



DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

COUNTRY REPORT: GREECE

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Due to its geographical position, Greece is called upon to function as a front-line state that receives, screens and determines protection, but also 'guards' the external borders of the EU.



Greece's migration policy has been consistently focused on managing its sea and land borders, and on improving the national asylum system. The country is developing a parallel policy of deterrence and legal migration, with the former prioritised over the latter.



Key challenges remain as regards reception and integration of asylum seekers and recognised refugees, despite Greece receiving significant funds from the European Union in the area of integration and reception.

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1

COUNTRY BACKGROUND

Greece, traditionally an immigrant-sending country, transformed in the period 1990-2009 into a destination country for economic migrants as well as a transit country for asylum seekers.

In the 1990s, the dissolution of both the USSR and Yugoslavia produced large-scale (forced) migration in Europe. The first immigrants came mainly from the neighbouring Balkan states, most notably Albania. From 2000, Greece recorded a significant number of irregular arrivals—mainly from Albania, once again, but also from countries beyond the immediate neighbourhood such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India as well as sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb region. Mixed migratory movements of economic migrants and asylum seekers created a multi-ethnic immigrant population that to this day maintains a significant presence in Greece. This is also a key characteristic of the route: it is utilized by mixed flows, i.e. people in need of protection, as well as people forced to migrate by socio-economic conditions, as well as by climate change.

It is worth noting that immigrants from Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Armenia, and Moldova comprised more than 10 percent of the total foreign-born population in Greece in 2001, while those from the 15 countries included in the European Union at that time made up 6 percent, and a remaining group drawn from a wide variety of countries totalled nearly 19 percent.

Although the Eastern Mediterranean route has been in focus for the past twenty years, it has acquired additional prominence since 2015 and the arrival of more than 870,000 people through the Greek-Turkish sea and land borders. In 2015, the *de facto* suspension of the Dublin Regulation by Germany for all Syrians and the “open” borders through the Western Balkans, resulted in a new migratory corridor for transitory movement. Largely uncoordinated by state authorities, people were able to transit quickly through the countries along the route to reach their intended destination. From the autumn of 2015 until late February 2016, this movement was more organized, with state authorities attempting to coordinate border crossings.

Greece functioned as the main entryway to the EU during the period 2015-2016, and was criticized for indirectly assisting transitory movements by failing to register migrants on

EURODAC on their arrival at the land and/or sea border¹. The reality is that the majority did not remain in the country, opting instead to transit to other EU member states (MS). This is evident in the rather limited number of asylum applications: only 13,197 applications were submitted to the asylum service in 2015.

The biggest shift, however, comes with the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016 and the closure of the Western Balkan route. The border closure was a critical blow to the Greek policy of allowing transitory movement *de facto* as a way of alleviating the impact of hundreds of thousands of arrivals. This initiated a period of ‘experimentation’ in the EU and in Greece as regards the externalizing of migration management, as well as new procedures and policies at the EU’s external borders. Greece undergoes an unprecedented transformation of its asylum system from 2016 until 2019, and the country serves as a testing ground for several EU policies that will eventually make their way into the Pact on Migration and Asylum.

The national elections of 2019 put bring the centre-right New Democracy party to power in Greece with a significant majority. The new government has a very clear policy of deterrence, which was also part of its election campaign. The coming into power of New Democracy coincides with a gradual shift across the EU to the right (and often far right) on migration. This report looks at the recent developments of the past five years, specifically as regards patterns of mobility, nationalities, domestic policies and preferences, as well as societal challenges with an emphasis on integration and civil society.

¹ Dimitriadi, A. (2023). The Greek Asylum Regime: From Latecomer on Reception to Inspirational Model on Asylum Procedures. In: Finotelli, C., Ponzo, I. (eds) Migration Control Logics and Strategies in Europe. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26002-5_16

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MOBILITY PATTERNS AND SHIFTS

Due to its geographical location, Greece, has been on the receiving end of mixed migratory movement since the early 2000s, with arrivals by sea and by land.

els for Greece, the lowest in more than a decade. It is also important to highlight that the 2020 data is limited, due to the suspension of the publication of figures by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum³.

Arrivals at land and sea borders		
Year	Sea arrivals	Land arrivals
2024*	45,769	6,283
2023	41,561	7,160
2022	12,758	6,022
2021	4,331	4,826
2020	9,714	5,982
2019	59,726	14,887

*Data as of November 13, 2024

Irregular migration

In 2019, Greece received a significant number of arrivals by sea and by land. The increase coincided with a crackdown on Syrian migrants in Turkey, as well as renewed fighting in Syria. It marked the first significant increase since 2016, and it also resulted in legislative changes in Greece intended to render the country 'unattractive' to asylum seekers. The International Protection Act (2019) introduced procedures and impossible-to-meet deadlines and focused on punitive measures for asylum applicants. UNHCR noted that the bill "reduces safeguards for people seeking international protection and will create additional pressure on the overstretched capacity of administrative and judicial authorities".²

The pandemic years provided a lull in arrivals. As the world closed its borders, arrival numbers fell to unprecedented lev-

els for Greece, the lowest in more than a decade. It is also important to acknowledge that it is still within the annual 'average' of migrants Greece received prior to 2015.

Over the last five years, Greece has continued to witness diverse and complex migratory movements, reflecting not only the continuation of displacement across certain parts of the world, but also the lack of legal pathways that would allow for more direct access to the EU.

