

MINORS IN MIGRATION: Irregular entry and asylum

Minors — under the age of 18 — may migrate in many different ways, through family reunification, moving in the hope of finding a better life, or through forced and traumatic migration caused by conflict, poverty or climate change. Overall, the number of minors in migration has been rising globally since the turn of the century. In 2020, there were an estimated [35.5 million](#) international migrant minors globally, the largest number ever recorded. This is [equivalent](#) to around 1 in 66 minors worldwide living outside their country of birth. This infographic focuses exclusively on forced and irregular movements of migrant minors to the European Union. [Eurostat](#) figures show that, on 1 January 2024 around 7.5 million minors in the EU were not citizens of their country of residence. However, [age assessment](#) of migrants remains a critical challenge, as a significant number arrive without reliable identification documents to verify their claimed age.

1. Irregular migration

Migrants are considered to be 'irregularly present' in an EU Member State if: they enter in an irregular way; following their regular entry they overstay their visa; they end up in an irregular situation in other ways; they are refused entry to EU territory under the [Schengen Borders Code](#). There are no accurate data on the number of migrant minors irregularly

present in the EU Member States. However, some trends can be inferred from data relating to the number of [migrant minors](#) detected while trying to cross the EU's external borders irregularly and those detected once they are already irregularly present in an EU Member State.

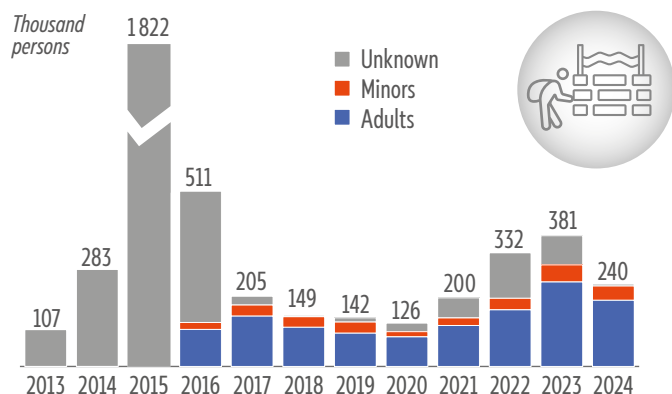
Irregular border crossings

Figure 1 shows that, in 2024, more than 41 500 minors were detected crossing the EU's external borders irregularly, over 12 400 of them unaccompanied (i.e. they arrived on EU territory without a responsible adult). This was the second highest annual number of minors detected irregularly

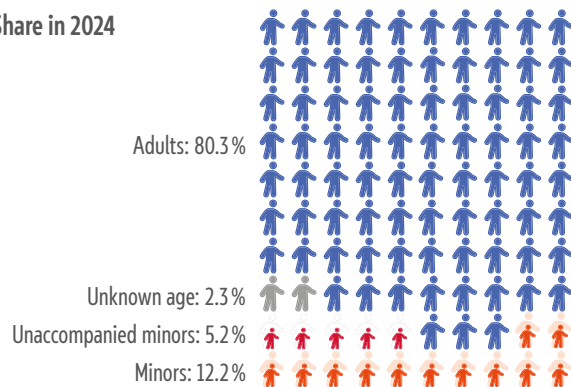
crossing the EU's external borders in recent years.

The lowest annual number was in 2020, which showed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number of minors arriving in the EU, as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency ([Frontex](#)) highlights.

Figure 1 – Irregular EU border crossings



Share in 2024



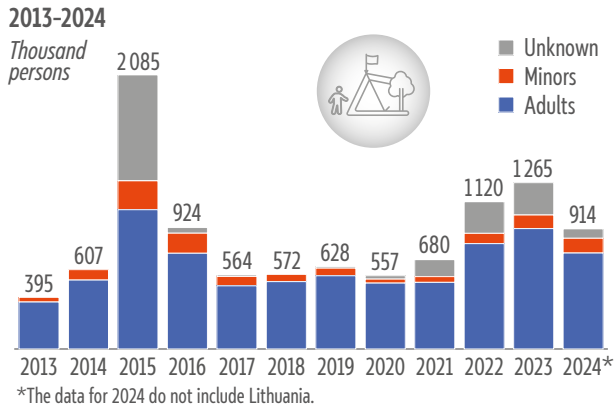
Migrant minors irregularly present in the EU

