



EASO Newsletter in 2014

Key COI Related Points

December 2014

January 2014

EASO delegation visits the Greek First Reception Service: includes training new staff in provision of COI

Update on EASO support activities, incl. training in Bulgaria: includes COI

EASO establishes focused consultation channels with civil society: EASO aims at developing a permanent two way dialogue with civil society (besides regular consultations during the annual Consultative Forum plenary meeting, the consultation on the Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the EU and the Annual Work Programme). In fact, during the past two years, several organisations have been involved more closely in specific areas of EASO work, and they share EASO's view that such cooperation has already yielded tangible results. EASO has decided to establish focused consultation channels with selected organisations on three key areas of EASO's work: unaccompanied minors (age assessment and family tracing), the EASO Training Curriculum (through the Reference Group), and the EASO Early warning and Preparedness System (EPS).

Iraq: COI Specialist Network and Practical Cooperation Workshop: The purpose of this meeting was to introduce participants of the Iraq network to each other and to the principles of EASO's Network Approach. Participants had the opportunity to discuss the objectives, potential activities and methods of communication of the Network. COI sources and activities were mapped and information gaps and recent developments in Iraq discussed. The use of the COI Portal, and in particular the use of the notification system was also explained to participants.

On the morning of 22 January, the COI specialists had a joint session with the participants of the Practical Cooperation Workshop on Iraq. The session looked into the current and likely future situation in Iraq. During this session, a COI specialist from the Swedish Migration Board was invited to present the key findings of a recent joint fact-finding mission with the Norwegian COI Unit Landinfo in Iraq.

Additionally, a Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), a pan-European think-tank, presented the complex political and security situation, while providing a historical perspective to the current conflict. Finally, a representative from the organization "Iraq Body Count" (IBC) gave an overview of the trends in casualties and nature of violence in recent years. The sources and methodology used by IBC to record such casualties were also explained.

As to the Practical Cooperation Workshop on Iraq, other sessions focused on the policy perspective and aimed at clarifying the main profiles of asylum applicants and commonly claimed grounds and at discussing divergences in recognition rates and choice in protection status. EASO presented data analysis on recent flows from Iraq as well as the outcomes of a questionnaire on applicants' profiles. In-depth discussions were then held on divergences in national decision policies, more specifically with regard to the application of Article 15c of the Qualification Directive. Specific case studies allowed for more practice-based discussions.

In the last part of the workshop, participants discussed key challenges related to refugee status determination for the Iraqi caseload, such as exclusion cases, vulnerable groups, credibility issues and COI gaps. The opportunities for an exchange of views between a mixed audience of COI researchers, decision/policy makers and UNHCR led to a better understanding of the situation in Iraq and will also, promote harmonisation of policy and practice in Member States in regard to this key source country.

The Quality Matrix In its kick-off meeting in November 2012, the Quality Matrix process began with an ambitious goal: to comprehensively map quality in the main aspects of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). A year later, on 10-11 December 2013, the EASO National Contact Points on Quality met in Malta for an annual meeting and concluded that in the course of 2013 EASO has made considerable progress in its work on Quality. Following its thematic approach, EASO, with the invaluable support of participating states, has already succeeded in mapping four core aspects, namely: Personal Interview; Evidence Assessment; Eligibility; Exclusion. In the process, experts from participating states, EASO, the European Commission and UNHCR have provided instrumental information on current asylum systems, examples of good practices and identified quality needs. Further, experts came together to discuss the most challenging issues and to identify possible solutions, learning from each other's experience and mutually reinforcing the quality of their systems. [...] The three topics tentatively envisaged to be in focus in 2014 are: Access to procedures; Special procedures, such as accelerated procedures, border procedures and subsequent applications; Reception conditions, including

identification of vulnerable persons.

