

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN GREECE

July – September 2026



1. Arrival trends: renewed pressure on Crete and persistent reception gaps

Children and families continue to arrive in Greece seeking protection. As of late September 2026, [28,210 arrivals](#) had been recorded nationwide. Among [sea arrivals recorded up to 31 July](#), Sudanese and Bangladeshi nationals accounted for 29.4 and 25.8 per cent respectively, followed by people from Afghanistan (9.3 per cent), Egypt (8.5 per cent) and Eritrea (4.5 per cent)¹. As of August 2026, [1,575 unaccompanied children](#) were accommodated in Greece, the majority boys over the age of 15, mainly from Egypt, Afghanistan, Sudan, Bangladesh and Syria.

Crete remained the main arrival point by sea, accounting for around [70 per cent of sea arrivals](#) between January and August 2026. [Of the 13,010 arrivals via Crete during that period, 7,490 occurred between June and August](#). Children are part of this movement: Coast Guard data [recorded](#) 780 children among arrivals to Crete and Gavdos in the first six months of the year. Children and unaccompanied children arriving in Crete and Gavdos are mainly from Egypt, Sudan, Bangladesh and South Sudan.

Reception shortcomings in Crete persisted despite summer arrivals remaining broadly comparable to the previous year². In Heraklion, newly arrived children, including unaccompanied children, have been sleeping on cardboard in a [crowded port building in significant substandard conditions](#). [A local Red Cross representative also described](#) cases of infants arriving with dehydration, highlighting the need for prompt medical screening and care on arrival. Following visits to Agyia, near Chania, and the port of Heraklion in July, the Greek Ombudsman described the abandoned warehouses and former offices used for temporary accommodation as [“unsuitable spaces that aggravate the situation”](#) and called for permanent facilities providing dignified accommodation for those arriving, including children and families. For children arriving with their families or alone, reception must allow prompt identification of their needs, safe and appropriate accommodation, access to health care and referral to child protection services. The continued reliance on unsuitable temporary premises makes those safeguards harder to deliver, despite the recurring and foreseeable need for adequate reception capacity. This is particularly concerning for children arriving via Libya, given the [documented risks of detention, abuse and severe deprivation in Libya before undertaking dangerous sea crossings to Greece](#). Children arriving after such journeys are highly vulnerable and may need urgent health care, psychosocial support and child protection services.

2. EU PACT implementation in Greece: children face delayed access to asylum and prolonged restrictions on movement

The concerns raised in the [Q2 briefing](#) are already emerging in the first months of implementation.

Screening

Following the entry into force of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum on 12 June 2026, the registration of asylum applications [effectively stopped](#) for a significant period [due to administrative failure](#). Registration has gradually resumed, but CSOs in Greece continue to observe [delays](#) in accessing and completing screening, as well as in registering asylum applications, at island Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs) and mainland Reception and Identification Centres (RICs). Screening procedures frequently exceed the applicable deadlines. This leads to two significant problems: first, delayed registration also delays children’s access to the screening

¹ These figures cover sea arrivals only and should not be read as a breakdown of all arrivals in 2026.

² Arrivals in Crete totalled [6,782 between June and August 2025](#), compared with [7,490 over the same period in 2026](#), an increase of approximately 10%. Total number of arrivals first 8 months of 2025 – first 8 months of 2026: [15% decrease](#).

procedure itself, including preliminary vulnerability and health checks, an individual assessment of their needs, appropriate reception conditions and the possibility to lodge an asylum claim. Second, many children, including those with their families, have been constrained in de facto detention facilities for extended time, also exceeding the applicable deadlines.

From preparedness to practice: assessing Pact implementation for children

Children have been facing arrest, detention or delays in accessing protection because the system through which their family is required to register an asylum claim is unavailable.

Families who were not detected by the Police/ Coast Guard on arrival and therefore were not transferred to a CCAC or RIC, have faced additional obstacles in accessing asylum. They must arrange their own appointment through an online platform that has been unavailable for prolonged periods. Seeking protection directly at a reception facility has not always provided an alternative; in some cases, it has instead led to arrest, detention and prosecution. [In a case documented in July](#), a mother and her two children went to Malakasa RIC to seek asylum after failing to obtain an appointment online. Instead of being able to proceed with lodging the asylum request they were refused entry, arrested, detained and a prosecution for “illegal stay” has been initiated. Other similar cases involving mothers and their children from Syria and Afghanistan were reported in July and early September.