Figure 2 shows the evolution in the number of third-country nationals found to be irregularly present on EU territory since 2013, and the share of minors among them. In 2024, minors represented 12.3 % of the total number, with a clear predominance of boys over the age of 14. The overall

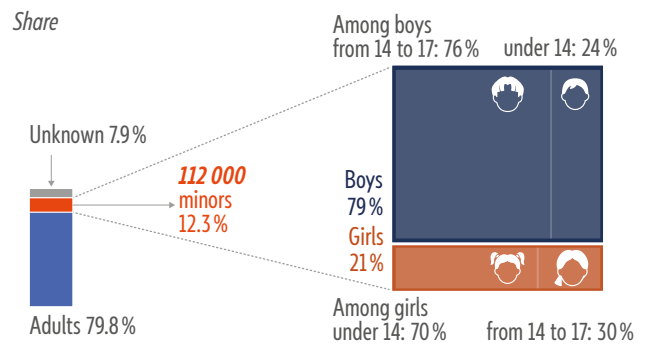
number of minors found to be irregularly present in the EU increased in 2024 (112 000) to the highest number recorded since 2016, when close to 153 000 minors were found to be irregularly present in the EU.



Figure 2 – Third-country nationals found to be irregularly present in the EU



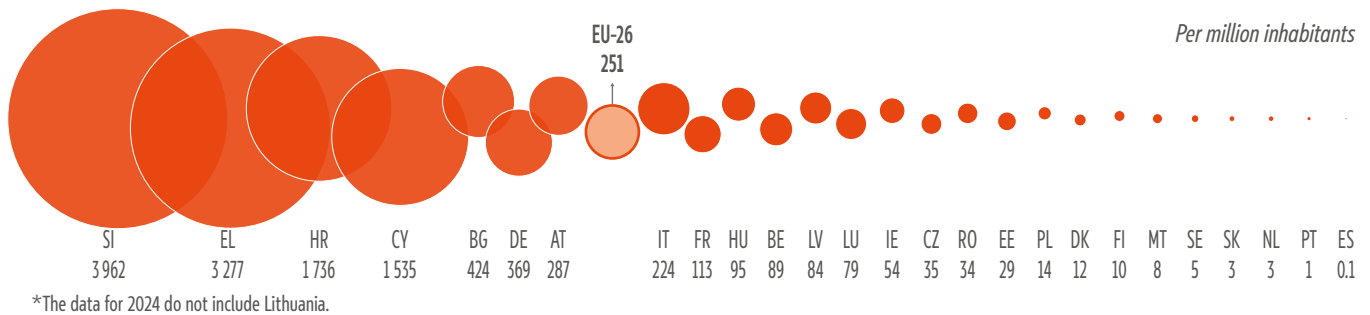
Minors in 2024* by age and gender



For diverse reasons, the numbers of migrant minors found to be irregularly present in the EU vary greatly between the Member States. In 2024, of the 112 000 minors found to be irregularly present throughout the EU, nearly 34 100 were detected in Greece, 30 800 in Germany and 13 200 in Italy. However, to gain a better understanding of this difference between Member States, the absolute figures

need to be correlated with the population of each Member State. Figure 3 shows the number of minors found to be irregularly present in the various Member States per million inhabitants in 2024. Slovenia has the highest number of minors irregularly present per million inhabitants, followed by Greece, Croatia and Cyprus.