Between 2019 and 2023, a total of 247,523 applications for asylum were registered in Greece. For 2024 (as of September 30), the number of asylum applications stood at 50,039, which is in line with the annual average. What the data shows, however, is that the main nationalities arriving to Greece have an international protection profile.

² UNHCR. (2019). UNHCR urges Greece to strengthen safeguards in draft asylum law. <https://www.unhcr.org/gr/en/13170-unhcr-urges-greece-to-strengthen-safeguards-in-draft-asylum-law.html>

³ Greek Council for Refugees. (2020). 'Country Report-Greece' (Asylum Information Database). <https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AIDA-GR_2020update.pdf>

Afghans and Syrians constitute the main groups seeking protection, and have been so for the past five years and beyond. Still, the past five years have witnessed noticeable shifts with regard to other nationalities. In the main countries of origin for asylum seekers⁴, Pakistanis constituted the third nationality in asylum applications in 2022, but were overtaken by Iraqis and Palestinians in 2023. Bangladeshis appear in the asylum data for 2022, but not in the top ten nationalities in 2023; this is likely also a product of the legislative changes in Greece that deemed Bangladesh a safe country of origin in 2021.

Applications from Turks have also been on the rise for the past couple of years. Growing political repression and instability are also the factors that made Turkish nationals the third most populous category of applicants in 2019-2020⁶. And although the number of applications has fluctuated, they have remained present in the data since 2016. Still, this trend is not unique to the Eastern Mediterranean corridor, as more than 100,000 Turkish citizens applied for asylum in EU countries in 2023, an 82% increase from the previous year. They constitute the third largest nationality seeking protection in the EU after Syrians and Afghans⁷.

Asylum application data			
Natitonicity	2023	Nationality	2024 (until September)
Afghan	9,488	Afghan	10,164
Syrian	14,015	Syrian	14,360
Palestinian	6,736	Palestinian	1,872
Egyptian	2,498	Egyptian	5,073
Iraqi	6,455	Iraqi	1,693
Pakistani	3,081	Pakistani	1,798
Turkish	2,714	Turkish	3,245
Eritrean	1,826	Eritrean	1,475
Somalian	2,935	Nepalese	1,149
DRC	1,528	Yemeni	1,119

In 2024, the main nationalities to date remain the same, with Syrians, Afghans, Egyptians, Palestinians, and Eritreans constituting the top five nationalities in terms of arrivals. What has changed is the entry points, with the Dodecanese islands now the main point of entry via the maritime border, rather than the islands of the northern Aegean. There has also been a significant shift in demographics, with UNHCR highlighting that a quarter fourth of arrivals are children, in contrast to previous years where under-18s accounted for a fifth of arrivals, and that “Of those, almost six out of ten are below the age of 12. Moreover, 22% of all children were registered upon arrival as unaccompanied or separated, mainly from Egypt, Syria, Somalia and Afghanistan”⁵. This indicates that while the eastern corridor receives asylum seekers in the main, vulnerable categories also use this route, which impacts reception needs.

Palestinians are not a new nationality for Greece. However, their presence in the apprehension data as well as the asylum data had been dwindling until 2022. The increase—evident since 2023—can be attributed to several factors, including the deteriorating economic situation but also an increase in Israeli-Palestinian violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories⁸. About three in every five applications are lodged by Palestinians arriving in Greece, while based on data from the Hellenic Ministry of Migration and Asylum, the majority of the wards of refugee status and subsidiary protection were to Palestinians and Afghans.⁹

⁴ Based on an analysis of the statistical data provided by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, available via <https://migration.gov.gr/statistika/>

⁵ UNHCR. (2024, August). Greece Sea arrivals Dashboard - August 2024. file:///C:/Users/Test/Downloads/GRC_SeaArrivals_Dashboard_20240831.pdf

⁶ European Union Agency for Asylum. (2024). ‘Applications lodged by Turks in the EU’. <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/18593358/>

⁷ European Union Agency for Asylum. (2023). EU received over 1.1 million asylum applications in 2023. <https://euaa.europa.eu/news-events/eu-received-over-1-million-asylum-applications-2023>

⁸ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/with-2022-deadliest-year-in-israel-palestine-conflict-reversing-violent-trends-must-be-international-priority-middle-east-coordinator-tells-security-council-press-release-sc-15179/>

⁹ European Union Agency for Asylum. (2024). Annual Report on the situation of Asylum in the European Union. https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2024-06/2024_Asylum_Report_

Another noticeable shift has been the increase in Egyptians arriving via the Eastern Mediterranean route. Though their numbers are relatively low in comparison to other nationalities, their presence has raised concerns and was a key factor in Greece's support for a deal between the EU and Egypt (see section 3). According to the EUAA: "In March 2022, the number of Egyptian nationals applying for asylum in EU+ countries reached its highest levels since at least 2014. Most Egyptians lodging applications did so for the first time. For the first quarter of 2022, 24% of first-instance decisions for Egyptian nationals were positive, with positive decisions predominantly granted on the grounds of temporary protection". Egypt increased control of the maritime border in 2016 to prevent departures, and as a result direct migration from Egypt is limited. Instead, what has been unfolding is transit through Libya and onwards through the Central Mediterranean, initially to Italy. The Italian policy shift of recent years facilitated the opening of a new 'corridor' from the Libyan coast to the island of Gavdos off the coast of Crete. Different nationalities use this route. Egyptians make a significant portion of those who embark on the dangerous journey, but there are a smattering of other nationalities, including Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Syrians, and Sudanese. Some have transited from Egypt to Libya or are aboard the few boats that leave directly from Egyptian shores. Although the numbers in this corridor are not high, they have been consistent over the past two years, suggesting the establishment of a new smuggling route. Finally, it is worth noting that, in 2024, Egyptian asylum applications to Greece have increased further, with 5,073 applications registered during the first nine months of the year.

