

Please cite as: EUAA, '4.4. Processing asylum applications at first instance' in *Executive Summary of the Asylum Report 2022*, Mayo 2022.

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In the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic and related health measures, EU+ countries continued to organise remote interviews with applicants for international protection and postponed the initial interview for applicants who showed symptoms of COVID-19 infection. In general, remote procedures were no longer exceptional but rather the new normal. EU+ countries put effort into long-term policy developments, improving the quality of first instance decisions, analysing data protection and privacy considerations, and publishing guidelines for certain profiles of applicants from specific countries of origin in which the situation was continuously evolving in 2021.

Several countries started to reorganise their asylum and reception services or completed restructuring their first instance authorities with the aim of clarifying the tasks and division of competences between their offices and various other ministries. Legislative proposals were initiated and new legislation came into force in 2021 to better align national laws with the provisions of CEAS, anticipate new technological developments or improve the efficiency of the asylum procedure during emergencies.

In 2021, EU+ asylum authorities issued some 535,000 first instance decisions, marginally more than in 2020 but roughly in line with pre-pandemic levels. As a result of the steady climb in applications, by the end of 2021 applications lodged in EU+ countries outnumbered first instance decisions by over 113,000. Thus, after a momentary reversal in 2020, the number of applications exceeded decisions again in 2021.

Three EU+ countries jointly issued just under two-thirds of all first instance decisions: France (26%), Germany (25%) and Spain (13%). Italy and Greece followed at a distance, issuing 8% and 7% of all decisions, respectively. Most first instance decisions in EU+ countries were issued to nationals of Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Colombia.

About 69,000 applications were withdrawn in EU+ countries, the most since 2017. Compared to 2020, this represented a 46% increase. The number of withdrawn applications in 2021 represented 11% of the number of applications lodged.

Over one-quarter of withdrawn applications were by Afghan nationals, accounting for over 18,000 applications in 2021 compared to 5,000 in 2020. Nationals of Syria, Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq, Bangladesh and Tunisia (in descending order) also withdrew a high number of applications.

Two-thirds of all withdrawn applications were implicit, meaning that the applicant had absconded and abandoned the procedure. Implicit withdrawals can serve as a proxy indicator of the beginning of secondary movements towards other EU+ countries. Consistent with this interpretation, figures in 2021 indicate a pattern of secondary movements from countries along the Balkan routes and at the EU's external borders.

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