Figure 3 – Migrant minors found to be irregularly present by Member State in 2024



Minors returned from the EU

Migrant minors, including unaccompanied minors, who are irregularly present can be ordered to leave EU territory under the [Return Directive](#), respecting certain conditions and taking due account of the best interests of the minor. Overall, 25 200 minors were ordered to leave the EU in 2024. The bar chart below shows that minors represented

5.5 % of the total number of third-country nationals ordered to leave in 2024 and 8.1 % of the total number of third-country nationals returned from the EU. Among those ordered to leave, 63 % were boys. In addition, more than 8 800 minors were returned from the EU in 2024, of whom 54 % were boys.

Figure 4 – Minors ordered to leave the EU and effectively returned from the EU

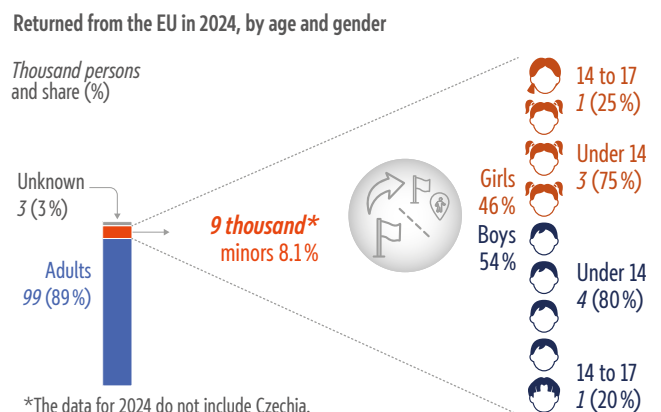
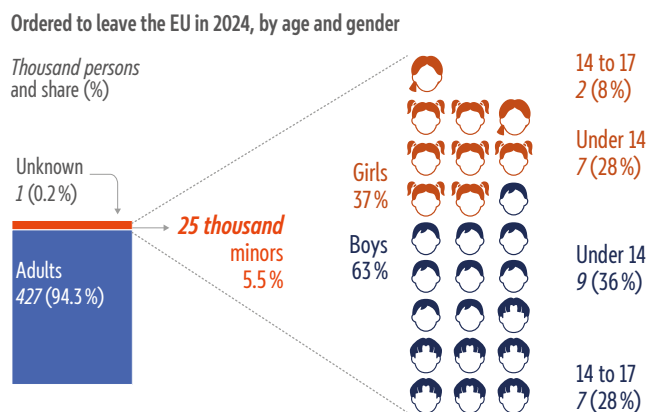
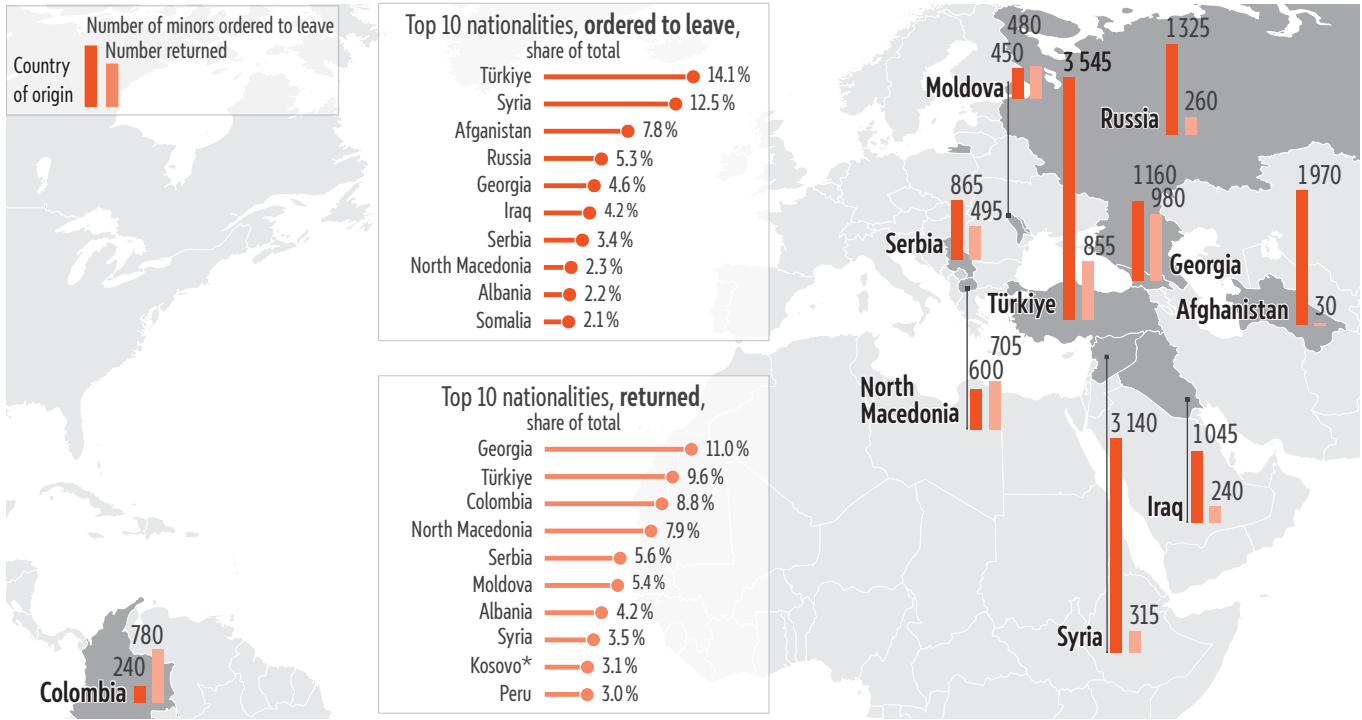


