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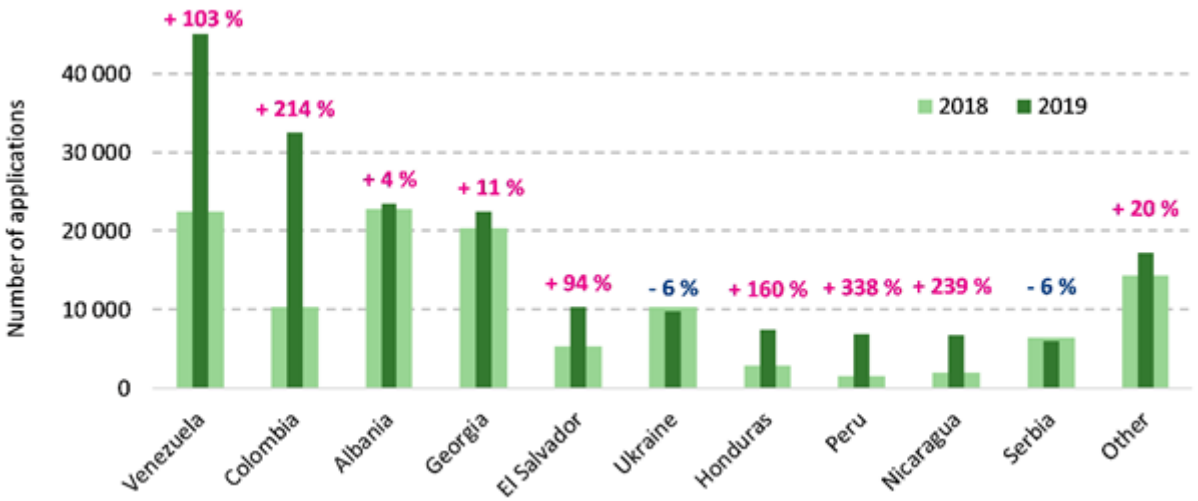
4.4 Applications from visa-exempt countries

Citizens of more than 60 countries and territories around the world are exempt from visa requirements when crossing the external borders of the Schengen area, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus and Romania.[172] A significant new trend in 2019 was an increase in the number of applications for international protection received from citizens of countries who do not need a visa to enter the Schengen area. Of the total 740 000 applications received, about 188 500 were from applicants from visa-free countries, representing more than one-quarter of all applications or a 59 % rise from 2018.

Much of this increase was due to a surge in applications lodged by nationals of Latin American countries, in particular Venezuela, followed by Colombia. In fact, more than two out of five applications from visa-exempt countries were lodged by Venezuelans and Colombians. A rise was also seen for applicants from: Georgia, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Peru (in decreasing order) *(see Figure 4.9).*

As a result, by the end of the year almost one-fifth of all pending cases concerned applicants from visa-free countries. The overall number of pending cases for visa-exempt citizens increased in 2019 compared to 2018, despite the fact that EU+ countries issued 60 % more decisions on their cases than the year before.

Figure 4.9 Applications for international protection by citizens from the top visa-exempt countries, 2018 and 2019



Source: Eurostat.

Applicants from Latin America

In 2019, there was a significant surge of applications from the Latin American region. Three-fifths of all applications from visa-liberalised countries (approximately 113 500) were lodged by citizens of Latin American countries, the majority from Venezuela, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Peru and Nicaragua (in decreasing order).

Among Latin American applicants, citizens of Venezuela have lodged the highest number of applications since 2015. And this number has kept on rising, culminating to almost nine times more applications by Venezuelans in 2019 than in 2016. This trend is set against the background of an ongoing socio-economic and political crisis in Venezuela and a period of hyperinflation.[173] As of early April 2020, more than 5 million refugees, migrants and asylum seekers were considered to have left Venezuela and to be living abroad – mostly within the region, with Colombia and Peru being the top receiving countries.[174]

Since 2017 to 2018, increasing numbers of Colombians and Peruvians have sought asylum in EU+ countries. In fact, in 2019, the rate of annual growth in applications lodged by nationals of Colombia and Peru in Europe even exceeded that of Venezuelan applicants.

