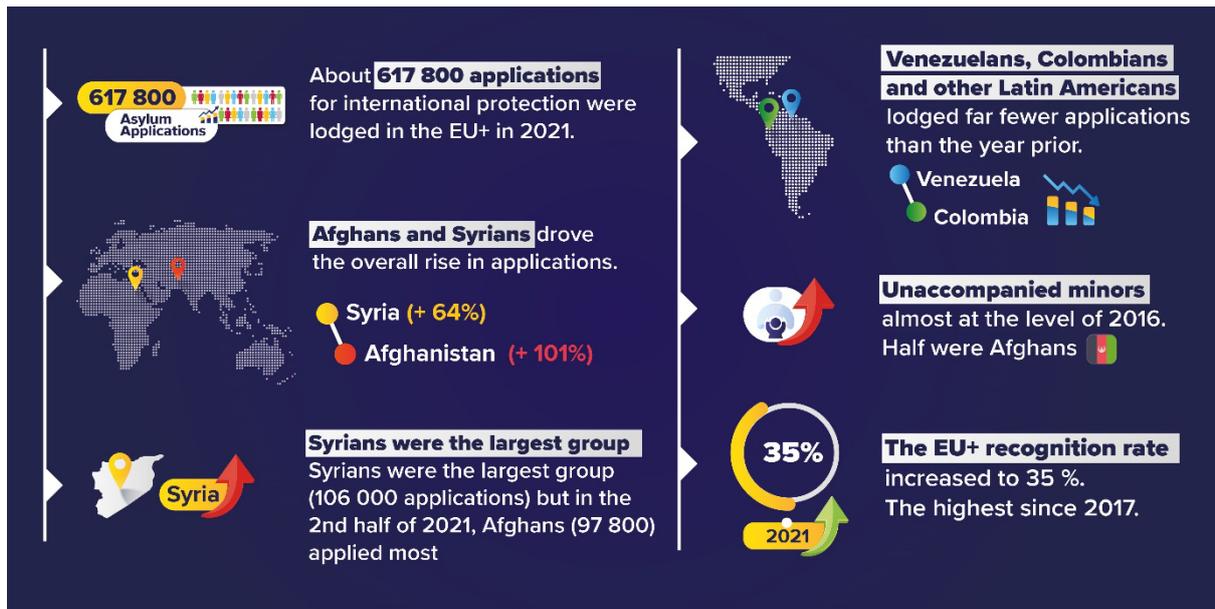


Latest asylum trends

Annual overview 2021



Key Findings

- In 2021, some 617 800 applications for international protection were received in the EU+, increasing by a third from 2020 and returning to pre-pandemic levels.
- The rise in applications was mostly due to more applications by Afghans and Syrians. In fact, both lodged the most applications since 2016.
- By the end of the year, Afghans were lodging the most applications for asylum but Syrians were overall the largest group applying in 2021.
- The top countries of origin were all in the Middle East and Asia: Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and Bangladesh. Far fewer Latin Americans applied than in 2020, while applications increased for a range of African nationalities.
- Belarusians lodged three times as many applications as the year before.
- In 2021, self-claimed unaccompanied minors lodged almost as many applications as in 2016. About half of all unaccompanied minors were Afghans.



- Decision making by EU+ asylum authorities (523 000 decisions at first instance) did not keep up with the number of applications lodged.
- The EU+ recognition rate was 35 % in 2021. Recognition rates were the highest for Eritreans (81 %), Yemenis (79 %), Belarusians (75 %) and Syrians (72 %). For Afghans, it was 66 % in 2021 but increased to around 90 % towards the end of the year.
- The number of cases pending at first instance increased during the second half of 2021. At the end of the year, some 442 500 cases were pending at first instance and half of them had been pending for less than six months.

Asylum applications in the EU+ returned to pre-pandemic levels

In 2021, **applications for international protection in the EU+ rose by a third to 617 800, returning to pre-pandemic levels** after a major dip in 2020. The level in 2021 was roughly similar to that in 2018 but still somewhat lower than in 2019. While it cannot be ruled out that COVID-19 and associated restrictions on mobility were still affecting access to asylum procedures, any such effect appears to have been considerably weaker than in 2020.