Figure 5 shows the most frequent nationalities of minors ordered to leave and/or returned from the EU in 2024. In 2024, the top five countries of origin of those ordered to leave the EU were Türkiye, Syria, Afghanistan, Russia and Georgia, whereas the top five countries of origin of minors effectively returned from the EU were Georgia, Türkiye, Colombia, North Macedonia and Serbia. These differences suggest some countries take a more collaborative approach to return procedures, but also emphasise that the internal situation in certain countries of origin may prevent the enforcement of return decisions issued against their nationals (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Russia).

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Figure 5 – Top 10 nationalities of minors ordered to leave the EU and/or returned in 2024

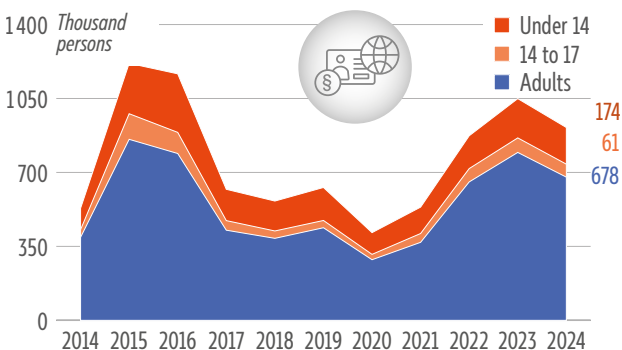


2. Minors and international protection

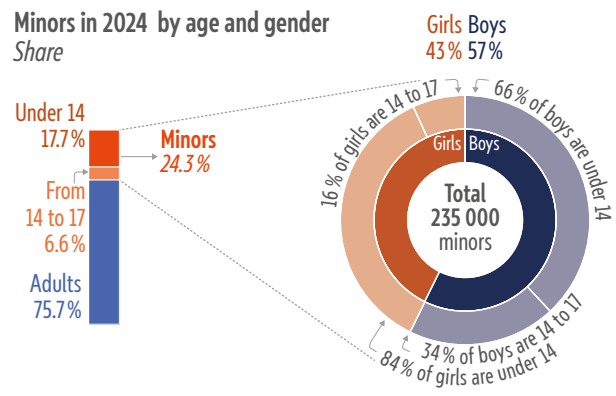
Minors are alarmingly over-represented in the number of refugees worldwide, comprising 40 % of the world's refugees in 2023. According to UNICEF, between 2010 and 2024, the global number of minors displaced due to conflict and violence more than doubled, from around 18.8 million to 48.8 million today. Under the EU Qualification Directive, minors can apply for international protection as part of a family unit or in their own right, if they comply with the requirements to qualify as a refugee or to be granted subsidiary protection. A minor can qualify as a refugee if he or she has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership

