

Rethinking asylum distribution in the EU

Shall we start with the facts?

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Ten months of what has been alternatively called a ‘refugee crisis’, a ‘migrant crisis’ and a ‘migrant and asylum crisis’ in the EU has fuelled an exceptionally vivid discussion about statistics. All member states are required to provide Eurostat, the EU’s statistical agency, with data on immigration and asylum in accordance with a regulation that sets out clear and concise rules on what data must be submitted.¹ The purpose of the regulation is to ensure that the data on migration and asylum the member states provide to Eurostat for publication is comparable across all EU countries.

A number of member states also have other data sources that do not conform to the Eurostat regulation but which they release to the public. These data, for instance in the case of Germany, from the EASY registration system designed to allocate responsibility for possible asylum applicants across Germany, are not consistent with the data member states must produce for Eurostat, so the results can be startlingly different.² Over the past ten months of the refugee crisis, uncertainty about the numbers has been a real challenge for policy-makers.

To understand the distribution of asylum seekers across the EU, the only consistent source of information is that released by Eurostat. So what do the Eurostat data reveal about the distribution of asylum seekers in the EU? According to the report it issued on 3 March 2016, relating to the full year of 2015,³ the total applications received for asylum was just over 1.2 million, with the number by month shown in Figure 1.⁴

¹ See Regulation (EC) No. 862/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 July 2007 on Community statistics on migration and international protection repealing Regulation (EEC) No. 311/76 on the compilation of statistics on foreign workers [2007], OJ L 199/23, 31.7.2007.

² See A. Singleton, “Migration and Asylum Data for Policy Making in the European Union: The Problem with Numbers”, CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe, No. 89, CEPS, Brussels, March 2016.

³ Refer to Eurostat, “Asylum statistics” (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics).

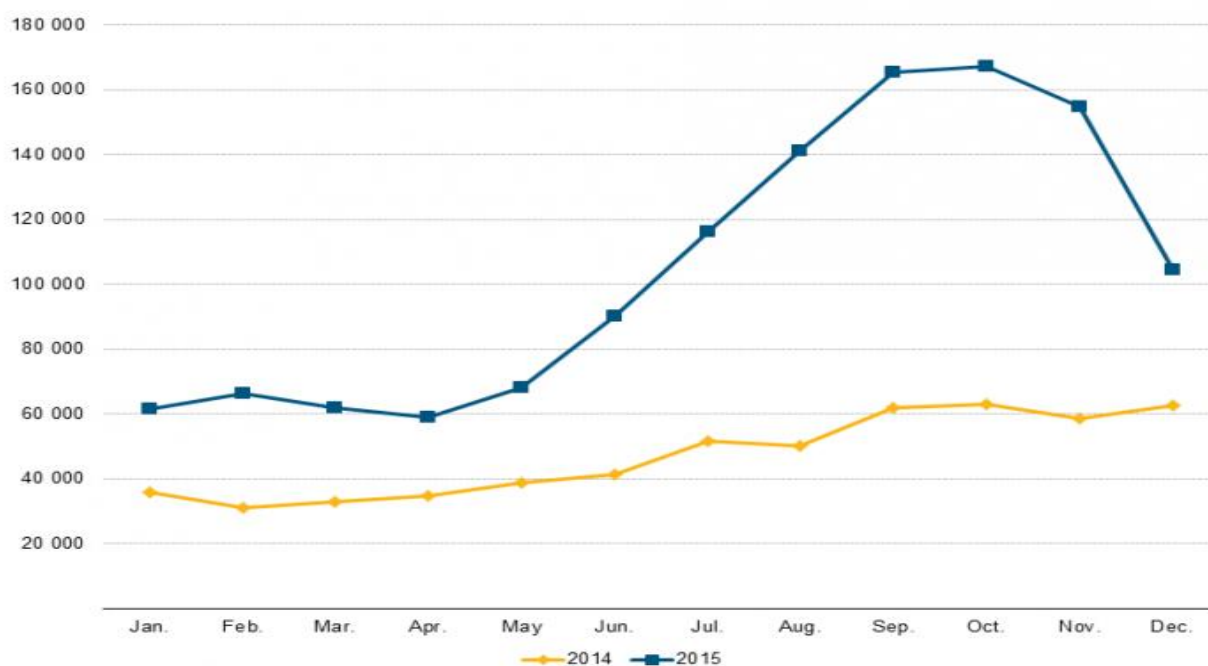
⁴ According to Eurostat (ibid.),

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Figure 1. First-time asylum applications the EU-28 (Jan. 2014 to Dec. 2015)

