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4.1 Access to territory and the asylum procedure

The recast Asylum Procedures Directive guides EU countries in providing effective access to the procedure for those in need and to safeguard the right to apply for protection. Still, throughout 2020, a number of incidents were reported at the EU's external borders related to preventing or delaying the application of the recast Asylum Procedures Directive and, consequently, the provision of effective access to the asylum procedure

Main legislative and policy developments in access to the asylum procedure in 2020 continued on the same path of previous years. Procedures continued to be finetuned so that authorities obtain as much information as possible at the beginning of the asylum process in an efficient manner and coordinated across different stakeholders. The overarching goal has been to better channel cases through the system and speed up the overall process.

In 2020, approximately 485,000 applications for international protection were lodged in EU+ countries, a sharp 32% drop compared to the number of applications in 2019. The decline, which resulted in the lowest number of yearly applications since 2013, can be attributed to COVID-19 restrictions which were implemented in EU+ and third countries, limiting movements across borders and within countries.

Indeed, the number of asylum applications fluctuated considerably during the year. They continued to rise at the beginning of the year, with more applications lodged in January and February 2020 than in the same months in 2019 (increases of 15% and 10%, respectively). However, after the first COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, applications dropped significantly. When confinement measures were gradually lifted across countries, the pace of applications began to resume *(see Figure 1).*

The impact of COVID-19 measures on asylum applications was unevenly distributed across EU+ countries. In countries where the asylum procedure was mostly suspended during the first wave of the pandemic, there was a notable drop in the number of asylum applications, while countries which kept their asylum procedure open had smaller decreases.

Overall, 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 consisting of Syria (70,000), Afghanistan (50,000), Venezuela (31,000), Colombia (30,000) and Iraq (20,000) – all lodging fewer applications in 2020. Together, the five top nationalities accounted for over two-fifths of all applications in EU+ countries.

Figure 1: Asylum applications by top receiving countries, by month, 2019-2020

Source: Eurostat [migr_asyappctzm] as of 28 April 2021.

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