



SAMOS LEGAL CENTRE NEWSLETTER

“Go Back or Go to Prison”: Greece's Harsh New Face on Migration

On June 27th, Minister Makis Vouridis resigned amid a corruption scandal, leaving the Ministry of Migration and Asylum under a cloud. Just one day later, his replacement, Thanos Plevris, stepped in. His message? Uncompromising. His legacy? A long political history rooted in the far-right. By mid-July, the Greek government had suspended asylum applications for anyone arriving by sea from North Africa—a controversial move that drew immediate fire from legal experts and human rights organizations.

Then, in September, a new law turned up the pressure even more. **Migration is now not just monitored—it's criminalized.**

Undocumented individuals face up to 5 years in prison, heavy fines, and electronic surveillance. The chance to regularize one's status after 7 years in Greece? Gone.

Thanos Plevris put it bluntly in Parliament: *“You are not welcome. If you are not granted asylum, you either return or go to prison.”* Behind these cold words are real people—families, children, students—many of whom have built their lives here. Their futures now hang in the balance.

On Samos, the consequences of these political shifts are already felt daily. Interviews are now mandatory for all nationalities, including groups previously recognized almost automatically, such as Yemenis, Sudanese, or Palestinians—despite the undeniable dangers in their home countries. At the same time, evictions from the CCAC have surged. Authorities strictly enforce the 30-day deadline after receiving a positive decision, without exception. Vulnerable individuals—single parents, survivors of trauma, or even people holding ferry tickets to Athens just days away—are being pushed out.

The result? A sharp rise in homelessness across the island. The lack of flexibility and humanity in applying the law is eroding any margin of dignity left for asylum seekers and refugees trapped in this system. NGOs are already pushing back, citing violations of both EU law and international conventions.

But in the meantime, a dangerous precedent is taking root: one where human dignity is replaced by detention cells, and asylum rights are treated as optional.

We will continue to monitor the implementation of the new law to defend the exercise of the right to asylum.

CONTEXT UPDATE

Summary of Political Changes in Greece on Migration

MINISTERIAL CHANGES

The summer began with political turbulence. On June 27th, Makis Voridis was forced to resign after being implicated in a corruption scandal involving the misuse of EU agricultural funds.

His replacement, **Thanos Plevris**, stepped in the very next day. **Known for his far-right affiliations** and rhetoric, Plevris wasted no time in signaling a harsher line on migration, promising to tighten laws and accelerate deportations.

SUSPENSION OF ASYLUM APPLICATIONS

Just weeks later (July 11, 2025), the government announced the **temporary suspension of asylum applications for anyone arriving directly by sea from North Africa**.

Officially justified as a measure to ease “pressure” on the system, the three-month suspension directly **contravenes EU law and the principle of non-refoulement**.

The measure has already drawn legal challenges, with the European Court of Human Rights intervening in certain cases, underscoring the tension between Greece’s policies and international obligations.

CRIMINALIZATION OF MIGRATION

In September, a sweeping new law fundamentally altered the legal framework. **Undocumented stay in Greece is now treated as a criminal offense**, punishable by 2 to 5 years in prison and fines of as much as €5,000. While “voluntary return” is promoted as a way to reduce penalties, in practice migrants face extended detention—up to 24 months—and tighter electronic surveillance.

At the same time, long-standing pathways to regularization have been abolished, cutting off one of the few routes to stability for undocumented residents. Even the costs associated with asylum procedures have increased sharply, with subsequent application for instance, fees tripled from €100 to €300.

ADDITIONAL MEASURES

Beyond these headline changes, the government has introduced further restrictions. New closed detention centers are being built, including on Crete. Deportation deadlines have been shortened dramatically, from 25 days to just 14 for voluntary return. And by broadening the definition of what counts as a “safe third country,” authorities have made it easier to dismiss claims and expedite removals.

