

Refugees from Afghanistan: statistical review

In August 2021, the radical Taliban Islamist movement, categorized as a terrorist organization by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation in 2003, seized power in Afghanistan. There were already approximately 2.6 million Afghan refugees in the world before the seizure of power by the Taliban in August, which caused a new, massive flight of people from Afghanistan. An accurate assessment of the exact scale of the crisis, number of victims, and other details will take months.

Meanwhile, as of July 1, 2021, only 686 Afghan citizens in Russia were considered to be in need of asylum by Russian authorities. 252 were granted refugee status, while the remaining 434 were granted a certificate of temporary asylum. In this new wave of refugees, the number of those who will be able to reach Russia and that of those who will be able to receive asylum status is yet unknown. Unfortunately, actions undertaken by the Russian Migration Service (GUVM of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia) and statements issued by Russian authorities project a grim outlook on this issue. The following is a brief statistical overview of the situation of Afghan refugees in the world and in Russia, at the end of 2020 and in the first half of 2021:

Critical figures (according to the UNHCR and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia):

- At the end of 2020, there were **2.6 million refugees from Afghanistan** in the world. Afghanistan was the third country in the world, just after Syria and Venezuela, from which the most refugees originated;
- At the end of 2020, **about 85% of refugees from Afghanistan** were located in only two countries: Pakistan and Iran;
- From January to August 2021, the number of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan increased by **551 thousand people**, exceeding the record number of internally displaced persons recorded at the end of 2020 (**2.9 million**);
- Over the past five years (from 2016 to 2020), the Russian Migration Service (GUVM of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia) refused to recognize the legal refugee status of people from Afghanistan **in 97.5% of the cases**; only **20 out of 784 applications** for refugee status recognition were granted;
- In 2020, a record-low number of people from Afghanistan (**102**) were able to apply for refugee recognition in Russia;
- As of July 1, 2021, **only 686 Afghan citizens in Russia** were considered to be in need of asylum by Russian authorities; 252 were granted refugee status, while the remaining 434 were granted a certificate of temporary asylum;
- In 2020, a record-high number of people from Afghanistan (**982**) received Russian citizenship through the bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia;
- In the first half of 2021, **653 people from Afghanistan** were accepted into Russian citizenship by the bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia. The figure exceeded that of the corresponding period in 2020 (425) and in that in the whole of 2019 (501).

In the world

[According to the UNHCR](#), at the end of 2020, there were 2.6 million refugees from Afghanistan in the world, which is 10% of the total number of refugees in the world (26.4 million at the end of 2020). Numerically, refugees from Afghanistan occupy highest place in Asia and third highest place (after refugees from Syria and Venezuela) in the world. Over the past ten years, the number of refugees from Afghanistan has fluctuated between 2.5 and 2.7 million people.

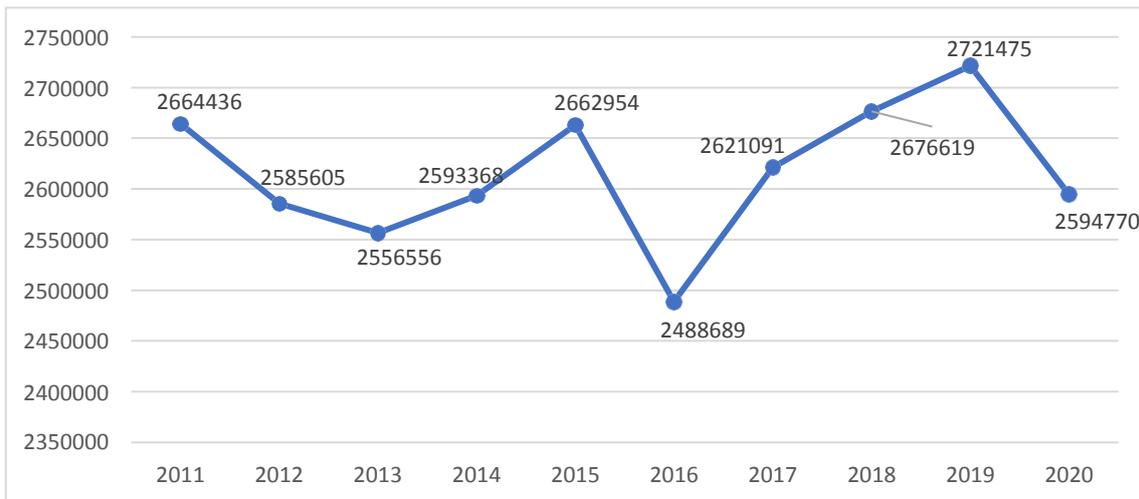


Figure 1. The number of refugees from Afghanistan from 2011 to 2020 (according to UNHCR data)