Moreover, 2023 also saw an increase in the number of Iraqi nationals arriving in Greece¹⁰ which made it the second main receiving country in the EU after Germany¹¹. The main reason is the fragile security situation in Iraq, which includes persistent attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), ground operations by Turkey, and the outbreak of hostilities in Palestine. As highlighted by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in March 2023, armed violence still continued in a "sporadic, fragmented and localized" form in the country, which "remain[ed] fragile and deeply divided".¹²

Migration due to war and conflict is also seen as a main factor in the flight of people from the Democratic Republic of Congo. There, decades of political instability, human rights

violations, armed and sexual violence, have increased the number of asylum applications by Congolese nationals. From 2021 through 2023, Somalis also appear in the top ten nationalities in Greece. Rather than a specific event, a combination of civil war, food insecurity, governmental deficiencies, and economic factors led to increased migratory movements via the Eastern Mediterranean route.¹³ Although the Eastern Mediterranean is not the 'traditional' route for either of these nationalities, some utilize it in an effort to bypass the Central Mediterranean route—and particularly Libya, although continues to function as a key departure country.

Finally, climate is becoming an increasingly important factor in migration, particularly in countries with weak socio-economic systems. While accurate data on climate-induced cross-border mobility is limited, reports produced by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center suggest that, in combination with "traditional factors", climate change could increase migratory movements in the East Mediterranean in the long run.

Beyond certain shifts in nationalities, we are also witnessing new entry patterns. In 2024, the Dodecanese, and particularly Rhodes but also smaller Tilos and Symi, have been key entry points, alongside the more 'traditional' disembarkation islands of the northern Aegean (e.g. Lesbos, Chios). Similarly, the island of Gavdos off the coast of Crete has emerged over the last two years as a relative new route for boats departing from the Libyan coast. Lacking reception capacity (or even facilities in some cases as in Rhodes) and resources, the different disembarkation points have been heavily affected.

Secondary movement from Greece

Less data is available for secondary movement from Greece to other EU member states. Nonetheless, this is an issue that links up with the broader mobility in the Eastern Mediterranean corridor, since for many arrivals Greece still constitutes a transit destination due to the limited options available to asylum seekers and refugees (see section on Societies). In 2021, a letter was sent by six interior, justice and migration ministers from Germany, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland to the European Commission, complaining of "a rapid increase" in the number of people "travelling with their Greek travel documents for refugees and using the pretext of travelling for family or tourism purposes to enter the above-mentioned states" and then lodging an application for asylum¹⁴. The issue of secondary movement remains key at the EU level. It is, however, a strategy that Greece has deployed for quite some time as part of an overall deterrence approach that renders the country inhospitable to those who have received protection.

EN.pdf

¹⁰ Hellenic Ministry of Migration and Asylum. (2023). Registered Third-Country Nationals or Stateless Persons, https://migration.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/2023_Registrations_12month_Mainland.pdf

¹¹ European Union Asylum Agency. (2023). Iraq: New EUAA reports highlight the impact of wider regional stability on civilians. <https://euaa.europa.eu/news-events/iraq-new-euaa-reports-highlight-impact-wider-regional-stability-civilians>

¹² Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2023). 'Iraq in 2023: Challenges and prospects for peace and human security', <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2023/iraq-2023-challenges-and-prospects-peace-and-human-security>.

¹³ International Organization for Migration, 'CMFS Brief: Somali Migrants to Europe' (IOM, 2018) <<https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/CMFS%20Brief%20Somalia%20-%20V8.pdf> > accessed 8 August 2024

¹⁴ <https://www.statewatch.org/news/2021/june/whip-greece-into-shape-so-we-can-resume-migrant-removals-northern-schengen-states-demand/>

Germany is the main recipient of secondary movement from Greece. In 2021, media reported that a total of 9,581 irregular arrivals at German airports had originated from Greece, with 80% of those arriving Afghan nationals. Since 2021, around 75,000 people who applied for asylum in Greece travelled on to Germany, while German courts have blocked Dublin returns on the grounds that returnees run the risk of not having their most basic needs met in Greece¹⁵.

The reintroduction and/or expansion of Schengen border controls across several EU member states in 2024 has been a cause for concern for Greece, as have fears that Germany will begin Dublin returns. Both are issues that will likely lead to the reinforcement of harsh border management and deterrence practices, and thus impact broader mobility along the Eastern Mediterranean route.

Temporary Protection - Humanitarian visas

Legal pathways for protection are not provided for in Greece, and nor does Greece issue visas on humanitarian grounds. The only exception was in 2021, when Greece accepted 819 Afghan nationals due to “the country’s commitment to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghan nationals in danger” following the Taliban’s return to power. The Ministry of Migration and Asylum had specified that this was an exceptional measure allowing temporary residence in Greece until “they can be resettled to third countries based on bilateral agreements”¹⁶.

Despite not issuing humanitarian visas, Greece has supported the European Council decision and applied the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians. Until December 2022, a total of 21,532 cards for temporary protection were issued for Ukrainian citizens by dint of the Decision No. 131035/4.3.2022 by the Ministry of Asylum and Migration on “Application of temporary protection of PD 80/2006”. In total, 32,640 Ukrainian citizens arrived in Greece during that year.¹⁷ That number has remained largely unchanged since, with the validity of the TPD extended.

