



Chairperson's Guideline No: 2024/1

Guidance Note on Country Information

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PRELIMINARY MATTERS

1. BACKGROUND

[1.1] This Guidance Note is issued pursuant to section 63(2) of the [International Protection Act 2015](#) (hereinafter referred to as ‘the Act’) and the [International Protection Act 2015 \(Procedures and Periods for Appeals\) Regulations 2017](#) (S.I. No. 116 of 2017) (hereinafter referred to as ‘the 2017 Regulations’), [as amended](#), which set out various matters relating to the conduct of Appeals before the Tribunal.

[1.2] This Guideline is intended to supplement the Act and Regulations and not to supplant them. In case of conflict, the provisions of the Act or relevant Regulation shall take precedence over this Guideline; it should be read in conjunction with the duties set out in the Act and other legislation, guidelines, codes, policies or other rules applicable to the conduct of Members of the Tribunal.

2. DEFINITIONS

[2.1] In this guidance note the following terms have the following meanings:

“Appeal” means an appeal submitted to the Tribunal in accordance with section 21(6), section 22(8) and section 41 of the Act. It also means an appeal submitted under Regulation 6 of the [European Union \(Dublin System\) Regulations 2018](#) (S.I. No. 62 of 2018) (hereinafter referred to as ‘the 2018 Regulations’).

“Appellant” means a person pursuing an Appeal and shall, where the context so admits or requires, include their legal representative within the meaning of section 2 of the Act, if any.

“Country of Origin” means the country or countries of nationality or, for stateless persons, of former habitual residence.

“Document” includes (a) any written matter, (b) any photograph, (c) any currency notes or counterfeit currency notes, (d) any information in non-legible form that is capable of being converted into legible form, (e) any audio or video recording, and (f) a travel document or an identity document.

“Information” includes (a) information in the form of a document (or any other thing) or in any other form, and (b) personal information, including biometric information.

“**Members**” means currently serving Members of the Tribunal responsible for determining appeals.

“**Tribunal**” means the International Protection Appeals Tribunal established under the Act and shall, where the context so requires, include a Member assigned to determine an Appeal. In that regard, whenever the Tribunal consists of more than one Member, it shall be grouped into divisions, each of which shall consist of one Member.

INTRODUCTION

3. INTRODUCTION

- [3.1] The Tribunal is conscious of its obligation to ensure that its decisions are based on precise and up-to-date information obtained from various sources, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as to the general situation prevailing in the countries of origin of applicants for asylum and, where necessary, in countries through which they have transited. In recognition of relevant developments in the Common European Asylum System, in particular the establishment of the European Union Asylum Agency¹ (hereinafter referred to as ‘EUAA’), Tribunal Members make their decisions in consideration also of information obtained from the EUAA and relevant international human rights organisations.
- [3.2] In that regard, the Tribunal notes Article 11 of [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/2303 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2021 on the European Union Agency for Asylum and repealing Regulation \(EU\) No 439/2010](#)², which mandates the EUAA to coordinate efforts among Member States to develop a common analysis on the situation in specific countries of origin and guidance notes to assist Member States in the assessment of relevant applications for international protection, taking note of the most recent UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from specific countries of origin. In accordance with Regulation 11(3), Member States are, in turn, required *‘to take into account the common analysis and guidance notes when examining applications for international protection, without prejudice to their competence to decide on individual applications for international protection’*.
- [3.3] Moreover, the Tribunal must determine the appeals before it on an individual basis, which includes taking into account all relevant facts as they relate to the country of origin at the time of taking a decision on the application;

¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/2303 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2021 on the European Union Agency for Asylum and repealing Regulation (EU) No 439/2010.

² The participation of Ireland in Regulation (EU) 2021/2303 was confirmed in [Commission Decision \(EU\) 2023/1576](#) of 28 July 2023.

including laws and regulations of the country of origin and the manner in which they are applied. In order to fulfil its responsibility to ensure an effective remedy including a full and *ex nunc* examination of both facts and points of law, the Tribunal needs to take due account of possible changes in the situation in the country of origin that may affect the relevance of information relied upon by the International Protection Officer, as the determining authority, in the decision at first instance.

