

COUNTRY OF HOST INFORMATION TRIMESTRAL REPORT

DECEMBER 2021

INTRODUCTION

The name of this report alludes to the “Country of Origin Information (COI)”, referring to the information on countries from which asylum seekers originate. The availability of and the expertise on COI is one of the cornerstones of decision-making in the asylum process and as such can enhance harmonisation. Through this our “Country of Host Information Report”, DCI Greece wishes to shift the narrative to focus on the host country, gathering targeted, relevant, reliable, accurate and up-to-date information on Greece in a transparent and impartial manner. With this report, we want to expertly inform the reader on the current situation and the latest developments from the ground affecting asylum-seekers and refugees in Greece, with a focus on children.

Overview

As of the 30th of June 2021, Greece is hosting approximately 40,061 asylum seekers according to the official data provided by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. According to UHCR’s data, the asylum-seeking population amounts to 60,873 people – and as of October 2021, the total land and sea arrivals since the beginning of 2021 amount to 6,587 people. Additionally, there are around 103,136 recognized refugees in Greece, according to the UNHCR.

The Asylum Procedure

On the 7th of June 2021, a Ministerial Decision entered into force, which declared Turkey to be a “safe third country” for people coming from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Since the passing of this decision, admissibility has become the most pivotal point in asylum interviews— admissibility refers to an applicant’s right to be admitted to the EU to apply for asylum, rather than being sent back to apply in Turkey. To pass this hurdle, interviewees from the five aforementioned countries have to explain why Turkey is an unsafe country for them. Personal interviews examine the “safe third country” concept with a focus on the circumstances that the applicant faced in Turkey. The Asylum Service decides on the admissibility of an application within 30 days, and if the asylum claim is considered inadmissible, asylum-seekers have 5 days to appeal this decision. Asylum-seekers are only referred to the regular procedure in case the asylum claim is found admissible. This procedure also concerns children in families and unaccompanied minors above 15 years old and is followed both in the islands and the mainland. Concerningly, DCI-G has noted a severe lack of legal support and representation for children, especially in the islands. We observed that, upon arrival, third country nationals are kept in quarantine facilities for 15 days, under the guise of COVID-19 prevention measures. But in many cases, the authorities initiate the asylum procedures while these people are kept in isolation and can thus not access legal aid. We have witnessed this having a negative impact on the subsequent asylum procedures, especially the admissibility procedure which has very strict deadline. Asylum was conceived in the 1951 Geneva Convention as a primarily humanitarian process, designed for supplicants who had lost their freedom, security and livelihood, and who could not necessarily always produce incontrovertible proof of their claims. We fear that, as the European and Greek policy continues to harden, the more the asylum process will move towards a traditional legal or judicial process in which asylum-seekers face a heavier burden of proof, and the more it will disadvantage those it was designed to protect.

A recent amendment of asylum legislation imposed a fee of 100 euro for each subsequent application after the first submitted by any applicant. ‘Subsequent application’ is a further application for international protection submitted after a final negative decision has been taken on a previous application; new substantial elements need to have arisen or been submitted by the applicant for the application to be found admissible, and thus be examined on the merits. This amendment violates EU law as the submission of a subsequent application forms part of the fundamental right to asylum enshrined in Article 18 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. In practice, this new obstacle has resulted in the impossibility of any second subsequent application since the implementation of the new legislation, as the Greek authorities failed to define the way in which the fee could be paid. This has resulted in hundreds of asylum seekers in the Greek islands being prevented from submitting a subsequent application.

Reception Conditions



On the Aegean Islands

As of mid-October 2021, the [official statistics](#) regarding the refugee and migrant population residing in the Eastern Aegean islands showed that there are 3060 asylum-seekers in the RIC on Lesbos, 218 on Chios, 276 on Samos, 122 on Leros, and 127 on Kos.

