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In 2021, EU+ countries received approximately 648,000 applications for international protection, indicating that the number of people seeking refuge in Europe essentially returned to pre-pandemic levels even while some COVID-19 restrictions were still in place. The total represents an increase by one-third compared to 2020, matching the level in 2018.

As in previous years, most applicants were male, but their share increased to 70% in 2021, compared to 65% in 2020 and 63% in 2019. Applicants aged 18-34 years, predominantly men, accounted for one-half of all applicants in 2021, while 29% were younger than 18. Only one-fifth of all applicants were older than 35. The shares of applicants by age were similar to previous years, with women only being the majority of applicants aged over 65.

In the first few months of 2021, the monthly level of applications remained roughly stable from the end of 2020. 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 (see Section 4.3). The peak in September partly resulted from the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the evacuations that followed. From August 2021 onwards, Afghans were lodging the most applications for asylum in EU+ countries.

However, in terms of the annual total, Syrians represented the largest applicant group in 2021, lodging about 117,000 applications in EU+ countries *(see Figure 4.7)*. In comparison, Afghans lodged 102,000 applications and were the second-largest group. Importantly, for both of these citizenships, applications in 2021 were the highest since the refugee crisis in 2015/2016. Their applications alone accounted for much of the overall increase in applications in 2021.

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). All these citizenships lodged considerably more applications than in 2020. In contrast, Venezuelans (18,000) and Colombians (14,000) lodged far fewer applications than in the previous 2 years.

Nationals of Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan lodged the most applications

Figure 4.7. Applications for international protection by nationality, 2021

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

Receiving countries

In line with the overall increase in the total number of asylum applications, the vast majority of EU+ countries received considerably more applications in 2021. As shown in Figure 4.8, Germany received the most asylum applications (191,000), followed by France (121,000), Spain (65,000) and Italy (53,000). In Austria (39,000), the number of applications was more than twice as high as in the previous year. This increase, as in many other EU+ countries, was linked to rising applications by Afghans and Syrians.

However, Spain was one of the few EU+ countries that received fewer applications, alongside Greece, Sweden, Finland and Malta (in descending order). The notable decrease in Spain was due to fewer applications by Latin Americans.

Most applications were received by Germany, France, Spain and Italy

Figure 4.8. Applications for international protection by receiving EU+ country, 2021

Figure 4.8. Applications for international protection by receiving EU+ country, 2021

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

National capacity to absorb asylum applications

The capacity of countries to receive applicants may depend on the gross domestic product (GDP), population size or the size of the territory. Figure 4.9 ranks EU+ countries in terms of the number of applications received relative to these three indicators, which can shed light on the relative pressure on national asylum and reception systems. For each indicator, countries shaded in blue received a lower relative volume of applications than the EU+ baseline, while countries shaded in red received a higher relative volume than the EU+ baseline.

Countries in Figure 4.9 are arranged in decreasing order based on applications relative to population size (the middle circle). By this measure, Cyprus received by far the most

applications in 2021, more than 1,500 per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Austria, where 432 applications were lodged for every 100,000 inhabitants, and Malta (294 per 100,000 inhabitants). In several other countries, applications were still relatively high, between 216 and 266 applications for every 100,000 inhabitants, including in Greece, Slovenia, Liechtenstein, Iceland, Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium (in descending order).

The most common indicator for a country's economic strength is GDP. In terms of applications relative to GDP, Cyprus again received by far the most applications in 2021 (59 applications per EUR 100 million of GDP), followed by Bulgaria and Greece (16 each). This measure was also comparatively high for Austria, Malta and Slovenia. Relative to the territorial size of countries, applications were the highest in Malta (473 applications per 100 sq km), followed by Cyprus (148) and Belgium (82).

In relative terms, most applications were received in Cyprus and Malta

Figure 4.9. Applications for international protection relative to GDP, population and country size, 2021

Figure 4.9. Applications for international protection relative to GDP, population and country size, 2

Notes: Countries are sorted by the number of applications received relative to population size (clockwise from highest to lowest). The shades indicate the relative number of applications received compared to the EU+ baseline (midpoint) for each of the three indicators. Data on GDP for Liechtenstein refer to 2020.

Source: Eurostat for asylum applications [migr_asyappctza] as of 22 April 2022, population [demo_pjan] as of 19 March 2022 and GDP [nama_10_gdp] as of 19 March 2022 and the World Bank [AG.SRF.TOTL.K2] as of 19 February 2021

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