Since May 2021, asylum applications have been increasing. Indeed, **citizens of many countries of origin lodged the most applications in several years** (see below). However, total applications remained far below the levels recorded during the so-called refugee crisis in 2015/2016. Some 85 % of all applications received in 2021 were first-time applications, suggesting that the applicant was newly arrived in the country receiving the application.

Conversely, some 14 % of all applications (89 100) were repeated applications, i.e. they were lodged after receiving a final decision on an earlier application in the same EU+ country. Repeat applications were especially common in 2021 (the most since at least 2014), perhaps in line with reduced mobility during the pandemic.

Top countries of origin in the Middle East and Asia

The overall rise of asylum applications in 2021 was primarily driven by Afghans and Syrians. Afghans lodged twice as many applications (some 97 800) compared to 2020. In the wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, EU+ countries received more than 10 000 Afghan applications every month since August, the most of any nationality. However, overall in 2021, Syrians still lodged slightly more applications (106 000) than Afghans, and almost two





thirds more than in 2020. In fact, **Syrians and Afghans both applied the most since 2016** (see country focus).

Iraqis were the third largest group of applicants in 2021 (some 28 700). While their applications have also increased considerably from 2020 (+ 58 %), due in part to the new route of irregular migration via Belarus, they remained lower than in the years prior to 2020. Iraqis were followed by Pakistanis (24 600), Turks (23 700) and Bangladeshis (20 000). For all three nationalities, applications were substantially higher than in 2020. Indeed, Bangladeshis lodged the most applications on record, i.e. since the beginning of the EPS data exchange in 2014 (see country focus).

The largest group of European asylum applicants were Albanians (11 100), followed by Moldovans (7 700). Both lodged around 70 % more applications in 2021 than in 2020, also the case for nearby Georgians (14 600). Compared to 2020, similar numbers of Ukrainians (6 300) sought asylum, but **three times as many Belarusians applied** (3 800). A significantly stronger increase only occurred for citizens of North Macedonia (5 000), whose applications quadrupled.

Fewer applicants from Latin America but more from Africa

In 2021, far fewer Latin Americans lodged applications for asylum in the EU+, in sharp contrast with many more irregular migrants from Latin America being encountered in the United States.ⁱ In EU+ countries, the main applicant groups from Latin America were Venezuelans (some 17 700) and Colombians (13 800), followed by Haitians, Peruvians, Hondurans, Salvadorians, Cubans and Nicaraguans. Together they lodged some 45 900 applications in 2021, down from 85 600 in 2020 and as many as 113 400 in 2019. This decline was the main reason why total applications in 2021 did not exceed the level in 2019, even though many more Syrians and Afghans applied for international protection. **However, Latin Americans started to lodge more applications during the second half of 2021.**

On the other hand, **applications increased substantially for a range of African nationalities**, often even beyond the levels in 2019. **This was especially true of North Africans:** Moroccans (some 14 800 in 2021) and Egyptians (6 600) lodged more or less twice the number of applications compared to 2020, and Tunisians (9 300) more than three times as many, all reaching the highest levels since at least 2014. As for the West African nationalities, Ivorians (9 200), Malians (9 000) and Senegalese (6 300) lodged the most applications since 2017. Together with a high number of Nigerians (15 400), the latter figures might partly reflect irregular migration on the dangerous Western African route to the Canary Islands. East African applicants originated mainly from Somalia (16 400, the most since 2016) and Eritrea (11 200), while applications by Ethiopians (3 200) remained limited despite the conflict in Tigray.





Unaccompanied minors almost at the level of 2016

In 2021, EU+ countries received some 27 300 applications by self-claimed unaccompanied minors (UAMs), far more than in any of the previous three years and nearly as many as in 2016 (29 300). Just five nationalities made up 80 % of all UAMs in 2021. **About half of all UAMs were Afghans (13 000, the most since 2015)**, increasing almost continuously since June 2021. They were followed by UAMs from Syria (4 500, the most since 2015), Somalia (1 700, the most since 2016), Bangladesh (1 400, the most on record) and Pakistan (1 200, roughly stable). Compared to 2020, applications by Syrian UAMs increased by 85 %, while they more than doubled for Afghan, Somali and Bangladeshi UAMs. Overall, UAMs accounted for one in every 23 asylum applicants (4 % of the total in 2021). About one in eight Afghan asylum applicants was a self-claimed UAM and one in 10 Somalis, but only one in 15 Bangladeshis, 21 Pakistanis and 23 Syrians.