Legal migration

Both discourse and policy on legal migration are very recent developments in Greece, only emerging in 2021. Labour market needs, mainly due to the pandemic, saw a significant portion of the migrant population move to other EU member states in search of better employment opportunities. The push for legal labour migration is therefore a result of demands by employers, organizations and lobbies that the hiring of migrants and asylum seekers in the country be facilitated and/or the mobility of third-country nationals to Greece

for employment enabled. The DiANEOSis 2024 survey on “What Greeks Believe—2024 (part 2)”¹⁸ shows, on the one hand, that Greeks have mixed views on migration and, on the other, that there is a broad consensus that labour migration is needed for the economy. Seven out of ten respondents recognized that the outflow of migrants creates a problem for the economy in agriculture, tourism and services in the home. A similar proportion point to the need for incentives and a culture of attracting workers to sectors where gaps exist. The survey also sought to document the prevalent prejudices and stereotypes about immigrants from different countries of origin. Here, immigrants from the Balkan countries garnered the most positive opinions (65.8%), perhaps because they are the ones with whom the local population is most familiar.

The legal migrant population in Greece is estimated at 848,571 in the Ministry for Migration and Asylum’s September 2024 data, based on permits issued. Of those, 256,058 are EU citizens and co-ethnics. The Third Country Nationals (TCNs) population stands at 482,982, and of those 77,750 are people who have received international protection (in previous years). However, the most common nationalities among permit holders suggests that refugees do not constitute a significant percentage of the legal migrant population. Albanians remain the most common nationality for permit holders at 57.5%, followed by Chinese (6.1%), Pakistanis (4.6%) and Georgians (4.1%).

Despite these figures, most permits fall under the ‘other’ category (219,565 in total), with more issued for family unification (149,329) and fewer issued for work (112,656). However, it is the latter that has been the principal focus in Greece since 2021, with the country attempting to look outside the EU for migrant labour through bilateral labour agreements (see section on domestic preferences). The Uniform-Format Residence Permit (ADET) data for September 2024 shows that Afghans, Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis and Somalis constitute the main nationality holders, in line with overall positive protection figures.

The centre-right New Democracy government is committed to two major legal reforms. The first, entitled Professional Insurance Reform, applies to around 30,000 undocumented migrants from non-EU countries who crossed into Greece irregularly and have been employed¹⁹, albeit irregularly, for a minimum of three years²⁰ and reduces the wait from six to two months for asylum seekers who want to enter the Greek labour market. A second reform is pending, which will upgrade the administrative process for visa issuance and renewing residence and work permits while in Greece, making it

¹⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/greece-worried-about-consequences-of-german-border-checks/a-70320699>; <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/53253/germany-and-greece-set-on-slowng-migration-numbers>

¹⁶ <https://migration.gov.gr/afixi-119-afganon-metanaston-sti-thessaloniki/>

¹⁷ Hellenic Ministry of Migration and Asylum, ‘Information Note’ (MoMA, 2022).

¹⁸ διαΝεοσις. (2024). Τι πιστεύουν οι Έλληνες- Μέρος Β’. https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/TPE2024_Part_B.pdf only available in Greek.

¹⁹ ANSA (2024). Greece: 2024 will be the year of ‘legal migration’, Infomigrants. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/55187/greece-2024-will-be-the-year-of-legal-migration>

²⁰ The deadline for migrants to submit applications for this permit is December 31, 2024.

quicker and more efficient. Both seek to facilitate the integration of populations that already exist in the country into the labour market.

An additional new 'source' of legal mobility is the Greek Golden Visa program, which has experienced something of a boom in the past few years, with 31,214 residence permits issued in 2023 alone. The Golden Visa program has attracted around 36,200 individual permanent investors from 2020 to 2023. The majority of the applicants are from China, Turkey, Russia, and Lebanon—the latter is important because it builds on the already positive relationship between Greece and Lebanon. Though changes will take effect from 2025 regarding the level of investment for Golden Visa, the program has allowed investment in Greece, but also mobility to take place

3

POLICIES

Greece's migration policy has been consistently focused on managing its sea and land borders, and on improving the national asylum system. Thus, it has primarily looked inwards, and also been heavily influenced by the EU legislative and policy framework (see the section on EU policies). Since 2019, there has been growing recognition that the external dimension of migration is just as—if not more—important, and this is where Greece has sought to take a more active role. Continuous demographic decline coupled with post-pandemic labour shortages have also accelerated both attempts to establish a more outward-looking perspective and to usher in a period in which legal labour migration pathways are essayed. The following section reflects on three broad priority areas for Greece: deterrence and border management, deals with third countries in the immediate neighbourhood, and bilateral labour agreements (BLA) with third countries.

Deterrence and border management

Since 2019, the discourse on migration has become highly securitized once again. A “strict but fair” migration and asylum policy has become Greece's official motto, and this has also been reflected in domestic policies.

Deterrence comes in many shapes and forms. Greece has been using legislation for years as a way of reducing its ‘attractiveness’ by making access complex, bureaucratic, and difficult²¹.

Greek migration policy overall has been restrictive since the early 1990s, especially with regard to asylum. Since 2015, several legislative changes have sought to grapple with the asylum-seeking population in the country by placing a strong focus on deterrence—most notably the International Protection Act (IPA) (Law 4636/2019), which was amended shortly after its adoption on 1 November 2019 (by Law 4686/2020). These two reforms restricted access to the asylum procedure further, while regularizing the practice of detaining asylum seekers for up to 18 months while massively reducing access to material care. Priority was placed on border security, with the reinforcement of the border fence along the land border

with Turkey in the Evros region and the strengthening of border patrols after the February 2020 Evros incident.

