

SNAPSHOT OF MIGRATION TO GREECE IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS¹

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December 2024



BACKGROUND

Greece, historically an emigrant-sending country, transitioned between 1990 and 2009 into a destination for economic migrants and a transit hub for asylum seekers. Since the early 2000s, irregular arrivals have increasingly included individuals from regions beyond Greece's immediate neighbors, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Maghreb. Mixed migration, encompassing both economic migrants and asylum seekers, remains a defining feature of Greece's maritime and land borders.

Over the past five years, Greece has continued to experience diverse and complex migratory flows. These patterns reflect ongoing global displacement as well as a lack of legal pathways for direct access to the European Union (EU).

MIGRATION TO GREECE

Greece remains a primary entry point for irregular arrivals to the EU. In 2019, irregular arrivals increased significantly compared to previous years, with 59,726 individuals arriving via maritime routes and 14,887 via the Evros land border, according to data from UNHCR. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp decline in numbers due to global border closures. However, an upward trend has been observed since 2022, with arrivals in 2023 reaching 48,721 and 52,052 recorded as of October 2024, signalling a return to pre-pandemic levels².

Asylum applications have also risen, according to data from the Ministry for Migration and Asylum. Between 2019 and

2023, Greece registered 247,523 asylum applications. By September 30, 2024, an additional 50,039 applications had been filed, consistent with the annual average. Notably, the majority of applicants are from countries with recognized protection profiles, including Afghanistan, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and Eritrea. Egyptians, a relatively new group, have appeared in the data since 2022.

As of September 2024, Greece reported 482,982 third-country nationals with residence permits, including 77,750 individuals who had previously received international protection. Albanians remain the largest group of permit holders, followed by Chinese, Pakistanis (4.6%), and Georgians (4.1%).

POLICIES

Greek migration policy is heavily focused on deterrence, employing complex, bureaucratic processes to reduce the country's attractiveness to migrants. Greece has long supported external migration controls, including the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016. Recent Greek-Turkish rapprochement has included migration as a key agenda item, aiming to strengthen border cooperation and facilitate returns to Turkey. Greece has also endorsed EU agreements with Egypt and, more recently, Lebanon.

Since 2019, Greece has explored legal labour migration pathways to address domestic labour shortages and enhance migration diplomacy with third countries, such as Bangladesh and Egypt. However, structural challenges have hindered the effective implementation of these agreements.

At the EU level, the Pact on Migration and Asylum is entering its implementation phase. Many member states have expressed dissatisfaction with certain aspects, calling for a new returns framework, harsher policies, more flexibility in how they react to migratory arrivals and exceptions to the rules in the face of 'instrumentalisation'. These shifts are likely to impact frontline states like Greece, which may adopt more "exceptional" measures to manage migration pressures.

¹ The policy brief is based on the information and sources provided in the Country Report of Greece. See Dimitriadi, A. (2024, December). Country report: Greece. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, PRIO Cyprus, ELIAMEP, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. <https://mena.fes.de/topics/regional-peace-and-security-project.html> (FriSi)

² All data on arrivals are from UNHCR Mediterranean Portal, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24489>

SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

Despite being the largest recipient of EU emergency funding for migration, Greece has invested significantly more in border management than in migrant integration. Although integration is part of the official policy narrative, practical support for both migrants and recognized refugees remains minimal. Recognized refugees, for instance, lose access to benefits and assistance upon receiving international protection, with bureaucratic obstacles further hindering access to essential services like residence permits and social security numbers.

The situation is even worst for migrants whose asylum applications have been rejected and particularly for those who have been rejected solely on inadmissibility grounds often due to Greece's consideration of Türkiye as a "safe third country". This is applicable for nationals of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia, and Syria. These individuals face legal limbo, with no status, rights, or access to basic services in Greece, but at the same time unreturnable to Türkiye that has unilaterally suspended returns since 2020. Homelessness has become prevalent due to policies that evict recognized refugees from camps and cut financial assistance 30 days after a positive asylum decision.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Boost Migration Diplomacy:** Enhance efforts to establish efficient and sustainable legal pathways for both labor migration and international protection, prioritizing cooperation with neighbouring countries.
- **Promote Humane Border Policies:** While emphasizing border management in line with the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, ensure compliance with international standards to provide access to protection for those in need and minimize reliance on "exceptional" measures.
- **Prioritize Integration:** Develop comprehensive integration strategies for both economic migrants and recipients of international protection. Address labor market needs while supporting the social and economic inclusion of migrant populations.

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ISBN: 978-9925-8195-3-9