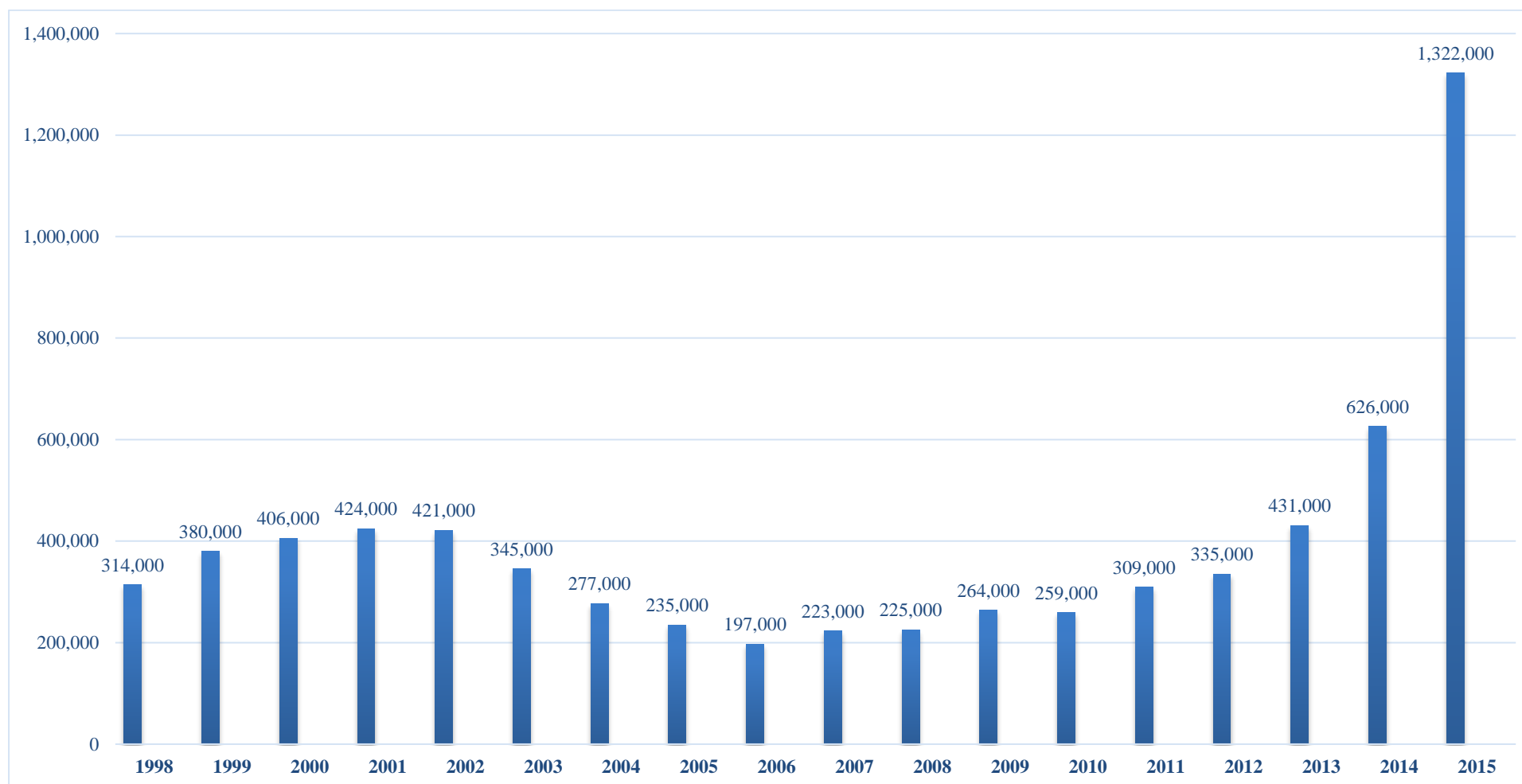


Source: Eurostat (online data code migr_asyappctzm)

As is apparent, the peak of asylum applications was in October/November 2015. There was a substantial drop in applications in December. According to Eurostat, these asylum applicants come from a wide range of countries, but there are three top sources: Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, there were 147 countries of origin of asylum seekers in 2015, according to the data. Syrians accounted for 145,100, Afghans for 79,300 and Iraqis for 53,600. A longer term comparison of asylum applications in the EU (1998–2016) is provided in Figure 2.

[t]he number of first time asylum applicants in the EU-28 in 2015 was 66 thousand (about 5 %) less than the total number of applicants. A first time applicant for international protection is a person who lodged an application for asylum for the first time in a given EU Member State and therefore excludes repeat applicants in that Member State and so it reflects more accurately reflects the number of newly arrived persons applying for international protection in the given Member State.

Figure 2. Asylum applications in the EU-28 (1998–2015)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat data.