By the end of 2020, **2.9 million** people were forced to relocate inside Afghanistan, according to the UNHCR. The number of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan has been constantly and rapidly growing over the past ten years, **from 450 thousand people in 2011 to 2 million and 890 thousand in 2020.**

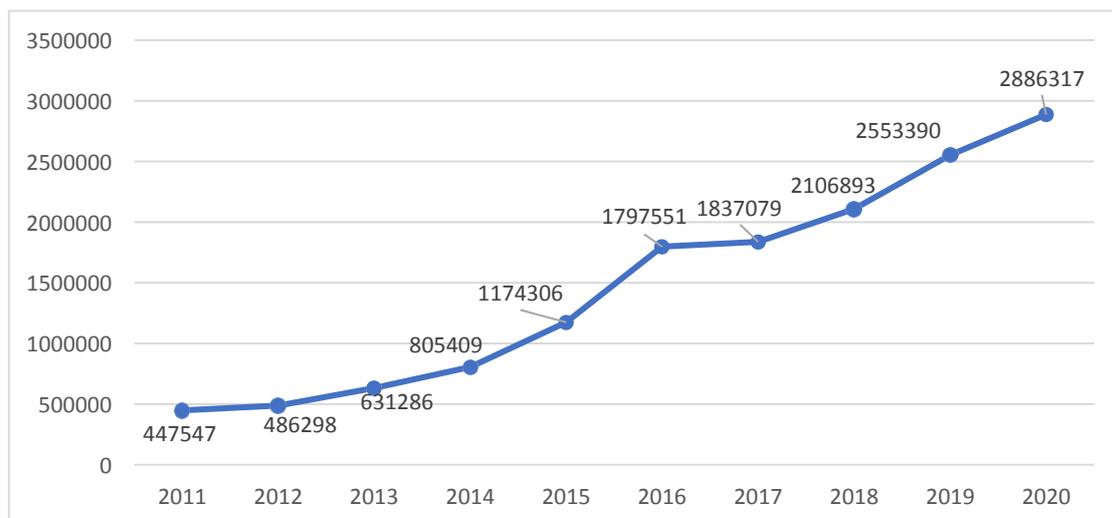


Figure 2. The number of internally displaced persons inside Afghanistan from 2011 to 2020 (according to UNHCR data)

The total number of Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons inside Afghanistan, according to the UNHCR, is close to **6 million people**. Meanwhile, **from January to August 2021, the number of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan increased by about 551 thousand** (see: [>>](#)).

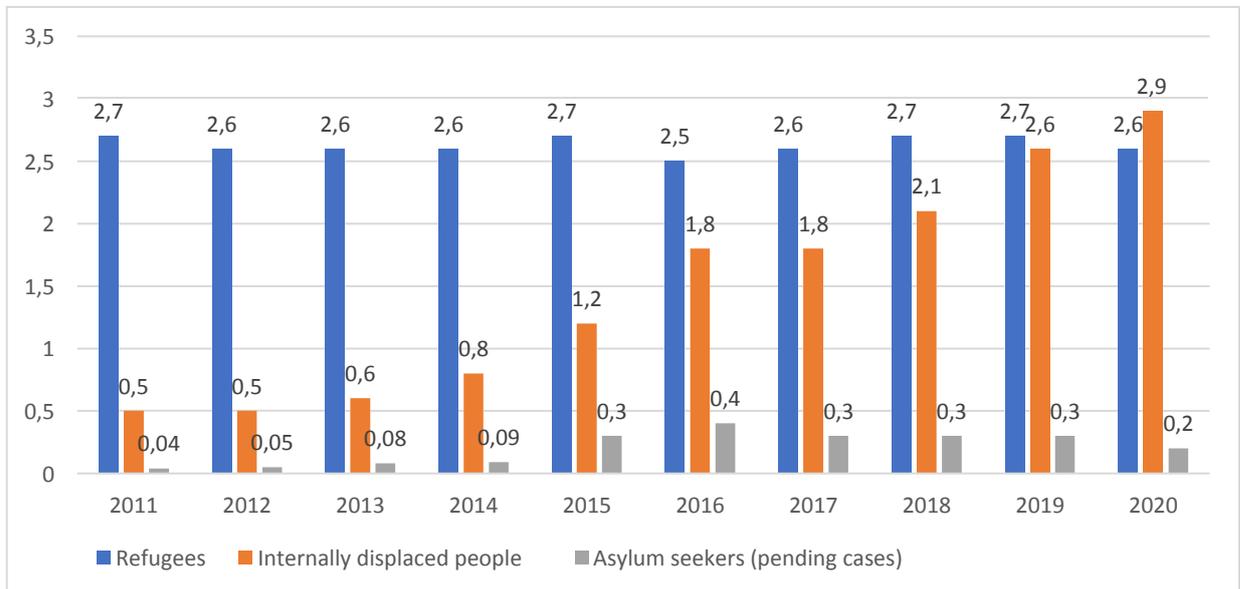


Figure 3. The number (million) of Afghan refugees, internally displaced persons in Afghanistan, and asylum seekers from Afghanistan whose requests have not yet been considered (according to UNHCR data)