February 2014

EASO training: to date 210 participants in COI training

Meeting between EASO Executive Director and a German delegation of the State Parliament (Landtag) from Baden-Württemberg included overview of EASO's products such as COI reports

Upcoming COI online Research Conference 26 & 27 March The objectives of the conference are to contribute to COI capacity-building by gathering and sharing knowledge and by identifying good practices regarding online research tools and methods. An assistant professor specialized in new/social/digital media and online journalism, a web and new media consultant, as well as representatives from ACCORD (the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation) and Huridocs (international NGO specialized in information technologies and documentation methods) are amongst the invited speakers and workshop facilitators. By inviting external experts specialised in the domain of internet research and experienced in training people, EASO intends to create an interactive environment focused on research methodology useful for COI researchers in the national asylum authorities and in organisations producing COI. During the conference, participants will be introduced to efficient online research tools, security and privacy of online research, information management and monitoring, potential and limits of social media as well as assessment of user-generated content platforms. They will have also the opportunity to explore various online tools during interactive workshops (How to find information which cannot be retrieved via search engines? How to validate pictures found via social media databases? How to effectively use Google maps, Twitter, Twitter's archive, Geofeedia?). On the second day of the Conference, a "marketplace" will give selected stakeholders (COI researchers, UNHCR/Refworld, ACCORD/Ecoi.net) the opportunity to present practical tools and best practices. The conference will end with a panel discussion on the state of play and future opportunities for online research in the field of COI.

Call for civil society input to the 2013 EASO Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the EU [ARC contributed]

Call for civil society input to the EASO Annual Work Programme 2015 [ARC contributed]

March 2014

Meeting between EASO Executive Director and French Office for Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) included discussions around enhanced collaboration between EASO and OFPRA, including on COI

EASO signed an Operating Plan which provides for support to Bulgaria, including on providing COI

EASO set up a 'communication multipliers' network composed of representatives of the Member States. The function of this group is to ensure that all EASO press-related information (such as EASO press releases and newsletters) and EASO publications (such as the annual report on the situation of asylum in the EU and the Country of Origin Information (COI) reports) reach the intended end users (including Ministry officials, case workers and COI experts).

EASO signed special support plan with Italy, in a number of prioritized areas, including on COI. An EASO team mapped out the Italian COI system and further advised on a possible technical upgrade. More specifically, support was given to support National Asylum Commission (NAC) in upgrading the so-called Italian SIPO system (Service of Information on Country of Origin) and further develop the Italian COI digitalized system. Specific analyst support was given, structuring existing data and offering criteria for uploading credible

information.

April 2014

Upcoming COI workshop on LGBTI (in light of European Resolution “EU Roadmap against homophobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity” which emphasises need for COI) The workshop will be open to COI researchers and analysts from EU+ countries, from selected organisations active in COI production (civil society) and UNHCR. This event will aim at sharing and aggregating knowledge on LGBTI-specific COI (terminology, research methodology, sources).

EASO training to be delivered on several modules including COI on 12 May 2014

COI online research conference - On 26 and 27 March 2014, around 50 COI professionals from 20 EU+ countries (EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland) attended EASO’s Conference on Country of Origin Information (COI) online research in Malta. The event discussed questions such as: how to use well-known search engines like Google most efficiently for a COI query, how to assess this information retrieved, e.g. a picture found on a social media platform like Facebook, How to choose and effectively use which (kind of) tool(s) for which kind of COI research. The Conference was open to civil society organisations active in COI production and asylum courts and tribunals. A Dutch technology expert specialised in new media and research for online journalists, an assistant Professor at University of Leuven, Belgium, an expert from ACCORD (the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation, Vienna) and a communications specialist at HURIDOCs (Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems International, Geneva), covered a broad variety of topics, from collecting and managing information (including social bookmarking), assessing and referencing sources and information from diverse social media platforms, to assuring security and privacy while doing research on sensitive issues. Interactive workshops and a market place offered the opportunity to try out some of the tools presented. Participants appreciated the balanced mixture of theory and practice and welcomed EASO’s timely initiative to keep pace with recent developments in internet tools and media.

COI strategic network meeting Representatives from 20 EU+ countries (EU member states + Norway and Switzerland), the Commission and UNHCR. Consists of heads of national COI units or persons otherwise responsible for COI-related activities within national asylum administrations. Meet biannually to provide guidance and feedback to EASO with regard to its COI activities in general and the activities of the COI Specialist Networks on specific countries of origin in particular. The April meeting started with an:

Update on MedCOI project (an ERF-funded project primarily aimed at providing reliable and high quality answers to queries about the availability and accessibility of medical services in countries of origin)

Meeting also provided an overview of recent EASO activities in the field of COI: COI online research conference, new developments of the Common COI Portal, the update of the EASO COI training module, operational support to Italy and Bulgaria, and a planned workshop on COI and LGBTI, presentation on Specialist Network activities and a presentation by the Commission on the new EU Funds (AMIF) and the opportunities they offer for projects in the field of COI. Main discussion topics related to EASO COI production by the Specialists Networks, the establishment of a pilot EASO COI Query System within Specialist Networks, and possible information exchange between EU+ countries on COI fact-finding missions.

