

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN GREECE

April – June 2026



1. 2026 trends: sustained arrivals and growing pressure on Crete

Greece continues to receive significant numbers of people seeking protection. As of mid-June 2026, [14,340 people](#) had arrived in Greece, representing an approximately 15 per cent decrease compared with 2025. Despite this decline, arrivals remain steady and Crete remains the central entry point in 2026, accounting for around [70 per cent of sea arrivals](#). This shift continues to place pressure on reception and registration capacity, particularly given the limited reception infrastructure available on the island. A temporary facility has been recently established in Ayia, Chania, however this is [still awaited](#) in Heraklion. At the same time the government publicly discusses the intention to proceed with an [increasingly restrictive](#) approach to migration and distances itself from the application of EU laws. In Parliament, it was indicated that [“in the event of a surge in arrivals, the suspension of asylum will be the mildest of the measures we will take”](#). No clarification was provided as to what additional measures could be envisaged, despite the fact that the suspension of access to asylum would itself be contrary to international and EU law.

Among sea arrivals, Sudanese and Afghan nationals together account for almost [39 per cent of arrivals in 2026](#), representing 20.3 per cent and 18.3 per cent respectively. The top five nationalities also include Bangladesh, which represents the largest single group at [25 per cent, followed by Egypt at 7.5 per cent and Yemen at 4.6 per cent](#). This profile points to mixed movements involving both families and single men, including unaccompanied children. As of May 2026, [1,465 unaccompanied children](#) were accommodated in Greece, the majority boys over the age of 15, mainly from Egypt, Afghanistan, Sudan and Syria.

2. PACT implementation in Greece: child protection safeguards at risk

On 9 June 2026, the Greek Parliament adopted national legislation for the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.¹ The law introduces major changes to the way asylum-seeking children and their families arriving in Greece will be screened, received, channelled into asylum procedures and, where relevant, returned. While presented as part of the implementation of a common European framework, the national legislation goes beyond technical transposition. It consolidates a [more restrictive approach](#), with increased reliance on border procedures, movement restrictions, detention or *de facto* detention, and accelerated processing.²

The process through which the law was adopted also raised concerns. The public consultation period was very short, and the bill was tabled in Parliament immediately afterwards, raising doubts as to whether comments from independent institutions, civil society and child rights actors were meaningfully considered.

For children and families seeking protection, the central concern is that the new framework risks making access to rights more difficult. Screening, border procedures and the application of the legal fiction of “non-entry” may result in newly arrived people, including families with children, remaining for longer periods in facilities at the borders or in closed or highly restricted settings. The entry into force of the new framework has also been marked by a critical gap: the absence, at the time of writing, of a functioning scheme **for free legal counselling at first instance**, including support to lodge an asylum application³. This is particularly problematic under the Pact, where procedures are expected to move faster and where early legal information can determine whether a person understands their rights, raises vulnerabilities, presents relevant

¹ L. 5307/2026, Gov. Gazzeta A’ 90/11-06-2026.

² See inter alia UNHCR, [UNHCR intervention at the hearing of actors regarding the draft law on the “Implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum”](#), 5-6-3036; Greek NCHR, [Observations on the draft Law](#), 28- p.39; Greek Ombudsman, [Observations on the draft Law](#), 2-6-2026, p. 24; see also Greek Council for Refugees, [Comments on the draft Law](#), 28-5-2026.

³ Contrary to Asylum Procedure Regulation, Article 16 Regulation 2024/1348. According to national legislation, a JMD is required for the establishment of the first-instance legal aid scheme (Article 102, Law 5307/2026). This has not yet been issued. As of the time of writing, the transitional scheme set out in Article 261(5) of Law 5037/2026 is not operational.

evidence, or effectively challenges an unlawful restriction. For children and families, lack of early legal support increases the risk that protection needs remain unidentified or that procedural guarantees exist on paper but not in practice.

A setback for unaccompanied children

The most serious child protection concerns relate to unaccompanied children. Since 2020, Greece had taken important steps to move away from the use of “*protective custody*” and to develop a specialised protection system for unaccompanied children, based on referral to age-appropriate accommodation, guardianship and child-specific care. The new legislation risks reversing parts of this progress.