Next is one of the most contested issues: Where did these people seek asylum? Table 1 reveals that over the 12-month period, there were 1,256,000 first-time asylum applications in the EU-28. Germany received 441,800 asylum applications, Hungary 174,435 and Sweden a total of 156,110. During the period between October and December 2015 (Q4) alone, Germany received 162,540 applications, corresponding to 38% of the total across the EU. There were surprisingly low numbers of asylum applications among the other, larger member states. For instance, France only received 70,570 applications, Italy 83,245 and the UK 38,370. Five member states accounted for 75% of all applications – Germany, Sweden, Austria, Italy and France, according to Eurostat.

Table 1. First-time asylum applications in the EU-28 (Q4 2014–Q5 2015)

	Q4 2014			Q1 2015			Q2 2015			Q3 2015			Q4 2015			Q4 2015	Change in %		Applicants per million population ⁽¹⁾ Q4 2015	Last 12 months
	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.		between Q3 2015 and Q4 2015	between Q4 2014 and Q4 2015		
EU-28	62 945	58 690	62 780	61 450	66 150	61 940	59 085	68 090	90 140	116 200	141 250	165 305	167 060	154 605	104 360	426 025	1	131	840	1 255 640
Belgium	1 540	1 145	1 405	1 210	1 070	1 160	1 110	1 615	2 315	3 130	5 160	6 360	5 525	5 530	4 810	15 865	8	288	1 410	38 990
Bulgaria	1 400	1 355	1 480	1 055	1 025	1 110	1 120	1 325	1 605	1 850	1 435	2 060	3 530	2 395	1 660	7 585	42	79	1 055	20 165
Czech Republic	100	70	110	95	90	170	105	85	85	75	85	100	115	115	110	335	29	20	30	1 235
Denmark	1 840	1 105	755	630	425	450	545	870	1 075	1 030	1 810	2 680	3 625	5 020	2 665	11 305	105	205	1 995	20 825
Germany	19 225	19 030	17 055	22 905	24 065	29 995	25 830	25 105	34 075	36 505	36 305	44 480	58 125	57 685	46 725	162 540	39	194	2 000	441 800
Estonia	25	10	5	5	15	30	30	10	25	20	10	45	20	10	10	40	-46	-9	30	225
Ireland	130	155	170	215	200	210	265	255	335	290	330	405	265	290	210	765	-25	69	165	3 270
Greece	745	580	790	925	895	790	855	1 005	1 000	1 065	880	940	845	1 000	1 160	3 005	4	42	275	11 370
Spain	720	630	600	835	850	1 220	1 330	1 055	1 290	1 145	1 030	1 405	1 470	1 740	1 225	4 435	24	127	95	14 600
France	5 580	4 555	5 380	4 025	5 135	5 610	5 175	4 355	5 150	5 330	5 240	7 070	7 735	7 145	8 595	23 475	33	51	355	70 570
Croatia	40	25	15	10	15	15	10	5	5	10	5	20	20	15	10	45	35	-43	10	140
Italy	8 890	6 785	5 610	4 740	5 075	5 430	4 500	5 130	5 265	8 510	8 775	11 105	10 365	8 270	6 075	24 710	-13	16	405	83 245
Cyprus	185	140	120	155	125	150	145	120	135	155	120	330	235	245	190	670	9	50	790	2 105
Latvia	30	15	30	15	15	15	25	30	50	30	20	45	70	10	5	85	-9	12	40	330
Lithuania	30	65	65	15	25	5	25	25	10	35	30	20	35	20	25	80	-6	-49	30	275
Luxembourg	125	110	85	85	95	85	70	85	95	90	165	365	375	425	430	1 230	97	288	2 185	2 360
Hungary	5 250	8 885	13 790	11 655	16 405	4 750	6 485	9 800	16 385	30 870	46 720	30 495	490	195	175	865	-99	-97	90	174 435
Malta	125	75	115	65	160	120	105	160	115	140	115	170	230	190	130	545	28	74	1 270	1 695
Netherlands	1 900	1 250	1 225	890	735	805	1 135	2 250	2 925	2 980	5 325	6 425	9 965	6 225	3 375	19 565	33	347	1 160	43 035
Austria	2 975	3 540	4 050	3 875	3 060	2 770	3 715	6 190	7 485	8 555	8 500	10 545	12 015	11 655	7 135	30 805	12	192	3 590	85 505
Poland	600	535	520	485	470	485	540	525	700	985	1 235	1 490	1 260	1 095	985	3 340	-10	102	90	10 255
Portugal	40	60	40	40	80	60	80	80	90	70	75	70	70	65	50	180	-17	29	20	830
Romania	185	80	95	100	75	160	205	85	85	85	110	75	90	85	65	240	-11	-34	10	1 225
Slovenia	40	15	35	15	10	20	15	10	15	10	20	40	20	45	35	100	41	13	50	260
Slovakia	25	30	35	15	10	25	5	20	5	5	5	5	5	15	160	180	959	100	35	270
Finland	405	310	385	305	310	345	335	510	760	1 455	2 865	10 805	6 985	5 690	1 785	14 460	-4	1 211	2 640	32 150
Sweden	7 545	5 515	6 310	4 340	3 515	3 560	3 405	4 850	6 045	7 515	11 270	23 735	38 535	36 075	13 275	87 885	107	354	9 015	156 110
United Kingdom	3 255	2 615	2 505	2 740	2 200	2 395	1 920	2 525	3 025	4 260	3 600	4 010	5 040	3 360	3 295	11 695	-1	40	180	38 370
Iceland	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	135	..	..	..	..
Liechtenstein	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Norway	1 010	825	730	560	480	480	520	1 160	1 075	1 335	2 285	4 885	8 570	8 105	1 005	17 685	108	589	3 425	30 470
Switzerland	2 215	1 545	1 375	1 450	1 300	1 375	1 270	2 070	3 665	3 785	3 785	4 410	4 635	5 555	4 760	14 950	25	191	1 815	38 060