Focus on selected countries of origin of applicants

Syria – In 2021, for the eighth year in a row, Syrians lodged the most applications in the EU+. They lodged some 106 000 applications for international protection, which was an increase by nearly two thirds from a year earlier and the most since 2016. During the year, Syrian monthly applications fluctuated considerably: a decline in the spring and summer was followed by a rise in the last trimester of the year, with an annual peak in November. Despite being overall the top citizenship in 2021, in the last five months of the year Syrians were outnumbered by Afghan asylum applicants and hence were only the second largest group of applicants between August and December. Most Syrian applications (87 %) were lodged by first-time applicants. However, in the first two months of the year, unusually high levels of repeated applications in the same country were recorded (close to 5 000 in both January and February).

Some 4 500 Syrian applications were lodged by self-claimed unaccompanied minors (UAMs), the most on record (i.e. since the beginning of the EPS data exchange in 2014). While UAMs represented a small share (4 %) of all Syrian applicants, Syrians accounted for 17 % of all UAMs applying in the EU+.

About 87 500 first instance decisions were issued on Syrian asylum applications in 2021 (+ 13 % from 2020), the most in four years. Furthermore, the number of withdrawals reached 5 000, the most in four years. Seven in 10 withdrawals were implicit, which means that the applicant could no longer be located and was deemed to have abandoned the asylum procedure. But despite the increased decision making and the rise in withdrawals, applications still exceeded case closures. As a result, at the end of December 2021 the number of pending Syrian cases at first instance was the highest in five years (some 68 300, up by two thirds from a year earlier). Close to three fifths of these cases had been in the system for less than six months.

The EU+ recognition rate for Syrians was 72 % in 2021, one of the highest across all citizenships, yet recording a notable decline from a year earlier (84 %). In fact, the recognition rate for Syrian asylum applications was the lowest since at least 2014, as the large numbers of repeated applications by Syrians in early 2021 had largely resulted in negative decisions. Roughly half of the positive decisions granted refugee status, while the other half granted subsidiary protection.

Afghanistan – In 2021, Afghanistan remained the second most important country of origin. The overall number of Afghan asylum applicants doubled from the previous year to some 97 800, the most since 2016. In the first seven months of the year, Afghan applications for international protection increased gradually but by and large steadily, with the inflow accelerating especially after May. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August seems to have spurred the rising inflow of Afghan asylum applicants, as nearly two thirds of all Afghan applications in the EU+ were lodged between August and December. In fact, during that time

Afghans became the top citizenship applying for asylum in the EU+. However, it is not possible to estimate the proportion of the Afghan applications that was lodged by evacuees.

As in the case of Syrians, most Afghans were first-time applicants (85 %). However, in the wake of the Taliban takeover, there was also a notable rise in repeated Afghan applications between August and November – two thirds of all Afghan repeated applications were lodged in these four months. The number of self-claimed UAMs from Afghanistan more than doubled in 2021 compared to 2020, reaching 13 000, the most since 2015. They accounted for 13 % of all Afghan applicants. Hence, nearly one half of all UAMs seeking asylum in the EU+ were Afghans.

About 51 900 first instance decisions were issued on Afghan asylum applications in 2021, which was an increase by a fifth from the previous year. Decision making especially accelerated after August, thus coinciding with the notable rise in applications after the withdrawal of NATO from Afghanistan. Furthermore, the number of withdrawals increased strongly (+ 155 % from a year earlier). In 2021, some 18 100 Afghan applications were withdrawn, which was the most in five years. The vast majority (eight in 10 withdrawals) were implicit. However, the increases in decision making and withdrawn applications were not enough to offset the twofold rise in applications. After declining in the first half of 2021, pending Afghan cases therefore mounted, to at least 69 300 at the end of December. As with applications and first instance decisions, the number of pending cases increased especially after August: while the level at the end of August only slightly exceeded that at the end of January (by 1 000), it then increased by more than 20 000 between August and December. At the end of 2021, Afghans had the most pending cases across EU+ countries. Almost three fifths of Afghan pending cases in the EU+ had been awaiting a decision for less than six months.