of a particular social group in his or her country of origin (Articles 9 and 10, EU Qualification Directive). A minor can be eligible for subsidiary protection if he or she does not qualify as a refugee but would face a real risk of suffering serious harm if returned to his or her country of origin (Article 15, EU Qualification Directive). Figure 6 shows the number of first-time applications for international protection in the EU since 2014, and the share among them lodged by minors aged under 14 and aged between 14 to 17. Minors represented 24.3 % of all applicants in the EU in 2024 (i.e. 235 000). The majority of minor applicants in 2024 were boys (57 %).

Figure 6 – First-time applicants, by age group



Minors in 2024 by age and gender Share



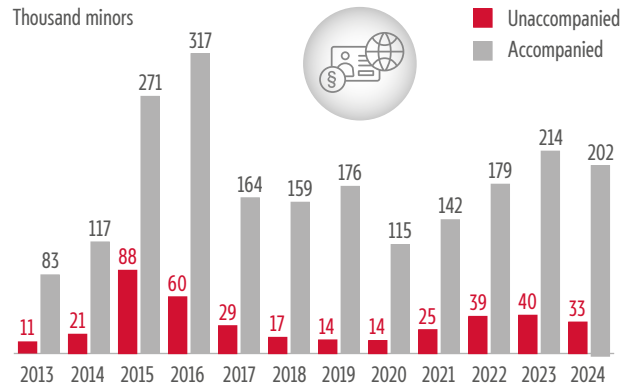
Unaccompanied minors

Minors arriving on the territory of a Member State [unaccompanied](#) by an adult responsible for them, or those left unaccompanied after entering the territory of the Member State, can also apply for international protection under the EU [Asylum Procedures Directive](#). National legislation determines the cases in which they can apply for international protection on their own behalf and those in which they must apply through a representative.

Unaccompanied minors [represented](#) 14.1 % of the total number of minors applying for international protection (first-time applications) in the EU Member States in 2024, as shown in Figure 7. The percentage was lower than in 2023 (15.9 %) and higher than in 2020 (10.6 %), but far below the figures seen in 2015, when 24.5 % of the minors applying for international protection in EU Member States were unaccompanied.

The number of unaccompanied minors applying for international protection in each EU Member State varies. Figure 8 shows the total and relative numbers of these minors in the various Member States in 2024. Germany topped the ranking in terms of absolute numbers, with 13 300 applicants, followed by Greece (4 700), the

Figure 7 – Unaccompanied minors applying for international protection



Netherlands (3 900), Bulgaria (2 600) and Italy (2 000). These five Member States together hosted more than 80 % of the total number of unaccompanied minors applying for international protection in the EU in 2024 (33 160). However, the order of this ranking looks different when the numbers are correlated to each Member State's population, with Cyprus at the top, followed by Bulgaria, Austria, the Netherlands and Greece.

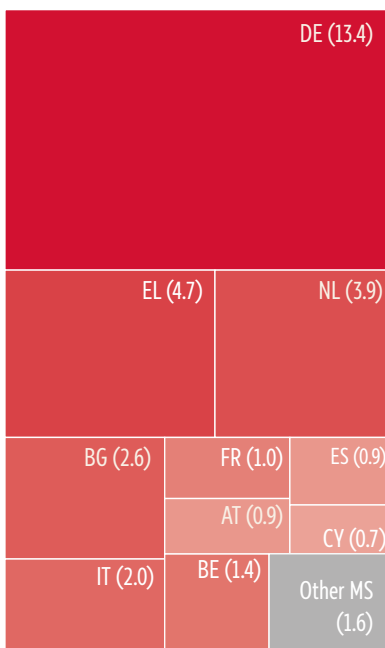
First instance decisions on applications for international protection

Figure 8 – Unaccompanied minors applying for international protection in 2024, in absolute and relative numbers

