



Concept Note

## **EUAA Country Information and Guidance Conference**

*Towards True Convergence in International Protection in the European Union*

10-11 October 2023

Malta (in-person meeting)

### **Context and purpose**

As per Regulation (EU) 2021/2303 of 15 December 2021, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) should be a ‘centre of expertise on asylum’.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the EUAA should:

‘facilitate and improve the functioning of the CEAS by coordinating and strengthening practical cooperation and information exchange on asylum among Member States, by promoting Union and international law on asylum and operational standards in order to ensure a high degree of uniformity based on high protection standards as regards procedures for international protection, reception conditions and the assessment of protection needs across the Union, by enabling genuine and practical solidarity among Member States in order to assist the affected Member States in general and applicants for international protection in particular (...)’<sup>2</sup>.

The Country Information and Guidance conference (CIGC) organised by the EUAA on 10-11 October 2023 in Malta is convened in this exact spirit, namely, that of promoting practical cooperation and information exchange between Member States and other key actors in the field of asylum in order to strive for greater convergence in Europe while maintaining high protection standards.

At the core of its mandate, the EUAA is a bridge-builder; its *raison d’être* lies in providing support, cooperating, facilitating. In this vein, this conference will bring together members of multiple networks the Agency is facilitating, namely: the COI Strategic Network, the Country Guidance Network, the Asylum Processes Network and the Courts and Tribunals Network. In addition, the conference will be opened to the European Commission and international organisations such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as well as civil society organisations (CSOs) members of the EUAA Consultative Forum.

The CIGC will focus on two key functions of the EUAA: the production of information on relevant third countries (otherwise known as Country of Origin Information – COI) and the provision of country-specific guidance in the assessment of applications for international protection (Country Guidance – CG). This conference will be the first of its kind to embrace COI and CG in a single event. Why this dual focus? Firstly, because country information and guidance are essential tools to foster convergence in the assessment of applications for international protection, while ensuring a fair and efficient implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Secondly, because COI and CG, albeit distinct processes,

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<sup>1</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/2303 of 15 December 2021 on the European Union Agency for Asylum, recital 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, recital 6.



are indissociable: the guidance notes issued by the EUAA derive from the common analysis of the situation in relevant countries which is itself based on country-of-origin information. Hence, this conference will also serve to enhance the need for evidence-based decision- and policymaking in a time when information gets easily distorted, politicized, and even artificially created.

With this conference, the Agency wishes to focus on an innovative and promising instrument in its toolbox (while country guidance pre-existed the EUAA, it only became an explicit function of the Agency in the new Regulation) and to encourage greater practical cooperation between producers and users of country information and guidance, including COI researchers, policy-makers, caseworkers, judges, legal practitioners, EU and UN civil servants, as well as CSOs members.

The CICG will therefore seek to exercise convergence in practice.

### **Objectives and scope**

The objectives of the conference are to bring together producers and users of EUAA country information and guidance with a view to taking stock of the Agency's activities; nurturing a better understanding of different roles, added value and responsibilities; promoting further networking and cooperation; identifying information and guidance needs; and fostering a common outlook to the future. This two-day event will feature thematic debates, quickfire and panel discussions, workshops, and networking opportunities.

Day 1 will be devoted to policy issues and the role and impact of EUAA's country information and guidance within the EU.

Morning sessions are meant to set the stage: through panel discussions, participants will be encouraged to share their views on the state of asylum in Europe, to identify key challenges in the assessment of international protection applications, and to reflect on the specific role the Agency plays within the European asylum architecture.

Afternoon breakout sessions will dig deeper into country information and guidance aspects:

- The results and recommendations of an external evaluation of the use and impact of COI and CG products will be submitted to the participants for discussion and validation;
- The application of the safe country concepts will be examined from both a research and a policy perspective with a view to discussing methodological, practical, and ethical considerations;
- The agency will further present the findings of its pilot convergence analysis, which looks into the key factors explaining the persistent variation in protection rates across the EU, and will invite participants to share their views on the way forward;
- Lastly, a fourth workshop will be devoted to yet another issue of common interest to participants, to be defined closer to the date.



Day 2 will look outward to situations and issues in third countries with a view to grounding CI&G ongoing and future activities in the reality.

Morning sessions will enable participants to hear from and discuss with renowned experts on our turbulent world and how – and which - conflicts, crises and other push factors will continue to send people *en route* to the EU, an island of (relative) peace and prosperity in the eyes of many. Against the backdrop of this global outlook, participants will have the choice to take part in up to two different regional workshops. Prior to each workshop, would-be participants will be given a chance to indicate their priority countries and topics. The regional workshops will therefore enable producers and users of COI and CG to focus on the most relevant issues and profiles, and to exchange directly on information requirements and guidance needs for the purpose of assessing applications for international protection and/or the application of the safe country concepts. The workshops will cover the following regions and potential countries:

- Asia (e.g. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran)
- Africa (e.g. Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan)
- Eastern Europe (e.g. Russian Federation, Ukraine)
- Latin America (e.g. Colombia, Nicaragua, Peru)
- MENA (e.g. Iraq, Syria)

### **Practical information**

The Country Information and Guidance Conference is convened by the EUAA Country Information and Guidance Unit jointly with the EUAA Asylum Processes Sector and the EUAA Courts and Tribunals Sector. It will take place at InterContinental Hotel, Malta, St Julian's, on 10-11 October 2023. The conference will be held fully in person in Malta. It is scheduled back-to-back with the EUAA Thematic meeting on Palestinian applicants and Article 1D of the 1951 Geneva Convention and the meeting of the Palestine COI Specialist Network, as well as the EUAA COI StratNet meeting, all three to be held on 12 October at the same venue.

The conference is intended for COI researchers, policy-makers, caseworkers, judges, legal practitioners, as well as representatives from the European Commission, UNHCR and civil society organisations. Invitations will be sent by the EUAA upon registration. Members of the following networks will be prompted to register for this conference: COI Strategic Network, the Palestine COI Specialist Network, Country Guidance Network (members nominated for general and strategic matters), the Asylum Processes Network, the Courts and Tribunal Network, as well as representatives of the European Commission, UNHCR and member organisations of the Consultative Forum. Each EU+ country may have up to one representative per network attending the conference. In addition, the COI Strategic Network will be offered to register one additional participant from a COI Country Specialist Network. Each civil society organisation may send one representative as well. In case of higher demand, a waiting list will be drawn up.

The EUAA will reimburse expenses incurred by participants invited to attend EUAA activities as per decision EASO/EDD/2021/006, which lays down rules for reimbursement, including travel-related expenses, accommodation allowance and daily subsistence allowance.