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Introduction

As the go-to source of information on international protection in Europe, the EASO Asylum Report series provides a comprehensive overview of key developments in asylum in European Union Member States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland (EU+ countries). All aspects of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) are covered step by step by summarising changes to legislation, policy and practices at the European and national levels. The report presents selected case law which has shaped the interpretation of European and national laws, as well as key statistical indicators for the 2020 reference year which highlight emerging trends and the effectiveness of asylum systems.

Building on trends seen in 2019, the number of asylum applications lodged in Europe continued to increase at the beginning of 2020, surpassing rates for the same period in the previous year. Most likely the rise in asylum applicants seeking refuge in Europe would have continued throughout the year if the world had not come to halt in the midst of a global pandemic. As of March 2020, the number of applications lodged in EU+ countries suddenly plummeted as lockdowns, travel bans and health measures were put in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In total, almost one-third less applications for international protection were received in EU+ countries in 2020 compared to 2019. To ensure continued access to the asylum procedure, Member States responded by turning to digital solutions and rearranged working arrangements.

To set the scene, Section 1 presents an overview of forced displacement globally and addresses the international community's response to large refugee movements. The section zooms in on two key topics in 2020, presenting the negative and positive secondary impacts of the pandemic: while global resettlement programmes were severely disrupted and departures delayed, the digitalisation of various steps of the asylum procedure brought long-term changes and efficiency gains for many asylum and reception systems.

Section 2 narrows in on the context in the European Union, presenting the evolution of CEAS and major developments in legislation, policy and jurisprudence at the EU level. It provides a summary of the proposals which were presented in the European Commission's new Pact on Migration and Asylum in September 2020. The section also discusses the agendas of the Presidencies of the Council of the EU in relation to migration and asylum, the impact of the UK's withdrawal from the EU and changes in migration routes to Europe.

As the centre of expertise on asylum, EASO provides technical and operational support to Member States to manage the influx of applicants and share best practices. Section 3 presents an overview of the role EASO plays in emergency assistance, building capacity and fostering the exchange of information across both EU+ and third countries. It describes the agency's role over the past 10

years in cultivating a harmonised approach across Europe to address international protection needs.

Section 4 analyses developments in each stage of the asylum procedure, including procedures for first and second applications, special procedures, the Dublin procedure, reception conditions, detention during the asylum procedure, access to the asylum procedure and to information, legal assistance, interpretation services, country of origin information, the content of protection, the return of former applicants and resettlement. Special highlight boxes are included to summarise the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and innovations in digitalising processes. While the overall number of asylum applications decreased significantly over the year, different stories unfolded at the country level. The key indicators which are presented help to identify and monitor trends in countries receiving asylum applicants and countries of origin. A special sub-section looks deeper into socio-economic indicators to compare the relative pressure on national systems.

The situation of minors and applicants with special needs are described in Sections 5. The section combines quantitative, qualitative and legal information, as well as key indicators, to provide an overview of current practices in regard to minors, women, victims of violence, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender and intersex (LGBTI) asylum applicants. The section focuses in particular on unaccompanied minors, reviewing changes to reception conditions, guardianship and procedures throughout the asylum process.

To include diverse perspectives, observations by civil society organisations and other stakeholders are presented throughout the report by topic. In 2020, concerns mainly centred around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on asylum and reception systems, including access to Europe and the asylum procedure; scarce places and conditions in reception facilities; the need for more support for applicants with special needs; and gaps in effectively addressing the fundamental rights of stateless refugees. Throughout the sections, relevant case law is also described as courts continued to interpret a wide range of aspects related to CEAS.

The report serves as a main reference for developments in asylum in EU+ countries. It collates a wide range of sources to provide accurate information to policymakers, national asylum authorities, researchers and practitioners involved in the field of asylum.

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