EU+ countries exchanged experiences and shared good practices and lessons learned with regard to the organisational changes and restructuring exercises many national COI units are currently planning or undergoing.

Training on COI portal The purpose of this training was to provide users of the COI Portal (National Common Portal Administrators/NCPAs, COI researchers and case workers) with hands-on explanation of the COI Portal’s main features (Notification system, News Section, Simple and Advanced Search). [...] The training focused on practical retrieval exercises on countries of origin for which the participants had indicated to have specific COI needs (Guinea, Syria, Pakistan, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Algeria and Iraq).

May 2014

First management meeting of the year held Frontex attended along with MSs, EU Commission, UNHCR. Representatives of Associate Countries attended as observers. Topics: the situation of asylum in the EU, EASO support to Greece, the state of play of EASO's support to Bulgaria and Italy, the annual report on the situation of asylum in the EU, EASO's 2013 annual activity report, the project in Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco and the state of play of the activities of the JHA [Justice and Home Affairs] Agencies' network.

COI and LGBTI workshop - 12 EU+ countries (EU MS + Switzerland and Norway) attended. [...] UNHCR presented its upcoming Eligibility Guidelines on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity which will include chapters on the situation in 10 countries of origin.

The Organization for Refuge, Asylum and Migration introduced its country findings methodology on "Sexually and Gender Nonconforming" individuals. Denmark shared its experience in conducting fact-finding missions on the situation of LGBT persons in Uganda and Nigeria, while the author of a report on sexual minorities in sub-Saharan Africa identified obstacles to covering a large and diversified geographical area in a comprehensive and balanced manner.

Break-out sessions gave the opportunity to Belgium, Sweden and France to present tools and good practices (for example checklists, standardized table of content, research indicators and LGBT reference groups) which have been developed in their national offices in order to harmonize and improve the quality of COI products on LGBTI and to better respond to the needs of case workers in this field. With case studies, participants identified best research practices and useful sources. In the last plenary session, participants agreed on the need to share information (such as sources, experts' interviews, reports and Fact Finding Mission reports) in order to avoid duplication and combine efforts. A guide - which could include a checklist for researchers, a glossary of terms and a list of useful sources; specific training for COI researchers; workshops on the situation of specific LGBTI groups in selected countries of origin; as well as joint COI production were mentioned as other possible steps forward.

COI Specialist Network on Iran 5th EASO specialist network. [...] The purpose of the meeting was to introduce participants to the Network principles and to start cooperation between COI experts on Iran. Participants also had the opportunity to discuss recent developments in Iran. Denmark made a presentation on a recent fact-finding mission in Turkey concerning Christian converts in Iran. Furthermore, during the meeting participants jointly mapped sources and COI activities and identified information gaps. Methods of communication were explored and the use of the COI Common Portal explained. To conclude the meeting, participants discussed the objectives and potential activities of the Iran Network.

EASO Practical Workshop on Contingency Planning situation in Ukraine emphasised need for practical and operational contingency planning (does not mention COI)

EASO Training activities includes modules on COI in June 2014.

Update on EASO support activities to Bulgaria: will include support in the field of COI in the coming months

June 2014

EASO to publish COI Report on South and Central Somalia: On 25 April 2014, EASO organised a preparatory meeting to kick off the joint drafting of a comprehensive Country of Origin Information (COI) report on South and Central Somalia. The report will cover the most important topics relevant for the asylum caseload of Somalian nationals dealt with by the principal destination countries of the EU. The initiative to draft a joint report was a result of the EASO COI Network Approach and developed within the EASO COI Specialist Network on Somalia. The process is being led by the Dutch expert on Somalia, who also acts as a network facilitator. COI specialists from Austria, Slovakia and Switzerland contributed to the different sections of the report, providing an overview on the general situation in Somalia, the clan system, the security situation

and the insurgency by Al-Shabaab, the situation of human rights, and migratory issues. EASO plans to publish the COI report in the summer.

