



Overview of the Current Situation for Recognized Refugees in Greece Following Asylum Decisions: Insights from Our Helpdesk Data

The journey of asylum seekers in Greece does not end with the issuance of a decision on their applications, whether positive or negative. Instead, many individuals find that these decisions often mark the beginning of new struggles rather than a pathway to stability. Upon receiving a decision, all applicants are required to vacate their designated facilities, yet the support needed to help them transition into the community is almost nonexistent. This lack of assistance leaves them vulnerable to a host of challenges, including homelessness, exploitation, unemployment, and social exclusion, as they navigate an uncertain future without adequate resources or guidance.

For those granted asylum and a residence permit, numerous barriers prevent their successful integration, despite their formal entitlements to healthcare, social services, and employment rights. These rights often remain out of reach due to administrative delays, insufficient support systems, and pervasive language barriers. Without structured integration programs or support mechanisms, newly recognized refugees are left to navigate complex systems on their own. Limited access to Greek language courses makes communication challenging, while the absence of vocational training opportunities and job support services limits their chances of securing stable employment.

Greece's high unemployment rate, which currently stands at around 11% and is even higher for marginalized groups, further complicates the situation. Even those with recognized status struggle to find meaningful work, as employers often favor Greek-speaking candidates with established social networks. This economic reality, combined with limited access to job support, results in many newly recognized refugees becoming trapped in a cycle of unemployment, vulnerability, and exploitation. Forced into informal, often exploitative labor arrangements, they face unsafe working conditions, inadequate wages, and significant risks of abuse. With minimal job security and little chance of economic advancement, they are effectively excluded from meaningful integration into Greek society, left to struggle on the margins with minimal support.

The situation is particularly concerning for vulnerable individuals, especially lone women and single mothers, who face heightened risks of exploitation, including sexual exploitation and trafficking. The lack of adequate support and protective services leaves these individuals vulnerable to predatory situations, where survival may come at the cost of personal safety and dignity. Without stable employment or social assistance, they are often targeted by traffickers and exploitative individuals seeking to capitalize on their precarious position. This vicious cycle of exploitation not only denies them the chance to achieve independence and security but also deepens their marginalization, making it nearly impossible to escape the cycle of abuse and vulnerability.

The inadequacies of Greece's official integration initiatives compound these issues. The "Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection" (HELIOS) programme—the only official integration programme—is funded by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and has been implemented by the IOM in partnership with NGOs since July 2019. While HELIOS offers housing subsidies, Greek language and integration courses, and employment assistance for up to twelve months, many recognized refugees and asylum seekers are ineligible. Furthermore, persistent funding interruptions and

implementation delays have hindered the program's continuity and effectiveness. According to media reports, recent funding interruptions have left approximately 4,000 beneficiaries at risk of homelessness and placed 500 program staff at risk of unemployment.¹

For those whose asylum applications are rejected by the Greek Authorities the situation is even dire. These individuals are issued a removal order effectively placing them in a state of legal and social limbo. Without a legal status, they lose access to all rights and services, including housing, healthcare, and social support. Stripped of these essential rights, they are left without any means to legally sustain themselves, unable to work or access even basic resources.² This forced exclusion pushes rejected applicants to society's margins, where they are highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, as they have no choice but to survive in precarious, often dangerous conditions. Many of these individuals are left to exist in the shadows, completely excluded from support networks, with no legal or social pathway to improve their circumstances.

Refugees returned to Greece from other EU countries also face significant challenges. They find themselves in legal limbo, as they do not qualify for shelters typically reserved for new asylum seekers. This precarious situation makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and trafficking, as individuals seeking to take advantage of their desperation target those without support networks. Employment opportunities are scarce for them and bureaucracy prevents access to any welfare benefits.³

An indicative example is the case of Maryam, who expressed her fear upon entering our office a few months ago, saying, "I feel lost. Please help me not go back to this man." Maryam, a young Afghan woman, was deported back to Greece from another European country and left alone at the airport past midnight. Through connections her family made, she found temporary shelter for the night, but in that room was also an unknown man who promised to help her. When Maryam arrived at our office, she was visibly distressed—shaking and crying—and conveyed her fear of returning to her previous location. Our team conducted a comprehensive risk assessment to evaluate potential threats, including gender-based violence and human trafficking. We learned that she had been granted asylum in Greece but had fled to another European country seeking safety and stability, as her safety was not secured here. Unfortunately, the authorities in that country rejected her application, confiscated her documents, and deported her back to Greece. Upon her return, Maryam found herself without accommodation options; as a recognized refugee in Greece, she was ineligible for a spot in the refugee camps or shelters that typically assist new arrivals. This left her vulnerable and without safe housing, highlighting the gaps in support for returnees who have been granted asylum yet struggle to find stability upon their return.

Maryam's story illustrates the perilous circumstances that individuals face upon being deported back to Greece, where they often encounter the same vulnerabilities and risks that initially drove them to seek safety elsewhere.