DCI-G believes that the Reception and Identification Centres on the Greek islands (Chios, Kos, and Lesbos) constitute indicative examples of inadequate reception settings for children on the move, since they violate numerous minimum standards regarding the rights of children to an adequate standard of living and a dignified life. The RICs in which unaccompanied minors are hosted are overcrowded, with insufficient personnel, especially with regards to doctors, psychologists, and social workers. Children on the islands live in small tents or makeshift shelters for prolonged periods of time and although the transfers of minors to the mainland have increased in the past two years, there are still many children stuck in the islands, deprived of basic rights. The reason of these slow transfers is mainly attributable to the very limited capacity and small number of shelters (for unaccompanied children) on the mainland.

“When Moria burned down, I started to have some hope that things will change. That we would go to a better place. I guess I was very young and naïve,” 16-year-old Jalal, from Afghanistan, has been living with his family in Lesbos for the past 4 years. After the fire in Moria, the family was transferred to the new camp. They have been sleeping in a tent, exposed to harsh weather conditions. Jalal has 5 other siblings, the youngest of them is 3 years old. They have no access to school, medical care and other basic rights. One day, one of his brothers, aged 6 years old, followed a man that promised to give him some toys. He was sexually abused but no support has been offered to boy and his family. They are now trying to recover and heal in an environment that keeps dehumanizing them.

When the DCI-G team visited the camp that was built after the Moria fire on Lesbos, it became evident that this new camp is still extremely unsuitable. The camp is largely exposed to dire weather conditions, as it is situated by the sea. People who live there are sheltered in unstable tents that do not protect them from the rain and the snow and at times, they are forced to sleep on the mud that takes over their tents - NGOs report that Kara Tepe RIC was left for more than 10 days without petrol for the generators and, consequently, electricity, while ex-Moria residents are expected to spend a second winter in tents amidst the pandemic. This was due to the generator maintenance contract not being renewed by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. The food lines are endless, and there is not enough food available to cover the needs of all the camp population. There are also serious safety issues in the camp. There have been reports of rape cases against children as young as seven years old in the area of the toilets. According to [MSF](#), post-traumatic stress disorder and symptoms of depressive disorder are among the most commonly seen by its medical teams, with an incidence rate of close to or over 50% in both child and adult patients. Lastly, the Mavrovouni residents continue to be subject to disproportionate restrictions on their movement, under the pretext of Covid-19. The camp administration uses a weekly "exit list" of the camp, and refugees are allowed to leave the camp only for three hours per day, three days per week. On Sunday, no one is allowed to leave the camp.

The Fylakio RIC in Evros is even worse, as this is actually a closed camp that amounts to a detention center. The children living there are deprived of their liberty for long periods of time, even though the law prohibits the detention of minors for registration purposes for more than 25 days. But as it is difficult to find a shelter in 25 days, children are regularly kept in this facility for more than a month, which is prohibited by law.

“What did I do wrong? Why did they put me in prison? I wanted to ask for protection. I thought Europe was different. I was told I would be safe here. The moment they arrested me, is the moment my dreams shattered,” 16-year-old Farhad from Palestine reached Greece through Evros. He was arrested at the border, where he expressed his desire to apply for asylum. Instead of taking him for registration, they placed him in detention. The boy was not aware of what was happening, and he could not understand what he did wrong. He found DCI-G’s phone number and called us. After 2 months in detention, he was finally free and placed in a safe shelter for minors. His story is one of the hundreds similar ones.

At the same time, the Greek government is establishing closed-controlled reception centres in the Greek islands, where asylum-seekers, whereunder children on the move will have to live without specific guarantees and lacking adherence to the best interests of the child principle. It has been announced that both the reception and identification procedures and the asylum procedures will take place while third country nationals are hosted in these closed-controlled camps, and there are no exceptions envisaged for children on the move, meaning they could stay there for a very long time, effectively imprisoned.

The first closed-controlled center, called multi-purpose reception and identification centre (MPRIC), is located on Samos and has been operational since October 2021, while the one on Leros will be operational starting December 2021. The EU-funded MPRIC on Samos is the first of five centres to be opened across the Greek islands and is considered a potential model for future facilities across Europe. This camp is designed to keep refugees out of sight and out of mind and houses asylum-seekers and refugees in prison-like centres in remote areas. It creates an environment that strips people of their agency, harms their mental health, and prevents them from interacting with local communities.