THE PROJECT IN FIGURES

Field Team

5

sessions to provide legal information were organised

102

Asylum seekers attended legal workshops

69

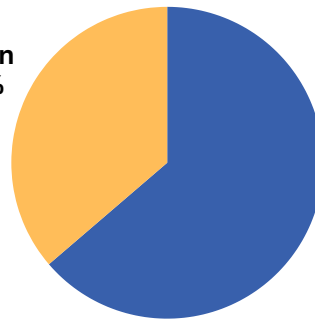
volunteers from non-legal organisation participated to our online workshop

Between April and September, we worked with:

1 project manager
1 legal coordinator
4 caseworkers
2 greek lawyers
12 interpreters

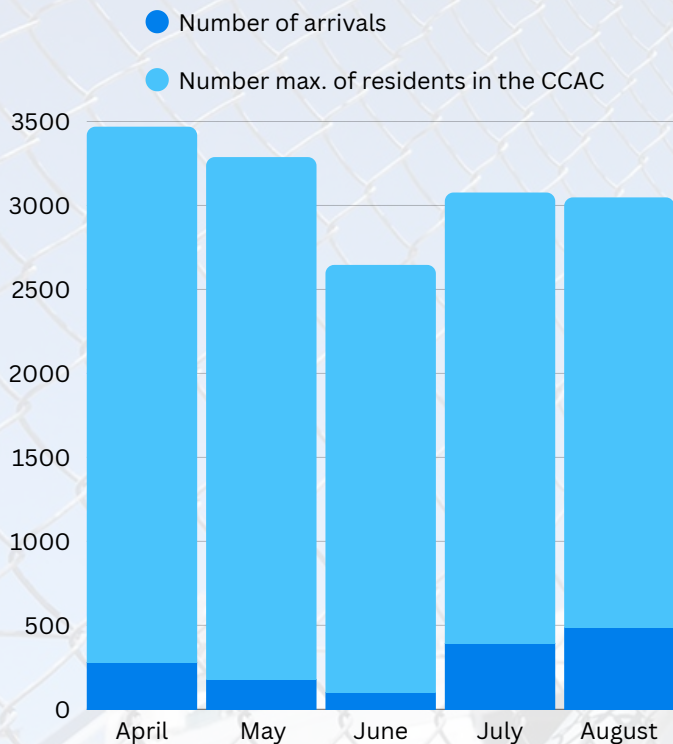
People directly supported :

Women
36.3%



Men
63.7%

10% of the people we met have declared having survived from SGBV, human trafficking or inhuman treatment.



*Data from the Greek Ministry of Migration

individual preparations for asylum interviews

201

requests sent to the authorities

171

Interview accompagnements

18

An average of **27 conversations** to answer to every morning. Messages received in around **ten different languages**.
599 new numbers contacted us on our hotline.



PROJECT UPDATE

CHANGES IN THE TEAM

This past months has brought many transitions.

We said goodbye to **Bintou**, who after nearly two years first as a caseworker and later as Legal Coordinator, decided to move on. Her professionalism, empathy, and dedication have been at the heart of the project. Last year, during a particularly challenging time without a project manager, she carried a heavy responsibility and was truly a cornerstone for the team. We are deeply grateful to her.

Mercedes re-joined us as Legal Coordinator – her second time with the project after working as a caseworker in 2023 during a very intense period. Although her stay this time will be short, her energy and commitment definitely brought a breath of fresh air to the team.

At the caseworker level, we also saw changes: Adèle and Mathilde, introduced in January, finished their missions in May and June. They were succeeded by **Estelle** and **Bérénice** in July. Arriving during a particularly uncertain time for the project, and at a moment of tightening asylum legislation in Greece, they have shown great curiosity and enthusiasm, becoming an essential support to the team.

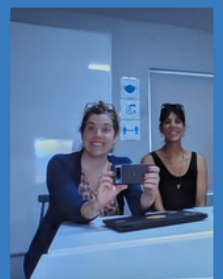
We also want to take this opportunity to warmly **thank all the volunteers** who make our work possible. They are not just an extra pair of hands, but truly the beating heart of the project. It is always encouraging to see so many applicants willing to join us, proof of the commitment and solidarity that continues to exist.