(¹) Relative to population as of 1st of January 2015

.. data are not available

Source: Eurostat.

But asylum seekers do not all go to member states according to an equal distribution of nationality (Table 2). So while the top countries of origin of asylum seekers in the EU as a whole were Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, a different picture emerges for Italy. There the top four countries of origin of asylum seekers were Nigeria, Pakistan, Gambia and Bangladesh. For Greece the top four were Syria, Pakistan, Albania and Iraq. Poland's top four, which consists of Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Armenia, shares no nationalities with Germany's list. France, on the other hand, had the following top four: Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

Table 2. Top countries of origin of asylum applicants (2015)

	EU-28		# (%)			# (%)				
	Syria	145 130	34							
	Afghanistan	79 255	19							
	Iraq	53 585	13							
	Iran	14 405	3							
	Albania	13 450	3							
	Other	120 205	28							
BELGIUM					BULGARIA			CZECH REPUBLIC		
	Afghanistan	5 555	35		Iraq	3 540	47	Ukraine	135	40
	Syria	4 750	30		Afghanistan	2 905	38	Syria	60	18
	Iraq	2 225	14		Syria	920	12	China	25	7
	Somalia	375	2		Pakistan	150	2	Iraq	15	4
	Iran	300	2		Iran	30	0	Vietnam	15	4
	Other	2 660	17		Other	40	1	Other	85	25
DENMARK					GERMANY			ESTONIA		
	Syria	4 220	37		Syria	86 330	53	Ukraine	15	33
	Iran	2 240	20		Afghanistan	14 585	9	Iraq	5	11
	Afghanistan	1 680	15		Iraq	13 900	9	Cameroon	5	11
	Stateless	1 130	10		Albania	9 475	6	Nigeria	5	11
	Iraq	995	9		Eritrea	3 390	2	Georgia	5	11
	Other	1 040	9		Other	34 860	21	Other	10	22
IRELAND					GREECE			SPAIN		
	Pakistan	235	31		Syria	685	23	Syria	1 330	30
	Nigeria	60	8		Pakistan	445	15	Ukraine	1 085	24
	Bangladesh	55	7		Albania	435	14	Venezuela	335	8
	Albania	45	6		Iraq	335	11	Algeria	285	6
	Afghanistan	40	5		Afghanistan	185	6	Palestine	255	6
	Other	330	43		Other	925	31	Other	1 145	26
FRANCE					CROATIA			ITALY		
	Sudan	2 250	10		Kosovo	5	11	Nigeria	5 575	23
	Syria	1 825	8		Cameroon	5	11	Pakistan	4 545	18
	Afghanistan	1 655	7		Syria	5	11	Gambia	1 680	7
	Bangladesh	1 625	7		Afghanistan	5	11	Bangladesh	1 635	7
	Albania	1 295	6		Turkey	5	11	Senegal	1 415	6
	Other	14 820	63		Other	20	44	Other	9 860	40
CYPRUS					LATVIA			LITHUANIA		
	Syria	300	45		Iraq	60	67	Ukraine	15	19
