

# CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN GREECE

January – March 2026



## 1. End-2025 trends and early 2026 data: Greece remains a key entry point for persons fleeing war and persecution

In 2025, Greece recorded [48,771 arrivals](#), representing a 21 per cent decrease compared to 2024, when 62,119 people arrived, and broadly returning to levels observed in 2023 (48,720 arrivals). Despite the decline in overall arrivals, Greece continues to remain a key entry point along the Eastern Mediterranean route.

The main nationalities among arrivals in 2025 were persons from [Afghanistan \(24 per cent\) and Sudan \(22 per cent\), followed by persons from Egypt \(20 per cent\)](#). Similar to previous years, the demographic composition of arrivals varies significantly by nationality. Afghan and Syrian populations tend to include a higher proportion of families, while arrivals from Egypt and Sudan are characterised by a greater share of single men and unaccompanied children, particularly adolescent boys. Children accounted for [20 per cent of arrivals in 2025](#), a decrease compared to 25 per cent in 2024. Among them, [32 per cent were identified upon arrival as unaccompanied or separated children](#), representing approximately 3,000 children. Egyptian nationals represented the largest group of unaccompanied children (53 per cent), followed by children from Afghanistan (12 per cent), Somalia (8 per cent), Syria (8 per cent) and Sudan (6 per cent).

In 2025, Crete emerged as a major entry point, with arrivals via the Libya–Crete route increasing fourfold. The lack of reception facilities continues to raise concerns over conditions, registration, and access to protection, especially for children. A February 2026 law amendment foreseeing new facilities remained unimplemented at the time of writing.

Early data for 2026 indicates that arrivals continue at a steady pace. As of [8 March 2026, almost 5,000 people had arrived in Greece, including 18 per cent children](#). Preliminary information suggests that Sudanese and Afghan nationals continue to represent the largest groups among new arrivals, reflecting ongoing displacement linked to conflict and instability in these regions.

### Solidarity still needed, for asylum seekers and children on the move

2025 trends underline Greece’s structural role in the EU asylum system and the importance of ensuring that reception, asylum and child protection systems are adequately resourced to respond to sustained arrivals, particularly for children and unaccompanied and separated children. Indeed, [61,629 applications for international protection](#) were submitted in Greece in 2025, with Afghan nationals representing the largest group of applicants (24.8 per cent). Since 2016, [213,832 people have been granted international protection in Greece](#), underscoring the country’s continued role as a key asylum country within the European Union.

The [European Commission’s Annual Asylum and Migration Report \(2025\)](#) continues to identify Greece as a country “under migratory pressure”. Relative to its GDP and population size, Greece recorded between July 2024 and June 2025 the highest number of irregular border crossings at EU level, the highest number of asylum applications (over 70,000) and the highest number of positive asylum decisions (almost 32,000). Greece also received one of the largest numbers of asylum applications **from unaccompanied children**. Despite this, [no relocation of unaccompanied children](#) from Greece took place 2025.

On 3 February 2026, a migrant boat carrying people seeking safety collided with a Hellenic Coast Guard patrol vessel off the coast of Chios. Fifteen people died in the incident and 25 were rescued. Among those, 3 children lost their lives, one went missing and many others have been hospitalised with serious injuries. Tragic accounts also include miscarriages and injuries to infants. The majority of victims suffered [severe head trauma](#), raising serious questions about the nature and intensity of the impact.

From the outset, [conflicting accounts](#) of the incident have emerged. Greek authorities maintain that the boat ignored orders and collided with the patrol vessel. Survivors, however, [describe](#) dangerous manoeuvres by the Coast Guard vessel, with some alleging it struck or passed over the boat without warning. Crucially, no independent, verifiable evidence has been made available to clarify these discrepancies. Although the Coast Guard vessel was equipped with a camera, [it was not in operation](#) at the time of the incident, raising serious concerns about transparency and the preservation of evidence.

The need for an impartial and effective investigation has been emphasized by, among others, the [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#), the [National Commission for Human Rights](#), and the [Greek Ombudsperson](#). Following the incident, competent Ministers and State officials have publicly targeted medical organizations, lawyers, and journalists. The Greek Council for Refugees, on an emergency mission to Chios, met with survivors and undertook to provide legal assistance.

*"We came here for protection"* said one of the survivors of Afghan origin. *"Suddenly, one big boat just came and crashed into us. People must know - it was not an accident"* the same person [added](#). *"I cannot return to my country (...) there is no security to raise your family and live peacefully"*, [said](#) another survivor.