According to the UNHCR, between the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, about 85% of all refugees from Afghanistan were located in two neighboring countries. 1.45 million Afghan refugees were in Pakistan, while around 780 thousand were in Iran (see: [>>](#)). It should also be noted that, according to the Iranian government, at the end of 2020, about 600 thousand people from Afghanistan in Iran had migration documents, while about 2 million lived in the country without them.

The following table shows the numbers of refugees from Afghanistan in the ten countries hosting the largest number of Afghan refugees in the world:

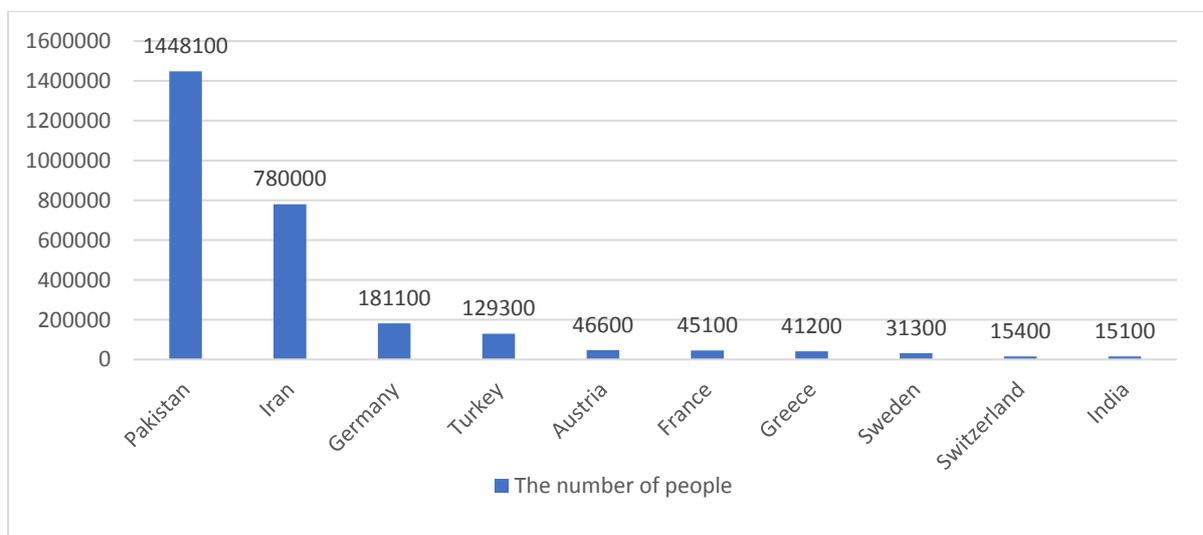


Figure 4. Ten countries with the largest number of refugees from Afghanistan at the end of 2020 (according to UNHCR data)

By the end of 2020, there were **several hundred thousand** officially recognized refugees from Afghanistan in the European Union. Most of them were in Germany, amounting to almost 200 thousand people. In 2020, Afghan citizens in EU countries submitted 44,190 initial asylum applications – only less than the number of requests submitted by Syrians (63,455), according to Eurostat [statistics](#). Furthermore, in seven EU countries (Greece, Belgium, Slovakia, Bulgaria, France, Croatia, and Romania), the largest number of initial appeals came from people from Afghanistan.

In Russia

There are only two legal statuses foreign citizens or stateless persons seeking refuge may apply for in Russia:

- 1) Refugee status – corresponding to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. However, significant limitations and reservations exist, as analyzed in the report "[Russia as a country of asylum](#)".
- 2) The status of temporary asylum – granted according to legislation, "[if there are grounds for recognizing a person as a refugee based on the results of checking information about this person and his family members who arrived with him, including the circumstances of arrival on the territory of the Russian Federation or the existence of humane reasons requiring the temporary stay of this person on the territory of the Russian Federation.](#)"

On paper, the status of political asylum is another option. However, according to information acquired by the Civic Assistance Committee, this status has never been granted to anyone throughout the 24 years that have passed since the signing of the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated July 21, 1997 N 746 "On approval of the Regulations on the procedure of granting political asylum by the Russian Federation".