Border procedures

The use of the asylum border procedure for families raised further concern because of its significantly broad application. The Head of the Asylum Service issued a [decision](#) allowing the application of the border procedures across both the mandatory and optional grounds provided under the APR. The procedure is also being applied to applicants whose nationalities fall within the Greek authorities’ designation of Türkiye as a “safe third country”, including Syrian and Afghani nationalities. In this respect, it is important to highlight that the [Court of Justice of the EU](#) and the [Greek Council of State](#) have established that an individual asylum application cannot be rejected as inadmissible where readmission to Türkiye is not possible. Nevertheless, the broad application of the border procedure brings more families with minor children within its scope. These families may then remain in border facilities under substantial restrictions on movement.

Concern comes not only in relation to the extended application of the asylum border procedures, which most experts consider inadequate in allowing the application of child specific safeguards and appropriate individual assessment of the children’s situation and needs. Restrictions on movement applied during the border procedure vary considerably between facilities. At Filakio RIC, asylum seekers are prevented from leaving the premises throughout the procedure, resulting in de facto detention. In other RICs or CCACs, the possibility to exit the premises was only granted for varying periods range - three hours on Kos and at Diavata, six hours on Lesbos and Malakasa.³ For children, the concern goes beyond the number of hours they are allowed to leave: restrictions on movement must take account of their individual circumstances and best interests. Any restriction on their movement must have a clear legal basis, be subject to an individual assessment that takes their circumstances and best interests into account and be open to challenge. Prolonged confinement can also undermine children’s access to health care, education and legal assistance, as well as ordinary family and community life. Under the Pact, families with children must be accommodated in facilities appropriate to their needs, following an assessment of the best interests of the child. Where the necessary support for a child cannot be provided, the border procedure must not be applied or must cease.

Legal guidance: gaps in access to a key Pact Safeguard

The Pact introduces free legal guidance at first instance, a safeguard that is particularly important when screening and asylum procedures move quickly. However, by the end of September, the dedicated scheme was not yet operational in Greece. The national framework adopted on 30 June 2026 provided for an additional payment of up to €250 to lawyers if an applicant requested voluntary departure within two months of a legal guidance session. The Greek National Commission for Human Rights [warned](#) that linking payment to this outcome called the independence and impartiality of the guidance into question. A new Joint Ministerial Decision issued in September made this payment conditional on approval by the Bar Associations, which [reiterated their opposition](#), while agreeing to participate in the scheme without the additional payment. During the reporting period, free legal guidance was provided under a transitional provision but was not available in

³ CEAS Sub-Working Group, Meeting Minutes, 21 September 2026.

all locations. It was largely delivered in [group sessions](#), [remotely](#), without lawyers [having access to individual case files](#). These limitations left family with limited opportunities to explain children's specific protection needs or seek advice on matters such as family reunification.

"We fled Afghanistan to save our lives. We passed through five countries to reach a safe place, and ended up in prison"

Woman refugee from Afghanistan who accompanied her two minor grandchildren - arrested when presented themselves in Malakasa RIC to ask for asylum. Convicted with 2 years sentence for "illegal stay" - currently in prison. Testimony collected and case supported by Refugee Support Aegean (RSA)

"The explicit refusal [...] to register an asylum seeker and her children, and the subsequent calling of the police authorities by the Malakasa RIC, which led to their arrest for the criminal offence of illegal stay and to the issuing of an administrative return decision and to their detention by the police authorities - under appalling conditions, no less - constitutes unlawful treatment that flagrantly violates Greek, EU and international law, puts people at risk and offends human dignity. This is not an isolated incident. The establishment of such practices, as well as the circumvention of indisputable human rights in the context of the implementation of the New Pact, are unlawful and are not tolerable in a democratic state" M.Tzeferakou - Lawyer, [RSA](#)

Age assessment: children remain at risk of being treated as adults.

Age assessment remains a critical gap in the implementation of the EU Pact. [Greek implementing legislation](#) requires assessments to comply with Article 25 of the [Asylum Procedure Regulation](#) and provides for a Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD) setting out the procedure. However, no new JMD has been issued since the Pact began to apply on 12 June 2026 and up until now the [previous problematic framework](#) remains in use, despite longstanding concerns about its compatibility with the new requirements. Whilst article 25 requires the assessment to be multidisciplinary and permits medical examinations only as a last resort when doubts remain, the Greek procedure still in use provides for X-rays examinations in all cases and gives priorities to the X-Ray findings over macroscopical and psychosocial assessment.