The Greek government and the European Commission insist that these new closed and controlled centres represent joint efforts to improve the security and safety of residents and staff. However, many residents report feeling like they are imprisoned. The MPRIC in Samos is surrounded by barbed-wire fences and entry is strictly supervised and controlled. The residents must go through a strict security process, and the entire camp has camera surveillance, undermining residents’ right to private life. Additionally, it has been reported that the services inside the Samos camp are insufficient. It has been reported that there is no protected section for single women, which raises significant safety concerns. And comparably to the camp on Lesbos, the camp on Samos does not afford protection from the weather and winter elements. For instance, rains of 15 October flooded the camp, forcing residents to wade through high pools of water whenever exiting their containers.



Picture of the MPRIC on Samos

On the mainland

Increasingly securitised changes to EU-funded reception facilities are not limited to the islands. Greek authorities are constructing concrete walls and chain-link fencing around several existing camps on the Greek mainland. Plans are also in motion to include drone patrols, magnetic gates with thermographic cameras, X-ray machines, and security cameras at the camps' entrances and exits. According to external reports, these surveillance measures will be implemented in 39 camps around the country. These measures and restrictions have confirmed the fears of refugees and civil society, that massive investments in securitised and isolated reception facilities will replace measures to support social inclusion within local communities and access to dignified accommodation. As of the 7th of October 2021, 15,135 asylum seekers reside in 2 camps. As of September 2021, IOM provides Site Management Support Services (SMS) to the Greek Government for 27 mainland long-term accommodation sites, hosting 18,874 People of Concerns, whereunder 7,568 are children. Separately, around 17,580 asylum seekers and refugees are hosted under the ESTIA urban accommodation scheme in apartments, almost half of whom are children (46%). Residents of the ESTIA accommodation program have reported the apartments to be unsafe, unhygienic and too small for families.

We are also witnessing the failure of the state to prevent homelessness and provide appropriate accommodation to children on the move in the mainland. There are not enough shelters for unaccompanied minors, resulting in many unaccompanied children on the mainland living in so-called 'Safe Zones'. These zones are actually they are supervised spaces within temporary open accommodation sites and are not safe at all. They were designed to be used as a short-term measure to care for unaccompanied minors, but the reality is that these safe zones are now treated as a permanent solution. Additionally, in the camps on the mainland, there are often no separate sections for families with children, and children in the sites face many difficulties accessing formal education, as the camps are usually far away from cities. There are some non-formal educational activities taking place in the sites, but this is not enough. This prevents the children to integrate into Greek society, as they have very few contacts with the local population.

“I came to Europe to save my life and study. I did not manage to do any of that. All I do all day is go around the camp, trying to avoid trouble. Some people in the camp, are very dangerous.”

15-year-old Zaher is one of the many unaccompanied minors living in the 'safe zone' of a camp in Attica. The safe zone from the section for adults was a few meters apart. He has to wait for hours in line to receive food and water, even go to the bathroom. A bathroom which is accessible by everyone, including the adults in the camp. He does not have access to basic rights, such as education. Zaher, as well as countless other unaccompanied children or children with their families, remain in a limbo situation for years, terrified of what will happen to them when the night comes.

We believe that people must have the right to move freely inside and outside camps. Those who fled conflict, persecution or extreme poverty in their countries of origin and reached the EU with hopes for a better future for themselves and their families, must have their fundamental rights upheld, their claims to asylum heard, and their dignity respected. Keeping people in closed centres risks being the antithesis of that. Repressive migration policies in Europe criminalise refugees and people on the move, rather than uphold their rights under international law. European governments must recognise that the quick fix to the migration issue that follows the logic “out of sight, out of mind” will not work. An effective, working solution requires vision, courageous leadership, and collective responsibility. We need those today more than ever.

People of Concern

Unaccompanied minors: According to EKKA, as of 15 October, 2,159 unaccompanied minors (UAMs) are estimated to be in Greece of which almost 92% are boys, 8% are girls and 9,1% children are below the age of 14 years old. However, this number only accounts for the UAMs that have been registered as asylum-seekers. The real number of UAMs in Greece is most likely way higher, as many children arrive via the borders on the mainland and stay invisible and unregistered for months or even years before they are found. Additionally, even when they are found, the registration process has been reported to be extremely slow, with people waiting for months before being registered.

