

European Council conclusions, 24-25 June 2021



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Indicative Leaders' Agenda 2021-2022



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EASO publishes a COI report:

Afghanistan – Security situation

The newly released [report](#) provides information on the security situation in Afghanistan, which is relevant for the assessment of international protection status determination, including refugee status and subsidiary protection.

The security situation in Afghanistan remains volatile. After the reduction in violence preceding the signing of the Doha agreement between the US and the Taliban on 29 February 2020, the Taliban resumed targeting government checkpoints and convoys. In terms of territorial control, the situation changes rapidly with the Taliban advancing in a growing number of Afghan districts. At the same time, civilians are continuously threatened by indiscriminate violence and targeted attacks.

✖ [Afghanistan: Security Situation Report](#) provides information about **relevant security trends in the period between 1 January 2020 and 31 May 2021**. The first part of the report provides a general overview of the security situation in the country, including conflict background and actors involved and main security incidents and their impact on the civilian population. The second part holds a geographic subdivision, focusing in greater detail on the security situation in all 34 provinces and Kabul city, and provides a description of the armed actors, recent security incidents as well as data on civilian casualties and conflict-induced displacements.

The report was co-drafted by COI experts from Belgium, Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, Cedoca (Centre for Documentation and Research); France, Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless persons (OFPRA), Information, Documentation and Research Division (DIDR); Poland, Department of Refugee and Asylum Proceedings, and researchers from EASO COI Sector, in accordance with the [EASO COI Report Methodology](#). The report was reviewed by experts from Denmark, Danish Immigration Service (DIS); Hungary, National Directorate-General of Origin Information Centre; Norway, Landinfo, the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre; Slovakia, Migration Office, Department of Documentation and Foreign Cooperation, and ACCORD, the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation.

In 2020, **Afghanistan** continued to remain the **second most important country of origin in EU+**. During the year, Afghans lodged 48 578 applications in the EU+ countries, which represented a decrease of 16 % compared to 2019 but constituted a higher number of applications compared to 2018. The recognition rate for Afghans was 53 % in 2020, an increase of 5 % from 2019. At the end of April 2021, around 41 100 Afghans were awaiting a first instance decision, accounting for 11 % of all pending cases in EU+. However, the backlog of Afghan cases pending longer than six months increased after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and remained above pre-pandemic levels.¹ While in 2020 Greece, Germany, and France were the main receiving countries for

applications lodged by Afghan nationals, the top three countries in the period between January and March 2021 were Germany, France, and Romania.²

Any further information may be obtained from the European Asylum Support Office on the following email address: press@easo.europa.eu

Notes

[1] This overview is based on EASO Early warning and Preparedness System (EPS) data

[2] Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex – annual aggregated data (rounded) as of 24 June 2021

The Cyber Blue Line – the new law enforcement frontier



It all started in 1854 at the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War when a red-uniformed Scottish Highland Regiment formed a long line and extraordinarily halted a Russian cavalry charge. This act of bravery inspired a phrase still in use today – the thin red line, which is echoed in the term thin blue line often used in the context of law enforcement – as a thinly stretched resource, resisting far greater forces. The thin blue line flag graphic has appeared on everything from police coffee cups to COVID-19 masks.

The ‘cavalry charge’ is now taking place in cyberspace, as a significant and ever increasing aspect of police work today is dedicated to providing safety and security online. This not only means protecting the rule of law and victims online, but also serving the online community. In doing so, law enforcement is confronted with a number of challenges that, at their core,

link to the question on where to draw the thin blue line in cyberspace.

Published today, the [Cyber Blue Line report](#) – the latest publication in the Europol Specialist Reporting series, highlights these challenges and identifies a number of pertinent issues which require debate, and thought leadership.

Join the discussion

From the thin red line, to the thin blue line, to the Cyber Blue Line: Where does responsibility now lie when it comes to maintaining secure and safe societies in cyberspace?

The two authors of the report – Prof. Dr. Mary Aiken and Dr. Philipp Amann, explore the changing ways in which policing could be approached, in the real world and cyberspace, in a continuously evolving technological upheaval.

Prof. Dr. Mary Aiken is a world-leading expert in Cyberpsychology – the study of the impact of technology on human behaviour. She is a Professor of Cyberpsychology and Department Chair at Capitol Technology University Washington DC, a Professor of Forensic Cyberpsychology at the University of East London, and an Adjunct Professor at the Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Ireland. Prof. Dr. Aiken is an Academic Advisor to Europol's European Cybercrime Centre (EC3). Prof. Dr. Aiken holds a PhD degree in Forensic Cyberpsychology, and a MSc in Cyberpsychology.