Age assessment has become an even more consequential safeguard under the Pact. [Greek law](#) allows applicants whose minority remains in doubt after screening to be referred to the asylum border procedure, where the relevant conditions are met, before their age assessment is completed. Legal experts [have raised concerns](#) that this practice conflicts with the presumption of minority, a well-established international legal principle requiring that individuals claiming to be children receive the benefit of the doubt during age assessment. They also question its compatibility with the rule that unaccompanied children are subject to border procedures exclusively on national security or public order grounds. Border procedures are now being used more extensively and often involve prolonged stays in facilities with severe restrictions on movement. This risks depriving children of child-specific safeguards, including guardianship and child-appropriate reception conditions. Applying the presumption of minority is therefore crucial to their safety, wellbeing and fair access to child-specific procedures. [It must continue to apply while age assessment is pending](#), including access to appropriate reception conditions, guardianship where applicable and procedural guarantees.

3. Children accused of smuggling: the need for child justice safeguards

An increasing number of children arriving via Crete is arrested on smuggling allegations (steering the boat or facilitation of entry). A preliminary GCR review of [Hellenic Coast Guard incident reports](#) for 1–25 September 2026 identified 47 people arrested in connection with 45 boat arrivals. Among them, **twenty-two were recorded as children**, some aged 13–15; a further ten were aged 18. All were from Sudan or South Sudan. The reports reviewed include the [arrests of a 16-year-old](#), reported on 1 September, and a [13-year-old](#), reported on 21 September. The arrest of children on similar allegations had also been documented [earlier in the year](#). An allegation that a child steered a boat must trigger a careful examination of the child's circumstances, including possible coercion or exploitation, while preserving the presumption of innocence and [ensuring procedural guarantees](#). Legal standards ensuring [the non-penalization of refugees](#) for breaches of immigration legislation in order to secure their own entry and/or that of family and [the pursuit of financial or other material benefit as a necessary element of the crime of "smuggling"](#) should also be applied.

Protecting civic space to safeguard children's rights

Restrictions on civil society affect the organisations that provide children on the move with legal assistance, protection services and humanitarian support. In September, the Greek Council of State [found key NGO Registry provisions unconstitutional](#), including the Ministry's discretionary power to refuse registration. It also referred questions to the Court of Justice of the EU concerning other registration restrictions and their compatibility with freedom of association and data protection. In its [urgent opinion issued on 28 September](#), the Venice Commission found that some registration requirements exceed what is necessary in a democratic society. It also raised concerns about increased criminal penalties linked to NGO membership and [recommended explicit exemptions from criminal liability for humanitarian assistance](#), including life-saving assistance, rescue and basic care. For children, barriers to organisations' work risk reducing access to essential support and independent advice, particularly where public services already fall short. The threat of prosecution may also deter assistance and the reporting of rights violations.

Policy recommendations

Provide safe reception for children arriving in Crete

The Greek Government should establish suitable reception facilities in Crete and ensure that children arriving with families or alone are promptly identified and referred to health care and child protection services. Children should not have to stay in overcrowded places without adequate bedding or washing facilities.

Limit the border procedure and protect children's liberty under the Pact

The Greek Government should avoid applying the optional grounds for the border procedure to families with children and should not rely on Türkiye's "safe third country" designation where readmission is not possible. Each child's circumstances and best interests must be assessed before a family is referred to the procedure; it must cease if the child's needs cannot be met. Restrictions on movement must have an individual, written basis, be proportionate, open to challenge and should not amount to *de facto* detention. The European Commission should examine these practices as part of its monitoring of Pact implementation.

Make legal guidance and age assessment effective safeguards

The Greek Government should ensure access to confidential and independent legal guidance from the start of the asylum process and remove any provision linking lawyers' remuneration to applicants' decisions to depart voluntarily. It should urgently adopt an age assessment procedure aligned with Article 25 of the Asylum Procedure Regulation. While age remains in doubt, children should receive child-specific protection and should **not be treated as adults**.

Apply child justice safeguards to children accused of smuggling

Possible coercion or exploitation should be examined in cases of children accused of smuggling. Child justice safeguards, including timely assistance from a lawyer, individual assessment and appointment of a Guardian should be provided. Legal standards ensuring [the non-penalization of refugees](#) for breaches of immigration legislation and [the pursuit of financial or other material benefit as a necessary element of the crime of "smuggling"](#) should also be applied.

Protect civic space to safeguard children's right

The Greek authorities should revise NGO registration requirements in line with the Council of State's findings and the Venice Commission's recommendations, enabling organisations to support children and families. Legislation should explicitly exempt life-saving assistance, rescue and basic humanitarian care from criminal liability, safeguarding children's access to essential support.

* 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 October 11th, 2026.