In December, all the hotels for UAMs and the safe zones in camps have closed. To replace these lost spaces, a new shelter was opened in Athens, with a meager capacity for 60 children to stay for 3 months until they are placed in a long-term shelter for children – this is absolutely insufficient and very short-term thinking. Lastly, the government has reported plans to discontinue the Special Secretariat for Unaccompanied Minors, just 18 months after its creation. The former responsibilities of the Secretariat will be transferred to the general directorate of the Migration and Asylum Ministry. We deeply regret this decision. Lastly, we need to underline the regrettable fact that the Guardianship legislation that has been adopted over three years ago, has still not been implemented in practice, meaning that unaccompanied minors do not have a legal guardian. In the absence of guardianship, the prosecutor of minors or the prosecutor of first instance acts as a temporary guardian of the children – this means thousands of children for a handful of prosecutors.

Recognized refugees: While the State has an obligation to house and provide basic necessities to asylum-seekers, it does not have this same obligation towards recognised refugees. Once individuals obtain the status of international protection, material reception conditions in form of cash or in kind are interrupted within 30 days after receiving the decision. The recognized refugees residing in State accommodation facilities have the obligation to leave them, within the 30 days following the decision. While the State has an obligation to house and provide basic necessities to asylum-seekers, it does not have this same obligation towards recognised refugees. Once individuals obtain the status of international protection, material reception conditions in form of cash or in kind are interrupted within 30 days after receiving the decision. The recognized refugees residing in State accommodation facilities have the obligation to leave them, within the 30 days following the communication of the decision granting them international protection. The same goes for unaccompanied minors, who have the legal obligation to leave the facilities within 30 days of reaching the age of majority. At DCIG, we believe that pushing people out of their accommodation without a safety net and measures to ensure their self-reliance is inhumane and pushes many into poverty and homelessness. Most of the affected refugees do not have regular income, and many of them are families with school-aged children, single parents, survivors of violence, and others with specific needs. We thus urge the authorities to develop a phased approach to housing refugees.

Cash assistance and food distribution

Lastly, we need to underline the very worrying development that has been flagged by many NGOs already. On October 1st, the Greek authorities took over the cash assistance for asylum seekers, which was previously managed by UNHCR. The handover created many problems, cash assistance for refugees and asylum seekers in Greece was cut, as this service transitioned from the UNHCR to the Greek government. This has left many camp residents without the ability to buy and cook their own food - and many others without any resources at all. Despite its importance, about 36,000 people did not receive their cash assistance in October. The Ministry of Migration and Asylum confirmed that financial aid had not been given to asylum seekers at that time. On 1 November, the Secretary General for Immigration Policy sent an invitation to all NGOs registered in the National Register of Greek and Foreign NGOs to submit proposals for actions to the National Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) regarding the financial aid programme. To date, no cash assistance has been provided.

At the same time, some catering services contracts in camps have expired and existing providers are now excluding beneficiaries living in the camp. Recognized refugees, as well as displaced persons awaiting registration and those whose request for asylum has been rejected, have been completely excluded from any provision of food on the mainland. The combination of the halting of cash assistance and catering services is seriously affecting the food security of asylum seekers and NGO efforts to assist are not enough to stem a growing crisis. Reportedly, 25% of those left hungry are women, including pregnant women, and 40% are children. Civil society has come together to cover the gap in food distribution, but we are all appalled by the lack of food provision by the Greek government, which de facto breaches the basic human right to adequate food.

Family reunification ●

In 2020, according to IRC statistics, only 469 unaccompanied children in Greece were allowed to join their family elsewhere in Europe, compared to 823 who were not. This means that 74% or 3/4 of all family reunification requests of unaccompanied children in Greece were rejected by other EU Member States. The suspension of reunification can have an extremely negative impact on the child who are prevented from being with their relatives.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its related restrictions, the challenges in family reunification procedures were exacerbated: we observed big delays in the transfers of people, the strict administrative timeframe was even more difficult to respect, both due to the overall slowdown of the asylum system and the difficulty of preparing the documentation required to support requests. As a result, the right to family life was severely impacted. Beyond COVID-19, other other longstanding limitations on access to family reunification such as the delays in conducting DNA tests, delays in the submission of documents, and insufficient legal aid and interpretation continued to hinder the process. Consequently, family reunification requests were rejected on purely administrative grounds.

