

# 2019 EU Asylum Trends

Asylum applications  
in the EU+ up by 13% last year



# KEY FINDINGS

- In 2019, there were some 714 200 applications for international protection, up by 13 % compared to 2018. This is the first year-on-year increase since 2015
  - There were five times as many applications for asylum than detections at the external border. Hence, applications are becoming less associated with irregular migration
  - 10% of all applications were repeat applications in the same country – this rises to a third of all applications for some citizenships
  - The overall EU+ recognition rate remained stable at 33 %
  - Syrians, Afghans and Venezuelans lodged a quarter of all applications
  - Afghans lodged a third more applications compared to 2018, but received fewer decisions with recognition rates varying widely between issuing countries
  - Several Latin-American citizenships also lodged far more applications than in 2018
  - A quarter of all applications were lodged by applicants who can enter the Schengen area visa-free
  - Applicants from visa-liberalised countries (VLC) tended to have low recognition rates, except for nationals of El Salvador (37 %)
  - Applicants from Venezuela had a low recognition rate (\*) but are currently issued with humanitarian protection by some countries
- Despite increased applications, EU+ countries issued fewer first-instance decisions compared to 2018
- Syrians (85 %), Yemenis (82 %) and Eritreans (81 %) had the highest recognition rates, whereas North Macedonians and Moldovans had the lowest (1 %)
  - Towards the end of 2019 there were more than 900 000 cases pending at all instances in the EU+
  - At the end of the year, some 540 559 cases were pending at first instance, up by 20 % from a year earlier, and the most since July 2017

## Latest asylum trends – 2019 overview



Some **714 200** asylum applications were lodged in the EU+ in 2019, up by 13 % compared to 2018



**The main countries of origin** of applicants were Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Iraq and Colombia



EU+ countries issued almost **574 150** decisions at first instance in 2019



**33 %** of the decisions issued in 2019 granted EU-regulated forms of protection



Some **540 559** cases were pending at first instance at the end of December 2019, up by 20 % from a year

# Applications increased for the first time since 2015

## *More visa-exempt Latin Americans and Afghans lodged applications*

In 2019, there were some **714 200 applications for international protection lodged in the EU+<sup>1</sup>, up by 13 %** compared to 2018<sup>2</sup>. An upward trend was already noted back in the autumn of 2018, and continued in 2019; in fact more applications were lodged in the second half of the year compared to the first. On average, some 56 300 applications were lodged each month in the first half of the year, whereas some 62 750 in each of the last six months. Similar to 2018, the busiest months were October (70 562) and November (67 449), which might be partially linked to a concurrent rise in irregular arrivals at that time. However, as usual there were far more applications for asylum than detections at the external border (the ratio was five to one). Thus, **asylum applications were not particularly driven by irregular migration, although this was dependent on the route taken.** Hence increased applications for asylum are probably driven by new applicants who might have arrived visa free, undetected or with fraudulent documents, first-time or repeated applications lodged by persons already present in the EU+, or applicants lodging more than one application in multiple EU+ countries. Overall, seven in ten of all applications were lodged in just five EU+ countries; the majority of EU+ countries received more applications than in 2018.

This was the first time the volume of asylum applications increased (on a yearly basis) since 2015. The increase can be attributed mainly to a sharp rise in applications lodged by nationals of several visa-free Latin American countries, and to a smaller scale increase among Afghans and a number of other citizenship groups. At the same time, the sharp drop in applications by citizenships seeking asylum in large numbers between 2015 and 2016, which was observed in 2017 and 2018, slowed down substantially.

Although stable with 2018, for the seventh consecutive year, **Syrians** still lodged the most applications for asylum (72 254) accounting for 10% of all applications in 2019. **Afghans**, likewise,

continued to rank second, but in this case applications increased substantially compared to 2018 (59 706 applications or + 32 %). **Venezuelans** lodged twice as many applications than 2018 (about 45 150), ranking third and outnumbering even Iraqis, Pakistanis and Nigerians.