First, the law permits unaccompanied children aged 16 and over to be placed in accommodation centres for adults when such placement is deemed to be in their best interests⁴. However, placing children alongside unrelated adults exposes them to heightened risks of violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect, while undermining the child-centred nature of the protection system. Given that the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration in all decisions affecting unaccompanied children, it is difficult to see how placement in such accommodation could meet that legal obligation. This [raises serious concerns](#) about both the substance and quality of the best interest’s assessment in practice, particularly in a context where access to specialised child protection services, guardianship and individualised assessment remains uneven.

Second, the legislation foresees the use of “safe zones” in mainland camps and Closed Controlled Access Centres on the islands as a more permanent form of accommodation for some unaccompanied children⁵. This includes children aged 16 and above, and children of any age depending on nationality or recognition rates⁶. This risks creating a two-tier child protection system in which access to appropriate care depends not on individual needs, but on age and nationality contrary to Article 2(1) of the Convention on the Right of Child.

This is deeply concerning from a child rights perspective. Any system that differentiates the accommodation and protection of children on the basis of nationality risks discrimination and undermines the principle that every child is entitled to protection without discrimination. This measure confirms a worrying and expanding trend across Europe, reinforced by the new laws, in which child protection decisions will be increasingly based on asylum recognition rates or assumptions about the likely outcome of their asylum claim, rather than the child’s best interests and needs assessment.

The normalisation of “safe zones” is also problematic because these spaces have repeatedly been documented as unsuitable for prolonged accommodation of children.⁷ Greek courts have consistently found that children placed in so-called “safe zones” are subjected to *de facto* detention,⁸ as they are not allowed to leave the facility. In recent years, the European Court of Human Rights has also granted interim measures in numerous cases concerning unaccompanied children remaining in “safe zones”.⁹ In practice, children placed in “safe zones” may face severe restrictions on movement, limited access to education, health care, psychosocial support and legal assistance. For a child who has fled conflict, violence, loss or exploitation, placement in a camp-based or closed setting can compound trauma and undermine trust in protection actors.

The law also reintroduces the possibility of detaining unaccompanied children where detention is considered to “safeguard” the child¹⁰. This formulation is particularly worrying. While this reflects an exception allowed under the EU Pact, it risks reopening the door to a form of protective custody logic that Greece had moved away from in recent years. Detention cannot be a child protection measure by design. International standards are clear that immigration detention is **never in the best interests of the child**, and that alternatives to detention and appropriate child protection accommodation must be implemented as a rule.

Age assessment: a gateway safeguard that must not expose children to border procedures.

There is one potentially positive development in the implementation of the national legislation. The law provides that age assessment procedures should be implemented in line with EU standards and that a new Joint Ministerial Decision will be

⁴ Article 40(9) L. 5306/2026.

⁵ Article 82 L. 5307/2026.

⁶ Nationality with a recognition rate below 20% or originated from a safe country of origin (Article 78(4) L. 5307/2026.)

⁷ See for example Save the Children & Greek Council for Refugees, *Children on the move in Greece* | January–April 2025.

⁸ See for example Administrative Court of Rhodes AP61/2025, Administrative Court of Syros AP7/2025, Administrative Court of Athens AP538/2025, Misdemeanor Judicial Council of Crete (Chania) 349/2025 - all Decisions available (in Greek) at [Greek Asylum Case Law Report](#).

⁹ For a brief AIRE Centre/Greek Council for Refugees, [Communication in accordance with Rule 9.2 of the Rules of the Committee of Ministers regarding the supervision of the execution of judgments and of terms of friendly settlements – O.R. v. Greece \(App No 24650/19\) group of cases](#), November 2025.

¹⁰ Article 27 L. 5307/2026.

issued. This appears to validate the need to revise the current age assessment framework that has been largely criticized by many experts¹¹. A new framework is urgently needed to restore safeguards, including the presumption of minority, the best interests of the child, multidisciplinary assessment and the use of medical examinations only as a measure of last resort. However, this positive step might be undermined by the possibility to refer a person declaring to be an unaccompanied child to border procedure where an age assessment procedure has not been finalised by the end of screening¹². This creates a serious protection risk and is against EU Law and international standards according to [experts](#). A child whose age is still being assessed should not be treated as an adult or channeled into a procedure that may lack the safeguards required for children. Pending age assessment, the presumption of minority should apply. This means that the person should be treated as a child until the procedure is completed.