The EU+ recognition rate for Afghans was 66 % in 2021, the highest since 2015 (and an increase from 53 % a year earlier). However, the recognition rate fluctuated strongly over the course of 2021 (e.g. between 45 % in July and 91 % in both October and November), being especially high in the last four months of the year. In fact, the recognition rates for Afghan applicants in October and November were the highest on record, with at least eight in 10 positive decisions granting refugee status and the remainder granting subsidiary protection.

Bangladesh – In 2021, Bangladeshis lodged some 20 000 applications for international protection in the EU+, the most on record (i.e. since the beginning of the EPS data exchange in 2014), and became the sixth largest group of asylum applicants in the EU+. From 2020, Bangladeshi applications increased by three quarters and – as was the case for other top citizenships – the majority was lodged in the second half of the year, with a distinct peak in September (some 2 800 applications). Furthermore, nine in 10 Bangladeshi asylum applications in the EU+ were lodged by first-time applicants.

Applications by self-claimed UAMs from Bangladesh increased at a higher rate than overall applications (+ 174 % compared to the previous year), resulting in about 1 400 applications by UAMs (the most on record). This accounted for a relatively small proportion of all Bangladeshi applications (7 %) but represented the fourth largest group among all UAMs seeking asylum in the EU+.

With some 16 300 first instance decisions issued across the EU+, the decision making on Bangladeshi applications also increased in 2021 – up by two thirds from the previous year and close to the peak of 2018. In addition, withdrawals by Bangladeshi applicants more than doubled compared to a year earlier: some 2 400 applications were withdrawn and eight in 10 withdrawals were implicit. These case closures partly explain the slight decline in pending cases despite the high inflow of applications. At the end of December 2021, some 12 700 Bangladeshi cases were still pending at first instance. Three fifths of all Bangladeshi applications in the EU+ had been pending for less than six months.

The EU+ recognition rate for Bangladeshis was 4 % in 2021, one of the lowest recognition rates of all citizenships seeking asylum in the EU+. Of the relatively few positive decisions, three quarters granted refugee status and the remainder granted subsidiary protection.

Decisions at first instance outnumbered by applications

In 2021, **EU+ countries issued about 523 000 decisions at first instance**, marginally more than in 2020 (521 000) but less than in every year from 2015 to 2019. Relatively many decisions were issued in March and April 2021, in response to large numbers of repeated applications by Syrians following a ruling by the Court of Justice of the EU (see country focus). Thereafter, the level of monthly decisions tended to decline until August and rebounded in the last four months of 2021. Until May, more decisions were issued than applications received (except in January). However, **from June onwards, applications outnumbered decisions in every month, often by a large margin**. In total in 2021, applications outnumbered first instance decisions by some 95 000. This gap was smaller than in 2019 but contrasted with 2020, when almost 60 000 more decisions were issued than applications received.

Most decisions in 2021 were issued to Syrians (some 87 500), representing a sixth of all decisions in the EU+. Another 10 % were issued to Afghans (51 900). Pakistanis, Colombians, Iraqis and Turks each accounted for 4 % of all decisions, and Nigerians, Venezuelans and Bangladeshis for 3 % each. Several top countries of origin exemplify how decisions have fallen behind applications. Compared with 2020, applications by Syrians and Afghans increased by 64 % and 101 %, respectively, while decisions issued to them increased by 13 % and 21 %, respectively. Iraqis and Turks respectively lodged 58 % and 50 % more applications in 2021 but decisions on their applications slightly declined. However, in the case of Bangladeshis, decisions (+ 68 %) increased broadly in line with applications (+ 77 %).



