

This piece shows the dire situation for refugees during the pandemic in Greece, in a context where the recently elected government had already been implementing anti-migrant and anti-refugee policies. The infamously overcrowded refugee camps faced additional hardship due to deliberately harsh government measures.

HOW COVID-19 HAS HIGHLIGHTED THE ANTI-MIGRATION AGENDA IN GREECE



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Greece made headlines in March and April and won significant praise for its response to Covid-19. By imposing strict limitations on movement less than two weeks after its first reported case, in combination with other drastic measures, the country managed to successfully contain the spread of the virus.

Less discussed are the ways in which the Coronavirus has affected Greek society and its most vulnerable and marginalised groups, in particular, asylum seekers and refugees. For them the pandemic is a potential threat to their fundamental rights in an increasingly hostile environment.

Since coming into power in July 2019, the New Democracy government has taken a hard line against migration by swiftly changing laws and policies.¹ Reports of illegal and violent pushbacks by authorities against migrants are increasing- an indication that new methods to keep refugees out of the country are being tested and implemented.² One of the government's earliest actions was the violent evacuation of squats- where refugees who could not access overcrowded camps were staying- without offering viable alternatives.³ The government's ongoing anti-migration rhetoric has created an unprecedented opportunity for far-right groups to promote their xenophobic and racist agenda leading to an increase in violent attacks against refugees and those who assist them.⁴

1 <https://www.asylumineurope.org/news/29-10-2019/greece-new-restrictions-rights-and-procedural-guarantees-international-protection>

2 <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/6/5ee33a6f4/unhcr-calls-greece-investigate-pushbacks-sea-land-borders-turkey.html>

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/26/greece-police-raid-athens-squats-exarcheia-arrest-migrants-agency-reports>

4 <http://rvrn.org/2020/03/racist-violence-recording-network-serious-concern-over-attacks-against-refugees-and-humanitarian-workers/>

It is in this context that the Coronavirus outbreak started in Greece in March 2020, exacerbating the already dire living conditions for refugees and creating additional barriers to their protection and integration. Preventative measures taken by the government included a six-week restriction of movement for all residents, during which time movement permits were mandatory. These measures, however, were not proportionately and equally applied to the whole population, especially when it came to migrants.

RESTRICTION OF MOVEMENT IN REFUGEE CAMPS

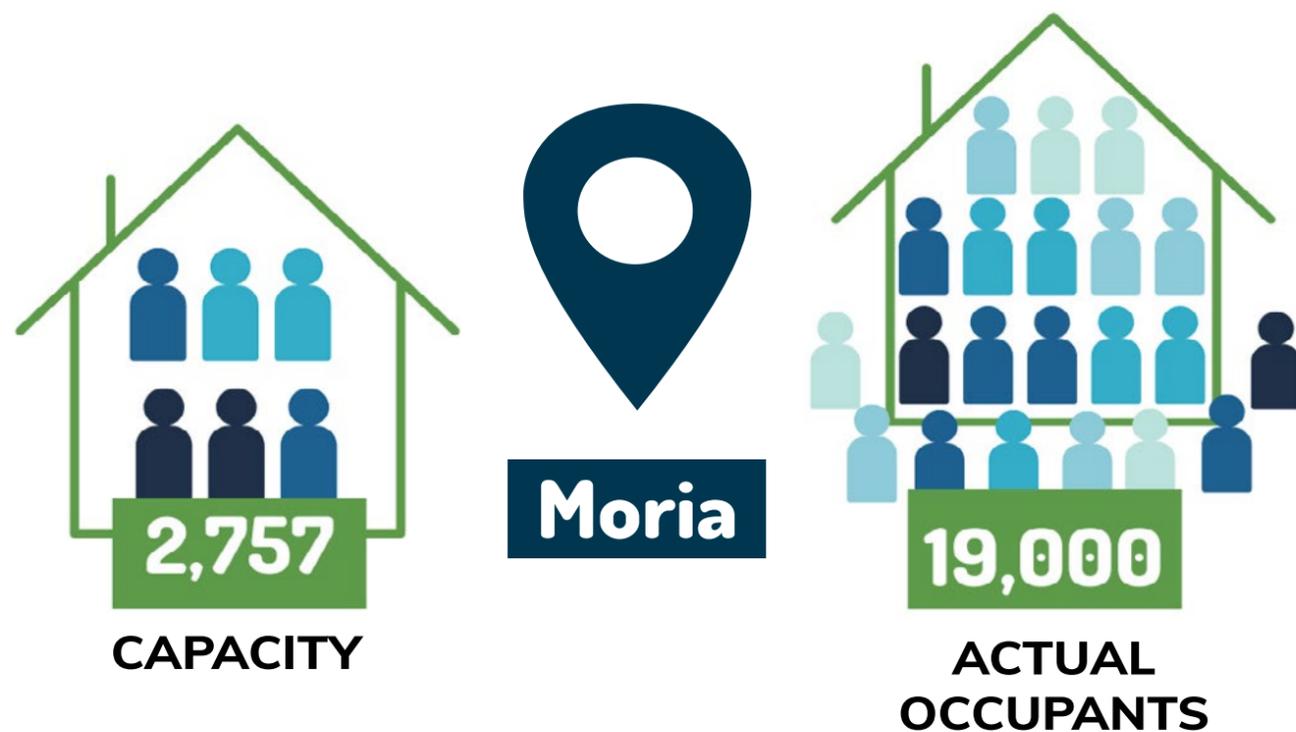
At the refugee Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) on the east Aegean islands, the government imposed a tougher lockdown, severely limiting the movement of residents even though no Covid-19 cases were reported during the six-week national lockdown period.⁵ Over the last four years, these facilities have become infamous for overcrowding, as well as for their appalling and inhumane living conditions. When the lockdown started, the Moria RIC on Lesbos housed more than 19,000 migrants while its actual capacity was just 2,757. The situation on other islands was similar,⁶ characterised by limited access to proper sanitation, food and basic services, including healthcare. Given overpopulation, the creation of Covid-19 isolation areas was impossible and an outbreak of the virus would rapidly spread among residents. The enforcement of lockdowns in the RICs

5 No Covid-19 cases were reported in the RICs between March and August

6 <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/8279/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea-22-3-2020/?lang=en>



Refugee Reception and Identification Centres before lockdown



created additional hardships for residents as it prevented them from going to nearby towns for food, medicine and other basic needs and put their lives at risk, potentially exposing healthy people to the virus.