LOOKING AHEAD

The project has existed since 2019 and, like many NGOs, has gone through ups and downs. Today, we are again facing a challenging period, with the need to limit our activities and make difficult choices. As you know, funding for solidarity work in Europe, particularly in the field of human rights, is increasingly scarce. For 2025, some usual grants were not renewed, and securing additional funding has proven difficult. Since our work is centered on people – our lawyers, caseworkers, and coordinators – most of our costs are linked to human resources.

For the end of this year, the team will be smaller, with only lawyers and the project manager staying on. This reduced structure comes at a moment that is fortunately less intense than past years, and it allows us to prepare for a new team of four staff members in January 2025.

We remain committed, even during this transition, to providing quality information and support to those who need it most.



RESTORING FAMILY LINK

In the context of Greece's complex asylum landscape, family separation remains a critical but often overlooked issue.

EU frameworks and national regulations recognize the right to family life and protects the right to private and family life – including the right to build relationships and stay in touch with family members.



Yet, in practice, people on-the-move are often separated from their families due to the inexistence of safe and legal routes in the European borders. Governments, now more than ever are falling into a pattern of prioritizing border control over basic human dignity. Despite restrictive immigration policies, lengthy bureaucratic procedures, and inadequate legal frameworks. People's need to be reunited their loved ones does not stop them from taking dangerous journeys full of uncertainty and risk of being arrested or deported by border security.

At the Samos legal Centre, we believe that preserving family unity supports mental health and reduces the vulnerability of individuals—stuck in the already stressful atmosphere of the asylum procedure in a hotspot.

We support applicants in different process of restoring family links. From ensuring a reunion within Greek borders to guaranteeing family reunification in another European country.

While international focus frequently falls on cross-border reunification under the Dublin III Regulation, or family reunification after recognition of status from the country of origin. As legal actor, we also play a crucial in restoring the right to family unity within Greece.

Upon arrival, asylum seekers—particularly unaccompanied minors, or different family members—may be processed separately, depending in they arrive from different islands, their arrival date and be held in reception centers far from their family members. Reuniting them is not automatic. After making locating exactly where the family member is in Greece, we make sure to submit formal requests to the Greek institutions (Asylum Service, Reception and Identification Service, Ministry of Migration) for reunification or co-location, especially for vulnerable cases.

Legal support is crucial at this stage to push for administrative transfer, make sure the file are processed together, even when the legal status of one member is still pending.

. DATA OF CASES SUPPORTED FOR FAMILY UNITY IN GREECE

- The Dublin III regulation allows asylum seekers in one EU country to reunite with family members in another EU member state under specific conditions.

From the moment we detect family ties across Europe, for an applicant, we assist them through the process submitting the Dublin request for family reunification, make sure they gather the required documents and respecting strict timelines (of 3 months after lodging the asylum application).

As legal actor, we act as intermediaries between the asylum seeker, the Greek Asylum Service and counterpart authorities in the other EU states)

IN MAY AND JUNE WE HAVE SUPPORT ... CASES OF DUBLIN III PROCESS

FAMILIES' STORIES

Our team had the opportunity to follow **an Egyptian father** who could have never imagined that exile would mean being **separated from his daughter**. The chaotic journey, filled with fear and uncertainty, left them stranded on two different islands: he on Lesbos, she on Samos.

When at last his daughter was able to join him, a new obstacle arose: her asylum application had been rejected. Despite the joy of their reunion, their future remained uncertain.

Finally, the father's refugee status was extended to his daughter. She too was able to obtain legal documents, ensuring not only her protection, but also her right to live alongside her father.

Today, they are once again together, living with dignity and with the hope of rebuilding their lives. Their story is a reminder that behind every administrative decision, there is a family bond that must be safeguarded.

We met a young Afghan woman who arrived in Samos completely on her own. Her only wish was to be reunited with her **younger brother**, a minor living in Switzerland. The legal process to apply for family reunification is always long and complex, and for someone who had already endured the journey to Samos and the harsh conditions of the CCAC, it was an especially daunting task.