In the mid-1990s, according to the UNHCR, there were about 20 thousand refugees from Afghanistan in the Russian Federation (see, for example, here: [>>](#)). According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, **as of July 1, 2021, only 686 Afghan citizens held one of the two legal statuses mentioned above** (252 held a refugee certificate, while the remaining 434 held a certificate of temporary asylum). The figure is notably lower than that at the end of 2020, when there were 770 Afghan citizens holding either one of the two statuses (256 with refugee status and 514 with temporary asylum status).

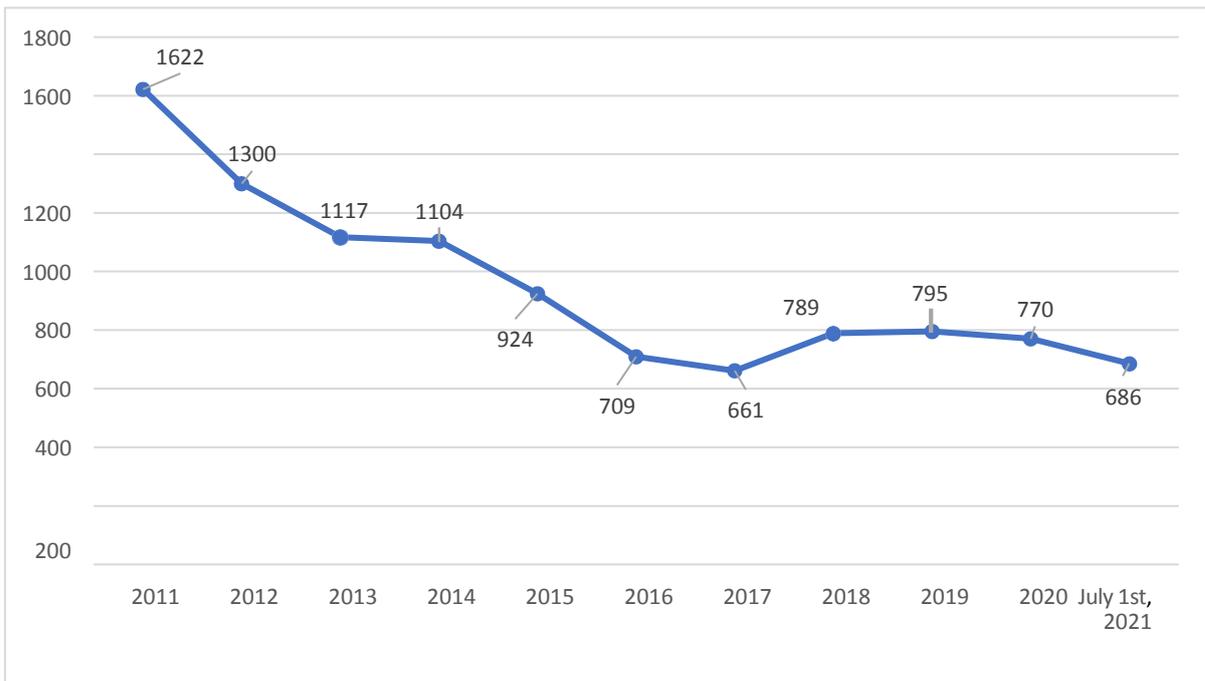


Figure 5. The number of Afghan citizens who had refugee status or temporary asylum status in the Russian Federation at the end of these periods (according to the data of the FMS of Russia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia)

According to the FMS of Russia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, the number of Afghan citizens residing in Russia from 2012 to 2018 was around 8-10 thousand people. The number approached 11 thousand at the end of 2019, but returned to the previous level by the end of 2020. Many of these people are refugees.