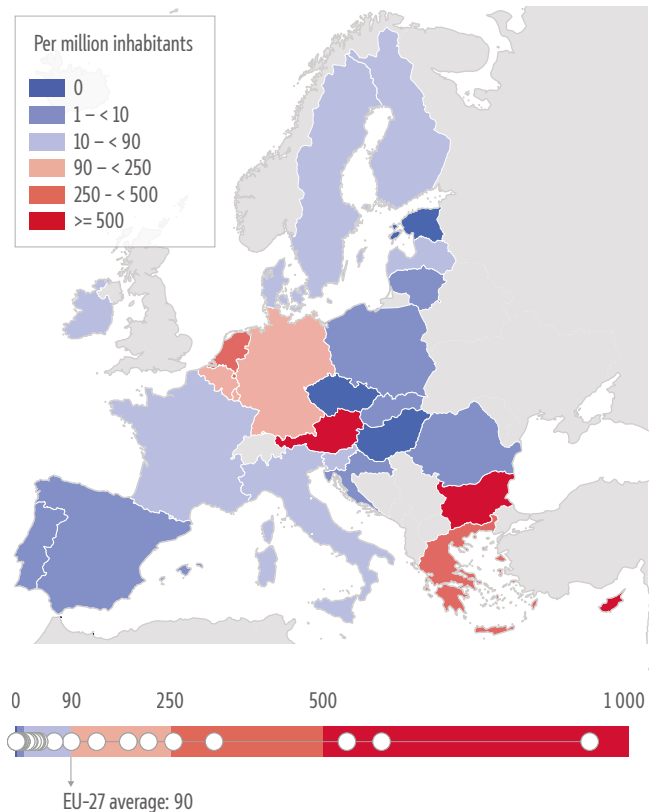
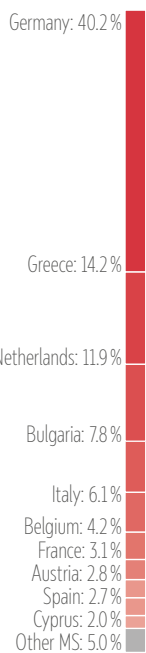
Top 10 Member States

Thousand

Total EU-27: 33.2



Share



Member States must process applications for international protection in accordance with all the principles and guarantees enshrined in the Asylum Procedures Directive, in particular Chapters II and III. Once processed, applications for international protection are either granted or rejected, depending on whether the applicant qualifies for international protection under the EU Qualification Directive. Applications for international protection may also be declared inadmissible under the conditions enshrined in Article 33 of the Asylum Procedures Directive.

[Eurostat](#) provides data on positive and negative first instance and final decisions on applications for international protection. First instance decision data include applications for international protection, authorisations to stay for humanitarian reasons under Member States' national law and decisions granted to persons who are subject to the Dublin Regulation ([Council Regulation 604/2013/EC](#)).

Figure 9 shows the total numbers of positive first instance decisions for international protection for minor and adult applicants, as well as the percentages of positive first instance decisions for minor and adult applicants. Looking

at the percentages of positive first instance decisions for both groups since 2013, it is clear that minor applicants have significantly higher chances of obtaining a positive decision at first instance than adults. In recent years (since 2017), the trend is even clearer, with a success rate in 2024 at first instance of 63 % for minors and 48 % for adults.

Minor applicant success rates at first instance differ widely across the Union, ranging from 100 % in Slovakia and Hungary to 0 % in Portugal in 2024, as shown in Figure 10. However, although the share of positive decisions might be high for certain Member States, it does not represent the absolute number of positive decisions. Success rates are only higher for adults than for minors seeking international protection in Estonia, Malta and Poland.