When the family reunification process fails, it simultaneously fails the protection and integrity of children. Very often due to the lengthy and bureaucratic procedures separated children on the move resort to smuggling or end up trafficked. The current system providing for family reunification exposes them to extreme violence, poor living conditions, lack of development, and serious mental health issues. We call the States to learn from the malpractices and come in agreement to redesign and cooperate towards the creation of a mechanism fair and able to accommodate the needs of the separated children on the move by making the process accessible, fast, effective and child rights centered.

Age Assessment ●

The age assessment procedure as it is organized in Greece does not comply with the international standards on child protection. In Greece, the age assessment procedure initiates with the assessment of the biometric characteristics such as the height or the weight of the minor. In the sole case that there is still a justified doubt as per the age of the minor, the minor will be referred to the Psychosocial Unit for an assessment by psychologists and social workers. However, on Lesbos, for example, there is no social worker in the RIC and there is only one psychologist. This means that there is a common practice that no alleged child is referred to this second stage of age assessment and a final determination is usually made at the first stage from the medical unit, only based on biometric characteristics. The same happens with the children that are not living in the RICs and that are referred to public hospitals, where a doctor is the sole age assessor, based only on biometric characteristics. We believe that the psychosocial assessment of the alleged minors from trained psychologists and social workers in these procedures is essential and needs to be respected. On top of this, there is a darker reality of Frontex and the border police mislabelling minors as adults on Greek islands. There have been many recorded instances of minors being registered as adults even though the minors claim to be under 18 years old. Minors declared as adults do not undergo an age assessment by the Greek authorities, and afterwards they are unable to demonstrate that they had protested the decision in the first place. These practices, although denied by Frontex, are a violation of the EU charter of fundamental rights. Among other things, the charter guarantees the right to good administration, effective remedy, and the best interests of the child.

One Afghan girl we spoke to, who was 15 when she arrived in Lesbos, said the policemen who registered her didn't believe her age, so registered her as an adult **“I told them I was fifteen years old, but the officers told me I looked older, and wrote 18 down. I tried to protest but I was tired, I didn't know it could have changed many things if I had been lawfully registered as a child”**. This unlawful act by the police didn't only place this child in terrible and dangerous conditions, it also prevented her from applying for family reunification in time.

Education and integration of children on the move

The well-being of the refugee children depends on school experiences. Attending school has been identified as a stabilising feature in the unsettled lives of young refugees. However, when it comes to children on the move in Greece, they have been effectively excluded from school and have been denied their right to education. 2020 and 2021 saw shockingly low numbers of refugee children attending school. Less than 15% of children in refugee camps attended formal school, and the attendance rate drops to 0,3% in the Reception and Identification Centres (RICs). Measures to contain the spread of Covid-19, particularly restrictions on movement from camps, has exacerbated the situation for asylum-seeking children. While the education crisis on the Greek islands is particularly acute, refugee children in the mainland of Greece also face dire prospects of receiving a quality education. Greece has a chronic problem when it comes to sending refugee children to school. Even before Covid-19, less than a third of refugee and migrant children were actually enrolled and attending school. The current Greek government does not even keep a tally, so the depth of the crisis remains hidden and deprioritised. The fact that so many are not learning is a deliberate choice by the government to ignore the needs and rights of those children.