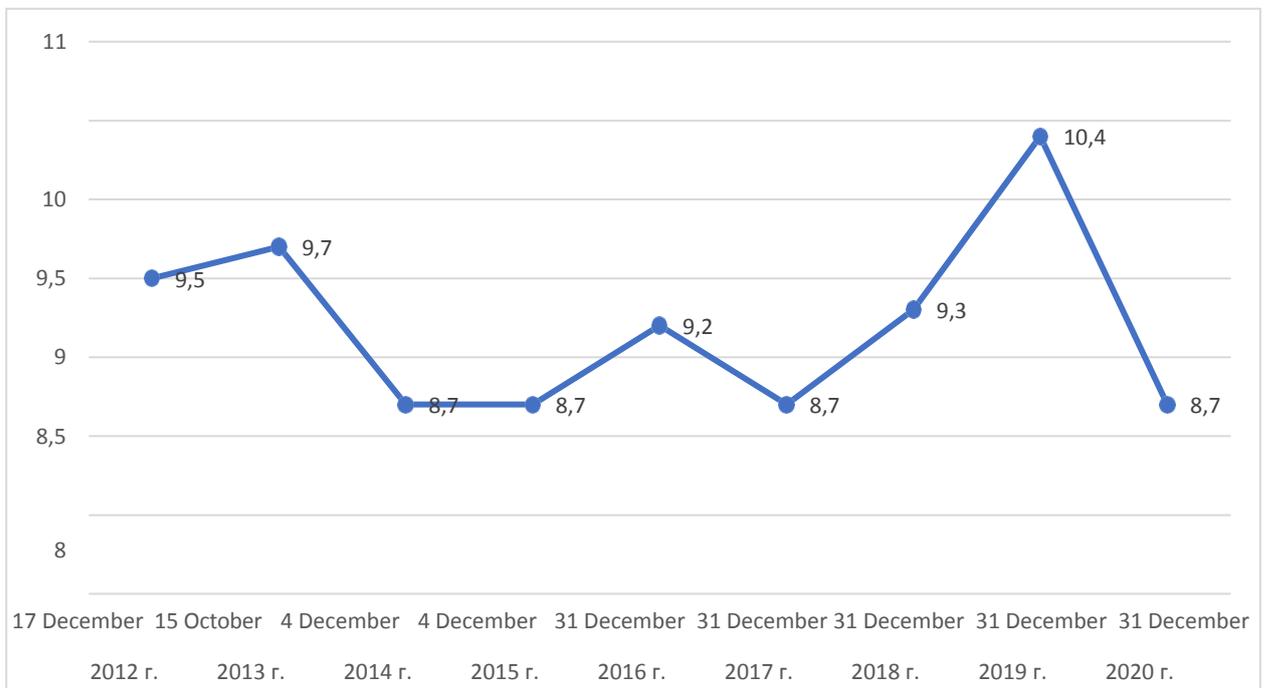


Figure 6. The number of Afghan citizens (thousand people) staying on the territory of the Russian Federation on the indicated date (according to the data of the FMS of Russia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia)

Refugee status

As is widely known, the brutal conflict that has loomed over Afghanistan for several decades sharply exacerbated in August 2021. Despite the dangers and threats in Afghanistan – one of the most dysfunctional countries in the world even before the events of August 2021, the number of Afghan citizens with refugee status in Russia has significantly decreased over the past 10 years, from 583 at the end of 2011 to 252 by July 1, 2021.

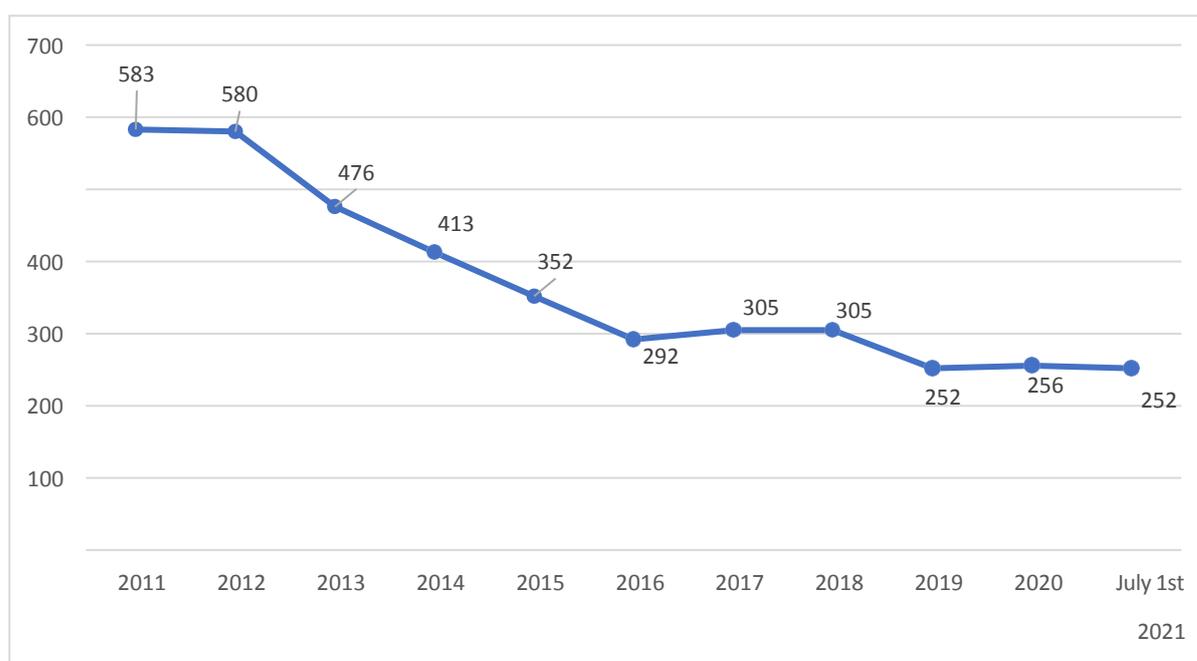


Figure 7. The number of Afghan citizens who had refugee status in the Russian Federation at the end of these periods (according to the data of the FMS of Russia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia)