Dr. Philipp Amann is the Head of Expertise & Stakeholder Management at Europol's European Cybercrime Centre (EC3) and responsible for assessing and acting on relevant trends and threats related to cybercrime and cyber-security. Other key areas of responsibility include managing EC3's advisory groups, prevention & awareness and technology foresight. Dr. Amann holds a PhD degree in business informatics from the University of Vienna and a MSc in Forensic Computing and Cybercrime Investigation from the University College Dublin.

Europol, as the collective voice of European law enforcement, strives to provide a platform for important discussions by facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue to discuss responsibility, accountability, safety and security now mediated by technology.

Are you an academic or a think tank with an interest in this topic? Then please get in touch with us at press@europol.europa.eu to discuss how we could work together to discuss, debate and conceptualise the Cyber Blue Line.

Making digital transition work for all SMEs



□□□□□□□□ The webinar looked at the state of digital transformation in European regions, taking stock of the latest research showing an increasing digital divide across European regions and urban-rural communities. Invited speakers shared their views on how public authorities at all levels can facilitate the digital transition of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), showcasing some best practices and collaboration initiatives from the European Entrepreneurial Regions.

In the opening session, Mr **Ivan Štefanec**, Member of the European Parliament and President of [SME Europe](#), identified three topics crucial for accelerating the digital transition of SMEs – the need to work on the digital infrastructure, digital skills and the legal framework for the digital economy.

Ms **Outi Slotboom** from the European Commission's DG GROW provided some facts and figures explaining why small businesses tend to lag behind in digital transition. She indicated that EU programmes and instruments had to be designed in a way to address diverse needs of SMEs – addressing advanced companies with more sophisticated digital solutions and, on the other hand,

providing more basic forms of support for traditional companies.

Mr **Eddy Van Hijum**, member of the CoR and rapporteur on the SME Strategy, said that *European programmes should strike a balance between supporting R&D and innovation of front runners in advanced technologies and providing more conventional support for the application of proven digital technologies in smaller businesses and family firms in various sectors*. Mr Van Hijum highlighted the importance of involving local and regional authorities in the development and implementation of national recovery plans, also in their parts related to digitalisation.

The first panel session of the webinar was dedicated to the presentation of preliminary results of the study run by the European Committee of the Regions ECON commission on '*The state of digital transformation at regional level and COVID-19 induced changes to economy and business models, and their consequences for regions*'. Representatives of the Forinit Foundation (Ms **Simona Cavallini**) and Eurochambres (Mr **Christoph Riedmann**) revealed concerns over the growing territorial digital divide in Europe. The final report, expected to be published by mid-July, proposes a framework for measuring digital preparedness in regions, identifies the specific contextual conditions which are needed to favour the digital transformation of SMEs and analyses the type of support local and regional authorities may provide. The study builds on a survey responded by 87 entities (LRAs, chambers of commerce, etc.) from 21 EU countries and further illustrations through 8 in-depth case studies.

Reacting to the study results, Mr **Dan Dalton** from Allied for Start-ups, said that the pandemic has emphasised the importance of digitalisation in the economy and created new market opportunities for start-ups across Europe. He stressed the importance of public financing to be used as a framework to unlock private investment and to address market failures, such as digital infrastructure in rural areas.

The second panel session provided an opportunity to look in a greater detail into regional instruments supporting digitalisation of SMEs, building on the collaboration and best practices in the European Entrepreneurial Regions (EER).

The session started with a presentation by Ms **Anne-Marie Sassen** from the European Commission's DG CONNECT, focussing on ways how EU instruments such as Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs), clusters and industry alliances can foster digital transition of SMEs. Ms Sassen has particularly highlighted the ongoing [pre-selection process for EDIHs](#), explaining the added value of promoting networking of EDIHs, clusters and Europe Enterprise Network offices to offer a seamless service to SMEs on the ground.

Mr **Vincent Duchêne** from the Idea Consult, partner in the ongoing collaboration project of the EER regions, presented a framework of the EER regions' collaboration in the area of digital transition. The main focus of the cooperation in this area is currently on the future collaboration between EDIHs.

Further presentations from representatives of the **North Brabant** (EER 2013),

Lower Austria (EER 2017) and **Silesia** (EER 2021-22) delivered an insight into some best practices for supporting SMEs by regional authorities, using available EU programmes. Speakers highlighted the key objectives and benefits resulting from cross-regional cooperation on digitalisation.

In the conclusion, Mr **Michael Murphy**, President of the CoR ECON commission, said that, *in order to meet the objectives of Europe's Digital Decade, public authorities in the EU need a multi-level, collaborative and inclusive approach to promote digital transition and digital cohesion in the EU, wisely using the resources of the MFF and the Recovery and Resilience Facility*. Mr Murphy said that the digital adoption and catch-up of existing SMEs should be among the top priorities in the new EU digital programmes.

□□□□□□□□ The final report of the CoR/Eurochambres on '*The state of digital transformation at regional level and COVID-19 induced changes to economy and business models, and their consequences for regions*' will be published by mid-July and you will receive a link by e-mail.

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