Rising recognition rate

The EU+ recognition rate was 35 % in 2021, the highest since 2017. For the EU+ recognition rate, only decisions that grant refugee status and subsidiary protection are considered positive, in contrast to decisions granting humanitarian protection under national law. Over the course of 2021, the recognition rate has risen significantly, mainly because Afghans increasingly received positive decisions (see country focus). **Almost two thirds (65 %) of the positive decisions in 2021 granted refugee status**, while the remainder granted subsidiary protection. These shares were broadly in line with the previous three years.

Afghans and Syrians together accounted for the majority of all positive decisions at first instance in 2021. **The recognition rate for Afghans increased substantially**, from 53 % in 2020 to 66 % in 2021, while it exceeded 90 % in October and November 2021. In contrast, the recognition rate for Syrians declined from 84 % to 72 %, due to numerous negative decisions on repeated applications. Among the nationalities receiving at least 1 000 decisions in 2021, also Eritreans (81 %), Yemenis (79 %) and Belarusians (75 %) had especially high recognition rates. Conversely, recognition rates were especially low for citizens of Moldova (0 %), India, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (1 % each) as well as Georgia and Serbia (3 % each).

Upward trend in pending cases in the second half of 2021

Cases pending at first instance – those that are still being processed by asylum authorities, not including those that are open in appeal or review (second and higher instances) – tended to decline until May 2021. At that point, some 360 800 cases were pending at first instance in EU+ countries, a comparatively low level last seen in 2014. However, **pending cases have continuously increased since June 2021**, resulting from rising applications that outpaced first instance decisions and other case closures. At the end of 2021, some 442 500 cases were pending at first instance,ⁱⁱ which was 7 % more than at the end of 2020 but still 11 % below the level at the end of 2019.

The high inflow of applications also steadily increased the share of cases that had been pending for less than six months, from a third in May 2021 to a half at the end of the year. At the end of 2021, some 16 % of the cases pending at first instance concerned Afghans, followed by Syrians (15 %), Iraqis (5 %) as well as Turks, Venezuelans and Pakistanis (4 % each). For pending cases at all instances,ⁱⁱⁱ data on the last quarter of 2021 are not yet available. At the end of September 2021, about 817 900 cases were pending in the EU+ at all instances. A year earlier in September 2020, some 882 000 cases had been awaiting a decision. Since then, EU+ countries have reduced this caseload by 7 %.





Definitions

Asylum applications include all persons who have lodged or have been included in an application for international protection as a family member in the reporting country during the reporting month.

EU+ refers to the 27 European Union Member States, plus Norway and Switzerland.

First instance decisions include all persons covered by decisions issued on granting EU-regulated international protection status (refugee or subsidiary protection) following a first time or repeated application for international protection in the first instance determination process.

Stock of pending cases includes all cases for which an asylum application has been lodged and are under consideration by the national authority responsible for the first instance determination of the application for international protection (until the first instance decision has been issued) at the end of the reference period (i.e. last day of the reference month). It refers to the “stock” of applications for which decisions in first instance are still pending.

The EU+ recognition rate includes EU-regulated forms of protection (refugee status and subsidiary protection) and excludes national protection forms (humanitarian reasons). It is calculated by dividing the number of positive first instance decisions (granting refugee status or subsidiary protection) by the total number of decisions issued.

This document is produced by the EUAA’s Situational Analysis Unit (SAU) on the basis of monthly data exchanged under the Early warning and Preparedness System (EPS). The data shared with the EUAA by the EU+ countries are provisional and unvalidated, and therefore may differ from validated data submitted to Eurostat (according to Regulation (EU) 2020/851 amending Regulation (EC) 862/2007). In line with the dissemination guide on EPS data, the EUAA cannot publish data disaggregated per EU+ country.

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ⁱ Pew Research Center, [What’s happening at the U.S.-Mexico border in 7 charts](#), 9 November 2021, accessed 7 February 2022.

ⁱⁱ Using values from earlier months for one EU+ country where data were unavailable for December 2021. Based only on the 28 EU+ countries reporting in December, the number was 442 086.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eurostat data ([migr_asypercentzm](#)) on pending cases at all instances in September 2021 were available for all 29 EU+ countries. EUAA EPS data on pending cases at first instance were available for 27 EU+ countries in September 2021.