EASO train-the-trainer sessions In June, EASO organised the last two training sessions of this semester. Nineteen participants from eleven Member States were trained in the module on Country of Origin Information and nine participants from four Member States participated at the training on Interviewing Vulnerable Persons. For the second semester EASO is planning to organise five train-the-trainer courses in Malta

Update on EASO support activities in Bulgaria: Four Country of Origin Information (COI) workshops on Algeria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria were organised, during which fact sheets were developed and discussed in detail. Specific questions on recent developments were addressed. In addition, Bulgarian officials from the State Agency for Refugees participated in the train-the-trainer session of the EASO Training Curriculum module on COI.

COI Specialist Network on the Russian Federation: At the Country of Origin Information (COI) Strategic Network meeting in November 2013 EU+ countries (Member States plus Norway and Switzerland) agreed to establish a COI Specialist Network on the Russian Federation, in addition to the five existing COI Specialist Networks (on Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, Iraq and Iran). On 17 and 18 June, the kick-off meeting for the network on the Russian Federation was held in Warsaw (reflecting the fact that the majority of the Network's members are from countries situated in the northern part of Europe) and was hosted by the country of origin unit of the Office for Foreigners' Department for Refugee Procedures in Poland. The session started with a presentation and description of the framework and goals of the network by EASO, together with updated information on the Common COI Portal, which should play a central role in disseminating knowledge produced by the networks to the end users. Briefings were given on the current situation in the Russian Federation, including two presentations from recent fact-finding missions conducted by Poland and Denmark. A mapping exercise was done on sources, COI activities and gaps. Discussions were also held on communication tools to be used by the network, its objectives and potential activities. Participants also visited the Centre for Eastern Studies, an independent public research institution monitoring the events and analysing the sociopolitical and economic processes taking place in Russia and other countries of the region.

July-August 2014

EASO publishes Annual Report [...] The aim of the Annual Report is to provide a comprehensive overview of the situation of asylum in the EU, by examining requests for international protection to the EU, analysing application and decision data, and focusing on some of the most important countries of origin of applicants for international protection. The report highlights the current trends of asylum flows in the EU. These comprise flows from Syria, the Russian Federation and also the Western Balkans countries. [...]

The report also highlights major developments with regard to EU and national policies, legislative changes and jurisprudence. In particular, 2013 saw the adoption of the asylum acquis package in June including the revised Reception Conditions Directive, revised Asylum Procedures Directive, revised Dublin Regulation, and the revised Eurodac Regulation, completing the review process (as the revised Qualification Directive was adopted in 2011). The EASO Annual Report serves as a useful tool for national and EU policy-makers helping to identify areas where improvement is most needed (and thus where EASO and other key stakeholders should focus their future efforts), in line with its declared purpose of improving the quality, consistency and effectiveness of the CEAS. [...]

Update on EASO's development of a common platform for sharing information and expertise on children Since commencing its work on children in 2011, EASO has developed and facilitated good cooperation between Member State administrations and actors within civil society. Instances of collaboration resulting from thematic meetings include: EASO joining UNICEF advisory board for the development of child-specific notices on Country of Origin Information (COI) [...]

EASO Practical Cooperation Workshop on Ukraine On 2 July 2014, EASO organised a Practical Cooperation Workshop on Ukraine, hosted by the Polish Office for Foreigners in Warsaw. A total of 29 participants attended the workshop, representing 14 Member States, the Commission, UNHCR, Frontex and EASO. An expert from the Centre for Eastern Studies was also present. The workshop was organised within a short timeframe following discussions during the EASO Management Board on 26 May on Ukraine, and statistical indications that the number of Ukrainian applicants, albeit still low compared to other caseloads, is rapidly increasing in a number of EU+ countries (EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland).

The workshop provided participants with an update on the current situation in different regions of Ukraine and on possible protection considerations as a result of this situation; to analyse and discuss data and profiles of Ukrainian applicants; to compare and discuss case processing and decision practices in different EU+ countries; and to inform each other of national contingency plans and measures to raise preparedness in case of a larger influx of Ukrainian applicants. So far the numbers of Ukrainian applicants are still very low compared to other countries of origin. Of all countries bordering Ukraine, only Poland had already witnessed a significant rise in the number of applicants. Some other countries at the Eastern border, who are not yet confronted with an influx, have contingency plans in place and are monitoring the situation closely. [...] Due to the constantly changing situation, especially in Eastern Ukraine, many EU+ countries have temporarily halted decisions on Ukrainian applications for international protection.