Facing political and security crises since 2018, nationals of Honduras and Nicaragua[175] also applied for international protection in EU+ countries at higher levels than a year ago *(see Figure 4.9)*. Citizens of El Salvador ranked third among visa-free Latin American applicants in 2019, even though the volume of their applications grew at a lower rate than those of Hondurans or Nicaraguans.

The majority of applicants from Latin American countries lodged their applications in Spain, followed at a far distance by Italy.

Applicants from the Western Balkan region

Nearly 20 % of all visa-exempt applications (about 36 000) were lodged by nationals of Western Balkan countries. The trend remained stable for Albania and Serbia, while decreasing numbers for at least the fourth consecutive year were reported for applicants from Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia (in decreasing order).

While applications from visa-exempt Latin American countries were concentrated in a few countries, nationals of Western Balkan countries sought asylum in a broader range of countries. France and Germany received the most applications from these countries of origin, followed to a lesser extent by the United Kingdom, Greece, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands and Ireland (in order of the number of applications).

Applicants from the Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership includes post-Soviet countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.[xvi] Just over 20 % of all applications from visa-liberalised countries (about 38 000) were lodged by nationals of the visa-exempt Eastern Partnership countries, but patterns varied by the country of origin. In 2019, applications from nationals of Moldova increased by 49 % compared to 2018, accounting for 3 % of all visa-exempt applications. The number of applications by Georgians also increased, by 11 %, although their share of all visa-exempt applications dropped from 17 % to 12 %. Finally, there was a slight decrease for Ukrainian applicants.

The top receiving countries for applications from visa-exempt Eastern Partnership states were the same as for applicants from Western Balkan countries – namely, France and Germany. To a lesser extent, they also sought asylum in Spain, Italy, Sweden, Greece, the Netherlands and Cyprus (by decreasing order).