**Together with Venezuelans, several other nationals of visa-free Latin American countries** also lodged far more applications in 2019. **Colombians** lodged more than three times as many applications as in 2018, rising from the seventeenth to the fifth position; nationals of **El Salvador** lodged twice as many applications as in 2018, ranking 20th among all citizenships of applicants. Moreover, applicants from **Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru** featured among the top 30 citizenships of origin, lodging more than 6 000 applications each in 2019, and at least doubling in number since 2018.

The list of the top 10 citizenships also included **Iraqi, Pakistani, Turkish, Iranian, Nigerian and Albanian** nationals. Iraqis sought asylum far less frequently than in 2018 (- 19 %), in line with the downward trend observed since 2015, whereas Turks lodged more applications (+ 10 %). Relatively stable flows were noted among the rest of the citizenships. The top 10 citizenships altogether lodged half of all applications in 2019.

Substantial increases in the number of applications were also recorded among citizenships outside of the top ranking. In relative terms, the sharpest were among nationals of **Cuba (+ 74 %), Moldova (+ 47 %), Congo (DR) (+ 33 %), Angola (+ 31%), China (+ 29 %), Vietnam (+ 25 %) and India (+ 24 %<sup>3</sup>)**. On the contrary, only few citizenships applied at lower levels than a year ago, namely **Kosovars, Libyans and Armenians** (decreases ranging between - 29 % and - 24 %), together with nationals of several African countries (**Ethiopia, the Gambia, Eritrea, Sudan, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire, ranging between - 21 % and - 10 %**).

About **one in 10 of all applications lodged in 2019 were repeated**, i.e. lodged by persons who previously received a negative decision in the same EU+ country. Consistent with previous reporting periods, this was extremely common among applicants from the Western Balkan region, including Serbia, North Macedonia (a third were repeats) and Kosovo (a quarter). This phenomenon is also relatively more common in some EU+ countries.

About 3 % of all applications in 2019 concerned self-claimed **unaccompanied minors (UAMs<sup>4</sup>)**. Concentration of UAMs was higher, though, among Vietnamese (14 %), Afghans (9 %) and Eritreans (8 %). Fewer unaccompanied minors from the Gambia sought asylum in the EU+ in 2019 than in the previous two years.

## Focus on relevant citizenships

### Syria

In 2019, Syrians lodged some 72 254 applications, more or less on par with 2018, but fewer than two years ago. Almost two thirds of all Syrian applications were lodged in just two EU+ countries. Despite the overall stable trend, Syrians lodged increasing numbers of applications throughout 2019: between February and May 2019, Syrians lodged about 5 300 applications each month, but this rose to 6 300 between July and September, and again to 7 200 in October and November. In fact, as of October the inflow (applications lodged) exceeded the outflow (case closures) each month, for the first time since mid-2018. Consequently, the number of pending cases also increased towards the end of the year. Of all first-instance decisions issued for Syrian applicants, 85 % were positive mostly granting refugee status.

### Afghanistan

Afghans (59 706) were the second most common applicants, accounting for 8 % of all applications lodged and up by 32 % from a year earlier. More Afghans sought international protection in the second half of 2019: from July onwards, Afghans lodged about 6 000 applications per month, up from just 3 900 during the first half of the year. At the same time, Afghans were increasingly detected illegally crossing the EU+ external borders. Afghans lodged three quarters of all applications in three EU+ countries. Despite these increases, Afghans continued to be issued the same volume of first-instance decisions throughout 2019, down by 40 % compared to 2018. Hence, the combined effect of more applications lodged and fewer decisions issued led to a sharp rise in the number of cases pending at first instance. At the end of the year, some 49 250 Afghan applications were awaiting a decision at first instance, up by 56 % from a year earlier; most of them were pending for less than six months.

Overall, half of all first-instance decisions issued to Afghans in 2019 offered some kind of EU regulated protection which is an increase compared to the previous two years. However, recognition rates continued to vary widely across EU+ countries (from 2 % to 98 % among EU+ countries with more than hundred decisions issued). Some countries continue to grant more often refugee status, whereas others subsidiary protection.

