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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Visa Working Party/Mixed Committee (EU-Iceland/Norway and Switzerland/Liechtenstein)
Subject: Visa issues and asylum applications

According to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), in 2020, 461 300 applications for international protection were lodged in the EU, down by 31 % from 2019. This can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions aimed at limiting the spread of the disease. The number of applications showed strong fluctuations throughout the year: while in January and February 2020 applications were higher than in the same months of the previous year, comparatively low numbers were recorded between March and June. In April and May, restrictions tended to be the most severe and correspondingly the number of applications was especially low, at less than 20 % compared to the number of applications in the same period in 2019. In July 2020, applications started to resume and remained somewhat stable for the rest of the year, between some 39 000 and 43 000 per month. In February 2021, some 38 300 applications for international protection were lodged in the EU, roughly stable compared to previous months. Applications remained at two-thirds of pre-COVID-19 levels. Applicants from visa-exempt countries seemed to be especially affected by the travel restrictions implemented due to the pandemic. In 2020, their applications decreased by 36 % from the previous year, whereas applications by citizens from visa-required countries fell by only 30 %.

In 2020, 4 % of all applications in the EU were lodged by persons claiming to be unaccompanied minors (UAMs), an increase of one percentage point from the previous year. The share of UAMs was particularly high in the last quarter of the year, when it reached 5 %.

Another notable development in 2020 was that twice as many North Africans, namely Moroccans, Tunisians, and Algerians, were detected illegally crossing the EU external border. However, this was not reflected in an increase in asylum applications. In fact, the number of applications by the aforementioned nationalities was significantly lower than the number of detected illegal border crossings.

Since the decline in applications after February 2020, numbers have recovered more for some groups of applicants than for others. One important group is citizens of visa-liberalised countries, who can enter the EU without a visa for stays of up to 90 days. In February 2021, this group lodged asylum applications corresponding to only one-third of the level in February 2020, amounting to a decrease of 68 %. In contrast, citizens of visa-required countries lodged applications in numbers that approached pre-pandemic levels, corresponding to almost 80 % of the level a year earlier.

Persons claiming to be unaccompanied minors (UAMs) lodged applications in numbers that came especially close to pre-COVID-19 levels. In February 2021, UAMs lodged more than 1 300 applications in the EU, corresponding to 80 % of the number in February 2020. From October to December 2020, applications by this group even exceeded pre-pandemic levels. To a large extent, this development is driven by UAMs from Afghanistan, who accounted for at least two-fifths of all UAMs throughout the last seven months. In February 2021, applications by Afghan UAMs substantially exceeded the number in February 2020 (by about 17 %). Overall, UAMs represented 3 % of all applicants in the EU in February 2021, as in January.

Despite the impact of the pandemic, nine of the 10 main nationalities of applicants were the same in February 2021 as in February 2020, before the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe. Apart from Syrian and Afghan – still by far the two most frequent groups – these nine citizenships include Pakistani, Iraqi, Nigerian, Colombian, Turkish, Venezuelan and Bangladeshi.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an additional challenge, as it frustrates the EU's ability to return irregular migrants, limits the capacity of third countries to readmit and reintegrate their nationals, and can reduce the willingness of migrants to return due to the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic in the countries of origin.

In 2020, data integration became the most pressing issue in the area of analysis and research; the more data become linked with the necessary level of precision, the more the EU can design a future-proof and efficient asylum system based on a detailed understanding of the underlying trends.

The utility of data is now measured by the extent to which it can be linked to other data in order to show its potential, by indicating e.g. how many people first applied for a visa and then applied for asylum. Until interoperability of migration-related databases is fully achieved at EU level, the exchange of information between Member States regarding new visa trends could clarify the following points:

1. Despite the travel restrictions, the number of applications lodged by citizens of visa-required countries in 2020 approached almost 80 % of pre-pandemic figures. In order to better understand this phenomenon, we would be grateful if you could give more details on these figures.
 - What is the percentage of migrants lodging an asylum application during the pandemic:
 - Having a valid visa at the time of application?
 - Having an expired visa at the time of application?
 - Having entered illegally?
 - Do you see any patterns in the applications that need specific consideration?
2. The number of asylum applications by UAMs, mainly from visa-required countries, is slightly increasing:
 - Do you see any patterns in the applications that need specific consideration?