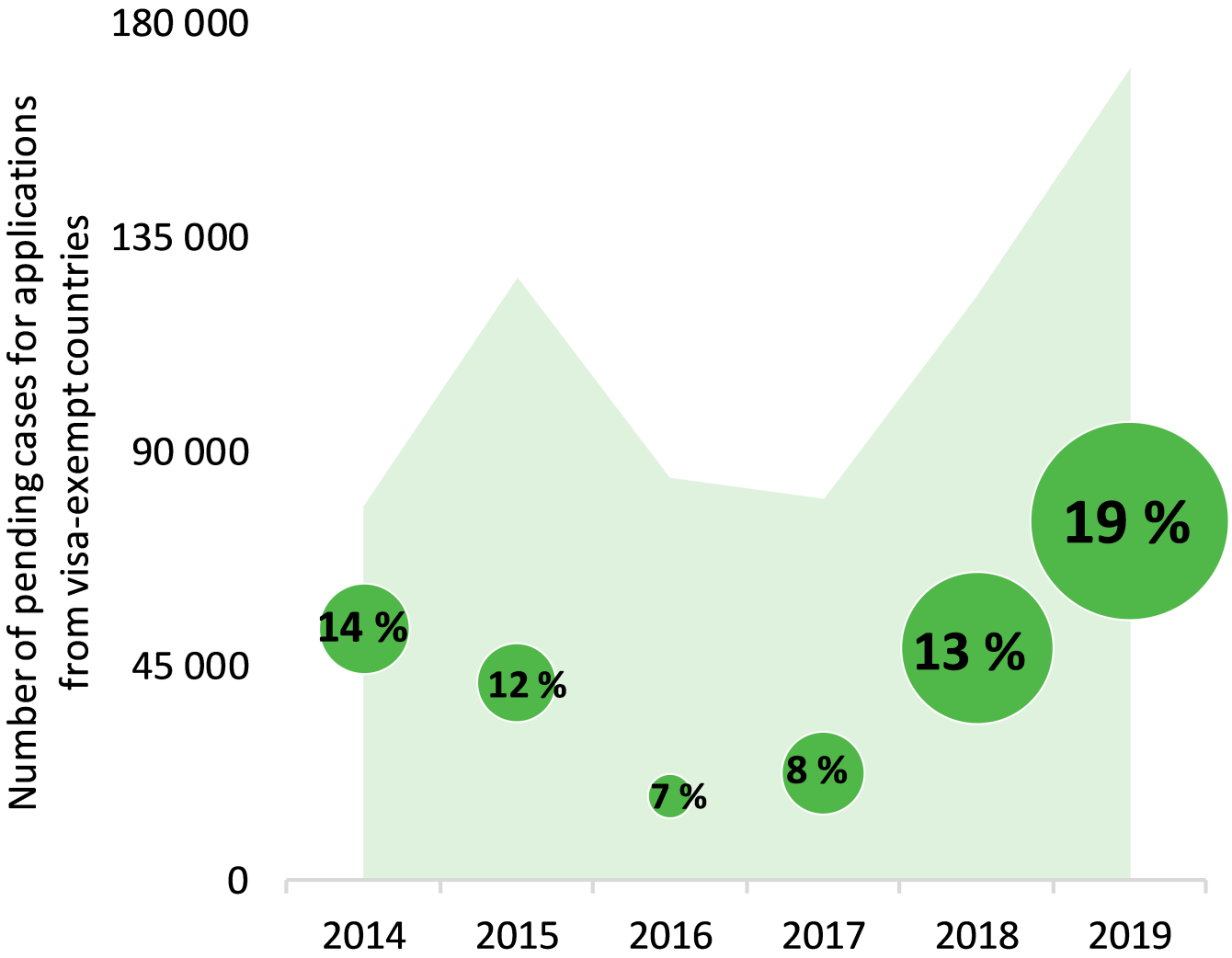
Applicants from the Eastern Partnership

The number of first-instance decisions issued by asylum authorities to applicants from visa-liberalised countries almost doubled in 2019 compared to 2018. The increase was mostly due to a notably higher volume of decisions rendered in Spain (almost eight times as many decisions as in 2018), accounting for 38 % of all first-instance decisions for visa-exempt countries. Similarly, Italy almost tripled its number of first-instance decisions.

The number of second or higher instance decisions issued by judiciary or appeals authorities to applicants from visa-exempt countries also increased in 2019, although to a much lesser extent than for first-instance decisions. The increase in second or higher instance decisions was mostly driven by France, Greece and Sweden (among countries with at least 1 000 second-instance decisions on applications from visa-exempt countries). Germany was the only country where fewer decisions were issued in 2019 (at both first and second instance).

Nonetheless, at the end of 2019, the number of pending cases for visa-exempt nationals continued to rise. About 170 500 applicants from visa-liberalised countries were awaiting a decision either at first or second instance in 2019, an increase of about 48 000 cases compared to 2018. In relative terms,19 % of applications from these countries were awaiting a decision in 2019, compared to just 7 % in 2016 *(see Figure 4.10).*

Figure 4.10 Pending cases at both first and second instance for applications from visa-exempt countries and their share of all pending cases in EU+ countries, 2014-2019



Note: The solid area represents all pending cases at first and second instance. The bubbles represent the share of pending cases for applications from visa-exempt countries.
Source: Eurostat.

[xvi] Of the Eastern Partnership countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus do not have visa-free access to the Schengen area.

[172] This is valid for stays of up to 90 days in any 180-day period and applies only to holders of biometric passports. For more details, see: Regulation (EU) 2018/1806.

[173] In 2019, the Central Bank of Venezuela officially declared a hyperinflation of 53 798 500 % between 2016 and April 2019. Since 2015, these data were unpublished. See: Venezuela Al Dia. (2019, May 28). *BCV admite hiperinflación de 53.798.500% desde 2016*. https://venezuelaaldia.com/2019/05/28/banco-central-venezuela-hiperinflacion-2016/

[174] Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela. (n.d.). *R4V, Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela*. Retrieved 20 May 2020, from https://r4v.info/en/situations/platform

[175] According to the Global Peace Index, Nicaragua recorded the largest deterioration in peacefulness in the 2019 GPI. Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Peace Index 2019: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, June 2019.

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