Motivations, experiences and consequences of returns and readmissions policy: revealing and developing effective alternatives

National Summary Report

Experiences, expectations and views of migrants and professionals in the field around RR and alternative policies

Case Study: Greece

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This document provides a concise summary of the key findings of **MORE Project WP5 in Greece**. For detailed analysis, evidence, and comprehensive insights, please refer to the full report. The information in this summary should not be considered complete or fully representative of the entire study.

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Introduction

This national report investigates the lived realities of irregular migrants in Greece and the perspectives of professionals who work to support them. Drawing on qualitative research—comprising semi-structured interviews with NGO workers, social workers, and legal professionals, and structured interviews with irregular migrants—the study offers insights into the effects of return and readmission (RR) policies on daily life, rights, and access to services. The findings highlight how restrictive migration frameworks, administrative opacity, and social exclusion have combined to create a state of prolonged legal and social limbo for thousands of migrants in Greece.

Executive Summary

Irregular migrants in Greece experience deep exclusion from formal systems of housing, employment, healthcare, and legal protection. The Greek state's non-recognition of irregular status produces what participants described as a "non-regime," where individuals effectively "do not exist" in institutional terms. This exclusion drives them toward informal economies, exploitative labor arrangements, and substandard living conditions.

Support actors—mostly women—described their work as increasingly constrained by policy shifts and funding cuts, while migrants reported relying almost entirely on community networks and social media for information and survival strategies. Gendered patterns were striking: nearly all interviewed migrants were men, while nearly all support actors were women. Female irregular migrants remain largely invisible and at heightened risk of exploitation or trafficking[1].

Healthcare emerged as a major point of concern. Despite formal entitlements for asylum seekers, practical access is limited due to staff shortages, lack of interpreters, and bureaucratic confusion. Many irregular migrants avoid hospitals altogether,

[1] See for instance: La Cascia C, Cossu G, Lindert J, Holzinger A, Zreik T, Ventriglio A, Bhugra D. Migrant Women-experiences from the Mediterranean Region. Clin Pract Epidemiol Ment Health. 2020 Jul 30;16(Suppl-1):101-108. doi: 10.2174/1745017902016010101. PMID: 33029187; PMCID: PMC7536719 and Reuters, "Greece failed to identify sex trafficking victims in migrant centre, UN expert allege"s: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greece-failed-identify-sex-trafficking-victims-migrant-centre-un-expert-alleges-2024-12-02/

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relying instead on peers for medication or informal treatment. Legal uncertainty and misinformation around asylum and residence procedures further perpetuate insecurity. Even where legal pathways exist—such as the "three-year law"[2] or bilateral labor agreements (notably with Bangladesh)—implementation delays and shifting policies hinder progress toward regularisation.

Overall, the research reveals a system marked by instability and exclusion, where migrants' resilience contrasts sharply with the institutional neglect they face.

Key findings

Living Conditions and Access to Services

Irregular migrants reported extreme difficulty accessing stable housing, medical care, and fair employment. Many live in overcrowded or informal settings, excluded from rental markets due to lack of papers. Employment is often exploitative, with long hours and minimal pay. Healthcare access depends on individual initiative or NGO intervention, as hospitals frequently deny treatment to undocumented patients.

Support actors described filling systemic gaps through improvised solutions—interpreting, escorting migrants to services, or providing basic medical supplies. They emphasized the emotional burden and lack of institutional support for their work.

Social Connections, (Im)Mobility, and Protection

Spatial isolation—particularly in remote camps—severely limits migrants' mobility and access to information. One interviewee stressed that "the most important thing of all is to get people out of the camps… If they live in urban areas or close to towns and cities, they will be more informed; that would greatly help with integration." The confinement of people to remote, controlled spaces effectively curtails their ability to participate in social life or access available resources in urban settings like Athens, where community organizations and migrant networks are more active.

[2] The option for migrants who entered after **30 November 2023** to use this "three-year" undocumented residence route under Article 193 no longer seems to apply to them. The law clearly uses that date as a cutoff. So if someone arrived or became undocumented after that date, they are **not eligible** under this provision.See: https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/GR-2023-51_3872.html?utm_source=

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Migrants primarily rely on peers, social media, and informal community networks for information and mutual support. This has created transnational information chains, with decisions about onward movement or return shaped by word-of-mouth.

Policy Environment and Alternatives to Returns

Participants expressed concern over the increasingly punitive tone of migration governance. When asked about alternatives to returns, one professional argued that the very concept of "returns" needs to be redefined:

"It's not so much about not doing returns; it's about doing them in a rational way… Let's build a network or a legal framework that ensures someone works for three years, that this work is not black, that there are no labor violations—and then they can go back. It's like the Greece–Bangladesh agreement… It's not realistic to stop returns; it's the wrong way we perceive them."

This reflects a call for pragmatic, rights-based mobility frameworks that recognize cyclical and legal migration as preferable to coercive deportation.

Another support actor criticized the dominant discourse of "migration management," urging a shift away from crisis-driven and control-oriented practices:

"We must stop adopting these control and management type practices that actually push people to death… The state handed everything to NGOs, but NGOs have their own interests too. There is no concept of care."

This critique highlights the fragmentation and outsourcing of migration governance in Greece, where state responsibility has been diffused across a patchwork of NGO-led interventions with inconsistent standards.

Finally, a youth center program manager voiced frustration over the allocation of EU funds:

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"Money is being funded for programs that are completely meaningless… They produce manuals and guides one after another, while we struggle to remain open and serve 800–1000 young adults a year."

Such reflections underscore the disconnect between policy rhetoric and grassroots realities, with underfunded community initiatives bearing the burden of front-line support.

Emerging and Relevant Issues

Interviews with migrants revealed that Greece is often not their intended destination. Many had aimed for Italy, attracted by word-of-mouth accounts of easier regularisation and work opportunities. Financial constraints or trafficker demands forced some to stop in Greece. One migrant recalled:

"There was a rumour that they had opened legal documents here… It was financial problems that forced me to stop in Greece. The trafficker wanted more money if I wanted to go to Germany or Italy."

Several interviewees planned to move onward, citing Greece's frozen "three-year law" and exploitative work conditions:

"I've decided that this coming summer I will go to Italy. Because it's easier to acquire documents there. Here when you are illegal, you work longer for less money."

These accounts illustrate the interconnectedness of national regimes within the EU migration system—where restrictive policies in one country directly influence mobility decisions toward others.

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Conclusions

As Greece enforces stricter return and regularisation policies, irregular migrants face heightened precarity and exclusion. Their experiences—defined by legal uncertainty, spatial segregation, and institutional neglect—illustrate how deterrence-based policies undermine integration and human dignity.

Support actors, working under immense strain, continue to demonstrate resilience, empathy, and creativity in addressing migrants' needs. However, the reliance on NGO structures without systemic accountability reveals a deep governance gap.

The report underscores the need for:

- **Policy coherence and transparency**, ensuring that return and regularisation mechanisms are humane, realistic, and rights-based.

- **Deconcentration of camps**, enabling migrants to access urban networks, information, and integration opportunities.

- **Reinvestment in community-based structures**, particularly youth and women's centers, which provide essential social and educational support.

- **Balanced migration governance**, where state institutions reclaim responsibility for care and protection rather than outsourcing it.

Ultimately, Greece's migration landscape demands a shift from crisis "management" to long-term inclusion, grounded in dignity, legality, and social justice.