EASO organises COI Portal training in Greece Following a first successful regional training on the Common Country of Origin Information (COI) Portal for Portugal and Spain (organised in Lisbon in April 2014), EASO organised two training sessions in Athens. Intended for Greek and Cypriot users (National Common Portal Administrators/ NCPAs, COI Specialists and case workers), the two sessions were hosted in the premises of the National Centre for Public Administration and Local Government, in Athens, from 30 June to 2 July. Besides providing users of the COI Portal with hands-on training of the COI Portal's main features, the sessions aimed at reinforcing the NCPAs' capacity to train their internal users. Participants welcomed this on-site training focused on countries of origin for which participants had indicated to have specific needs (namely Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Eritrea, Georgia, Guinea, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Iran and Iraq). On 1 July, the two EASO trainers met with the COI unit of the Greek Central Asylum Service to exchange views on the first training session and on the use of the COI Portal in relation to national COI needs. It should be noted that Greece has the highest number of registered COI Portal users. Furthermore, the Greek COI unit has been actively using the COI Portal to provide its national COI products. These products are then retrievable since the COI Portal also supports search in non-Latin alphabets. Moreover, as any registered EU+users, Greek COI Portal users can benefit from a variety of COI available in different languages such as English, French and German. [...]

September 2014

New publication: Tools and Tips for Online COI Research EASO recently published a new Country of Origin Information (COI) product, entitled "[Tools and Tips for Online COI Research](#)" (EASO Practical Guides Series). This document aims to provide a high-level overview of some of the main tools and tips for online research that could be of use to COI researchers. T

he "Tools and Tips for online COI Research" are based mainly on information provided by the various speakers invited to the Online COI Research Conference organised by EASO on 26 and 27 March 2014, in Malta. It is also supplemented with additional information where appropriate. Divided into three main chapters (Searching and Information retrieval; Organising Information; Privacy while searching the Web and Data Protection issues), the document covers a wide variety of tools, such as social bookmarking, anonymous search engines, archived content and RSS Feeds.

EASO at the European Parliament [...] In 2013 and 2014, EASO further increased its capacity to enhance common Country of Origin Information (COI). EASO now has 7 COI specialist networks (Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Russian Federation). Another key aspect of EASO's work is that of analysing asylum trends and setting up an Early warning and Preparedness System. By using this system, EASO exercises a constant informative function, i.e. publishing quarterly asylum reports and ad hoc trend analysis, also available on EASO's website. In the coming years, EASO shall particularly focus its efforts on supporting Member States' implementation of the asylum acquis following the adoption of the legal instruments of the Common European Asylum System and providing operational support to Member States. Moreover, EASO will

have a more central role in coordinating capacity building measures through training, practical cooperation activities, COI and quality reports. [...]

Final evaluation of EASO's support activities to Bulgaria [...] An important contribution was the assistance 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 the evidence assessment. [...]

Kick-off meeting of the COI specialist network on Afghanistan On 16 and 17 September 2014, EASO organised the kick-off meeting for the Country of Origin Information (COI) Specialist Network on Afghanistan. This is already the 7th COI Specialist Network established over the last 1.5 years. Other networks cover Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, and the Russian Federation. The session started with a presentation and description of the framework and goals of the network by EASO, together with updated information on the Common COI Portal, which should play a central role in disseminating knowledge produced by the networks to the end users. Similar to activities of other Specialist Networks, a mapping exercise was done on sources, COI activities and gaps. Discussions were also held on communication tools to be used by the network, its objectives and potential activities.

EASO to publish a COI Report on the security situation in Afghanistan On 17 and 18 September, in the margins of the kick-off meeting for the COI Specialist Network on Afghanistan, EASO organised a preparatory meeting to start the joint drafting of a COI report on the security situation in Afghanistan. The goal of this report is to provide security-related information relevant for international protection determination (refugee status and subsidiary protection). Besides a general overview of the security situation in Afghanistan, this report shall also provide short specific updates on all 34 Afghan provinces. The initiative to draft a joint report was a result of the EASO COI Network Approach and developed within the EASO COI Specialist Network on Afghanistan. COI specialists from Austria, Belgium, France and EASO will co-draft the report, supported by specialists from Greece, Hungary and Slovakia, who will do complementary research. The Netherlands, Sweden and UNHCR will be involved in the peer review. EASO plans to publish the COI report in the beginning of 2015.