- [3.4.] The purpose of this Guidance Note is to outline the relevant standards and principles governing the sourcing and assessing of country information for the determination of appeals under the Act and the 2018 Regulations.
- [3.5] It is internationally acknowledged that consideration of country information, including country of origin information (hereinafter referred to as 'COI'), is an essential element in assessing an application for international protection and related matters, and international guidelines have developed as a result. These guidelines focus on defining COI and the relevant quality standards and principles that distinguish country information, and in particular COI, from other information used in assessing international protection applications and related matters.
- [3.6] The Tribunal, through this Guidance Note, intends to follow international best practice when assessing general country information and COI and to share this practice with appellants and their legal representatives to assist them in preparing their appeals and other submissions to the Tribunal.

4. AUTHORITATIVE DOCUMENTS

- [4.1] The Tribunal takes note that in accordance with the EUAA Regulation, the EUAA shall be a centre for gathering relevant, reliable, objective, accurate and up-to date information on relevant third countries in a transparent and impartial manner, making use of relevant information, including child specific and gender-specific information, and targeted information on persons belonging to vulnerable and minority groups. The Agency shall draw up and regularly update reports and other documents providing information on relevant third countries at European Union level, including on thematic issues specific to relevant third countries.
- [4.2] The Tribunal recognises the following guidance documents as containing the above mentioned quality standards and principles that represent international best practice in assessing country information:

- [European Union Asylum Agency \(EUAA\), Country of Origin Information \(COI\) Report Methodology](#) (February 2023)³
- [European Asylum Support Office \(EASO\), 'Judicial Practical Guide on Country of Origin Information'](#) (2018)
- [Austrian Red Cross/ ACCORD, Researching Country of Origin Information Training Manual](#) (2013)
- [Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#) (April 2008)

[4.3] This Guidance Note is largely based on the definitions, principles and recommendations found within the EUAA COI Report Methodology, the EASO Judicial Practical Guide, ACCORD training manual and the Common EU Guidelines. In addition, the Tribunal has also referenced the work of the International Association of Refugee and Migration Judges (IARMJ), through the checklist 'Judicial Criteria for Assessing Country of Origin Information'⁴, and UNHCR, through the guidelines set out in a 'Note on the Burden and Standard of Proof in Refugee Claims'⁵.

DEFINITION OF COUNTRY INFORMATION

5. DEFINITION OF COUNTRY INFORMATION

[5.1] Country of origin information (COI) refers to information about the country of origin of an applicant that is used in procedures for determining their qualification for international protection. COI is not specifically defined in the legal instruments comprising the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), although Article 4(3)(a) of [Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004 on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted](#) (hereinafter 'the Qualification Directive'), which refers to all relevant facts as they relate to the country of origin', would appear to serve as a definition.

[5.2] It would be very difficult to give a more precise definition, in light of the variety of material that can be referred to as COI. The requirement that these facts, per Article 4(3)(a) Qualification Directive, include 'laws and regulations of the country of origin and the manner in which they are applied' appears to indicate that, in the context of the assessment of international protection

³ This guide is the rebranded edition of the EASO COI Report Methodology 2019. The EUAA COI report methodology builds on the Common EU Guidelines for processing COI (April 2008), the EU common guidelines on (Joint) Fact Finding Missions (November 2010) (for oral sources), and the ACCORD Training Manual: Researching Country of Origin Information (2013 Edition).

⁴ IARLJ, [Judicial Criteria for Assessing Country of Origin Information \(COI\): A Checklist](#), Paper for 7th Biennial IARLJ World Conference, Mexico City, 6-9 November 2006 COI-CG Working Party

⁵ UNHCR, [Note on the Burden and Standard of Proof in Refugee Claims](#), 16 December 1998.

needs, the analysis of the situation in the country of origin must take due account, inter alia, of the existing legal framework as it is applied by the authorities of the country of origin at the time of the assessment of the application. The term ‘country information’ has a broader meaning and refers to information on any country including, for example, countries of transit, countries designated as responsible for examining an application under the Dublin III regulation, safe ‘first countries of asylum’, and ‘safe third countries’.⁶

[5.3] Country information supports legal representatives and Tribunal Members making decisions on international protection appeals and related matters in their evaluation of:

- the human rights and security situation
- the political situation and the legal framework
- cultural aspects and societal attitudes
- the humanitarian and economic situation
- events and incidents
- geographical issues in claimants’ countries of origin (or, in the case of stateless people, countries of former habitual residence) or countries of transit.