Some issues have persisted since 2020, including the alleged pushbacks at the Greek-Turkish maritime and land borders²², loss of life at sea (including the Pylos shipwreck in 2023)²³, poor reception conditions (especially on the Greek islands in the Aegean), and an anti-Turkish discourse²⁴ that was partly boosted by the ‘border crisis’ of February-March 2020. The latter proved to be a gamechanger for Greece. In February 2020, thousands of migrants moved towards the Greek-Turkish land border in Evros. In response, Greece closed its border and suspended access to asylum in its territory. Greece announced that it was invoking Article 78 (3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) to justify the suspension of asylum, even though this would have required a request to be submitted by the EU Commission and agreed on by the EU Council. The Greek approach would eventually find its way into the Pact on Migration and Asylum (the provisions on Crisis and Force Majeure) allowing member states to derogate from the rules in certain circumstances.

Deterrence, however, goes beyond legislation. Greece has expanded and will continue to expand the fence along the Evros land border.²⁵ It has also pushed for the reinvigorating (EU-Turkey Statement) and/or establishing of deals with third countries.

²¹ Triandafyllidou, A., & Dimitriadi, A. (2013). Migration Management at the Outposts of the European Union: The Case of Italy's and Greece's Borders. *Griffith Law Review*, 22(3), 598–618. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10383441.2013.10877014>

²² European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) (2024). Report on the visit to Greece. 21, <https://rm.coe.int/1680b0e4e1> ; ECRE (January 2024). Greece: Ongoing Pushbacks and Tragedies—More Reports Highlight the Country's Inhumane and ‘Failing’ Asylum System. <https://ecre.org/greece-ongoing-pushbacks-and-tragedies-more-reports-highlight-the-countrys-inhumane-and-failing-asylum-system-ecthr-rules-against-the-authorities/>

²³ UNHCR and IOM. (2024, June). One year on from the tragic shipwreck off Pylos, Greece Joint statement by UNHCR and IOM. <https://www.unhcr.org/europe/news/news/one-year-tragic-shipwreck-pylos-greece>

²⁴ Bailey-Morley, A. and Lowe, C. (2023). Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Greece country profile. London: ODI. <https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-greece-country-profile>

²⁵ Dimitriadi, A. (2023). A Steel Fence for Europe's External Borders. *Border Criminologies*. <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2023/05/steel-fence-europes-external-borders>

EU partnerships supported by Greece

Despite the multiple problems that have arisen from the attempted implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement²⁶ and the complete breakdown of a key component of the deal, namely returns to Turkey, Greece was and remains a staunch supporter of the deal, and of the returns component in particular.

Turkey unilaterally suspended returns in 2020, but Greece proceeded nevertheless to list Turkey as a ‘safe third country’ in 2021 for asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Somalia. In the same year, the former Migration Minister, Notis Mitarachi, called on Turkey to take back 1,450 migrants to demonstrate a “willingness to cooperate” with the EU on a 2016 deal in stemming irregular arrivals²⁷. Many had seen their asylum application rejected on the basis of inadmissibility, yet no returns were feasible. Over 10,000 inadmissibility decisions have been issued with few returns made. Following a legal challenge before the Greek Council of State²⁸, an opinion was requested from the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU), which ruled that if it is ‘established’ that the ‘safe’ third country ‘does not in fact’ readmit the asylum seekers concerned, a Member State ‘cannot’ find their applications admissible and must consider those applications on their merits. In other words, so long as Turkey refuses to accept returns, applicants’ cases must be examined on merit (rather than on admissibility grounds). As put simply by Steve Peers in his analysis of the ruling: “Greece can have a dog; but it will be wagged by its Turkish tail”.²⁹ Despite the recent decisions, it is expected that, at a political level, Greece will continue to reiterate its call for the implementation of key components of the Statement.

However, Greece has not looked solely at Turkey; it has also publicly called for more deals with and support from countries including Egypt and Lebanon. Both are in Greece’s immediate neighbourhood, and both are countries of origin as well as transit for mixed migratory movement.

In the case of Lebanon, Greece’s preferences relate more to the Syrian population and the displacement in the wider region, as well as to support for Cyprus, which constitutes one of the main recipients of boats departing Lebanon. In the

spring of 2024, Cyprus hosted an international meeting of interior ministers to discuss the migration issue, with a particular emphasis on Cyprus’ plan to declare parts of Syria safe for migrants to return to. The former Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum, Dimitris Kairidis, noted that “The increase in illegal flows from Lebanon to Cyprus underlines the importance of the external dimension of the fight against illegal migration, through the strengthening of European support to Lebanon and the cooperation of EU member states with each other and with FRONTEX so as to better protect the external borders of the EU”. According to reports, Greece is willing to explore declaring parts of Syria safe for returns, as do other EU member states³⁰. Similarly, it has supported the €1 billion package of EU funding for *inter alia* support for border and migration management.