Age assessment is not a technical formality. It is a gateway to protection. If a child is wrongly treated as an adult, they may lose access to guardianship, child-appropriate accommodation, procedural safeguards and protection from detention or unsuitable reception conditions. Under the Pact implementation framework, this risk becomes even more serious because early screening decisions may channel a person into border procedures, where accelerated timelines, restricted access and limited availability of legal assistance and specialised child protection professionals can make it harder to identify children and assess their needs properly. In this context, referring a person whose age is still pending assessment to the border procedure risks exposing children to adult procedures before their status as children has been properly determined.

Independent monitoring: making fundamental rights safeguards effective

A central safeguard under the Pact is the establishment of an independent mechanism to monitor fundamental rights during screening and border procedures.¹³ In Greece, the mechanism was not included in the main Pact implementation legislation but introduced through separate legislation on inheritance law adopted in May 2026. The National Transparency Authority (NTA) was designated as the monitoring body.

This choice raises significant concerns. Effective monitoring is not an administrative detail. It is one of the key safeguards intended to prevent rights violations at the border and in closed or restricted facilities. For children and families, an independent monitoring mechanism should help ensure that safeguards are real in practice: that children are identified, that families are not unlawfully detained, that allegations of ill-treatment or pushbacks are investigated, that reception conditions are monitored, and that complaints can be made safely.

Concerns have been raised about whether the National Transparency Authority has the independence, mandate and human rights expertise required for this role¹⁴. Its statutory mandate is not centred on human rights protection, and questions have also been raised about the process for appointing its leadership¹⁵ and its capacity to investigate rights violations at borders¹⁶. Concerns with regards the independency and the methodology used by NTA in particular for human rights violations at the borders are further depicted in the recent case law of the European Court of Human Rights.¹⁷ The designation of a body that is being found not entirely independent or specialised in human rights risks weakening one of the few safeguards built into the Pact framework. Against this background, GCR [has argued](#) that designating the NTA as the Independent Monitoring Mechanism is an example of undermining any potential safeguards included in the Pact.

For children, this matters because violations often occur in places that are closed, remote or difficult to access: border facilities, screening areas, safe zones, camps and detention-like settings. Without robust independent monitoring, children and families may have no effective way to raise concerns, challenge unlawful restrictions, or obtain protection when safeguards fail.

¹¹ JMD 147627/2025, for more details see Save the Children & Greek Council for Refugees, [Children on the move in Greece I January–March 2026](#).

¹² Article 11(3) L. 5307/2026

¹³ Article 10 of the Screening Regulation & Article 43(4) APR.

¹⁴ See inter alia Greek Ombudsman, [Observation on Article 39 of the draft law Reform of Inheritance Law Provisions](#), 13-5-2026, Greek NCHR, [The NCHR at the Parliamentary Committee with regards the draft Law of the Ministry of Justice](#), 14-5-2026.

¹⁵ Its leadership is proposed by the government and can be approved by a simple parliamentary majority, meaning that appointments do not require broad cross-party consensus, see Joint CSO Report - [Rule of Law in Greece 2023](#), para. 59. Indeed the present Head of the NTA has been elected in August 2025, [only by the votes of the ruling party](#).

¹⁶ The protection of human rights is not included on the statutory purposes of NTA; See also FRA, [Monitoring fundamental rights during screening and the asylum border procedure – A guide on national independent mechanisms](#), 2024; RSA, [Comments on the draft Law](#), May 2026.

¹⁷ ECtHR, A.R.E. v Greece, application no 15783/21, 7-1-2025, paras. 227-228.

3. Protection system for unaccompanied children: hard-won progress at risk.

Recent developments also point to a broader weakening of the protection system for unaccompanied children in Greece.