[A broader pattern of accountability failures](#) in Greece's maritime border operations has already been documented in recent years. Between 2022 and 2025, the ECtHR has found violations of the right to life and the lack of effective investigations in four different cases involving Hellenic Coast Guard operations<sup>1</sup>. The Chios incident therefore raises not only questions about what happened on the night of 3 February, but also whether **existing accountability mechanisms are capable of establishing responsibility when loss of life occurs at sea**.

Beyond individual responsibility, the tragedy reflects a structural failure: in the absence of safe and legal pathways, families continue to undertake dangerous crossings where the line between border enforcement and search and rescue is blurred. In such contexts, **the absence of transparency and accountability amplifies the risk to life, particularly for children**.

## 2. New legislative developments: criminalisation and protection rollback

The new legislation of Ministry of Migration and Asylum adopted in February 2026 introduces a series of provisions that risk paving the way for the criminalisation of legitimate humanitarian action and further restricting civil society space. It provides for aggravated felony sentences and extremely high fines for members of registered NGOs in cases of, inter alia, "facilitation" of entry or stay of third country nationals, as well as the possibility for an organisation to be deleted from the MoMA Registry as soon as prosecution is initiated against an alleged perpetrator, even before the case is heard by a Court.

Said legislation has been strongly criticized by national Human Rights institutions ([1](#), [2](#)), which have underlined its non-compliance with the Greek Constitution, European and international law and have called on the Government to withdraw the provision. Similar concerns have also been raised by [United Nations bodies](#). In a Joint Letter sent to the Greek Government by 5 UN [Special Rapporteurs](#), including the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders, they underline:

*"We are very concerned that the Migration Code, as amended by the Law would impose unfair restrictions on the work of NGOs working in the field of migration in Greece, while criminalising their activity of defence of human rights. It is argued that the Law would undermine humanitarian and civil society work, including broad definitions that could capture humanitarian acts"*

This legislation not only paves the way for the criminalisation of humanitarian action, it also risks creating a chilling effect on civil society organisations in Greece, including child rights organisations, within an already increasingly restrictive environment for civil society actors working on migration and child protection. Civil society organisations continue to play a critical role in identifying UASC, providing legal assistance and ensuring access to protection services. Measures that restrict their work risk **weakening safeguards for children on the move** at a time when protection needs remain significant.

<sup>1</sup> Safi and Others v. Greece, application no 5418/15, 07 July 2022; Alkhatib and others v Greece, application no 3566/16, 16 January 2024; Almukhlas and Al-Maliki v. Greece, application no 22776/18, 25 March 2025; F.M. and others v. Greece, application no 17622/21, 14 October 2025.

This legislation was adopted shortly after the verdict of the Criminal Court of Lesbos in the case of 24 humanitarians who had been prosecuted and faced serious charges, including facilitating the illegal entry of third-country nationals. The case has been described as [the biggest case of criminalisation of solidarity in Europe](#). In January 2026 all defendants were acquitted of all charges after 8 years of criminal proceedings. “Rescuing people in danger at sea and providing humanitarian aid is not a crime but a moral duty and a legal obligation” [noted](#) the Greek Council for Refugees.

### Weakening the protection for children and young adults

The same bill significantly undermines safeguards for children transitioning into adulthood. It abolishes a provision - introduced as recently as 2023 - that allowed unaccompanied children to obtain a residence permit upon reaching adulthood, provided they had successfully completed three years of schooling in Greece. Beyond its legal effect, this measure had served as an important incentive for children to enrol in and remain within the formal education system, supporting their longer-term integration.

In a [joint letter](#) to the members of the Greek Parliament, 17 organisations of the Child Rights Advocacy Network (CRAN) warn that this repeal constitutes “a significant step backward on child protection issues and the reversal of a long-term investment by the Greek state in the integration of young people who arrived as unaccompanied children into the country’s social and economic life”.

### Protection in reverse: prosecuting children for their own survival

The shift of arrivals towards Crete has been accompanied by a worrying pattern of **criminalisation of children and young persons on the move**. Criminal prosecutions for “smuggling”<sup>2</sup> are being brought systematically and in large numbers against newly arrived persons. These charges are often based solely on the allegation of “steering the boat”, even in cases where individuals report that they drove the boat under threat, in a situation of emergency, or as the only way to reach safety. In practice, for almost every boat arriving there is at least one person accused of “smuggling” and facing the risk of extremely severe sentences, including life imprisonment.

