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4.4 Processing asylum applications at first instance

Efforts in 2020 focused on fast and efficient processing while ensuring guarantees for applicants in EU+ countries. The drop in asylum applications in 2020 provided an opportunity to review current practices; introduce more efficient methods, including through digitalisation; issue new guidelines for the assessment of applications; and tackle the backlog of pending cases.

In conjunction with the significant decrease in the number of applications lodged, such changes may have contributed to the number of decisions issued in EU+ countries outnumbering applications lodged for the first time since 2017. Overall, asylum authorities in EU+ countries issued about 534,500 first instance decisions in 2020, with just five countries accounting for more than four-fifths of all first instance decisions: Germany (24%), Spain (23%), France (16%), Greece (12%) and Italy (8%). Most first instance decisions were issued to nationals of Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan and Colombia (in descending order).

In addition, about 47,200 applications were withdrawn, the lowest number since 2013 and more than one-quarter less than in 2019. The decline in both the number of applications and the number of withdrawn applications resulted in a ratio of 1 withdrawal for every 10 applications lodged in 2020, similar to 2019. While Eurostat data do not indicate the type of withdrawal, EPS data suggest that most withdrawn applications in 2020 were withdrawn implicitly, as in previous years. Withdrawals, especially implicit ones, can serve as a proxy indicator of absconding and the beginning of secondary movements towards other EU+ countries. Consistent with this interpretation, most withdrawals took place in frontline Member States, such as Greece and Italy, which together accounted for more than one-third of all withdrawals.

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