAMs are transferred to Banya which is considered a centre specialised in the reception of UAM. At Banya, the 'specialised' care consists mainly of the fact that the centre accommodates only vulnerable groups, and there is a children's playground. A lot of the UAM run away from the centre, as there is nothing meaningful to do. Age assessment is presently rarely carried out (only wrist analysis which has a high margin of error) and is costly; there are plans to also provide for dental analysis. However, age assessment is relevant, also to protect other UAMs from adult applicants pretending to be minor. - Other vulnerable groups are mainly identified based on visible or self-evident signs, such as family composition or gender (single mothers), pregnancy, visible handicaps, severe illness... However, as the means or specialised reception to address special needs is equally limited, both would have to be addressed and improved at the same time. - There appears to be no process for identifying or protecting victims of human trafficking. - Focus of social work activities has been on getting children to school or in language classes, and organising other social activities, and less on identifying or referring	- Awareness has been raised, however. In February there were still families accommodated in Banya alongside UAMs, this has now stopped (except for single mothers). Reception of UAMs in Registration and Reception Centre Sofia remains problematic however, as they are considered 'accompanied' UAMs. - The shortage of social workers contributes to a large extent to the lack of proper identification and referral. There has to be sufficient staff available to consult and implement a manual or new procedures, including a sufficient number of social workers in the regional centres.	- proposals to improve the referral system were not developed. - However, the participation in projects regarding vulnerability screening such as the EASO quality tool and the Protect project was stimulated due to the raised awareness of the gaps in the BG system.	- developed in greater collaboration with SAR and other actors active in this area in order to promote greater ownership and sustainability. - Participation in the EASO quality tool workshops will enhance capacity to improve vulnerability screening and referral mechanisms. It could also allow for an exchange of good practices in EU-MS. - The Migration Directorate continues with its own vulnerability and medical screening and identification system. Some more coordination between the Migration Directorate and SAR would be useful. - As the medical check-up is now an integral part of the intake procedure in Reception Centres, and as medical staff are now part of the staff of a centre, some aspects of vulnerability screening and identification could be achieved - More social workers and more specialised staff should be recruited. All staff should be trained in vulnerability assessment, including training for accommodation officers. - The referral system needs to be further developed and improved.
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vulnerable groups, however there was no specific measure to improve access to education. - There has to be sufficient staff available to consult and implement manual or new procedures, for such a measure to be effective. This may have been underestimated at the time of proposal of the measure.			
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EASO Measure 3.8 – Support in dealing with backlog at 1st instance

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
At the beginning of EASO support in the last quarter of 2013, SAR was facing an influx six times higher than the previous year. This particular pressure on the asylum system created a need for optimizing asylum processes to accelerate and prioritize procedure to reduce and avoid creating new backlog.	SAR is now better prepared to optimize their asylum process in order to deal with possible higher influxes. The SAR Quality Unit expressed satisfaction with the support provided as it provided them with a practical tool to use in preparing for higher influxes and to optimize existing resources. In this process, SAR identified several continuing gaps with regard to improving its capacity to optimize its asylum processes and ensure quality. This is primarily related to the lack of sufficient resources, primarily in terms of staff.	It is too early to measure impacts.	The Quality Unit of SAR now has relevant tools to prepare for and deal with possible backlogs. There are several proposals developed in coordination with the EASO experts, which SAR can consider for subsequent implementation. This includes, for example, the need to ensure that caseworkers are able to focus on their tasks (preparing interview, conducting interview, evidence assessment and drafting decisions), rather than on administrative and logistical preparations.

EASO Measure 3.9 – Support in absorption of the emergency financial support to Bulgaria provided by the EU Funds under SOLID Programme

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
- The need for assistance in maximising absorption rates for the various funds in view of the acute asylum and reception crisis, as well as supporting institutional capacity for the management and programming of the AMIF and ISF funds was relevant, given the needs in this area at the time of implementation. - However, as there was limited engagement from some relevant units	- The assistance rendered was in some aspects very effective, in some others less effective: - Absorption rates under ERF AP 2012, revised and especially ERF AP 2013, revised EM were very high. These funds were primarily used to provide for enhancing reception and living conditions for applicants and to increase institutional capacity for SAR, in other words to address the severe crisis that Bulgaria	- An additional measure – an electronic card system - to be funded under the EM was proposed by an EASO expert. Though the measure did not get accepted under the EM, it was taken up through the national budget and is currently being developed. - SAR will use the recommendation from the evaluation report to	- The RA for the new AMIF fund does not at present have the knowledge of the ERF and EIF - There is little exchange of information and experience, limited consultation with stakeholders... all contributing to sustainability problems