EASO formally launches its cooperation with Norway State Secretary Gulati spoke highly of EASO's supporting role in the implementation of the Common European Asylum System and expressed Norway's objective to be fully involved in EASO's work, including through further participation in the Asylum Intervention Pool and EASO's work on Country of Origin Information (COI). Mr. Forfang particularly commended EASO for its work on statistics and analysis, which is shedding new light on the situation in the EU. The Executive Director stated that since the establishment of EASO, Norway has been closely involved in the work of the agency. He also acknowledged Norway's key contributions to setting up the COI function within EASO and thanked them for their active contribution to joint COI production as the first EU+ country (EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland) to "Europeanise" a report –on the situation of women in Chechnya. The Executive Director gave a presentation to staff of UDI on the work of EASO and a presentation on recent asylum trends in the EU+ countries. Later on, the Executive Director visited Landinfo, the COI unit where he met Mr Jörg Lange, Head of Landinfo and staff. There the Executive Director delivered a presentation to country experts on how EASO sees the future of joint common COI production. He highlighted EASO wants to work with national COI units to optimise production of COI in EU+ countries and improve overall quality.

October

EASO publishes COI report on Somalia In 2013, Somalia ranked 7th in the top countries of origin in the EU+ countries (EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland), with a total number of 20,810 applicants. The Somali caseload affected 22 out of 30 EU+ countries. Topics covered in the report include: general country information; the clan system and ethnic groups; the security situation; Al Shabaab; Human Rights; migration; mobility; and displacement. The Somalia report aims to provide information to support COI researchers, first and second instance decision makers, and policymakers active in the national procedures for the assessment of asylum applications from Somali nationals. [...]

By providing this report, EASO aims at ensuring a common comprehensive information package on countries of origin of importance at EU level. To this end EASO adopted a COI Network Approach in 2013 in order to make

use of the existing national COI capacity in the EU, and to avoid duplication and fill in gaps including via the joint production of common EU COI products. This involved the setting up of COI Specialist Networks on key countries of origin at European level, including Somalia.

Researchers from Austria, Slovakia, Switzerland, the Netherlands and EASO participated in the joint drafting process of this country overview report within the context of the EASO COI Specialist Network on Somalia. The report was written in accordance with common COI quality standards as described in the EASO COI report methodology. It was reviewed and commented upon by other experts (from Finland, Sweden and the UK) in order to check and ensure quality. It is EASO's intention to continue to produce such reports on important countries of origin and to update them on a regular basis in order to raise and harmonise COI standards in the EU and to further support the practical implementation of the Common European Asylum System. [N.B. ARC and the Dutch Council for Refugees published joint comments on this report available at: http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/90_1416814948_2014-11-somalia-arc-dcr-comment-easo-report-south-and-central-somalia.pdf]

EASO publishes COI report on Chechnya In 2013, applicants from the Russian Federation increased significantly to become the second largest citizenship of origin for asylum claims in the EU. Although the number of applicants from the Russian Federation had been relatively stable since 2008 at around 20,000 applicants annually, 2013 saw a significant rise with 71 % more applicants registered than in 2012, reaching a volume of 41,485 applicants. The vast majority of these persons were from the Northern Caucasus region, more particularly from Chechnya. [...] The Chechnya report is an example of a "europeanised" national COI report: the report was drafted by researchers from Landinfo, the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre. It was then reviewed by a peer review group made up of COI experts from: the EASO COI Specialist Network on the Russian Federation; Estonia, the Netherlands, and Poland, in order to ensure its accordance with the standards laid out in the EASO COI report methodology.

COI seminar on Somalia On 14 October, EASO held a Country of Origin Information (COI) seminar on Somalia for members of the EASO COI Network on Somalia. The meeting gave the COI Specialist Network on Somalia the opportunity to have in-depth discussions on specific topics relevant for the international protection status determination procedures. In order to facilitate the discussions, Mr. Jabril Ibrahim Abulle, Director of the Center for Research and Dialogue Somalia, and Mr. Periklis Kortsaris, UNHCR Protection Officer in Mogadishu, were invited to present updates on the security and humanitarian situation and the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs), minorities and women in Somalia. In addition, the Somalia network discussed past, on-going and future network activities, and exchanged experiences on the drafting, reviewing and publication process of the recent EASO COI report on Somalia (see page 2), which was codrafted and peer reviewed by members of the Somalia network.

Practical cooperation workshop on Eritrea Back to back with the Somalia COI seminar, EASO organised a practical cooperation workshop on Eritrea on 15 and 16 October. The meeting helped in obtaining a better understanding of the reasons behind the sharp increase in the numbers of Eritrean asylum applicants in recent years and recent shifts in flows. It also helped clarifying the main profiles of applicants, commonly claimed grounds and divergences in decision practice among EU+ countries (EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland), and allowed for discussion related to credibility issues and COI needs.

