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Conclusions

In 2019, the number of applications for international protection increased in Europe for the first time since 2015. Against this background, EU+ countries continued their efforts to further calibrate their asylum systems and enhance solutions for international protection, building on initiatives introduced in previous years.

As outlined in the report, major developments included:

The backlog of applications for international protection still awaiting a decision remained much higher compared to the pre-2015 level, illustrating the heightened pressure under which EU+ asylum and reception systems are still operating;

Secondary movements of applicants have attracted increasing attention among EU+ countries and added to debates about the current functioning of the Dublin procedure.

EU+ countries continued to place an emphasis on swift registration and collection of detailed information from applicants in the early stages of the asylum procedure to distinguish more efficiently between persons in need of protection and those who will be directed to return. This has been coupled with measures to enhance border procedures.

Efforts increased across EU+ countries to support the needs of applicants with vulnerabilities, from early identification and provision of procedural safeguards to improving specialised reception facilities and developing tailor-made information materials for unaccompanied minor applicants in particular.

With a considerable number of cases pending at second instance, courts and tribunals continued to play an important role in shaping the practical application of the provisions of the European asylum acquis.

Despite continued efforts by EU+ countries to identify solutions for the effective return of persons with no right to stay in the EU, including former applicants for international protection, the number of actual returns remained much lower than return decisions.

In the absence of major legislative progress toward the adoption of the CEAS reform package, considerable work was accomplished in policy implementation and practical cooperation among EU+ countries in the area of asylum.

Fundamental issues regarding the EU's external borders remained at the forefront of public debate, particularly in relation to search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea and the safe disembarkation and relocation of rescued migrants. The increased migration flows along the Eastern Mediterranean route amplified the pre-existing pressure on the asylum systems of Member States in the region. To assist frontline Member States along the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes, in 2019 EASO improved and, when needed, expanded its operational support to Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta.

The trends outlined in the *EASO Asylum Report 2020* set the background for the current year. In addition, the novel COVID-19 global outbreak will play a critical role in shaping asylum-related developments by highlighting the need for innovative approaches toward ensuring full respect

for the right to asylum. With the New Pact on Migration and Asylum currently being drafted, lessons drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic may be valuable in modernising and improving asylum procedures across EU+ countries.

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