	Palestine	75	11		Vietnam	10	11	Afghanistan	15	19
	Pakistan	55	8		Pakistan	5	6	Russia	10	13
	Vietnam	35	5		Russia	5	6	Georgia	10	13
	India	30	4		Ukraine	5	6	Azerbaijan	10	13
	Other	175	26		Other	5	6	Other	20	25
LUXEMBOURG					HUNGARY			MALTA		
	Iraq	410	33		Afghanistan	260	30	Libya	220	40
	Syria	385	31		Syria	160	18	Syria	215	39
	Afghanistan	190	15		Iraq	145	17	Eritrea	25	5
	Iran	45	4		Turkey	60	7	Ukraine	20	4
	Albania	40	3		Pakistan	50	6	Somalia	15	3
	Other	160	13		Other	190	22	Other	50	9
NETHERLANDS					AUSTRIA			POLAND		
	Syria	8 530	44		Afghanistan	12 360	40	Russia	2 625	78
	Iraq	2 165	11		Syria	8 145	26	Tajikistan	240	7
	Afghanistan	1 950	10		Iraq	4 320	14	Ukraine	200	6
	Eritrea	1 510	8		Iran	2 125	7	Armenia	70	2
	Iran	1 510	8		Stateless	605	2	Kyrgyzstan	35	1
	Other	3 900	20		Other	3 245	11	Other	175	5
PORTUGAL					ROMANIA			SLOVENIA		
	Ukraine	35	19		Syria	75	32	Afghanistan	25	24
	Mali	30	17		Afghanistan	30	13	Pakistan	20	19
	Pakistan	15	8		Iraq	20	9	Syria	10	10
	Syria	10	6		Bangladesh	20	9	Kosovo	10	10
	Guinea	10	6		Pakistan	10	4	Iran	10	10
	Other	80	44		Other	80	34	Other	30	29
SLOVAKIA					FINLAND			SWEDEN		
	Iraq	150	83		Iraq	8 105	56	Afghanistan	31 420	36
	Afghanistan	10	6		Afghanistan	4 300	30	Syria	25 505	29
	India	5	3		Syria	490	3	Iraq	14 900	17
	Pakistan	5	3		Iran	460	3	Stateless	3 660	4
	Other	10	6		Somalia	205	1	Iran	3 370	4
					Other	900	6	Other	9 030	10
UNITED KINGDOM					NORWAY			ICELAND		
	Iran	1 570	13		Syria	6 075	34	Albania	35	26
	Iraq	1 295	11		Afghanistan	4 905	28	Iraq	20	15
	Syria	975	8		Iraq	2 225	13	Afghanistan	15	11
	Afghanistan	910	8		Iran	1 110	6	MK	15	11
	Eritrea	885	8		Stateless	665	4	Stateless	10	7
	Other	6 060	52		Other	2 700	15	Other	40	30
LIECHTENSTEIN					Other			SWITZERLAND		
					Syria	6 075	34	Afghanistan	5 895	39
					Afghanistan	4 905	28	Syria	2 385	16
					Iraq	2 225	13	Iraq	1 545	10
					Iran	1 110	6	Eritrea	1 010	7
					Stateless	665	4	Sri Lanka	645	4
					Other	2 700	15	Other	3 470	23

Citizenships selected here are those with the highest number of asylum applicants registered during Q4 2015 in the EU-28.
 # Absolute number of asylum applications
 % Percentage shares are calculated on rounded figures and may not add up to totals
 Kosovo – see methodological notes, MK – The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

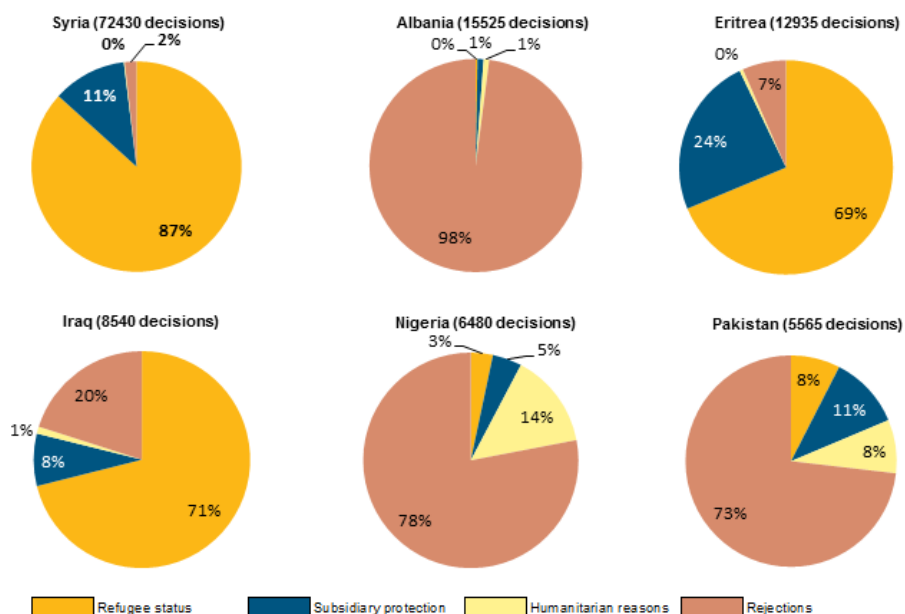
Source: Eurostat.