During the meeting, expert presentations were delivered by UNHCR, on the situation in the region and general protection challenges for Eritrean nationals, and by Frontex, on recent trends in irregular migration of Eritrean nationals. Dr. Conny Rijken (Tilburg University) briefed the participants on the role of human traffickers and incidents of exploitation and torture of Eritrean nationals en route.

Issues relating to the open-ended national service, identified as one of the core push factors for Eritrean nationals, were discussed in detail during a presentation by Prof. Gaim Kibreab (London South Bank University). Participants of the workshop highlighted the need for more intensified information-sharing between EU+ countries on topics related to the Eritrean asylum flow and welcomed further activities aimed at increasing preparedness (e.g. in terms of COI) in possible new destination countries.

Upcoming event: 3 years of EASO Training Curriculum In January, EASO will organise a big event in Malta to celebrate the results of the work conducted during the 3 years of EASO's Training Curriculum and to take the opportunity to reflect on the way to develop the Training Curriculum further and further improve its

quality. [...] 2015 will also be the year in which an impact assessment of the EASO Training Curriculum will take place, and at the same time the process towards a certification of the Curriculum will be launched. [...]

Practical cooperation conference on Syria and Iraq On 30 and 31 October 2014, EASO held a two-day practical cooperation conference on Syria and Iraq in Malta. Up to 70 participants from national asylum services, courts and tribunals, civil society organisations and international organisations received expert updates on the security, humanitarian and human rights situation in Syria and Iraq. The line-up of speakers included Mr Aron Lund (a freelance writer and journalist in Middle Eastern politics), Mr Francesco Motta (head of the Human Rights Unit of UNAMI), Mr Ammar Abdulhamid (co-founder and president of the Tharwa Foundation), Mr. Ahmed Ali (Iraq Team Leader at the Institute for the Study of War), and Ms Eva Savelsberg (co-founder and president of the European Center for Kurdish studies). During presentations, these speakers covered a wide range of topics, such as the emergence of the Islamic State (of ISIS/ISIL) in the region; sectarian armed groups (other than IS) in Syria and Iraq; risk profiles in Syria and Iraq; ethnic and religious minorities in Syria and Iraq; the control of Iraqi State Authorities; the security situation in Baghdad and South Iraq; the situation in the Kurdish areas; the situation at the Turkish border; and inter-communal dynamics in Syria. Participants had the opportunity to address questions to the experts, both during Q&A sessions and informal breaks. During breakouts, participants also discussed asylum policy topics of particular relevance to these countries, more particularly the application of exclusion clauses and the choice of status granted to Syrian and Iraqi nationals (with a focus on the application of Article 15c of the Qualification Directive). Experts were asked during a final panel discussion to discuss future perspectives for both Syria and Iraq. As the outlook is very negative for both countries, and even for other countries in the region, it can be assumed that Europe will continue to be confronted with increasing numbers of Syrian and Iraqi nationals applying for international protection in the following years. EASO will continue its support to Member States and associated countries in raising preparedness and harmonising practices.

EASO coordinates report on joint actions by JHA agencies to address THB [Trafficking in Human Beings] [...] Among the most relevant activities developed by EASO in collaboration with other agencies listed in the report are the following:

[...]• EASO has been also working in the mainstreaming of THB awareness in all its training materials. In particular, with the Commission's support, it has been updating its Interviewing Vulnerable Persons training module to equip asylum officers with the skills to identify vulnerability indicators, including the ability to identify potential THB victims and prepare them for the asylum interview while taking into account their special needs. EASO has also recently updated its Country of Origin Information module, introducing a distinct section on research on trafficking; [...]

November/December 2014

EASO holds 4th Consultative Forum Subjects of the panel discussions included:

- Early warning and preparedness in view of the Ukrainian and other crises, planning and cooperation to strengthen EU and Member States' responses;
- Influx of Eritrean asylum seekers: EU and Member States' practical responses;
- Different forms of protection granted in the EU to Syrian applicants: analysis of similarities and differences in Member States' application of legal concepts;
- Facilitating a more common use of Article 15 of the Qualification Directive in the EU – EASO's COI and practical cooperation activities on Afghanistan and the development of guidance and tools on Article 15c.
- On the second day, breakout sessions were held on specific EASO products and services, such as producing and sharing EU-level COI and EASO's operational support.