Those prosecuted include individuals who prima facie falls within the refugee definition, unaccompanied children fleeing conflict in Sudan, and persons travelling with their spouses and minor children. In the latter cases, this practice also [leads to family separation](#), with parents detained on smuggling charges—often without contact with their children for months. The Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) is aware of cases of children as young as 15 years old accused of smuggling, while other actors report that around [300 young or very young Sudanese nationals](#) are currently imprisoned awaiting trial or already convicted.

Proceedings are frequently conducted with extreme brevity, inadequate interpretation and limited access to appropriate legal assistance, as lawyers under the state legal aid scheme are often appointed at the last moment<sup>3</sup>. A further consequence of this practice is that unaccompanied children against whom charges are brought are deprived of age-appropriate reception conditions and are obliged - while awaiting trial and under an obligation imposed by the investigating judge - to remain for prolonged periods within the premises of a Reception and Identification Centre (RIC). In such case, children remain in conditions amounting to de facto detention and under inadequate living conditions. For example, a Sudanese boy recently acquitted of all criminal charges was required to remain in de facto detention in Malakasa “safe area” for almost 4 months.

**These practices raise serious concerns regarding their compatibility with international and national legal standards.** Article 31 of the Geneva Convention [ensures](#) that refugees can gain access international protection effectively, without being penalised for breaches of immigration legislation. The United Nations Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants requires [the pursuit of financial or other material benefit](#) as a necessary element of the crime of “smuggling”. In addition, the Greek Migration Code provides that its provisions, including those related to “smuggling”, should not be applied to asylum seekers. The proper application of said provisions by Greek Courts remains a matter of concern.

### Age assessment safeguards weakened as Greece prepares for EU Pact implementation

As Greece prepares for the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, concerns are growing that the current age assessment framework<sup>4</sup> may fall short of the safeguards required under EU and international standards. In August 2025, Greece adopted new legislation on age assessment which has been widely [criticised](#) for its lack of compliance with international standards and EU law, as well as for the risk of undermining the protection of unaccompanied children.

<sup>2</sup> Defined as ‘Transport of third-country nationals with no right to entry’, Article 25(1) L. 5038/2023

<sup>3</sup> BVMN (2026), [Chania, Crete Trial Monitoring – 2 March 2026](#).

<sup>4</sup> Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD) no 147627/2025, GG 581/B/22-8-2025.

The legislation removes the obligation to use medical examinations only as a last resort, gives priority to the findings of X-ray examinations over less intrusive methods, significantly shortens the deadline for appeals, and weakens the principle of the presumption of minority.

**Age assessment constitutes a critical gateway safeguard:** when a child is wrongly classified as an adult, access to child-specific protections - including guardianship, appropriate reception conditions and procedural safeguards - may be lost simultaneously. In practice, the implementation of the legislation has not resolved existing challenges, while new concerns have emerged. For example, the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) is aware of the case of a Sudanese asylum seeker who was determined to be an adult due to the priority given under the new legislation to the results of X-ray examinations. In this case, the first two stages of the procedure (macroscopical examination and psychosocial assessment) identified indicators within the range of childhood. However, contrary to the principle of the presumption of minority and the best interests of the child, the age determination was ultimately based solely on the X-ray results. Implementation challenges also persist. According to actors present on the ground, the Athens Children's Hospital, designated as the hospital responsible for conducting age assessment procedures, is currently able to carry out only two assessments per month, resulting in significant delays.

### 3. “The first thing I would do is buy food for my children”

The prolonged suspension of the cash assistance programme for asylum seekers in Greece - funded through the [EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund \(AMIF\)](#) - raises serious concerns regarding compliance with reception standards. Asylum seekers have not received the legally provided cash assistance since April 2024, amounting to nearly 21 months without regular payments<sup>5</sup>.

[Frontline organisations report](#) that this extended interruption has had concrete and harmful consequences for asylum-seeking children. Without financial support, families are unable to supplement insufficient camp food, purchase age-appropriate nutrition, diapers, school supplies, winter clothing, or hygiene items, nor cover transportation costs to access healthcare, psychosocial support, education, or legal assistance. At the same time, transportation services previously provided through AMIF-funded programmes [have also been suspended](#), further limiting residents' ability to travel from camps to cities for essential needs such as medical appointments or administrative procedures. Children living in remote facilities - often several kilometres from the nearest town - are particularly affected, as the lack of even minimal funds deepens isolation and limits access to essential services. Civil society actors describe heightened psychological stress within families, increased vulnerability, and a marked deterioration in living conditions, directly undermining children's well-being, development, and protection.