What made the difference was her courage to keep going, even when the paperwork felt overwhelming, and the dedication of our volunteer interpreter, who made communication possible every step of the way. Together, we walked through the process, holding on to the hope of family.

The day we received the news that her request had been accepted was unforgettable. Soon after, she sent us a photo of herself and her brother together again—two big smiles radiating relief, love, and a new beginning.

For her it meant safety and family; for us, it was a reminder of the impact this work can have on real lives

ADVOCACY

We are now members of the **Aegean NGO Network**, a new civil society alliance initiated by Boat Refugee Foundation and supported by Oxfam.

This network brings together NGOs operating across the Aegean islands to collectively monitor conditions, share data, and advocate for rights-based policy and practice. Together, we aim to amplify our impact through joint reporting, coordinated advocacy, and—when necessary—strategic litigation.



In this context, we contributed to the network-wide data collection efforts on key issues. A thematic briefing on the shrinking space for civil society has already been circulated to European stakeholders as well as a Monitoring reporting.

As part of our commitment to collective action, we continue to monitor major shifts on the ground. In fact, after the **suspension of organized transfers** for months, we submitted a formal **complaint to the Greek Ombudsperson**, particularly highlighting the impact on vulnerable individuals such as the elderly or those with medical needs. We also denounced reports that people seeking transfers were being asked to pay in exchange for relocation. In response, the **Ombudsperson validated our concerns** and calling for urgent corrective action. We now await a formal response from the authorities, especially as the transfer landscape appears to be shifting again.

We remain engaged in strategic advocacy with EU actors. In June, we joined Samos NGOs in a meeting with Sarah Zemp, the European Commission's new policy officer for Samos, Kos, and Leros. Based inside the Samos CCAC, her role is to act as a direct link between the EU and local actors. This meeting provided an important opportunity to present first-hand accounts of dysfunctions in the asylum and reception systems, and we welcomed her openness to maintaining ongoing dialogue with NGOs on the ground.

In parallel, we also remain active in monitoring and responding to the rapidly evolving legal framework on migration in Greece. Over the summer, we **co-signed two joint statements regarding the new bill** introduced by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum.

While the main features of this legislation have already been outlined above, our interventions focused on highlighting its incompatibility with EU and international law, as well as its devastating impact on long-term residents and people in vulnerable situations.

In particular, we drew attention to:

- the extension of detention to 24 months and the introduction of electronic monitoring as disproportionate and harmful measures;
- the abolition of residence permits for exceptional reasons, effectively closing one of the last pathways to regularization;
- the risks of AI-based interpretation in asylum interviews, which undermine both accuracy and confidentiality.
- We will continue to closely monitor the implementation of the new framework and document its impact on the ground, so that people's rights and dignity remain at the center of the debate.

SUPPORT THE PROJECT

A HEARTFELT THANK YOU – AND A CALL TO KEEP GOING TOGETHER

First and foremost: **thank you**

Whether you've been following us since the early days or just recently joined our community, your support and encouragement mean the world to us. This project has only been possible because of the solidarity and trust of people like you, who believe – like we do – that everyone deserves dignity, information, and access to their rights.

Today, we face a new chapter. Resources are shrinking, needs are growing, and we are doing our best to adapt. To keep going, we have launched a fundraising campaign on HelloAsso. This campaign is not just about covering immediate costs – it's about building the foundation that will carry us into the future.

If you can, we invite you to support us once more:

- by making a contribution, no matter the size,
- by sharing the campaign with friends, colleagues, or networks who may want to help,
- or simply by staying connected and spreading the word.
-

Every gesture makes a difference. Together, we can ensure that this project continues to stand by those who need it most.

Thank you for walking this path with us.

**Support the Samos
Legal Centre Project !**



Direct link to our
Fundraising campaign

Follow us and support our work on social media



[samoslegalcentre asffrance](#)