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Pressure on the EU's external borders intensified in 2021 with the number of arrivals resuming to pre-pandemic levels. Illegal border-crossings escalated, and EU+ countries had to manage sudden mass arrivals and ever-increasing numbers of applications for international protection.

In 2021, EU+ countries received approximately 648,000 applications for international protection, representing an increase by one-third compared to 2020 and matching the level of 2018. In the first few months of 2021, the level of applications remained roughly stable. But about halfway through the year, applications started to increase and culminated in two monthly peaks in September and November 2021.

The peaks were largely the result of more applications by Afghans and Syrians, including many repeated applications by Afghans. Syrians represented the largest applicant group in 2021, lodging about 117,000 applications in EU+ countries, followed by Afghans who lodged 102,000 applications. These two citizenships were followed at a distance by nationals of Iraq (30,000 applications), Pakistan and Turkey (25,000 each) as well as Bangladesh (20,000).

Regarding receiving countries, Germany received by far the most asylum applications (191,000), followed by France (121,000), Spain (65,000) and Italy (53,000).

While COVID-19-related restrictions and quarantine requirements were still in place, EU+ countries responded to the increased arrivals by adapting processes to facilitate the making, registering and lodging of applications. Several countries rearranged reception places and reorganised first instance procedures. Other countries continued with initial or arrival centres where asylum and reception authorities work together.

Figure 1. Applications for international protection by receiving EU+ country, 2021

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Source: Eurostat [migr_asyappctza] as at 22 April 2022.

Yet, a number of incidents were reported at the EU's external borders where EU provisions were not applied timely and effective access to the asylum procedure was delayed or denied. The CJEU, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and national courts scrutinised the policies and practices of EU+ countries, reiterating the importance of respecting the principle of *non-refoulement*

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