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icon for applicants with special needs

Policies and practices for applicants with special needs were shaped by existing national legislative frameworks and by the specific profiles of applicants with special needs arriving in a country.

Some EU+ countries focused on improving the identification of and support to applicants with special needs by developing national strategies, coordinating mechanisms, improving vulnerability assessment processes and continuing to provide a wide range of specialised training. Other countries launched new initiatives or continued with existing ones, focusing on specific groups of applicants. For example, guidelines to assess cases were updated and finetuned to ensure that claims related to gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), sexual orientation and gender identity, and trafficking in human beings are adequately taken into account by asylum officials. In addition, specialised trainings for staff continued to equip case officers with the knowledge to identify and address specific needs in a swift and appropriate manner.

Some reception systems were once again faced with the challenge of adequately supporting applicants with special needs when specialised reception places were limited. Finding a place for applicants with vulnerabilities was a priority in many EU+ countries, but available places were not necessarily the best fit for the purpose of accommodating specialised reception needs.

The new EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted for 2021-2030, and the European Commission called on Member States to work closely with the EUAA in the area of asylum. In particular, it called to facilitate the training of protection officers and interpreters who are in contact with applicants with special needs, including persons with disabilities. In addition, the new comprehensive EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 2021, with specific considerations on refugee children’s access to education and adequate health care, as well as their need for age-appropriate information and guidance during the asylum procedure.

Unaccompanied minor applicants

In 2021, about 23,600 applications for international protection were lodged by unaccompanied minors in EU+ countries, the most since 2017. The share of unaccompanied minors within all applicants for international protection remained relatively stable at around 4%, so the increase in their absolute number is a reflection of more asylum applications being lodged in general, rather than of a disproportional influx of unaccompanied minors.

The absolute number of applications by unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan (12,600) and Syria (3,900) was the highest since 2016 and considerably higher than in each of the previous 4 years. In relative terms, more than one-half of all applications by unaccompanied children were lodged by Afghans (53%), followed at some distance by Syrians (16%), Bangladeshis (6%) and Somalis (5%), all with increasing trends compared to recent years.

About two-thirds of all unaccompanied minor applicants were 16- to 17-year-olds, and girls represented just 6% of all unaccompanied minors in EU+ countries.

The higher inflow of unaccompanied minors highlighted pre-existing gaps in national asylum systems, including the appointment of guardians, assessing the age of self-proclaimed minors, and having a clear legal framework to effectively ensure that a child’s best interests are taken into account in the context of asylum. The rapid inclusion of children into mainstream education remained a challenge in several countries. This may have a negative impact on their future perspectives as recognised beneficiaries of international protection and on the possibility to obtain other types of permits related to study or work, if their asylum application is rejected.

Read more...

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