Where Greece has been most active, however, is in relation to Egypt. This is partly due to the Egypt-Libya-Crete corridor that has emerged over the past two years, but also due to the broader strategic partnership between the two countries, coupled with increased concerns over Egypt’s collapsing economy and its potential to trigger migratory movement³¹. However, beyond bolstering their broader partnership, Greece has also supported a broader EU-Egypt partnership, in the light of the new migratory corridor. The former Greek Minister for Migration noted in March 2024 that the main concern were the arrivals in Crete and their profile: mainly Egyptians, not Syrian or Afghan refugees, which is to say economic immigrants from Egypt. The EU-Egypt deal is not grounded solely in migration. However, the latter is a critical component, in particular the commitment on the Egyptian side to curb irregular departures. While large-scale onward movement is not a likely scenario, movements out of Egypt could increase if the economic and/or political situation for migrants in Egypt deteriorates, with Greece and Italy functioning as the main countries of arrival in the EU. The country therefore remains a priority for the Eastern Mediterranean corridor.

Bilateral labour agreements

Greece signed bilateral labour agreements in the 1990s with Albania (1997, still in force), Egypt and Bulgaria. In the case of Albania and Bulgaria, the focus was on seasonal agricultural workers being granted residence and work permits to meet the demand from Greek employers (*metaklisi*). In the case of Egypt, the initial agreement covered the fisheries sector, with an additional agreement allowing for the mutual transfer of social security rights. Greece also pursued regularization programs during that period, in line with practices applied in Italy and Spain. In 2022, acknowledging the increased demand for and limited supply of labour, Greece expanded its partnership framework, inviting a quota of foreign workers from specific countries while also expanding the overall quota who could be recruited for seasonal and/or temporary work.

²⁶ Dimitriadi, A. (2023). No Turning Back: Greece and the EU–Turkey Statement Seven Years On. GPPi. https://gppi.net/media/ASILE_2023_Greece.pdf

²⁷ Al Arabiya (2021). Greece calls on EU to ensure Turkey takes back over 1,000 migrants. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/01/14/Greece-calls-on-EU-to-ensure-Turkey-takes-back-over-1-000-migrants>

²⁸ The Greek Council for Refugees and Refugee Support in the Aegean challenged the Greek government’s decision to list Turkey as a safe third country. In February 2023, the Council of State decided (by an 18-4 vote) that the listing of Turkey was invalid on the grounds that EU law precluded designating a country which refused to readmit asylum-seekers as a ‘safe third country’. The CJEU was asked about the interpretation of EU law on the readmission point before giving its final ruling.

²⁹ Peers, S. (2024). Pyrrhic victory for the Greek government: the CJEU rules on Turkey as a “safe third country”. *EU Law Analysis*, <https://eulawanalysis.blogspot.com/2024/10/pyrrhic-victory-for-greek-government.html>

³⁰ Cleaver, T. (2024). Cyprus hosting summit on Syrian migration. Cyprus Mail, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/05/17/cyprus-hosting-summit-on-syrian-migration/>

³¹ Fahmy, A. (2024, December). Country report: Egypt. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

In February 2022, the governments of Greece and the People’s Republic of Bangladesh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on migration and mobility. The MoU was ratified in Greece by Law 4959/2022 in July 2022. The bilateral agreement sets out the conditions of entry and temporary residence for Bangladeshi nationals for the purpose of temporary employment, in line also with the 2017 EU-Bangladesh Agreement. The memorandum covers seasonal labour needs exclusively. In exchange, Bangladesh committed to facilitate the return of its citizens. Secondly, the invitation process allocates 4,000 temporary five-year residence permits of five-year duration, to be granted annually. Upon conclusion of the five-year period, the holders will need to return to Bangladesh. Thirdly, and to address existing labour shortages, the memorandum allows for up to 15,000 Bangladeshis already residing undocumented in Greece to be granted a temporary long-term seasonal visa (five-year residence permit) to access seasonal work (9 months per year); they, too, will need to return home when the five years have elapsed. The visa is only valid for Greece and does not allow the holder to work in other EU member states. This is the first time Greece offered legalization to a specific nationality, linking legalization to labour market needs as well as returns.

In contrast, the Greek Egyptian agreement is more limited in scope. The agreement between Greece and Egypt was signed in Cairo on 22 November 2022 and sets out the conditions whereby 5,000 Egyptian citizens will be permitted to enter into and reside in Greece for the purpose of their employment in the agricultural sector. The Egyptian side is responsible for the selection of applicants. However, the agreement was not implemented in 2023; this appears to be partly due to Greek bureaucracy, but also to difficulties with visa issuance³². No data has been made available for 2024, suggesting implementation continues to lag.

Finally, Greece had announced that six bilateral transnational labour mobility agreements—with Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova, as well as Vietnam, India, and the Philippines—are to be signed. These will follow the lines of previous deals, but with less emphasis on returns and more on seasonal and skilled labour.

³² Dimitriadi, A. (2024, July). Looking for seasonal workers: Greece’s search for migrant labour. ELIAMEP Policy Paper. <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/looking-for-seasonal-workers-greeces-search-for-migrant-labor/>

4

SOCIETIES

Traditionally, integration is the biggest challenge for Greece; it affects refugees as well as migrants. Over 50,000 recipients of international protection and asylum seekers undertook secondary movement from Greece to Germany alone in the period 2019-2022, suggesting that integration is not only absent, but also a component critical for rendering protection effective. It is also the area in which civil society has been most active, despite multiple obstacles hindering its role.