Furthermore, the lack of a framework to support UAMs before and as they transition towards adulthood exacerbates the youth risks of exposure to homelessness, violence, and exploitation. The loss of age-specific rights means that, upon turning 18, refugee and migrant youth must move out of their accommodation. With very few exceptions, they are left to secure accommodation on their own, and often to leave school and find work, leaving them with very few future prospects of employment, leaving them with few alternatives for survival than to resort to unpaid, undocumented or illicit work, or once more resort and fall victim to smuggling and trafficking networks. All of this is multiplied for UAMs who find themselves homeless, for whom turning 18, instead of a day to commemorate, can mark the consolidation of a life in obscurity and stigmatisation. They can also be deprived of their liberty for the purposes of return (if they have received a negative asylum decision) or transferred to unsuitable camps and centres alongside adult populations until their legal status is resolved. Alongside, the youth often lose their support network (e.g., social worker, peers, mental health support) when this transition also leads to a change of geographical location.

The Child Protection System

Successive Greek governments have been structurally unable to organise a coherent system of child protection. Gaps in protection embedded in the national Greek protection system, and lead to widespread institutional violence against children. The child protection system is not only terribly underfunded, but also inefficient, as it works through multiple parallel networks of services that are disjointed and inadequate. There is no actual child protection system in Greece, but rather parallel networks and institutions with mandates that relate to the protection of children, but who do not work well together, and the lack of clarity in the mandates and authorities result in huge gaps and deficiencies in protection. There is a structural lack of coordination and weak cooperation between the different actors. The lack of information-sharing and communication, the void of commonly understood protocols of coordinated action, and the absence of a clear structure means that protection actors act in isolation and sometimes against each other. Many professionals refrain from taking action, preferring to deflect the responsibilities to other actors.

Furthermore, child protection is approached in a very restrictive way in Greece. It seems that child protection is limited to physical protection, leaving behind protection from bureaucracy, access to education, empowerment of children, and generally ensuring their wellbeing and their realisation from child to functional adult. There is also an urgent need to implement prevention mechanisms for violence against children. In Greece, children need to have been proven to be a victim of violence to be protected by the law. The few prevention mechanisms that do exist need to be activated by one of the juvenile public prosecutors, who are already overworked and do not have the capacity to respond to the activation of these mechanisms.

“A mother should never be separated from her child. Change this policy!”, Fufu, a 29-year-old mother from Congo who arrived in Greece with her 5-year-old daughter after years of persecution in her country. Fufu was arrested and separated forcibly from her little girl. The mother was transferred to jail and her daughter in a hospital and then a children’s institution. For months, she did not have any news about her daughter, even though a DNA test took place, and was positive. She was hopeless since she thought that probably her child was a victim of organ trafficking. Her case was referred to DCI Greece and we immediately took the case over and started looking for the little girl.

A requirement for the mother to be set free and be reunited with her daughter was to find a safe place to stay, after she was released. A legal report was sent to the Official Authorities of Accommodation and a safe shelter for both the mother and the daughter was found one week later. Her child however was still in a child’s institution, and no one knew which one. After countless calls, DCI-G managed to locate the little girl and informed the mother that her child was safe. We mobilized and pressured the authorities for the mother and her daughter to be finally reunited. Five months after their forced separation Fufu and her daughter are finally together and happy. Even though this case has a happy ending, it showcases the many rights violations by the Greek State.

Recommendations

We call upon the Greek State to:

1. To exclude all children from the admissibility procedures that have been established under the new Ministerial Decision that assesses Turkey as a safe country for specific nationalities, and refer children to the regular asylum procedure
2. To provide and ensure free access to a trained legal representative to support the young refugee and asylum seekers during the asylum process (including during the first degree) and administrative procedure
3. To speed up the family reunification procedures and eliminate the bureaucratic obstacles to ensure that children will be reunified with their families in Europe
4. To transfer minors from the islands to the mainland as soon as possible, and ensure appropriate accommodation for children on the move
5. To extend the period of financial assistance and access to food, especially to families with children living in camps
6. To establish integration programmes and support for asylum-seekers and recognised refugees and beneficiaries of international protection
7. To develop a coherent protective framework in law and practice for children who have been victims of any form of violence - with a special focus on the creation of an emergency response procedure and the creation of a safe space for the child to find protection immediately after reporting the incident of violence
8. To ensure that all children have access to education and the Greek public schools regardless of their documentation
9. To remove the fee for each subsequent asylum application after the first and accept subsequent applications.