What were the outcomes for asylum seekers over 2015? There are two main forms of protection that the member states can grant to someone seeking asylum. The first is refugee status – which is an acknowledgement by the state that the person has a well-founded fear of persecution in his or her country of origin on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. This status is set out in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. When member states recognise someone as a refugee, this is declaratory of the fact that the person has been a refugee since leaving the country of persecution.

Alternatively, the member state can issue a decision that the person is a beneficiary of subsidiary protection. This means that his or her circumstances do not fit the 1951 Refugee Convention definition but that other international and EU commitments mean that the person is entitled to protection. These include a substantial risk of torture in the country of nationality, the death penalty or serious risk of harm as a result of international or internal armed conflict. These rules are set out in the Qualifications Directive No. 2011/95/EU.⁵ Member states are permitted to grant people a national status as well if they wish.

According to Eurostat, member states granted protection status to 333,350 asylum seekers during 2015, which constitutes an increase of 72% in comparison with the previous year.⁶ Over half of these beneficiaries hold Syrian nationality. Germany alone granted the status to 148,200 of the total number in 2015.⁷ The first instance decisions on whether a person is a refugee or a beneficiary of international protection – some of which will have been made for those who applied for asylum in 2015, but the numbers also include applications made the previous year – are shown in Figure 3 by main country of origin.

Figure 3. First instance decisions on asylum applications by citizenship (Oct. to Dec. 2015)



Citizenships selected here are those for which the highest number of first instance decisions was issued during Q4 2015
Data for Austria are not available

Source: Eurostat.

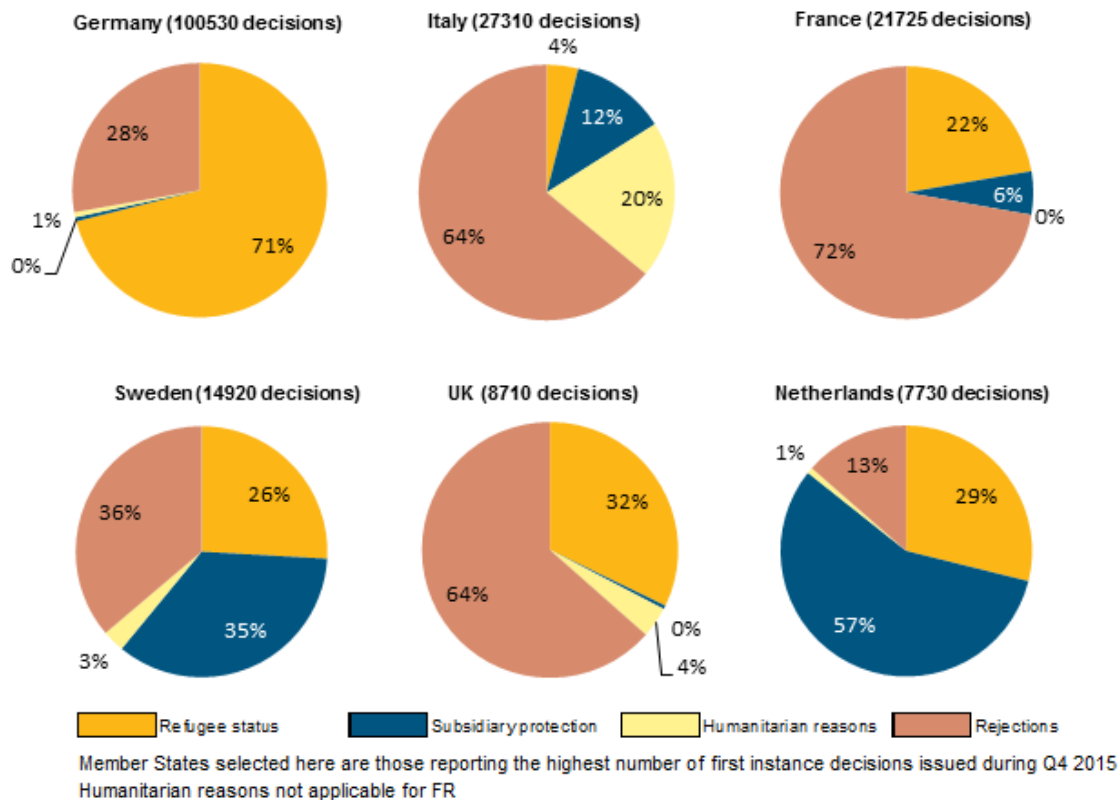
⁵ See Directive No. 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted, OJ L 337, 20.12.2011.