and authorities, additional prior consultations should have taken place to ensure full commitment to and ownership of the EASO support.	faced. The effects in this regard were considerable - As to the absorption rates for the EBF and RF funds, they are high for the AP 2012 but for AP 2013 still have to increase; EASO experts assisted in finding solutions for the absorption of RF - The necessary support was given to redraft the NP for AMIF and ISF, and the NP for AMIF was ultimately submitted - Further development of the management control system will depend on the appointment of the MoI as RA (after the elections)	amend the proposed actions of AP 2013, revised ERF should it be necessary, to ensure better absorption of the funds.	for management of the future funds - There is limited capacity for understanding and obtaining funding priorities from beneficiaries of the funds and for planning a coherent strategy
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EASO Measures 3.10 and 3.11 – Support with core training of newly hired staff members and training in modules of the EASO Training Curriculum

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
In January and February 2014, SAR hired 160 new staff, many of whom had no previous experience in the asylum field. There was a significant need to provide immediate and condensed introductory training that would allow asylum officials to gain basic knowledge and skills, but not take much time away from their work during the period of particular pressure.	Many caseworkers attending the training expressed improvement in their skills and knowledge and the ability to apply them their daily work. Many caseworkers also expressed increased confidence and motivation in their work as this training gave them.	The Directors of two regional centres (outside of Sofia) as well as senior colleagues in another centre expressed having noted clear improvements in the performance and confidence of the newly-hired SAR staff after the training. These improvements in the confidence, motivation, skills and knowledge of asylum officials as well as in the quality of their work can be partially attributed to the EASO training measure given that many officials had no prior knowledge of asylum procedure. In addition to EASO support, the efforts of SAR internally including coaching and guidance from more experienced caseworkers as well as from legal advisors, Quality Unit, and COI Unit were essential in this regard.	The knowledge and skills gained by asylum officials will stay with them and continue to develop through further experience. However, the sustainable knowledge transfer is depending on staff turnover, which is particularly relevant in Sofia. SAR and MoI actively supported the organization of the trainings and ensured that as many asylum officials as possible were able to participate in the trainings. BG authorities are committed to continuing the training through the trainer-of-training methodology of the EASO Training Curriculum. SAR assumed ownership of this measure, closely cooperating with EASO and acting as co-trainers for several sessions on COI and the national asylum law and procedures. EASO trained national trainers and translated three core modules into Bulgarian, which enable SAR to develop and carry out national trainings for all (new) staff. It would be useful to include such actions in a national training plan to ensure continued sustainability.

EASO Measure 3.12 – Support with capacity building in the field of COI

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>At the time the OP was signed, Bulgaria did not have a COI Unit, but instead two BG officials working on COI among several other tasks. They were unable to provide the necessary support to caseworkers. The EASO measure was able to respond to this need by promoting the development of a COI Unit with six staff members in March 2014 and building their capacity.</i> <i>Several areas for additional and complementary measures were identified, including:</i> <i>Improvements to the national COI portal</i> <i>Defining and further clarifying the tasks and responsibilities of the COI Unit, including through the development of a mission statement</i> <i>Increased skills and knowledge through further training (both through workshops and on the job training) in several areas (researching skills, responding to requests, updating factsheets)</i>	<i>The COI Unit was supported in enhancing its capacity in several ways including training on EASO COI portal, technical advice on workflow management and the participation in EASO COI networks and practical cooperation workshops.</i> <i>The BG officials working in the COI Unit expressed that the training and practical cooperation workshops provided have led to significant improvements in their COI knowledge and skills that are applied in their daily work. Both newly hired as well as more experienced staff noted that the EASO support has facilitated their daily work, such as research skills and tools and exchange of ideas and practices.</i>	<i>The establishment of a COI Unit has led to overall improvements in the ability to provide quick and comprehensive replies to COI inquiries of caseworkers.</i>	<i>The work of the newly established COI Unit will continue after EASO support ends. The COI officials have enhanced skills and knowledge to provide timely and quality replies to COI requests. COI staff is committed to continue building their capacities and to maintain the benefits of the EASO support; however, they face some constraints in terms of the other tasks they are assigned, which does not allow them to focus on their core mandate.</i>