Access to protection

Greece has undertaken several reforms in its asylum system starting from 2016, driven by the adoption of the EU-Türkiye statement of 18 March 2016. Following the July 2019 elections, the new government announced a more restrictive policy on migration and asylum, amending once more the asylum procedure. L. 4636/2019 (hereinafter International Protection Act/IPA), which entered into force on 1 January 2020. The new Law has been criticised of reducing safeguards for people seeking international protection and creates additional pressure on the overstretched capacity of administrative and judicial authorities. Since then, several reforms have been implemented speeding up the asylum procedure, weakening further basic guarantees for persons in need of protection.³³ Throughout the years, various deficiencies have plagued the asylum system, from limited staff to delays in issuing decisions and more recently, absence of interpretation which has resulted in postponing asylum registrations and interviews, directly impacting asylum applicants who are often uninformed of the postponement of their case.³⁴

Integration

Like most EU member states, Greece has had various integration strategies, yet the common denominator throughout has been that implementation has fallen short of the design. The third national strategy for the social integration of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection³⁵ in

2022 focuses exclusively on asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection and is harmonized with the current legislative framework of Greece. It includes four main pillars: pre-integration of asylum seekers; social integration of beneficiaries of international protection; prevention of and effective protection from all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse; and monitoring of the integration process.

Overall, “the organized reception and integration of people entering Greece were not a priority for many years. Rather, the focus was placed on managing migration flows”.³⁶ Although the actions of the last five years have sought to take the place of the absent inclusive integration plan, more coherence and continuity is still required. The Migrant Integration Policy Index notes that migrants in Greece “enjoy basic rights but not equal opportunities. So, the country’s approach is thus classified as providing ‘equality on paper’”.³⁷

This has a direct impact on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who are seeking to settle in Greek society, as they encounter administrative barriers and obstacles in almost every area of their everyday lives, from employment to education. A study commissioned by ETH, supported by UNHCR,³⁸ found that refugees and asylum seekers scored highest in economic integration. Labour market access is vital for autonomy and becoming an integral part of the host country. However, challenges remain, with over a quarter of the refugees in the study reporting exploitation, such as being made to sign documents they did not understand or working without formal contracts.

According to the European Website for Integration: “Greece’s 2019 integration strategy was more comprehensive than the current one, since it covered all TCNs and set out, among others, measures for the promotion of integration in the education system and the labour market, as well as access for

³³ Greek Council for Refugees. (2024, November 10). Short overview of the asylum procedure. AIDA Report. <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/asylum-procedure/general/short-overview-asylum-procedure/>

³⁴ Refugee Support Aegean (2024, November). Major deficiencies in the provision of interpretation services in Greece. <https://rsaegean.org/en/major-deficiencies-in-the-provision-of-interpretation-services-in-greece/>

³⁵ Ministry of Migration & Asylum. (2022). National Integration Strat-

egy. <https://migration.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NATIONAL-STRATEGY-FINAL.pdf>

³⁶ National Centre for Social Research (n 36) 17.

³⁷ Migrant Integration Policy Index. (2019). Greece-2019. <https://www.mipex.eu/greece>

³⁸ Casalis, M., Hangartner, D., Hartman, A. and Sanchez, R. (2023). Home for good? Obstacles and Opportunities for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Greece. ETH. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106568>.

access to public services”. These were important integration components for all migrants who are currently being either left out or whose needs have been addressed only vaguely by the new strategy.

In terms of service provision, civil society and international organizations have played a crucial role here, attempting to fill the gap left by the absence of a structured state-sponsored integration mechanism.

Health care

Healthcare in Greece is different on paper and in reality. Free access to health care for beneficiaries of international protection is provided under the same conditions as it is provided to nationals. However, despite the favourable legal framework, actual access to health care services is hindered in practice by significant shortages of resources and capacity—this is a problem for both natives and foreigners³⁹. To access health care, a Social Security Number (AMKA) is needed, the issuing of which has been conditional since December 2023 on having a “valid residence title in the country with labour market access”. According to a survey conducted by UNHCR⁴⁰ between July 2022 and June 2023 with 424 beneficiaries of international protection: “Twenty-nine per cent of respondents had difficulty accessing healthcare because of language barriers, challenges to securing appointments and lack of information on the national health care system”, while the number of households that have at least one member with specific needs stood at 36%. Chronic illnesses, mental health issues and physical disabilities are the top three reported vulnerabilities.

Employment

An important legislative development was L. 5078/2023 and particularly Article 192 which amended Article 57 of the Asylum Code, providing that applicants have a right to access the labour market within sixty days of the lodging of their application and the receipt of the relevant legal documents.

NGOs have set up Job Fairs to facilitate connections between employers from various sectors and refugees or migrants seeking employment. For instance, in July 2024, a Job Fair held on the island of Lesbos was attended by 452 individuals and resulted in 219 job offers. Additionally, UNHCR has launched the ADAMA online platform, which plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between refugees looking for jobs in Greece and prospective employers across the country. This initiative not only provides refugees with essential information about the labour market and connects them with employers, it also encourages businesses and agencies in the private sector to actively include refugees in their workforce, thereby fostering greater inclusion and diversity in the Greek labour market⁴¹.

³⁹ Greek Council for Refugees. (2024, November 10). Report: health-care. AIDA. <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/content-international-protection/health-care/>

⁴⁰ UNHCR. (2022, August). Key Findings: July 2022—June 2023 Protection Monitoring of Refugees in Greece. <https://bit.ly/4dgyE2l>

⁴¹ UNHCR. (2024). Fostering integration early on: Successful conclusion

The Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection (HELIOS) programme has been supporting beneficiaries of international protection since July 2019 on the basis of a specific set of criteria. HELIOS was funded by the European Commission (AMIF) between June 2019 and December 2021; it is currently funded from the national budget and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Greece⁴². By November 2023, the project had supported a total of 45,221 beneficiaries; however, being the only programme of its kind currently in operation, it is unable to cater to the growing needs.