## Venezuela

Venezuelans lodged twice as many applications in 2019 (45 166) than in 2018. The overwhelming majority of Venezuelan applications were lodged in one EU+ country. Only 5 % of first-instance decisions issued to Venezuelan applicants granted some EU-regulated forms of protection, either refugee status or subsidiary protection, 18 percentage points less than in 2018 and, in fact, the lowest since 2016. However, this calculation does not include permits to stay for humanitarian reasons under national law concerning international protection (i.e. humanitarian protection), which are granted automatically to Venezuelans in some EU+ countries. More decisions are now being issued to Venezuelans but still, at the end of 2019, around 44 000 Venezuelans cases were pending, up by 42 % from December 2018. Venezuelans have visa free access to the Schengen Area, and so do not feature in analyses of irregular migration.

## Colombia

Colombians lodged three times as many applications in 2019 (32 340) than in 2018, and ranked fifth among all citizenships. This trend is likely to continue, considering that a third of all applications were lodged during the last three months of 2019 and almost all in one EU+ country. Despite this dramatic increase just 6 320 first-instance decisions were issued to Colombians in 2019 resulting in a similarly dramatic rise in the number of pending cases. The recognition rate for Colombians in 2019 was 7 %, the lowest since at least 2014. The backlog of Colombians at the end of 2019 reached some 31 400 cases, 56 % of those pending for less than six months. Proportions of those pending for less or more than six months tended to converge during the last five months of the year. Colombians have visa free access to the Schengen Area, and so do not feature in analyses of irregular migration.

## Congo (DR)

In 2019, asylum applications from Democratic Republic of Congo reached a record high (9 828), up by 33 % compared to last year, and on a smooth rise since 2016. In particular, asylum trends increased sharply during the second half of the year. From 2017 onwards, Congolese nationals have been applying for asylum mostly in two EU+ countries, reaching in 2019 the highest levels in the last five years. Almost one in three applicants overall and in the top two destination countries specifically received a positive first-instance decision, mostly granting refugee status. Recognition rates varied, though, from 8 % to 52 % among the countries issuing the most decisions. In 2019, fewer first-instance decisions were issued (5 961) than in previous years. At the same time, some 8 550 cases were pending at the end of 2019, the highest since 2014, up by 75 % compared to December 2018.

## First-instance decisions stabilised but variations between issuing countries remain

In 2019, EU+ countries issued about 574 150 decisions at first instance, more or less in line with 2018<sup>5</sup>. However, the pressure on first-instance authorities increased dramatically in some EU+ countries. A third of all first-instance decisions related to just four citizenships (Syrians, Venezuelans, Afghans, Iraqis). For these top citizenships, the number of decisions issued more or less mirrored the number of applications lodged i.e. stable for Syrians, massively increased for Venezuelans, and decreased for Iraqis

– with roughly as many decisions as applications lodged. Afghans represented an exception, since they lodged far more applications, but received far fewer first instance decisions for the second consecutive year, clearly impacting on the backlog of pending cases for this citizenship. Most Latin-American citizenships received far more decisions than in 2018, exemplified by the case of Venezuelans, who received ten times as many decisions as in 2018.

## Low recognition rates for most Visa-Liberalised Countries (VLC)

Overall, the EU+ recognition rate in 2019 was 33 %. Some 70 % of all positive decisions granted refugee status<sup>6</sup> and the rest subsidiary protection.

Among the citizenships receiving most decisions, the highest recognition rates were for Syrians (85 %), Yemenis (82 %) and Eritreans (81 %), but all slightly lower than in 2018<sup>7</sup>. In contrast, the rate of positive decisions issued for applicants from Visa-Liberalised Countries (VLC) was much lower. For example, for Western Balkan VLC, the rate ranged from 1 % for North Macedonians to 6 % for Albanians and for Eastern Partnership applicants from 1 % for Moldovans to 9 % for Ukrainians. The recognition rates for these countries were at similarly low levels also in 2018. Although the recognition rates for Venezuelans and Colombians were also low (5 % and 7 % respectively), they decreased by 18 p.p. and 6 p.p. compared to 2018. Only Salvadorians continued receiving a higher share of positive decisions (37 %). It must be noted, however, that such recognition rates do not include permits to stay for humanitarian reasons under national law concerning international protection (i.e. humanitarian protection), which are granted automatically to some Latin-American nationals in some EU+ countries. Among non-visa-free countries, recognition rates were also low for applicants from India, Tunisia, Armenia

and Ghana, among others, ranging from 3 % to 6 %. Compared to 2018, the recognition rates dropped sharply for Palestinians (49 %, - 25 p.p.) along with doubling of decisions issued, while they increased moderately for Sudanese (68 %, + 12 p.p.), Turkish (55 %, + 9 p.p.) and Cameroonians (29 %, + 8 p.p.). For some countries, nearly all positive decisions granted refugee status; this was especially the case for Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Sudan, China and Nigeria.

