

1. About the report

The [EASO Asylum Report 2021](#) provides a comprehensive overview of developments in the field of international protection at the European and national levels. Based on a wide range of sources, the report presents a brief overview of the global context of asylum, highlights developments in the European Union (EU) and examines the main trends and changes in legislation, policies, practices and case law across EU Member States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland (EU+ countries). The report focuses on key areas of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), while taking into consideration the broader context of migration and fundamental rights.

2. Main developments in the field of asylum in 2021 in the European Union

In the context of Europe, building on progress made in the negotiations over the two packages of reform proposals since 2016, the European Commission presented a new Pact on Migration and Asylum in September 2020. It proposed a fresh start on addressing migration through improved, faster and more effective procedures, while striking a balance between fair-sharing of responsibility and solidarity. The holistic approach of the European Commission in coordinating an inclusive consultation process and the effort to thoroughly integrate the linkages between different migration and asylum policy areas in one coherent approach were received positively.

The overall decrease in the number of arrivals at the EU's external borders in 2020 masks differences in trends across migration routes into Europe. The Western and Eastern Mediterranean routes had fewer arrivals compared to 2019, while the Western African, Central Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes experienced increased arrivals. As pressure on frontline Member States persisted, the European Commission, EASO, national authorities and other EU Member States worked to improve the situation.

In its role to ensure a harmonised interpretation and application of EU law, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) issued several judgments mostly related to preliminary rulings, further interpreting various provisions of CEAS.

EASO expanded support to Member States through operational and technical assistance plans, and continued to provide training activities, practical tools, guidance and recommendations. The agency undertook information collections and published analyses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on national asylum and reception systems. EASO also remained active on the ground and assisted in relocating unaccompanied children from Greece to other Member States.

3. Functioning of the Common European Asylum System

COVID-19: National authorities had to balance restrictive COVID-19 measures with respecting the right to asylum for people in need of protection. Asylum and reception systems in EU+ countries proved resilience and flexibility to ensure a continuity of services through the introduction of new working modalities and digital solutions. In parallel, courts played a key role in reviewing new practices to ensure they held up to legal standards and guarantees.

Digitalisation: The COVID-19 pandemic provided a new impetus to accelerate the use of digital technologies in the field of asylum. In 2020, EU+ countries implemented new electronic systems throughout the asylum procedure to increase efficiency, for example by online submissions of documentation and remote interviews. Digitalisation can also entail potential risks with data privacy and accessibility issues for applicants lacking digital literacy skills, equipment or connectivity.

Access to territory and the asylum procedure: EU+ countries continued to finetune and centralise the initial stages of the asylum procedure to obtain as much information from applicants as possible and enhance coordination across different stakeholders. They introduced updated guidance and instructions to prioritise cases and increase efficiency in processing. Nevertheless, a number of incidents were reported related to preventing or delaying effective access to territory and the asylum.

In 2020, approximately 485,000 applications for international protection were lodged in EU+ countries, a sharp 32% drop compared to 2019. The decline, which resulted in the lowest number of yearly applications since 2013, can be attributed to COVID-19 restrictions which limited movement across borders and within countries. Almost two-thirds (63%) of all asylum applications in 2020 were lodged in just three countries: Germany (122,000), France (93,000) and Spain (89,000), followed at some distance by Greece (41,000) and Italy (27,000). The top countries of origin were unchanged from 2019: Syria (70,000), Afghanistan (50,000), Venezuela (31,000), Colombia (30,000) and Iraq (20,000).

While the overall number of asylum seekers decreased in 2020, increased arrivals were reported in the Western African, Central Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes. In addition, when considering GDP, population density and country size, Cyprus, Malta and Greece continued to be under the greatest pressure to absorb and accommodate more asylum applicants.