Child rights organisations have raised [concerns](#) about the closure or possible discontinuation of key services, including emergency accommodation facilities and semi-independent living arrangements, as well as the [suspension of child protection support activities](#) linked to the National Emergency Response Mechanism in Athens following the expiry and non-renewal of cooperation arrangements and delays in funding. This is particularly concerning as over recent years, Greece had made important progress in building a dedicated child protection framework for unaccompanied children, following clear public commitments by the Greek authorities. This included the development of guardianship, specialised shelters, emergency accommodation, semi-independent living arrangements and the National Emergency Response Mechanism, with the support of civil society organisations, international organisations and UNHCR.

These developments raise serious doubts regarding Greece's compliance with the obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. When services are reduced, delayed or left without sustainable funding, children face increased risks of abuse, exploitation, trafficking, homelessness and other serious rights violations.

The protection of unaccompanied children cannot be treated as a temporary response dependent on fluctuating arrival numbers. A functioning, adequately funded and predictable child protection system is a standing obligation of the State and an essential element of preparedness. Dismantling services, losing specialised staff and weakening established mechanisms risks recreating the protection gaps that Greece had worked to overcome in recent years.

The impact of suspended child protection services

"The Network for Children's Rights (NCR) was among the first civil society organizations to support the establishment of the National Emergency Response Mechanism, contributing expertise and experience while providing essential services to unaccompanied children. Until the suspension of our programme, we had supported more than 7,000 children, many of whom were facing severe vulnerabilities and protection risks, including serious health conditions, shipwreck survivors, and victims of trafficking, exploitation and abuse. We sincerely hope that the programme will resume soon, so that these vital services can once again be made available to unaccompanied children in need."

Panos Christodoulou, Executive Director of the Network for Children's Rights

Policy recommendations

Ensure that Pact implementation strengthens, rather than weakens, child protection safeguards

The Greek Government should ensure that the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum does not lower existing child protection standards. Screening, border procedures, restrictions on movement must not delay children's access to asylum, legal information, vulnerability identification, health care, appropriate reception conditions and child protection referrals. The European Commission should closely monitor Greece's implementation to ensure compliance with EU law and fundamental rights and intervene when violations are assessed or suspected.

Children are children first and foremost: protection concerns must never justify detention

Greece should not reverse the progress achieved in ending the detention of unaccompanied children. The reintroduction of measures that deprive children of their liberty, or the renewed use of "safe zones" and Closed Controlled Access Centres beyond short-term emergency reception, risks normalising prolonged stays in settings that are not designed to provide specialised care for unaccompanied children, represents a serious setback for child protection. All unaccompanied children should be referred without delay to specialised, child-appropriate accommodation, guardianship and support. They should never be placed in adult accommodation, detained or held for prolonged periods in closed or restrictive settings. Children are children first and foremost, and protection concerns must never be used to justify their detention, as detention is never in the interest of the child.

Restore safeguards in age assessment procedures

Greek authorities should urgently adopt a revised age assessment framework fully aligned with EU and international child protection standards, which include a multidisciplinary approach through the participation of qualified professionals, and the application of medical assessment only as a measure of last resort when in doubt. Pending the completion of age assessment, the presumption of minority must apply: the person concerned should be treated as a child and should not be referred to border procedures or placed in adult or detention-like settings.

Ensure independent and effective monitoring of children's rights

The Greek Government should ensure that the Independent Monitoring Mechanism required under the Pact is genuinely independent, adequately resourced and equipped with human rights and child protection expertise. The European Commission should assess whether the designated monitoring body meets the requirements of independence and effectiveness under the Screening Regulation, including its capacity to monitor rights violations affecting children and families at borders and in closed or restricted facilities. If independence and effectiveness are not ensured, the Commission should fulfil its obligation to initiate infringement proceedings, now that the Pact is applicable.

Preserve and fund the child protection system for unaccompanied children

The Greek Government should ensure the continuity, adequate funding and timely renewal of specialised services for unaccompanied children. Services developed in recent years - including emergency accommodation facilities, shelters, semi-independent living arrangements, guardianship and the National Emergency Response Mechanism - should not be discontinued or weakened. A stable and adequately resourced child protection system is essential to prevent homelessness, exploitation, trafficking and other serious rights violations.

* 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 19th of June 2026.