The number of Afghans who were able to apply for refugee status has reduced nearly fivefold over the past ten years. The Civic Assistance Committee has written extensively and repeatedly about the tremendous difficulty of applying for refugee status recognition in Russia, as well as about the often illegal refusal by the migration service to accept refugees (for more information, see the report "Russia as a country of asylum" published by the Civic Assistance Committee [>>](#)). Even if immigrants from Afghanistan successfully filed petitions, the migration authorities normally did not satisfy them. Over the past ten years, refugee status has been granted to citizens of Afghanistan in only less than 10% of the cases (225 out of 2,860 appeals). Worse, over the course of the past five years, since the elimination of the FMS of Russia and the transfer of its powers to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, only 20 Afghans have been recognized as refugees – 2.5% of the 784 cases in which Afghan citizens were able to file an application. In other words, **in 97.5% of the cases, bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia refused to approve applications for refugee status recognition submitted by immigrants from Afghanistan.**

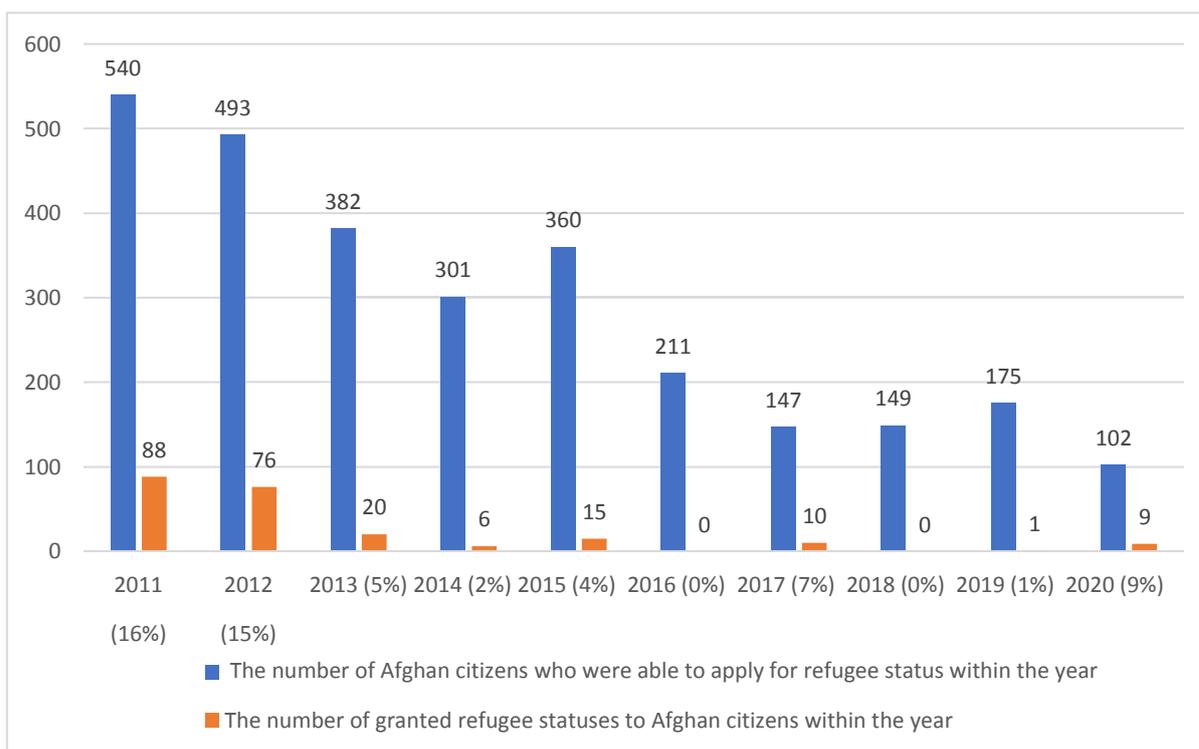


Figure 8. The number of Afghan citizens who were able to apply for refugee status, and Afghan citizens who received it in the Russian Federation at the end of the year, and the percentage of the latter in relation to the former (according to the data of the FMS of Russia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia)

According to the Civic Assistance Committee, the significant reduction in the number of recognized Afghan refugees and that of people who applied for refugee status is the result of the lack of incentive and will of the GUVM of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia to be an organization protecting the right to asylum. Neither did its predecessor, the FMS of Russia, carry such a vision. Nonetheless, the FMS was a separate organization specializing in migration, while the GUVM a department within the largely repressive Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, headed by officials who perceive refugees as a mere problem, a trivial issue. In fact, this also provides a plausible explanation to the decrease in migration specialists, as well as the complete absence of statistics and news feed concerning the institution of asylum on the official website (<https://mvd.ru/>).