16th EASO Management Board meeting [...] The Management Board is made up of representatives of EU Member States, the Commission and UNHCR. Representatives of Associate Countries attended as observers. The representatives discussed the activities to be conducted by EASO in the coming years, the Country of Origin Information Portal, the situation of asylum in the EU with particular focus on the Mediterranean, Syria, Ukraine, Eritrea and Iraq, EASO's Early warning and Preparedness System (EPS) and the second Annual Resettlement and Relocation Forum held in Brussels. Other subjects on the agenda were: cooperation with members of the courts and tribunals; the latest judgement of the European Court of Human Rights in the case

Tarakhel v Switzerland; EASO's Communication Plan for 2015; joint processing in the field of asylum; the activities conducted in the JHA Agencies' network; EASO's Information and Documentation System and the upcoming plenary meeting of the EASO Consultative Forum in Brussels.

EASO at EU Presidency conference on managing asylum flows On 18 and 19 November, the Italian Ministry of Interior organised, with the support of EASO, a conference entitled 'Managing Asylum Flows: Strengthening the Tools, Strengthening the System' in Rome. [...] On the second day of the conference, participants discussed further the management of asylum flows in different thematic workshops, such as on Country of Origin Information (COI).

EASO COI Strategic Network meeting [...] Heads of national COI units, or persons otherwise in charge of COI at the national asylum administration, of 26 countries attended the meeting. The meeting allowed EASO to present recent activities in the field of COI namely: conclusions of meetings of COI specialist networks (on Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and the Russian Federation); recent practical cooperation meetings (on Ukraine, Eritrea and Syria/Iraq); and work conducted on a guide for COI on LGBTI. Specific aspects related to EASO COI production were discussed in more detail, given EASO's recent publication of a country overview report on Somalia, a topical report on the situation of women in Chechnya, and the ongoing drafting of a COI report on the security situation in Afghanistan. Discussions focused on challenges and lessons learned, tools developed, future updates of existing reports, and topics of future EASO COI production.

Now that the COI Network approach is being consolidated, the StratNet decided to create a new specialist network on Eritrea and provided input during a breakout discussion on the scope, tools and indicators for a more formal evaluation of the network approach in 2015. On countries of particular importance, such as Nigeria and Ukraine, workshops will be held next year.

In addition, participants exchanged views and experiences on analysing interview protocols in order to profile caseloads, identify information needs and better orient COI production, based on the presentation of an ongoing Finnish European Refugee Fund project. Bulgaria, Italy and Greece provided briefings on the new COI units, recently established as a result of EASO's operational support.

Finally and most importantly, a new proposal regarding widened access and further development of the Common European COI Portal received positive feedback from the StratNet.

COI seminar on Pakistan On 9 December 2014, EASO held a Country of Origin Information (COI) seminar for members of the COI Network on Pakistan. This meeting allowed the network members to have in-depth discussions on topics relevant for international protection status determination procedures, such as the security situation in different parts of Pakistan, ethnic and religious minorities and sectarianism, the general human rights situation in Pakistan, and the situation for women and internally displaced persons (IDPs). During the meeting, external experts from the region provided their insights in the above mentioned issues. In addition, the network discussed past and ongoing activities and future forms of cooperation in the field of COI on Pakistan.

Common COI Portal regional training for Italy and Slovenia On 24 November 2014, EASO organised a regional training session on the Common Country of Origin Information (COI) Portal for Italy and Slovenia. [...] Most participants were recently appointed as COI researchers in the new Italian COI unit (established in July 2014). They welcomed this on-site training tailored to their needs and focussing on queries related to countries of origin for which they had COI needs (namely Pakistan, Nigeria, Mali, and Ukraine). Besides providing the researchers with hands on training on the COI Portal's main features, the session also aimed at reinforcing the Italian and Slovenian National COI Portal Administrators' (NCPAs) capacity to train their national users. [...]

EASO publishes work programme 2015 [...] In 2015, EASO will focus its efforts on contributing to the effective, coherent and consistent practical implementation of the revised EU asylum acquis. Key to the further development of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) is sufficient capacity in EU+ countries' national asylum systems. EASO will have a more central role in coordinating these capacity building measures through practical cooperation activities, including training, Country of Origin Information (COI) and quality reports.