EASO Measure 3.13 –Support with regard to 2nd instance

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>The needs assessment carried out as part of this measure ensured that the EASO support measure was tailored to the specific existing needs of judges. All relevant stakeholders were consulted as part of the needs assessment (NIJ, SAR, UNHCR, and Helsinki Committee). Close cooperation with the National Institute of Justice and participation from the Sofia Administrative Court and the Bulgarian Supreme Administrative Court also ensured that the workshop was focused on national needs.</i>	<i>Expected results have been achieved through the active preparation and participation of all stakeholders and EASO experts.</i> <i>100% of participants in the tailor-made workshop felt that they gained more knowledge and skills in the areas covered and expressed overall satisfaction with the training provided.</i>	<i>It is too early to measure the impact due to the fact that the workshop took place on 29 and 30 September 2014. The aim is that the workshop facilitated the improvement in the knowledge and skills of the judges and prosecutors and improved the quality of the decisions taken by the judges from the Regional Administrative Courts and the Supreme Administrative Court, applying ECtHR and using COI in a coherent and comprehensive way.</i>	<i>Ownership of this support measure was guaranteed through the active participation of the NIJ in the planning and implementation of this measure. Judges expressed that they will apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills in their future decisions.</i> <i>Further training needs were identified by the participating judges and prosecutors. Although the NIJ has the capacity to support the logistics of such trainings, they would require external support to invite relevant expertise. In addition, judges indicated the need to include the Bulgarian National Bar Association (Vish Adcokacki Sevet) to train legal advisers, who have limited knowledge of the CEAS.</i>

EASO Measure 3.14 – Support with the collection and analysis of statistical asylum data

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>Data collection in the area of asylum is carried out by three main stakeholders: State Agency for Refugees, Chief Directorate Border Police and Migration Directorate. Data collection and analysis is carried out primarily with the Automated Information System (AIS). The EASO support measure aimed at mapping and addressing some of the existing gaps in data management capacity, including scattered data sources and lack of coordination among data collectors and users.</i>	<i>Take up and effectiveness could not be measured as the expected outputs are not yet completed.</i> <i>An initial draft of the mapping report of data collection, analysis and reporting has been completed and will soon be shared with Bulgarian authorities. This mapping proposes measures Bulgarian authorities can take to improve their data management capacities, including steps necessary to: Interconnect various data sources allowing for an improved information system; validate the existing data to provide it to relevant EU bodies; enhance their data systems to automatically extrapolate data required.</i>	<i>It is too early to assess the impact of this measure.</i>	<i>Future efforts in this area by Bulgarian authorities and support organization should focus on developing an integrated migration and asylum information system. Such a system would result in sustainable improvements in the provision and processing of data. This would help Bulgarians ensure that data can be used as an effective evidence-based management tools and to respond the need to EU-wide compatible data.</i>

EASO Measure 3.15 – Support with developing an Electronic Card System

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>There is a need for integration of the various databases, as data is sometimes logged several times and excel sheets are currently used. The existing databases are not automatically linked. The Bulgarian authorities expressed a need for a residents management system in reception and accommodation centres that will allow for improved bed management and rendering of services to residents at the level of each centre. Finally, there is need for a system that will allow for management of the entire reception system, the inflow and outflow and allocation of reception places. Expectations for this system to solve a number of issues in reception are high.</i> <i>EASO was involved in the discussions concerning the Bulgarian software and hardware requirements, and BG authorities drafted the TORs in Bulgarian based on the system plan developed with EASO support.</i>	<i>The EASO technical support and advice as well as hands-on demonstration of the Hungarian model was well received and led to improved knowledge of SAR officials and supported them in drafting the TORs for their own system.</i>	<i>This measure has led to increased reflection on the various responsibilities of different units in data and process management. In addition, it has increased dialogue and reflection on management needs, as the card system also involves strategic information gathering.</i>	<i>The card system will be funded through the national budget. Procurement contracts of this magnitude attract a lot of interest and can take many months (especially due to long appeals, which suspend the process).</i> <i>If the system is implemented, the measure may prove sustainable given that it will have led to a new national system.</i> <i>The extent to which all the processes and needs have indeed been thoroughly analysed could not be assessed. If not done thoroughly, this may present a risk for the implementation and maintenance of the system.</i>