⁶ See Eurostat, “Asylum Decisions in the EU: EU Member States granted protection to more than 330 000 asylum seekers in 2015, Half of the beneficiaries were Syrians”, 75/2016, Luxembourg, 20 April 2016.

⁷ Sweden granted 34,500, Italy 29,600, France 26,000, the UK 17,900, Austria 17,800 and the Netherlands 17,000.

Syrians had an overall recognition rate of 98% across the member states, followed by Eritreans at 93% and then Iraqis at 80%. There are differences in recognition rates across member states, which is linked to the differences in countries of origin of asylum seekers, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. First instance decisions by outcome in selected member states (Oct. to Dec. 2015)



Source: Eurostat.

In 2015, the EU adopted a decision to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers from the front line states – Greece and Italy – to other member states on the basis of a redistribution key. The European Asylum Support Office provided assistance in the process of allocating asylum seekers to member states.⁸ While the temporary relocation scheme is voluntary in nature for member states, it is obligatory for asylum seekers. Figure 5 provides a snapshot of the status of relocations in the EU.

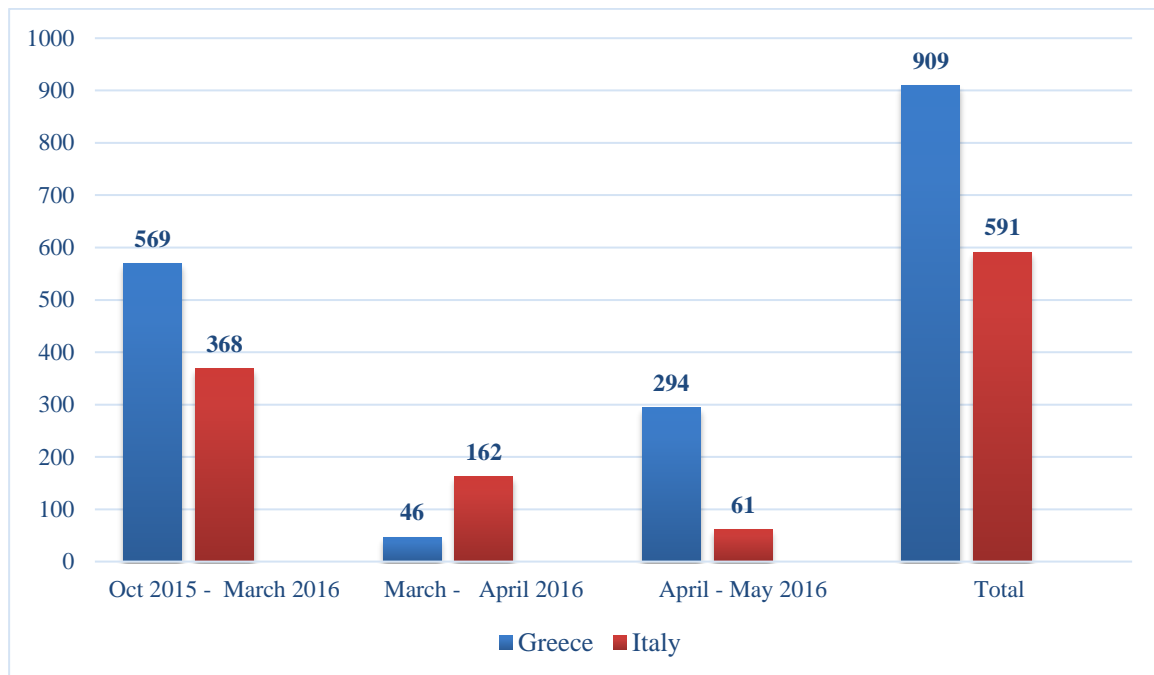
By March 2016, according to the European Commission, only 937 asylum seekers had been relocated from Greece and Italy.⁹ More recent Commission data (up to 13 May 2016) show that the total number of persons relocated had increased to about 1,500 (909 from Greece and 591 from Italy). This figure sharply contrasts with the original target of 160,000 asylum applicants due to be relocated from these two countries.¹⁰ As Figures 6 and 7 show, the most significant numbers of relocations have been to France (499), Finland (259), Portugal (211) and the Netherlands (192).

⁸ For the exact ‘work flow’ and the involvement of actors in the relocation process, refer to European Commission, Annex to the Communication, First Report on Relocation and Resettlement, COM(2016) 165 final, Brussels, 16 March 2016 (<http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160316/first-report-on-relocation-and-resettlement-annex-5-en.pdf>).

⁹ See European Commission, Communication, First Report on Relocation and Resettlement, COM(2016) 165, 16 March 2016.