** The name is fictionalised to protect privacy and security*

Reception Conditions for Asylum Seekers in Greece: Severe Deficiencies and Humanitarian Challenges

¹ Refugee Support Aegean, <https://rsaegean.org/en/helios-new-interruption/>; Accessed on 31-10-2024.

² Asylum Information Database, 2023 Update Greece, https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/AIDA-GR_2023-Update.pdf; Accessed on 31-10-2024.

³ Refugee Support Aegean, <https://rsaegean.org/en/recognised-refugees-in-greece-2024/>; Accessed on 31 October 2024.

In Greece, reception conditions for asylum seekers remain critically inadequate across both island and mainland facilities. While the specific challenges vary, facilities throughout Greece consistently fail to meet basic standards of care, with glaring gaps in food provision, healthcare, and essential services. According to recent data, around 18% of camp residents nationwide lack access to fundamental reception requirements, including food and financial support. On Lesbos and in Schisto (near Athens), these figures are alarmingly higher, reaching 36% and 32% respectively, pointing to a systemic failure in meeting basic humanitarian standards (near Athens).⁴

On the islands, severe overcrowding strains resources and compromises the safety of camp residents. Asylum facilities routinely operate at five times their intended capacity, creating extreme pressure on sanitation infrastructure and water supply. Overcrowded, poorly monitored conditions heighten security risks, particularly for women and children, who remain vulnerable to violence and exploitation within the camps. The lack of vulnerability assessments further complicates the situation, as individuals with urgent needs—including unaccompanied minors, survivors of violence, and individuals with health conditions—do not receive timely or adequate support. This oversight jeopardizes their safety and well-being, making it difficult for them to navigate the complex asylum process.⁵

The strain on facilities has been compounded by a sharp increase in new arrivals; for instance, February 2024 saw arrival numbers spike to eight times those of the previous year. Systemic administrative delays further aggravate the situation, with significant interruptions in asylum card issuance and organized transfers. In April, these processes were entirely halted, leaving thousands effectively stranded on the island and unable to sustain themselves. Individuals have reported that asylum interviews are often scheduled within days of arrival, leaving insufficient time to seek legal counsel or understand the complex asylum requirements. Environmental factors compound these issues; the extreme summer heat, with temperatures reaching over 40°C this July—the hottest month ever recorded in Greece—has worsened conditions in already under-resourced camps. Without adequate ventilation, air conditioning, or respite from the heat, residents suffer physical distress, sleep deprivation, and deteriorated mental health.⁶

On the mainland, while conditions are somewhat better, they are still far from sufficient to meet basic needs. Residents of mainland camps face ongoing shortages of food and heating, as well as restricted access to healthcare services. Essential medical care is frequently delayed, disproportionately affecting vulnerable individuals who are in urgent need of treatment.⁷

Poorly maintained camp infrastructure often resembles prison-like environments, lacking natural light, functional bathrooms, and kitchen facilities, creating a harsh and dehumanizing atmosphere. A Greek law limiting food provision based on asylum status has left approximately 35% of residents without access to food, a humanitarian gap exacerbated by bureaucratic delays in financial allowances, which currently leave an estimated 15,000 individuals without vital assistance.^{8,9} Healthcare services are severely under-

⁴ Refugee Support Aegean, <https://rsaegean.org/en/stats-reception-of-asylum-seekers-jun-24/>; Accessed on 30-10-2024.

⁵ Asylum Information Database <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/reception-conditions/housing/conditions-reception-facilities/>; Accessed on 31 October 2024.

⁶ DCI Greece Periodical Report, reporting period June - September 2024, p. 6.

⁷ Asylum Information Database <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/reception-conditions/housing/conditions-reception-facilities/>. Accessed on 31 October 2024.

⁸ Refugee Support Aegean, Refugee camps in mainland Greece, Report June 2024, p. 7-8; https://rsaegean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RSA_RefugeeCampsMainland.pdf.

⁹ Refugee Support Aegean, Refugee camps in mainland Greece, Report June 2024, p. 8-10; https://rsaegean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RSA_RefugeeCampsMainland.pdf.

resourced, with some camps employing only one healthcare worker for every 700 residents, a situation that greatly restricts access to essential medical support. Vulnerability assessments, critical for ensuring that at-risk individuals receive adequate care, are inconsistently administered, leaving many asylum seekers—especially those with pre-existing conditions, trauma, or specific protection needs—without appropriate medical and psychological support.

Finally, immigration detention has increased substantially in early 2024, with over 12,000 detention orders issued, often upon arrival. This shift contradicts the EU's policy of using detention as a last resort and disproportionately impacts individuals from high-risk countries like Syria and Afghanistan, despite limited return options. Conditions in detention centers frequently fall short of EU standards, lacking adequate healthcare, legal aid, and humane living conditions, thus underscoring ongoing non-compliance with fundamental EU policies on immigration and asylum.¹⁰

¹⁰ Refugee Support Aegean, <https://rsaegean.org/en/immigration-detention-greece-first-half-2024/>; Accessed on 31-10-2024.