

Refugees without identification documents

The Greek Asylum Service must urgently resolve technical problems

A large number of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in Greece have remained for months without access to basic rights and face inhumane living conditions such as homelessness, hunger, poverty and no access to or continuation of urgent medical examinations, treatment and medication, as they have not been provided with the necessary identification documents. The Asylum Service, the competent issuing authority, informs them in writing or orally that it is unable to grant them an International Protection Applicant Card (Δελτίο Αιτούντος Διεθνή Προστασία, DADP), citing "technical problems" related to the lack of equipment or the inability to issue a Provisional Foreigner's Insurance and Health Care Number (Προσωρινός Αριθμός Ασφάλισης και Υγειονομικής Περιθαλψής Αλλοδαπού, PAAΥPA).

Technical problems related to the PAAΥPA issuance system

The problem with the issuance of the Temporary Foreigner's Insurance and Health Care Number (PAAΥPA), introduced after the Greek Government **abolished** the right of asylum seekers to a Social Security Number (Αριθμός Μητρώου Κοινωνικής Ασφάλισης, AMKA) in the summer of 2019, emerged at the beginning of this year and in an increasing number of cases from April 2022 onwards. It arose upon the interconnection of involved services in the "Alkyoni" database, and specifically after the entry therein of the Social Security Electronic Governance (Ηλεκτρονική Διακυβέρνηση Κοινωνικής Ασφάλισης, IDIKA), with the aim of automatically granting PAAΥPA to all applicants for asylum. IDIKA recognises the personal details of the beneficiaries from a potential previous issuance of PAAΥPA, AMKA or Temporary Social Security Number (Προσωρινός Αριθμός Μητρώου Κοινωνικής Ασφάλισης, PAMKA). In these cases, the system declares that there is already an insurance number and does not allow the issuance of PAAΥPA. As a result, identification documents cannot be issued. In for a new PAAΥPA number to be assigned and thereby for a DADP to be issued, the pre-existing social security number must first be deleted.

Among the people faced with this "technical problem" are various cases at different stages of the asylum process. Indicatively, it may concern the following:

- * Those who received PAMKA for their vaccination against COVID-19 before the issuance and acquisition of PAAΥPA;
- * Those who received a negative asylum decision and their PAAΥPA was deactivated but later lodged a subsequent application;
- * Those who have received a positive decision to their asylum application but do not have an asylum seeker card (e.g. because they are in detention), are recognised refugees who have been returned from other EU Member States and have never received residence permits in Greece, persons whose protection status had been revoked but who later received a (new) protection status but also those who received a positive asylum decision following a subsequent asylum application.

Refugees deprived of their basic rights

Instead of an asylum seeker card, the Asylum Service Offices issue to the beneficiaries either "asylum seeker certificates" or "international protection beneficiary certificates". These certificates state the details and status of the persons concerned, as well as the fact that an asylum card cannot be issued due to a "technical problem". According to reports these certificates are not even granted in certain cases. It has also been observed that the beneficiaries' details regarding their status in the asylum procedure are incorrectly stated on some certificates.

The asylum seeker card is of vital importance for both asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, as it proves the identity of the holder and the legality of their stay in Greece. The aforementioned certificates are not recognised as identification documents by public authorities such as the Police, Citizen Service Centres (Κέντρα Εξυπηρέτησης Πολιτών, KEP) of municipalities, tax offices, public hospitals etc. In addition, the certificates do not contain a PAAΥPA or AMKA, although these numbers necessary for a series of administrative actions and especially unhindered access to health care.

In practice, regardless of their status as asylum seekers or beneficiaries of international protection, people are unable to rent a flat, to work, to open a bank account, to sign solemn declarations and to have their signatures certified before KEP. This restricts their access to legal assistance and representation. The complete lack of identification documents hinders people's access to public education, their ability to obtain a tax number or to change their details at the tax office. Finally, they are under a constant risk of arrest and detention, since they do not hold any identification document carrying their photo and personal details. The Asylum Service certificates do not guarantee any protection against arrest and detention.

Furthermore, asylum seekers cannot even provide the necessary identification to start / continue receiving cash assistance. Persons housed the "ESTIA II" accommodation scheme for applicants for international protection are at risk of having their housing contracts disrupted and may be exposed to homelessness. Beneficiaries of international protection cannot submit a request for a residence permit (Άδεια Διαμονής Ενιαίου Τύπου, ADET) or a travel document, as the police authorities require them to produce a valid asylum seeker's card. They are also excluded from social benefits and guaranteed minimum income or are unable to enrol on the "HELIOS" integration programme (Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection).

Civil society and lawyers denounce state inaction

The Greek authorities' assurances that the technical problems would be resolved by August 2022 through an amendment to the existing regulations (Joint Ministerial Decision 717/31.01.2020, Gov. Gazette B' 199) have not been implemented to date. This amendment would provide for the possibility of converting PAMKA to PAAYPA or AMKA and is said to be expected in the coming weeks. Yet, it remains unclear whether the aforementioned issues will be immediately resolved or whether more time will be needed to address said technical problems. In any case, a substantial backlog of cases will be created as a result of this problem, been known to the relevant authorities for months. A large number of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection will have to wait even longer to obtain the documents they are entitled to and to access basic rights.

Organisations defending the rights of refugees, including Refugee Support Aegean (RSA), as well as private lawyers, have addressed the competent authorities, requesting immediate resolution of these problems. Reports have been submitted to the Ombudsman, leading to interventions towards the authorities on the issue. In a related response, the Asylum Service (514277/05.09.2022) stated that: "*Issues such as those mentioned above will be definitively resolved after the issuance of the new JMD by the Ministry of Labour as regards A.M.K.A, and the new JMD regarding P.A.A.Y.P.A from our Ministry, which are expected in the immediate future. With the new procedures, depending on the status of the applicant, there will be a transition from A.M.K.A. to P.A.A.Y.P.A. and vice versa.*" Nevertheless, the problem has yet to be addressed in most cases, at least with regard to the issuance of PAAYPA.

Joint Ministerial Decision 605869/2022 on the issuance of PAAYPA, entering into force on 1 November 2022, is expected to resolve those difficulties, once implemented. However, the actual time of delivery of the necessary identification documents in pending cases is unclear.

The case of Khaled from Syria is illustrative. Khaled has been in Greece since 2019 and only received international protection status in August 2022 following a subsequent asylum application. To this day, however, he cannot apply for a residence permit. In the absence of any identification documents, he is deprived of access to his legally guaranteed rights as a refugee status holder in Greece. As a torture victim with psychological problems, he is in need of psychopharmacological treatment, but his PAAYPA has been deactivated and harsh living conditions compound his condition.*

"My PAAYPA has not been working for more than 1.5 years, since I received the negative decision on the first asylum request I had submitted. I live in a camp where I have been informed that I will have to leave since I have been recognised as a refugee. A month ago, I contacted the HELIOS programme to sign up but they told me to wait for their phone call. They told me I would not be able to proceed with the process without documents. I can't even work - I cannot even get a tax number. I'm not well mentally. I can't even get a free Public Transport Card for the unemployed. I was without papers for many months because they rejected my initial asylum request, but now that I got asylum I am again without papers. I had many dreams about my life in Greece but they got scattered in the wind."

* Names have been changed to protect the identity and privacy of the persons concerned

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