Figure 9 – Number of positive first instance decisions on applications for international protection in the EU

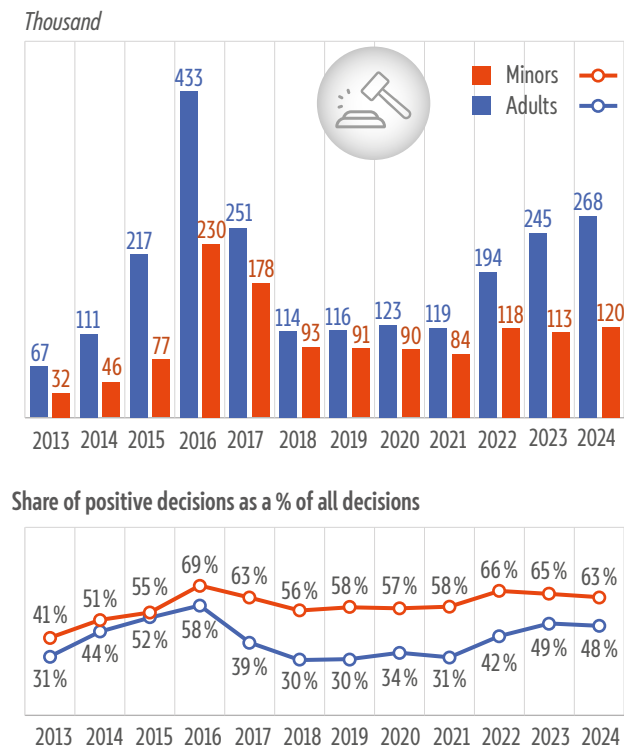
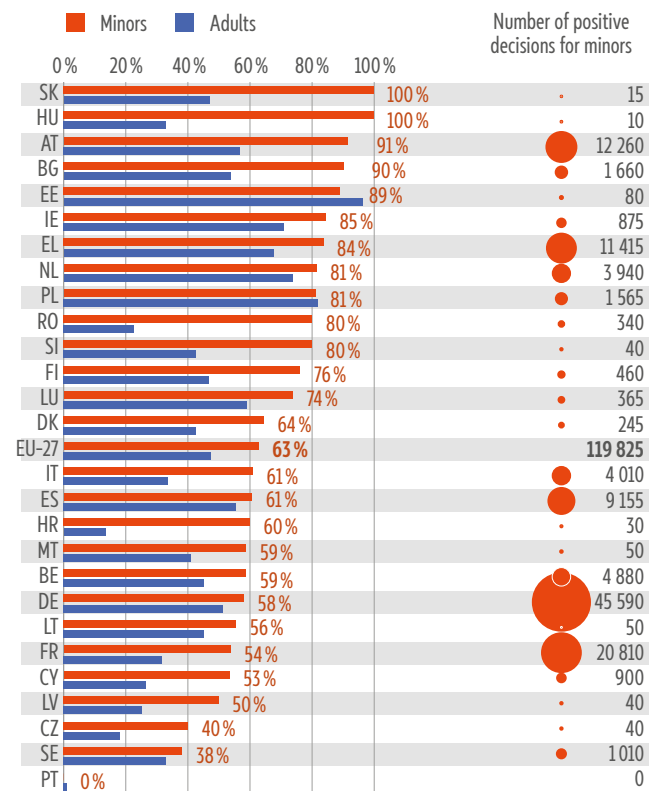


Figure 10 – Proportion of positive first instance decisions on applications for international protection, by Member State (2024)



Final decisions on applications for international protection

An appeal may be made against decisions made on applications for international protection before national administrative or judicial authorities, as provided for in Member States' laws. However, Article 46 of the EU Asylum

Procedure Directive requires Member States to provide applicants for international protection with an effective remedy before a court. Once all internal remedies have been exhausted, a decision on the application is considered final.