#### **Living with two children without cash assistance** *(This testimony was documented by GCR)*

A single mother from Sudan who arrived in Greece in August 2025 and has since been residing with her two minor children in a mainland camp near Athens reported to GCR:

“I have never received any cash assistance. I went to the office in the camp to explain that I am a single woman with children and asked if there was any benefit. They told me there are no benefits, no cash [...] I have no money. The situation in the camp is awful; the food is not eatable. If I received the cash assistance, the first thing I would do is buy food for my children [...] Once my child had a very high fever but I did not have the money to go to the hospital [...] I had to wait three days while my child was burning up before I could see the doctor in the camp, who referred us to the hospital. We were transported by ambulance and my child was hospitalised.”

The suspension of financial assistance also compounds broader concerns regarding reception conditions in mainland camps, where a significant number of children reside. In February 2026, families with children residing in Oinofita camp (central Greece) [protested](#) against the conditions in the facility, which they described as “tragic” and “inadequate for human living”: “*We are not safe. It is like prison*”, they stated. These concerns echo repeated observations by CSOs<sup>6</sup> and [UNHCR](#)

<sup>5</sup> Although limited and inconsistent disbursements took place during the first months of 2025, payments stopped entirely again in May 2025, with no clear timeline for resumption communicated by the authorities.

<sup>6</sup> See GCR-Save the Children report (2024) [“It does not feel like real life”: Children's everyday life in Greek refugee camps](#); RSA (2025) [“Human Rights Day: the unseen reality of refugee camps in Greece”](#), etc.

regarding the conditions prevailing in mainland camps, where a large number of children continue to live (27% as of June 2025), and where effective remedies to challenge inadequate reception conditions are not available<sup>7</sup>.

## Policy recommendations

### Protect civil society space supporting children on the move

The Greek Government should review legislative provisions that risk criminalising humanitarian action and restricting civil society space. Civil society organisations play a key role in providing legal assistance, child protection support and access to asylum and reception services. Their work must be safeguarded to uphold children's rights.

The European Commission should assess the compatibility of the new legislation with EU law and fundamental rights. Humanitarian assistance, child protection and legal aid must not be criminalised, and no organisation should lose registry status, funding or operational access before a final court decision.

### Ensure effective access to protection for children turning 18

The removal of residence permits for unaccompanied children reaching adulthood after successfully completing three years of schooling in Greece represents a significant setback. Greek Authorities should ensure that young people transitioning to adulthood can continue education, training and access to protection without risk of arrest, detention and removal.

### End the criminalisation of children and refugees seeking safety

Greek authorities must ensure that children and persons seeking protection are not prosecuted for acts related to their arrival, pursuant to Article 31 of the Geneva Convention (1951). Practices leading to the detention or prosecution of children and asylum seekers in such circumstances should be reviewed and brought in line with international refugee and child rights standards.

### Restore safeguards in age assessment procedures

As Greece prepares to implement the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, authorities must urgently review the current age assessment framework to ensure full compliance with EU and international child protection standards. Greece, with support from the European Commission, should ensure that age assessment procedures remain multidisciplinary, non-invasive, and guided by the presumption of minority and the best interests of the child, in order to prevent the misclassification of children and avoid a growing gap between EU commitments and national practice.

### Guarantee children's rights in reception conditions: restore cash assistance

The Greek Government should urgently restore the AMIF-funded cash assistance programme for asylum seekers. EU Commission should ensure that asylum seekers have indeed access to cash-assistance, as provided by EU Law. Access to basic financial support is essential to ensure that children and families can meet their basic needs and access healthcare, education and protection service.

\* This brief, authored by Alexandros Konstantinou (GCR) and Anne-Lise Dewulf (SCI), reflects information compiled and updated to the best of the authors' knowledge as of **13<sup>th</sup> of March 2026**.

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<sup>7</sup> The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe noted the lack of effective remedies available to asylum seekers in Greece to challenge inadequate reception conditions and raised concerns regarding the effectiveness of the complaints mechanism of the FRO within the MoMA, as the majority of complaints concerning reception conditions are transmitted for review within the Ministry itself (Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, [CM/Del/Dec\(2025\)1531/H46-20](#), 12 June 2025 see also [RSA, 2025](#)).