For some citizenships the recognition rate depended on where the application was lodged, even among the top countries issuing them the most decisions. For Afghans, the share of positive decisions varied between 21 % and 73 % for the three countries issuing the most decisions, but the range difference was much broader when all EU+ countries were taken into account. Wide variations in recognition rates across the top three countries issuing decisions were recorded also for Iraqis (24 % to 67 %), Iranians (25 % to 65 %), Somalis (32 % to 99 %) and Sudanese (15 % to 83 %). Conversely, less variation was noted for Syrians (85 % to 96 %) and Eritreans (71 % to 86 %). However, the variation in recognition rates increased for Syrians compared to a year ago. As previously, the variation was more limited for citizenships having a recognition rate lower than the EU+ average.

## Increase in the number of cases pending at first instance since late summer of 2019

**Based on latest available data (November 2019), there were more than 900 000 cases pending at all instances in the EU+<sup>8</sup>.** Overall the number of pending cases at all instances was still not reduced compared to 2018, plus the pressure on first-instance authorities increased sharply: **at the end of 2019, some 540 559 cases were pending, up by 20 % from a year earlier, and the highest since July 2017<sup>9</sup>.** This represents a noticeable development, since the number of pending cases had been largely stable for most of 2018 and 2019, but increased over the last months of the year; part of this increase was nonetheless due to technical revisions in some EU+ countries. At the end of 2019, half of all first-instance cases were pending for more than six months.

**Syrians (50 900) and Afghans (49 250) continued to have the most cases awaiting a first-instance decision, each accounting for**

9 % of all cases pending in the EU+. The backlog of Syrian cases was only slightly higher than a year ago (+7 %), but the number of Afghan open cases increased by a large 56 %. Venezuelans (43 985) were the third citizenship with most pending cases, up by 42 % compared to 2018; however, in this case the share of cases pending for longer than six months was much reduced, from 77 % at the end of 2018 to 51 % at the end of 2019. Similarly, the stock of other visa-free Latin-American countries, namely Colombians, Nicaraguans and Peruvians, was at least doubled compared to December 2018. The stock of pending cases decreased only for a few citizenships, most notably for applicants from Ukraine (- 30 %), Nigeria (- 24 %) and Guinea (- 17 %)<sup>10</sup>.

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### Endnotes

1. The EU+ was composed, in 2019, of 28 EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland. Monthly data on applications for international protection were available for 30 EU+ countries until September and for 29 EU+ countries from October onwards.
2. Based on EPS data. For the 2018 overview based on Eurostat data, please consult this webpage: [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asyencntzm&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyencntzm&lang=en)
3. For citizenships lodging at least 2 000 applications in 2019.
4. Claimed UAM represent the asylum applicants claiming to be below the age of 18 years rather than those assessed to be such after an age assessment has been carried out. Several EU+ countries have difficulties reporting on claimed UAM in the framework of the EPS data exchange. These figures should therefore be considered as underestimations of the actual proportion of claimed UAM.
5. 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. Data on first-instance decisions were available for 30 EU+ until September and for 29 EU+ countries from October onwards.
6. 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.
7. For citizenships with at least 2 000 first-instance decisions in 2019.
8. An indication of the cases pending at second and higher instances (i.e. in appeal or review) may be drawn by comparing the number of cases awaiting a decision at first instance (EPS data), with those pending at all instances of the administrative and/or judicial procedure (Eurostat data). The latest data fully available refers to October 2019 (except from Poland where September data were used).
9. Data on pending cases for December 2019 were available for 28 EU+ countries.
10. Among the top 30 citizenships with most pending cases.