[5.4] To qualify as relevant country information for consideration by the Tribunal, it is essential that the source of the information has no vested interest in the outcome of the individual claim for international protection.⁷

QUALITY STANDARDS AND PRINCIPLES

6. INTRODUCTION

[6.1] The purpose of this section is to outline the quality standards and principles used by the Tribunal in assessing country information. These standards and principles act as a framework for assessing the quality of the information being used by the Tribunal for the determination of international protection appeals and related matters.

[6.2] The relevance of country information may vary in individual cases. Country of origin information alone cannot foresee the range or types of abuses that a particular individual may suffer in a given context. As with other types of evidence, the COI relevant to a specific case must be assessed in light of the

⁶ [Judicial analysis on evidence and credibility assessment in the context of the Common European Asylum System](#) (Second edition, 2023), 22.

⁷ Definition taken from the [Austrian Red Cross/ ACCORD, Researching Country of Origin Information Training Manual](#) (2013), 12.

entirety of the material put before the [...] tribunal. In some cases country information may have a direct probative value in regard to an applicant's account, but it will more commonly be an aid to assessing its plausibility and its external consistency.⁸

7. QUALITY STANDARDS

The substantive quality standards adopted by the Tribunal for using country information are as follows⁹:

- (a) **Relevance:** connected to the fact, event or matter in question. Country information used for deciding on international protection needs is relevant when it is based on questions rooted in legal concepts of refugee and human rights law or on questions derived from an applicant's statements.
- (b) **Reliability:** trustworthy to the matter, fact or event in question. Decisions on international protection needs should be based on country information from reliable sources, taking into account the source's political and ideological context as well as its mandate, reporting methodology and motivation.
- (c) **Currency:** up-to-date or the most recent information available and where the events in question have not changed since the release of the information.
- (d) **Objectivity:** not influenced by emotions, personal prejudices, interests or biases. As each source has its own perspective and focus, different types of sources should be consulted to achieve the most comprehensive and balanced picture possible.
- (e) **Accuracy:** conformity of a statement, or opinion, or information to the factual reality or truth. Only information that is correct and valid at the time of making a decision should be used. Accuracy can be achieved by cross-checking and corroborating information.
- (f) **Traceability:** the degree to which the primary and/or original source of a piece of information can be identified. To ensure transparency, country information should be fully referenced to enable readers to independently verify and assess the information.

⁸ [European Asylum Support Office \(EASO\), 'Judicial Practical Guide on Country of Origin Information'](#) (2018), 9.

⁹ Quality criteria for evaluating and validating information taken from the [Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#) (April 2008), 12. The standards are presented in the order in which they appear in the assessment cycle.

(g) Transparency: the information is clear, unequivocal and intelligible. Every piece of information should be traceable to its source.

8. PRINCIPLES

The standards described above rest on basic principles that should be observed when researching and using country information. While technical skills and an understanding of international protection are needed to adhere to quality standards, the principles form a frame around the standards and aim at contributing to fair procedures:

(a) **Neutrality and Impartiality:** Country information research should be conducted in a neutral manner with regard to the outcome.

(b) **Equality of Arms as Regards Access to Information:** Country information should be equally available to all decision-making bodies and to legal representatives of applicants in procedures for persons seeking international protection. Applicants must have access to the information a decision is based on, so that they may comment on it.

(c) **Using Public Information:** To support fair procedures, publicly available information should be used. Public information is open to review and scrutiny by the applicant, experts and the public at large.