Food insecurity

Greece has gradually been reducing the quantity of its material reception conditions for years. A 2023 report released by INTERSOS HELLAS in cooperation with HIAS Greece and the Greek Council for Refugees entitled: “Being hungry in Europe: an analysis of the food insecurity experienced by refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and undocumented people in Greece” presented evidence collected since 2021 of massive food insecurity affecting migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented people in Athens⁴³. The Greek government announced on 17 May 2023 that food in the Mavrovouni Closed Controlled Access Centre on the island of Lesbos would only be provided to residents seeking asylum, with no exceptions for particularly vulnerable people, including recognized refugees and those who have been denied refugee status.⁴⁴ This is not the first time that food insecurity has been utilized as a deterrence measure.

Systemic lack of support

In Greece, “recognized refugees—who should be the most safeguarded of all, given their precarious status—are already cut off from financial assistance within a month of being granted protection”⁴⁵ and booted out of reception centres within 30 days. Refugees should receive support to find a job, study, or access certain social benefits, but various bureaucratic obstacles make such support extremely difficult to access; these include a general lack of access to residence permits, travel documents, and temporary social security numbers.

The situation is even worst for migrants whose asylum applications have been denied, including those rejected solely on

of largest job fair for refugees and asylum-seekers on Lesbos. <https://www.unhcr.org/gr/en/57787-fostering-integration-early-on-successful-conclusion-of-largest-job-fair-for-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-on-lesvos.html>2024

⁴² Ministry of Migration and Asylum. (2024). HELIOS project. <https://migration.gov.gr/en/migration-policy/integration/drasis-koinonikis-entaxis-se-ethniko-epipedo/programma-helios/>

⁴³ INTERSOS HELLAS, HIAS Greece and the Greek Council for Refugees. (2023). Being Hungry in Europe: An Analysis of the Food Insecurity Experienced by Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Migrants, and Undocumented People in Greece. <https://www.intersos.org/en/greece-intersos-presents-the-report-being-hungry-in-europe/>

⁴⁴ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor. (2023, July). Greece’s starving of refugees and asylum seekers is causing a dangerous crisis. <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/greeces-starving-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-causing-dangerous-crisis>

⁴⁵ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor. (2023, July).

inadmissibility grounds due to Greece considering Turkey to be a “safe third country” for nationals from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia, and Syria. Left in legal limbo and lacking access to legal status, rights, and basic services in Greece while unable to proceed to Turkey, they often remain in the country without any basic assistance, including food provisions.

The role of the EU in developing Resilience

The EU has been the main funder of Greek reforms since 2015 as regards migration and asylum. The support the Union provides to help Greece better manage migration and borders comes from three EU funds and includes €2.27 billion from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, €450 million from the Internal Security Fund, and €668.9 million from the Emergency Support Instrument⁴⁶. This financial assistance has indeed been the biggest factor in boosting Greece’s resilience as a front-line state, followed by the deployment of EU Agencies as well as national experts from different member states.

Greece was the largest beneficiary of the European Commission’s emergency funding for immigration in 2023, securing €42.4 million from the AMIF budget for two main actions: 1) developing fibre optic lines and software to improve data exchange between border stations; and 2) providing foster care/family and community care and semi-independent living arrangements for unaccompanied minors in their teenage years⁴⁷. This is also indicative of the broader priorities of the country to boost border controls and assist vulnerable groups, with a particular emphasis on minors.

⁴⁶ European Commission. (2022, January). Managing Migration: EU support to Greece. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/202202_Eu%20Budget-financial%20support%20to%20greece.pdf

⁴⁷ InfoMigrants. (2023, November). Greece tops EU’s migration funding league. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/53269/greece-tops-eus-migration-funding-league>



5

CONCLUSION

Due to its geographical position, Greece is called upon to function as a front-line state that receives, screens and determines protection, but also ‘guards’ the external borders of the EU. These multiple roles require Greece to develop resilience with regard both to fluctuations in arrivals in the years ahead, and—more importantly—to the integration of those who succeed in regularizing their stay or receiving international protection. Legal migration, which is increasingly dominant in the public and policy discourse, also needs to become a reality as part of the broader resilience script; establishing legal pathways would allow Greece to reduce the pressure at its external borders and allow for safe and orderly migration along the Eastern Mediterranean route.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angeliki Dimitriadi is a political scientist with an interest in irregular migration and asylum, as well as the interplay between migratory movement and policies of deterrence and protection. Her research focuses on migration management policies at external borders, migration governance in the EU and European foreign policy on migration. She is a non-resident fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute and was a Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Migration Program at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy until December 2024. She holds a PhD from Democritus University of Thrace on transit migration from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. She has an MA in War studies from King's College London and a BSc in International Relations & History from the London School of Economics.

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COUNTRY REPORT: GREECE

Greece remains a key entry point for mixed migration, reflecting not only the continuation of displacement across certain parts of the world, but also the lack of legal pathways that would allow for more direct access to the EU. The report offers a snapshot of developments for the past five years, focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean route. It takes note of the shifts in certain natio-

nalities and dynamics of mobility, zooms in on policies and specifically the recent attempt to develop a foreign policy geared towards legal migration in parallel with deterrence for irregular entry, as well as current challenges and successes regarding the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Greece.