EASO Measure 3.16 – Ad-hoc workshops - Case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>The training has been tailored to the needs of the participants, based on their daily work and their initial level of knowledge. It was specifically requested by the legal advisors from SAR.</i>	<i>The training was effective as the persons trained are better equipped to apply the CJEU rules in the asylum determination procedure, both in administrative and judicial phases and in the Dublin procedure.</i>	<i>The impact was positive as the legal counselors are better informed on how to apply the case law of the CJEU.</i>	<i>The knowledge achieved during the workshop is used in the daily work of the legal advisers, who expressed that they have a better understanding of the case law of the CJEU.</i> <i>In order to enhance the quality of the decisions in the asylum procedure and Dublin, using the knowledge received during the training there has to be a method within SAR to keep the information up-to-date.</i>

EASO Measure 3.16 – Ad-hoc workshops – Training of interpreters in the asylum process

Relevance	Effectiveness	Impact	Sustainability
<i>The measure was specifically requested by the BG authorities, in relation to the new interpreters hired as a result of the increased number of asylum applications.</i>	<i>The measure was effective as the interpreters expressed much greater awareness of their roles and responsibilities in the interview. Their behaviour has changed in relation to the applicants and the authority officials.</i>	<i>The impact was very positive since interpreters are more confident in their role and more professional towards the applicants. They refrain from adding personal comments during the asylum process and the knowledge achieved during the training has been shared with other interpreters.</i>	<i>The newly hired interpreters who have attended the training provided by EASO are able to act as trainers for other colleagues. There is a Code of Conduct developed originally by UNHCR used by some interpreters of SAR. The Code of Conduct needs to be available to all interpreters. The materials produced during the workshops have been provided to BG stakeholders after translation.</i>



Annex 2: List of data collection methods

Desk review

- Operating Plan to Bulgaria including Amendment No 1,
- Deployment overview,
- EASO stocktaking report,
- Outline per measure from EASO perspective,
- Activity reports of the experts,
- Deliverables per measure (manuals, procedures, PowerPoint presentations, guidelines, agendas)
- Completed evaluation forms for several activities.

Key informant interviews

- Key informant interviews were mainly held with four profiles: registration officers, caseworkers, legal advisors and managers, working in the Regional Centres of the State Agency for Refugees.
- Furthermore, representatives from the Dublin Unit, COI Unit as well as statisticians were interviewed for specific measures related to their concrete tasks and mandate.

Focus groups

- One focus group was organised to cross check the information received during the field visits for Measure 3.3 regarding the development of fact sheets and Measure 3.4 concerning the quality tools drafted. By comparing the different statements made and asking corresponding questions, the evaluation team was able to validate the information and to achieve as a result a common understanding of the utility of the tools established (fact sheets and quality templates).

Meetings

- Besides the Headquarters of the State Agency for Refugees in Sofia, the evaluation team visited three Registration and Reception Centres (Banya, Harmanli, Sofia), three Accommodation Centres (Voenna Rampa, Vrazdebna, Kovachevtsi) as well as the Transit Centre Pastrogor and the Distribution Centre Elhovo. In addition, meetings with the Ministry of Interior have been held. Through these consultations and onsite visits, the experts were able to assess the EASO support to Bulgaria provided over the past eleven months.

Discussion workshop

- Two discussion workshops have been organised to present the draft report to the main stakeholders in order to check the factual basis of the evaluation and to discuss the findings and recommendations.
- This tool was used for a meeting with stakeholders on working level after the field visits have been completed as well as at the closing meeting of the evaluation.
- The profile of the participants in the first discussion workshop at working level included legal advisors, caseworkers, registration officers, members of the Dublin Unit and reception experts from the State Agency for Refugees as well as representatives from the International Cooperation Directorate at the Ministry of Interior.
- In the closing meeting, management level from SAR and MoI was present. Representatives included the Deputy Minister of Interior, the Deputy Chairperson of SAR, managers and directors as well as the coordinators of the Operating Plan to Bulgaria and the evaluation.

Questionnaire

- Questionnaire for 34 caseworkers to analyse the impact of the following measures:
 - o EASO Measure 3.3. Support on top 3 countries of origin
 - o EASO Measure 3.5. Support with regard to the Dublin III Regulation
 - o EASO Measure 3.10. Core training
- This tool proved to be excellent to collect anonymous data from all caseworkers employed by the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees and to get their feedback about the knowledge and skills gained in the workshops/trainings.