Eventually, the government proceeded with a response plan that included, among other measures, the transfer of some of the most vulnerable RIC residents to hotels in mainland Greece and the creation of Covid-19 isolation areas outside the facilities. Initial proposals for transfers to hotels on the islands were turned down by local authorities who have grown frustrated over the years with the mismanagement of the situation. In some cases, local authorities were unwilling to collaborate with the central government and NGOs on the new isolation centres, even forcing one to close.⁷ Both examples are indicative of the gaps and inadequacies in the implementation of the response plan which, considering the overcrowded state of the RICs, was impossible to execute.

The situation in the camps on the mainland was similar. Strict lockdowns were applied, and some camps went into full quarantine when several refugees tested positive for the virus, causing stress and frustration among residents. Even more troublesome was the government's decision to continue the lockdowns of all RICs and camps even after movement restrictions and mandatory permits were lifted for the rest of the country. Meanwhile, none of the camps had reported Covid-19 cases at the time. These lockdowns, which remain in place today, are unjustified and discriminatory and run the risk of becoming the norm, especially since the government announced its intention to build new 'closed' camps well before the pandemic.⁸

⁷ <https://www.msf.org/msf-forced-close-covid-19-centre-lesbos-greece>

⁸ <https://www.themigrantproject.org/greece-closed-camps/>

“Until [the government] proceeds with a proper emergency response plan that places people in safe and adequate housing, people’s lives will be at risk and a potential second Coronavirus wave in the fall could have catastrophic results.”

FURTHER MEASURES AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON REFUGEES

During the lockdown, many refugees did not have access to sufficient information about the pandemic in a language that they understand and found it hard to comprehend the extraordinary government measures that led to fines for “non-essential movement”. Newcomers could not apply for asylum since the asylum service had closed its doors to the public. As a result, newcomers were denied access to the healthcare system and labour market, as proof of application for international protection is required for refugees to access most services. Refugees who were gainfully employed had to stop working, yet they could not access financial assistance from the state because

most of them work on the black market. Children stopped going to school and families found it hard to adjust to the digital environment due to lack of mobile equipment, digital literacy or access to the internet.

Greece has never had a social housing programme and social services for citizens are limited. Accommodation and social services for refugees are even scarcer, and the current government has consistently put in place obstacles that preclude meaningful integration. However, some housing schemes exist for asylum-seekers awaiting the outcome of their application, and the Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection programme (HELIOS) - the only programme for recognised refugees - was created just 15 months ago. While HELIOS is supposed to contribute to rent costs for up to one year, the



programme is hard to get into and approximately 70 percent of those enrolled have yet to receive their subsidies.⁹ Meanwhile, the Greek rental market has seen a dramatic price increase in the last years and migrants are often turned away by landlords. It is in this context that, prior to the pandemic, the government announced a change in legislation, which would force refugees out of their accommodation within 30 days of receiving official refugee status - whereas the grace period had previously been six months. Refugees and communities that work with them were heartened when these forced evictions were paused for six weeks, but it was to be short-lived, as the forced evictions immediately resumed after lockdown measures were lifted.¹⁰ As the forced evictions began in earnest in early June, hundreds of recognised refugees became homeless overnight, seeking shelter in Victoria Square¹¹ and other locations in central Athens.

The impact of strict lockdowns and other restrictions imposed by the government exclusively on refugee populations is yet to be fully understood. However, civil society organisations that work with the refugee community are reporting an increase in mental health issues, domestic violence, and levels of stress.

9 https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/HELIOS%20Factsheet%20September%2020%20W3_0.pdf

10 <https://www.solidaritynow.org/en/exits/>

11 <https://rsaegean.org/en/recognised-but-unprotected-the-situation-of-refugees-in-victoria-square/>

AD-HOC SOLUTIONS ARE NOT THE ANSWER

In September, the first Covid-19 case in an island RIC was confirmed. Shortly thereafter, another 35 people were found to be positive and Moria camp in Lesvos was quarantined. A few days later the camp was evacuated due to a massive fire, forcing approximately 13,000 people to sleep rough. Arson was determined to be the cause - allegedly an attempt to destroy the camp after the harsher restrictive measures were announced. Police and far-right groups gathered around the camps to stop refugees from moving to other locations whilst tensions between local villagers and asylum-seekers mounted. A new temporary camp, which is likely to become a closed facility, was built nearby to host the homeless refugees. In central Athens, riot police rounded up recognised refugees sleeping in Victoria Square, taking them to detention centres.

Unless the government changes its anti-migration narrative and agenda, and until it proceeds with a proper emergency response plan that places people in safe and adequate housing, people's lives will be at risk and a potential second Coronavirus wave in the fall could have catastrophic results. At the same time, the EU should meaningfully share responsibility - sending funds is not enough. Since April, a coalition of willing Member States have safely and successfully relocated hundreds of unaccompanied children from the Greek islands to their territory.¹² More countries should join the coalition and more vulnerable groups should be included in the relocation programme to bring people stranded in deplorable conditions in Greece to safety.

12 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1288

