



The digitalisation of asylum processes

The information presented in this fact sheet is extracted from the [EASO Asylum Report 2021](https://www.easo.europa.eu/easo-asylum-report-2021/13-digital-connectivity-and-digitalisation). Direct link to the section: <https://www.easo.europa.eu/easo-asylum-report-2021/13-digital-connectivity-and-digitalisation>

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred governments and the international community in general to use new technologies in the field of asylum to ensure a continuity of services. Digitalisation can increase the efficiency in the functioning of asylum and migration systems, improve accessibility to services and promote connectivity among refugees and migrations.

While the benefits are clear, attention has been drawn to the potential of new technologies to exacerbate existing divides and exclude those who do not possess digital literacy or access to equipment.



Key developments extracted from the EASO Asylum Report 2021

- **Access to the asylum procedure:** Some countries started to introduce and pilot systems to manage the identification of applicants for international protection over 2020. The Netherlands has already been using a self-registration tool through which asylum applicants can provide personal data electronically, so registration staff become involved at a later stage more briefly for verification. Many experts, civil society organisations and asylum authorities are closely following the developments in these innovations.ⁱ
- **The Dublin procedure:** The COVID-19 pandemic was not a catalyst for further digitalisation of the Dublin procedure. Support for the identification of some potential Dublin cases has already been considerably digitalised, for example through the use of Eurodac, the Visa Information System (VIS) and the Schengen Information System (SIS). In addition, communication between countries was already done electronically through DubliNet.
- **Processing asylum applications at first instance:** First instance procedures were quickly automated to allow applicants to book an appointment, check the status of their application, submit relevant documents or be notified about the first instance decision online. Many countries conducted personal interviews through videoconferencing and IT tools were developed for language analysis. The new e-services were effective in limiting the physical

presence of asylum applicants during the first instace procedure and ensured continued communication with an applicant. In effect, digitalisation allowed for the timely notification of decisions and facilitated the right to an effective remedy. Nonetheless, some civil society organisations, such as Caritas Vienna,ⁱⁱ cautioned that some applicants faced difficulties in navigating the online tools and contacting authorities through email.

- **Processing asylum applications at second or higher instances:** Judicial authorities launched electronic tools for the remote submission of appeals and the delivery of relevant communication and decisions. Courts and tribunals in some countries made use of electronic or digital signatures to issue decisions. However, technical support and the training of judges and clerks on how to conduct hearings remotely were a challenge in many countries.
- **Reception of applicants for international protection:** The rollout of reception management systems continued in 2020. These systems include a comprehensive overview of an applicant's file, including any special needs, and improve the assignment of accommodation and specific support. They often comprise of an entry-exit system, increasing security within reception facilities. At the same time, these systems potentially raise issues of data protection and have been found to be vulnerable for data leaks. The pandemic spurred reception centres to improve wifi connections and invest in more computers, particularly for online learning. However, support services to the most vulnerable applicants should also be provided in person rather than online.
- **Access to information:** Countries strengthened and adapted their practices to ensure effective access to information for asylum applicants and procedural fairness by: making use of new technologies, establishing alternative channels for the dissemination of information and raising awareness through electronic communication tools, such as online platforms and hubs, mobile applications and social media channels. Indeed, digitalisation not only helped during social distancing, but it also enabled information to reach more people in more languages, with ease and speed. Many countries developed dedicated hotlines and built on existing websites to ensure that information was available in many languages. Some platforms were equipped with interactive nodes where questions and replies could be posted.
- **Interpretation services:** Due to the implementation of new technologies and smart organisation, countries were able to implement a safe way to conduct interviews with interpretation. Interpretation by telephone and videoconferencing became the norm in several countries. Many countries already had systems in place for remote interviews, while other countries established online interviews for the first time. To assist, [EASO](#) and [UNHCR](#)ⁱⁱⁱ published guidelines on conducting remote interviews with a focus on remote interpretation.
- **Content of protection:** Digitalisation efforts affected various aspects of the content of protection differently. National authorities in recent years have focused on gathering and exchanging information to review and eventually withdraw protection, or to grant family reunification. Many integration support services moved online due to the pandemic, including language learning, social orientation and employment coaching. However, following these services was often difficult for newcomers, who were beginners in learning the language and could not properly understand or follow the instructions.
- **Return of former applicants:** To continue to provide information on return procedures and reintegration counselling, countries turned to remote communication. New systems were also put in place to enable applicants for a voluntary return to file a request online.

Furthermore, online communication tools were used to maintain communication with third countries on identification procedures of returnees and issuance of travel documents.^{iv}

- **Resettlement:** In line with the European Commission's [guidance](#) on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum, return procedures and resettlement,^v countries turned to digital solutions to continue activities. Digitalisation allowed national systems to continue to function and helped to stop backlog accumulation. Remote interviews were carried out to process resettlement cases referred by UNHCR and virtual pre-departure orientation were used to carry out preparatory activities for the integration of already-selected refugees.
- **Children and applicants with special needs:** New communication channels and digital tools were increasingly used to provide information about the asylum procedure in general, and in particular, material was adapted to reach out to children and applicants with special needs. Updates on health measures and procedures in the country were provided through YouTube videos, phone hotlines, posters and online platforms in the absence of traditional face-to-face communication. While digital information provision was often a good alternative, communication had to be adapted to applicants without the necessary digital skills. In addition, digital tools do not replace human contact and interaction which are essential for guaranteeing the best interests of children and applicants with special needs.

To search for more developments by topic, country or year, consult the [EASO National Asylum Developments Database](#).

To read more case law related to asylum, consult the [EASO Case Law Database](#).

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Sources

Please see the [Bibliography for the EASO Asylum Report 2021](#) for the full list of over 1,000 references.

ⁱ Deutsche Welle. (2017, March 17). *Automatic speech analysis software used to verify refugees' dialects*. <https://www.dw.com/en/automatic-speech-analysis-software-used-to-verify-refugees-dialects/a-37980819>

ⁱⁱ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2020). *Migration: Key fundamental rights concerns - Quarterly Bulletin - 2020: 1 July - 30 September 2020*. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-migration-bulletin-4_en.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2020, May 15). *Key Procedural Considerations on the Remote Participation of Asylum Seekers in the Refugee Status Determination Interview*. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5e73794.pdf>

^{iv} European Migration Network. (2021). *Inform #5 - Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on voluntary and forced return procedures and policy responses: Series of EMN-OECD informs on the impact of COVID-19 in the migration area*. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/00_eu_inform5_return_en.pdf

^v European Commission. (2020, April 16). *Communication from the Commission, COVID-19: Guidance on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement: C(2020)2516*. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/guidance-implementation-eu-provisions-asylum-return-procedures-resettlement.pdf>