(d) **Data Protection:** The personal data of a claimant and information that potentially may make the claimant identifiable must be protected and should never – directly or indirectly – be shared with the alleged persecutor.¹⁰

9. SOURCES OF COUNTRY INFORMATION

[9.1] In the context of processing country information, the meaning of the term ‘source’ can vary depending on the circumstances of its use: it may be used to describe the person or institution providing information or it may be used to describe the information product produced, either by that person or institution, or by others.¹¹

[9.2] Source assessment is the process of thoroughly and critically evaluating a source against the mentioned quality standards, by way of asking the following questions:

¹⁰ Definitions taken from the Definition taken from the [Austrian Red Cross/ ACCORD, Researching Country of Origin Information Training Manual](#) (2013), 30.

¹¹ [Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#) (April 2008), 6.

Who is providing the information;
What information is provided;
Why are they providing this information;
How is the information presented; and
When was the information gathered and provided?¹²

- [9.3] **No hierarchy of sources:** It is not possible to establish a hierarchy of sources, as it is not possible to state that individual sources will always be more reliable or useful than others. Some sources (e.g. international organisations and NGOs) may be more valuable for information on the general human rights situation, whereas other sources (e.g. national or local news agencies or experts) may be more valuable for information on particular events.¹³ The Tribunal is entitled to prefer certain material over certain other material, but it must conduct a rational analysis of conflicting country information and justify any preferment of one piece of information over another.¹⁴
- [9.4] **Anonymous sources:** As a general rule sources of information used in a report should be named and publicly accessible. In some cases it may not be possible to name the primary source without putting the person's security at risk; this would be the case if an author who directly contacted a primary source were to publish their details.¹⁵ UNHCR recommends that anonymous evidence (where the source is concealed) is relied upon only where this is necessary to protect the safety of witnesses and the asylum-seeker's ability to challenge the substance of the evidence is not substantially prejudiced.¹⁶
- [9.5] **Social Media:** In general, social media are not subject to the same standards of regulation as established information sources. Social media may be useful in specific contexts, for example when looking for information corroborative of where and when a demonstration took place.¹⁷ Information such as personal websites, weblogs, internet forums and chat boxes are usually regarded as dubious because the source cannot be clearly identified.¹⁸

¹² Taken from [European Union Asylum Agency \(EUAA\), Country of Origin Information \(COI\) Report Methodology](#) (February 2023), 14.

¹³ [European Union Asylum Agency \(EUAA\), Country of Origin Information \(COI\) Report Methodology](#) (February 2023), 14.

¹⁴ The necessity to state the reasons for the preference is well-established and the *locus classicus* in that regard is *D.V.T.S. v. Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform & anor.* [\[2007\] IEHC 305](#), [\[2008\] 3 IR 476](#).

¹⁵ [European Asylum Support Office \(EASO\), 'Judicial Practical Guide on Country of Origin Information'](#) (2018), 15.

¹⁶ UNHCR, [Country of Origin Information: Towards Enhanced International Cooperation](#), 2004, para 32.

¹⁷ [European Asylum Support Office \(EASO\), 'Judicial Practical Guide on Country of Origin Information'](#) (2018), 13.

¹⁸ [Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#) (April 2008), 11.

10. CHECKLIST

[10.1] In order to further ensure consistency and quality in using COI, the Tribunal recommends the use of a checklist to assist all parties in sourcing and assessing COI.

[10.2] A checklist was developed by the International Association of Refugee Law Judges (IARLJ)¹⁹ and has become “a well-established (‘soft-law’) source of reference”.²⁰ Although this checklist was developed with protection judges in mind, it provides a useful template also for applicants and their legal representatives in the sourcing and assessing of COI. The checklist is reproduced in an appendix to this Guidance Note.

COUNTRY INFORMATION PORTALS/PROVIDERS

11. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this section is to identify certain standard sources of quality country information.

12. COI PORTALS/PROVIDERS

The following provide independently and neutrally researched COI from a variety of sources, including international, governmental and non-governmental sources. However, the mere fact that a document is placed on these portals does not mean that it automatically complies with the Quality Standards or Principles identified above.

(a) European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA)

The [EUAA COI Portal](#) provides access to COI for use in Protection Status Determination procedures. It is managed by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) in cooperation with the national asylum authorities of EU+ states (EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland). The EUAA COI Portal provides selected COI authored by EU+ national asylum authorities, EUAA and other EU institutions.

(b) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)/Refworld

¹⁹ Now the International Association of Refugee and Migration Judges (IARMJ).