Temporary asylum status

Statistics regarding Afghan citizens with temporary asylum status in Russia also reflect a grim reality. The number of Afghan citizens with temporary asylum status has more than halved over the past ten years. As of December 31, 2020, there were only 514 of them, 29 people less than that in the corresponding period of the previous year. The first half of 2021 witnessed a further drop in the number to only 434 on July 1, 2021.

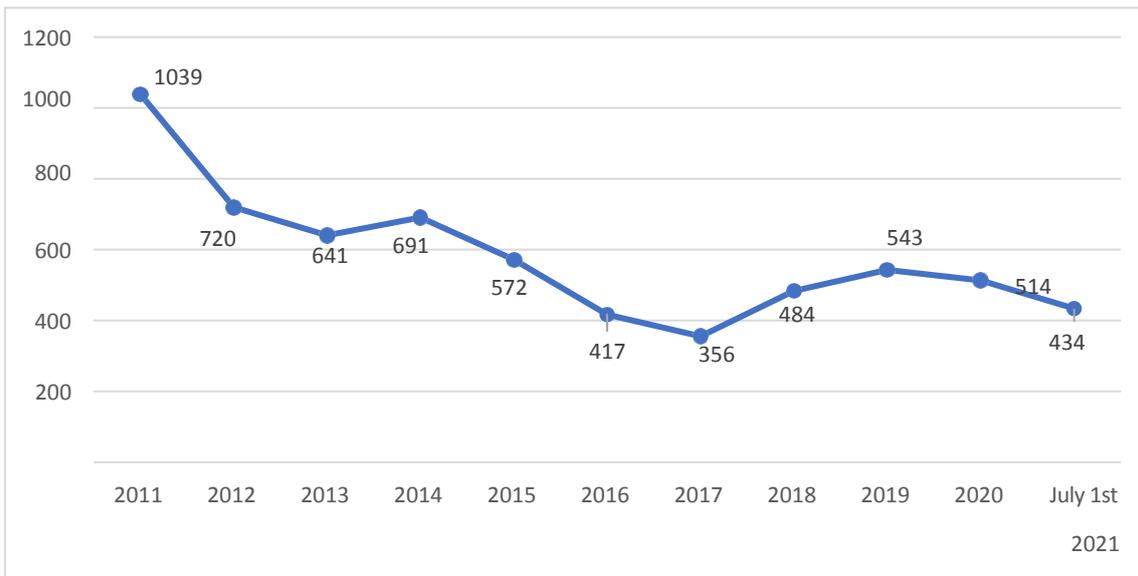


Figure 9. The number of Afghan citizens with the status of temporary asylum in the Russian Federation at the end of these periods (according to the data of the FMS of Russia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia).

The number of Afghans who were able to apply for temporary asylum status in 2018 nearly doubled compared to 2017. However, in 2020 a sharp, almost twofold, fall occurred. In general, the percentage of Afghan citizens granted temporary asylum certificates among those who managed, despite numerous obstacles, to file an application dropped significantly after the transfer of power from the FMS of Russia to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia. The average percentage of cases in which temporary asylum was granted decreased from 51% during the period 2011-2015 to 39% during the period 2016-2020.