Figure 11 – Positive final decisions on appeal or review on minors' applications for international protection

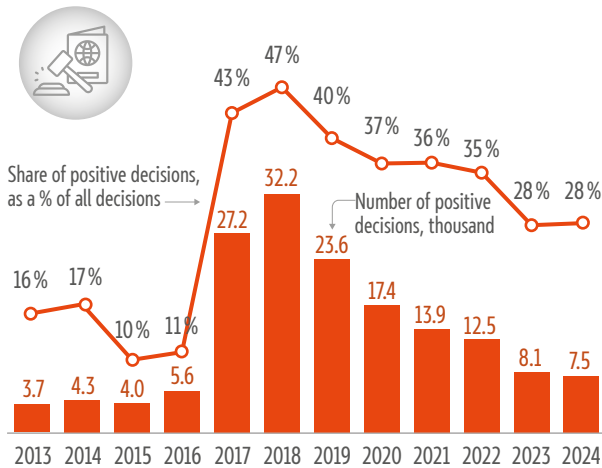
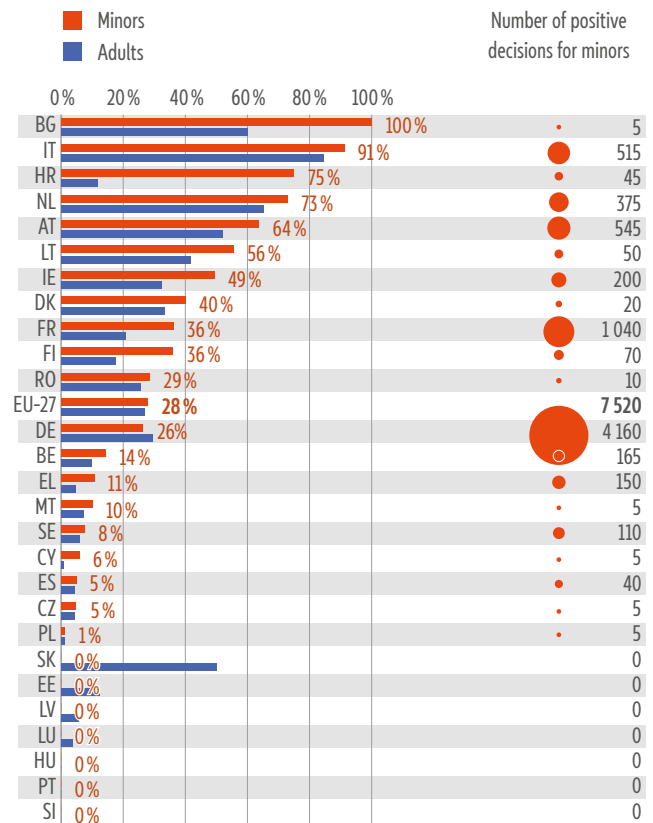


Figure 11 shows the number of positive final decisions on applications for international protection lodged by minors in the EU Member States, while the line chart reflects the share of positive decisions among all final decisions. By comparing this share with decisions at first instance (see Figure 9), the chances of minors getting a positive final decision are seen to be considerably lower than at first instance and at similar levels to final decisions for adults.

The uneven distribution of positive final decisions among Member States is illustrated in Figure 12, which also shows that 7 of the 27 Member States issued no positive final decisions for minors in 2024.

Figure 12 – Proportion of positive final decisions on minors' applications for international protection, by Member State in 2024



Notes

Data sources: Fig. 1 [Frontex Annual Risk Analysis](#); Fig. 2 and Fig 3 Eurostat [migr_eipre](#) and [demo_pjangroup](#); Fig. 4 [migr_eiord](#) and [migr_eirtn](#); Fig. 5 [migr_eiord](#) and [migr_eirtn](#); Fig. 6 [migr_asyappctza](#); Fig. 7 [migr_asyunaa](#); Fig. 8 [migr_asyunaa](#); Fig. 9 [migr_asydcfsta](#); Fig. 10 [migr_asydcfsta](#); Fig. 11 and Fig. 12 [migr_asydcfina](#).

Data were collected in October and November 2025.

Country codes: Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BG), Czechia (CZ), Denmark (DK), Germany (DE), Estonia (EE), Ireland (IE), Greece (EL), Spain (ES), France (FR), Croatia (HR), Italy (IT), Cyprus (CY), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), Luxembourg (LU), Hungary (HU), Malta (MT), Netherlands (NL), Austria (AT), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Romania (RO), Slovenia (SI), Slovakia (SK), Finland (FI), Sweden (SE)

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