Children and applicants with special needs: In 2020, about 14,200 applications for international protection were lodged by unaccompanied minors in EU+ countries, representing 3% of the total 485,000 applications. Highlighting the importance of early identification and referral, a number of EU+ countries updated their legislation, policies and guidance in 2020, implementing quality monitoring measures and developing new vulnerability assessments for applicants with special procedural needs.

The Dublin procedure: In 2020, 95,000 decisions were issued in response to outgoing Dublin requests. This represented a decrease by one-third compared to 2019 and was in line with the scale of the decrease in the number of asylum applications lodged in 2020. About 13,600 transfers were completed, representing one-half of the number of transfers in 2019.

Special procedures: Special procedures were adapted to accelerate the processing of applications, including the introduction of various types of border procedures, periodic reviews of safe country of origin lists to prioritise cases in the accelerated procedure and further clarification on the criteria for repeated or subsequent applications to prevent the misuse of the asylum system.

Decision-making: The drop in asylum applications provided an opportunity for EU+ countries to review current practices; introduce more efficient methods; issue new guidelines for the assessment of applications; and tackle the backlog of pending cases. As a result, for the first time since 2017, decisions issued by EU+ countries outnumbered applications lodged. The stock of pending cases was reduced by 18% with about 773,600 asylum applications awaiting a decision at the end of 2020.

EU+ countries issued about 534,500 first instance decisions in 2020. At second or higher instance the number of decisions decreased by almost one-fifth: from around 300,000 in 2018 and 2019 to about 237,000 in 2020. The EU+ recognition rate for first instance decisions on asylum applications was 42%, including national forms of protection. At second or higher instances, the recognition rate was 29%.

About 47,200 applications were withdrawn, the lowest number since 2013 and more than one-quarter less than in 2019. As in previous years, most of these were withdrawn implicitly, which can serve as a proxy indicator for absconding and the beginning of secondary movements.

Reception: The increased centralisation and coordination of the initial reception phase continued, and more countries established arrival centres where all stakeholders of the asylum and reception process

worked together. The phenomenon of recognised beneficiaries of international protection or former applicants remaining in reception structures beyond the end of the asylum procedure persisted in several

EU+ countries. Strong concerns were expressed about conditions in specific reception facilities, which typically triggered multilateral collaboration to improve reception conditions.

Legal assistance and representation: Existing initiatives for the provision of legal assistance were expanded and cooperation with stakeholders was strengthened. Some countries introduced measures to improve the quality of legal services, for example by enhancing qualification requirements.

Return of former applicants: As the rate of implemented returns of third-country nationals remained relatively low in many EU+ countries, a number of new legislative and policy initiatives were adopted in 2020 to improve the enforcement and cost-effectiveness of the return procedure. Countries also promoted assisted voluntary returns and worked in greater cooperation with Frontex.

Resettlement: Due to the pandemic, the number of resettled refugees decreased significantly. Nonetheless, countries continued their efforts through remote interviews and dossier selections.

Additional resources accompanying the *EASO Asylum Report 2021*:

- ▶ EASO Asylum Report 2021 ([landing page](#)); ([PDF](#)); ([HTML](#))
- ▶ Executive Summary ([PDF](#)); ([HTML](#))
- ▶ EU+ and country fiches ([PDF](#))
- ▶ Graphs on key indicators ([PDF](#))
- ▶ [National Asylum Developments Database](#)
- ▶ [Data visualisations of key indicators](#)
- ▶ [EASO Case Law Database](#)
- ▶ [Sources](#)

Recent publications referenced in the *EASO Asylum Report 2021*:

- ▶ Asylum Case Law in 2020 ([PDF](#))
- ▶ Border procedures for asylum applications in EU+ countries ([PDF](#))
- ▶ ‘Safe country of origin’ concept in EU+ countries ([PDF](#))
- ▶ Follow-up: COVID-10 vaccination for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection ([PDF](#))
- ▶ COVID-19 vaccination for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection ([PDF](#))
- ▶ EASO Special Report: Asylum Trends and COVID-19 ([PDF](#))