²⁰ IARLJ - International Association of Refugee Law Judges, [Judicial Criteria for Assessing Country of Origin Information \(COI\): A Checklist](#), Paper for 7th Biennial IARLJ World Conference, Mexico City, 6-9 November 2006 by members of the COI-CG Working Party.

[Refworld](#) contains a vast collection of reports and information relating to situations in countries of origin, policy documents and positions, and documents relating to international and national legal frameworks, compiled from UNHCR's global network of field offices, governments, international, regional and non-governmental organisations, academic institutions and judicial bodies.

Since 1 January 2019, ACCORD's [ecoi.net](#) has been endorsed by UNHCR as the main global platform for country of origin information. At the same time, UNHCR's [Refworld](#) reinforced its law and policy collections in the course of 2019, relaunching its protection information platform in 2020. Together these platforms will enable end-users to have easy and fast access to high-quality and up-to-date protection information.

(c) European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI)

The [ecoi.net](#) is managed by [ACCORD, the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation](#). ACCORD is a department of the Austrian Red Cross, based in Vienna, and provides neutral and impartial COI research services to all actors involved in Austrian asylum procedures and to other organisations based on agreements.

The [ecoi.net](#) covers more than 160 sources on a regular basis and preferably uses reliable information sources or sources with a high reputation, such as the United Nations, international non-governmental organisations, news and media services or government departments dealing with asylum and refugee issues. However, [ecoi.net](#) will also include less prestigious sources if they offer an added information value.

The [ecoi.net](#) does not cover events in all countries of the world to the same extent, but there is a focus on countries of origin of asylum applicants in Europe. For a list of all regularly covered sources, along with information on what countries each source is covered for, see: [our sources](#).

(d) ReliefWeb

[ReliefWeb](#) is a humanitarian information service provided by the [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#). The service is managed by the Digital Services Section of OCHA's [Information Management Branch](#).

ReliefWeb's editorial team monitors and collects information from more than 4,000 key sources, including humanitarian agencies at the international and local levels, governments, think-tanks and research institutions, and the media. ReliefWeb editors select, classify, curate and deliver the content that is most relevant to global humanitarian workers and decision-makers on a

24/7 basis, enabling them to make informed decisions and to plan effective response.

(f) Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

The [Research Directorate at the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada](#) provides COI to the Refugee Protection Division and the Refugee Appeal Division. The information in the COI is carefully selected from publicly-available sources and oral sources to represent a variety of viewpoints. Sources may include foreign government organisations, agencies, and news services; national and international non-governmental organisations; human rights organisations; academic publications; and other independent news services.

(e) Refugee Documentation Centre (RDC)

The [Refugee Documentation Centre \(RDC\)](#) provides a specialist query and research service in support of the work of the Legal Aid Board and Department of Justice agencies involved in Refugee Status Determination, Immigration and Naturalisation. Solicitors and barristers on the Service for Asylum Seekers panel of the Legal Aid Board may also use the service. The service is not available to members of the public.

Applications for the service may be made by completing and submitting an [RDC Query Form](#). The minimum notice required by the RDC is five days. You can submit the query via the online form or by email, fax or post.

Sources used by RDC researchers include in-house collections, subscription databases, Internet sources, and national and international contacts. The query responses include a fully referenced list of sources cited.



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International Protection Appeals Tribunal

APPENDIX

Judicial Criteria for Assessing Country of Origin Information

The IARLJ checklist comprises the following questions:

1. Relevance and adequacy of the Information

- (i) How relevant is the COI to the case in hand?
- (ii) Does the COI source adequately cover the relevant issue(s)?
- (iii) How current or temporally relevant is the COI?

2. Source of the Information

- (iv) Is the COI material satisfactorily sourced?
- (v) Is the COI based on publicly available and accessible sources?
- (vi) Has the COI been prepared on an empirical basis using sound and reliable methodology?

3. Nature / Type of the Information

- (vii) Does the COI exhibit impartiality and independence?
- (viii) Is the COI balanced and not overly selective?

4. Prior Judicial Scrutiny

- (ix) Has there been judicial scrutiny by other national courts of the COI in question?