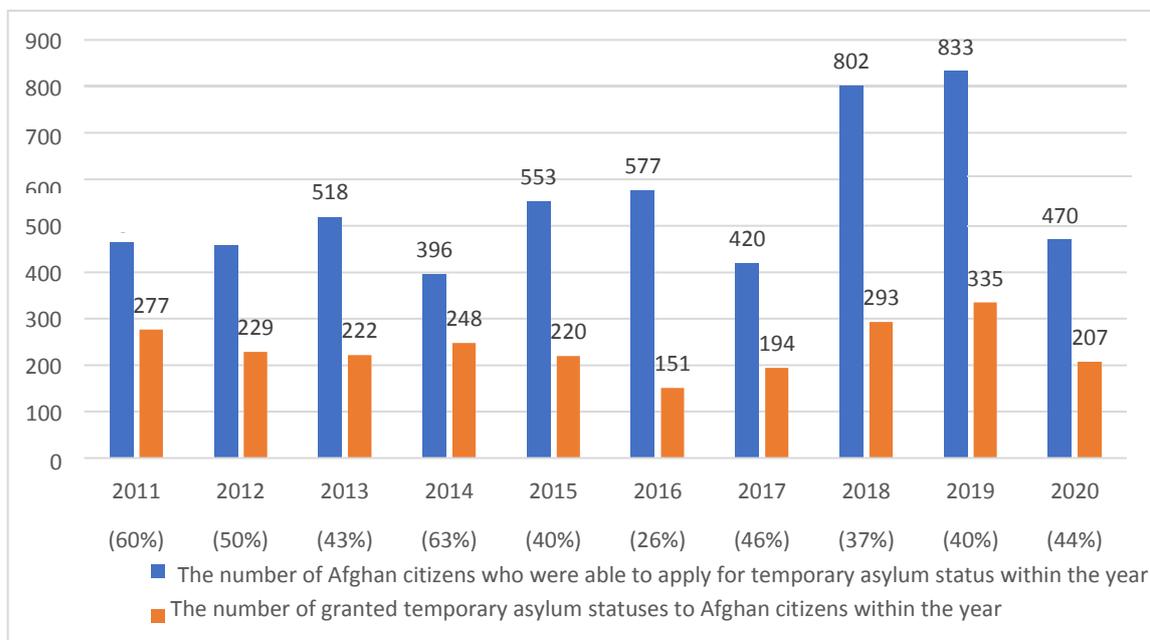


Figure 10. The number of Afghan citizens who were able to apply for refugee status, and Afghan citizens who received it in the Russian Federation at the end of the year, and the percentage of the latter in relation to the former (according to the data of the FMS of Russia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia).

The decline in the number of Afghans who were able to apply for temporary asylum and that of those who were eventually granted temporary asylum status is caused by the same reasons, as in the case of decreasing refugee status applicants and holders.

Temporary residence permit, residence permit and admission to Russian citizenship

In comparison with the previous year, the number of immigrants from Afghanistan accepted into Russian citizenship by the bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia in 2020 has increased from 501 in 2019 to 982 in 2020. The number of residence permits issued to citizens of Afghanistan has also grown.

In the first half of 2021, the bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia admitted 653 people from Afghanistan into Russian citizenship. This figure exceeded that in the first half of 2020 (425) and that in the whole of 2019 (501).

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	The first half of 2021
Received Russian citizenship	300	441	461	501	982	653
Granted temporary residence permit	470	594	782	914	614	191
Granted residence permit	458	427	539	689	874	434

Table 1. The number of people from Afghanistan who have received Russian citizenship, temporary residence permit or residence permit (according to [the data](#) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia).

In our opinion, the sharp rise in the number of Afghan citizens who received Russian passports in 2020 and the first half of 2021 occurred largely owing to the political, economic and migration processes. Possible reasons for these trends include the pandemic and the desire of Russian authorities to compensate for the decline in population of the Russian Federation. However, it ought to be noted that the latter factor does not solely affect Afghan citizens. In 2019 and 2020, the Law on Citizenship of the Russian Federation was amended by the authorities, allowing people from several former Soviet republics to obtain Russian citizenship with ease. In addition, bureaucratic requirements and quibbles regarding the admission of foreigners into Russian citizenship have softened. Hence, the increased ease in the adoption of Russian citizenship has affected both Afghans and immigrants from other foreign countries. In 2020 and the first half of 2021, around 97% of those who acquired Russian citizenship were from former Soviet Republics, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia. Among them, Ukrainians account for the highest percentage. In 2020, 409,549 immigrants from Ukraine became holders of Russian passports. In the first half of 2021, another 184,385 Ukrainians acquired Russian citizenship. In both periods, more than 50% of the total number of people who acquired Russian citizenship were Ukrainians (656,347 in 2020 and 351,670 in the first six months of 2021).

As shown in the above statistics, there were already many Afghan refugees in the world even before the tragic turn of events in August 2021. Meanwhile, in Russia, people from Afghanistan have faced significant difficulties in obtaining refugee status or temporary asylum status since the abolition of the FMS of Russia and transfer of its functions to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia in 2016. As a result, both applicants and holders of refugee status and temporary asylum status in Russia from Afghanistan have dropped systematically.

It is our opinion that this phenomenon demonstrates the indifference and inability of the GUVM of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia to act as an organization truly performing humanitarian functions. Despite having similar issues and limitations, the FMS of Russia was a separate organization specializing in migration affairs. Many officials in the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia perceive refugees more as a problem and possible source of danger, rather than people in need of assistance and protection of their rights. Throughout several years of observation, it has come to our notice that the institute of asylum is a mere non-core activity for the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, to which attention and funding are insufficiently allocated.

Of course, we will keep you informed about the developments of the Afghan refugee situation in the second half of this year.