¹⁰ See the Resolution of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on relocating from Greece and Italy 40 000 persons in clear need of international protection, Brussels, 22 July

Figure 5. Total relocation of asylum seekers from Greece and Italy (Oct. 2015 to mid-May 2016)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission data.

Figure 6. Total relocations from Greece by destination country

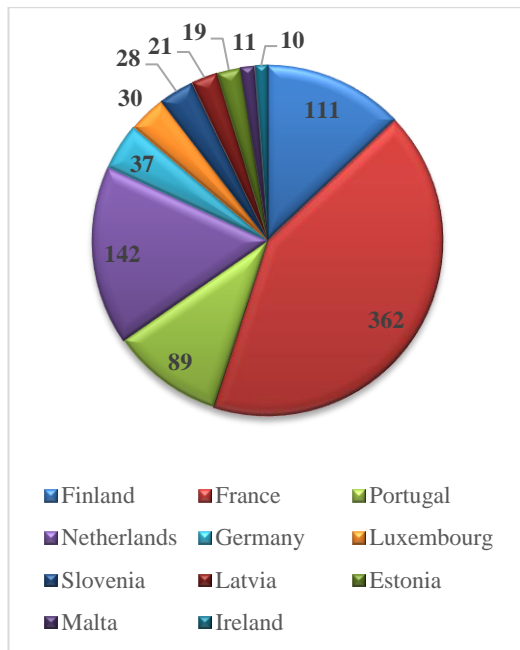
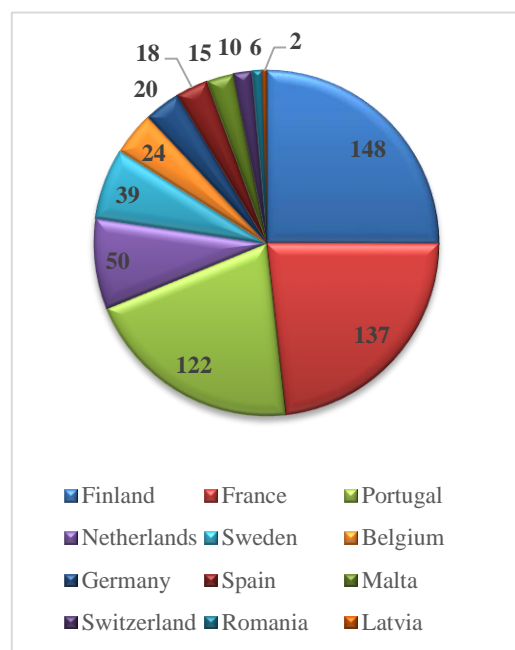


Figure 7. Total relocations from Italy by destination country



Note: Concerning relocations from Greece, six asylum seekers respectively have been effectively relocated to Cyprus and Lithuania, four to Bulgaria and four to the Czech Republic.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission data.¹¹

2015; see also the Council Decision establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece, 12098/15, 22 September 2015.

¹¹ See European Commission, Annex to the Communication, Third report on relocation and resettlement, Annex 1, Relocations from Greece by 13 May 2016, Brussels, 18.5.2016 COM(2016) 360 final; in the same work see also Annex 2, Relocations from Italy by 13 May 2016.

A key finding from the overall statistical data provided here is that in light of the information provided by Eurostat, it seems that most asylum seekers ‘self-relocate’ across the EU. Although the result is that five member states have received the majority of asylum applications, most of these top five are fairly large, have well-functioning asylum systems and with the exception of perhaps Sweden, seem able to cope with their asylum seekers.

Furthermore, of those asylum applications determined in fourth quarter of 2015, over 50% were granted international protection,¹² indicating that of those arriving during the autumn and winter, many fulfil the definition of refugees or persons entitled to international protection.

At the same time, efforts by the EU to engage in the substantial relocation of asylum seekers from front line countries to other member states has been rather unsatisfactory. A number of member states and representatives of the European Commission are highly resistant to the idea that asylum seekers might be better placed to know where their best chances of integration are than any officials, and that this knowledge might be helpful for everyone in both the short and long term.

Yet in practice, it seems that it is asylum seekers who move to seek asylum and member states that determine their applications. Once the member states reach their decisions (often positive), the asylum seeker is recategorised as a refugee or beneficiary of international protection. Then, he or she is entitled to work and to start the process of contributing to the receiving member state.

¹² According to Eurostat, “198,600 first instance decisions were made by the national authorities of EU Member States during the fourth quarter of 2015. Among them, nearly 60% were positive (i.e. granting a type of protection status).” See Eurostat’s “Asylum quarterly report” (data extracted on 15 June 2016), Luxembourg (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report).