

The State of the World's Human Rights; Greece 2023

Excessive use of force

Reports persisted of unlawful use of force in police operations, including the policing of demonstrations such as protests following the Tempi rail disaster in February.

In June, a court in the capital, Athens, convicted a police officer of torture in its “misdemeanour form” for beating a student during a Covid-19 check in Nea Smyrni square in March 2021. A second police officer was convicted as an accessory.

In November, an appeals court found police responsible for the life-threatening injuries sustained by psychologist Yiannis Kafkas during a 2011 demonstration in Athens, and awarded him compensation.

Right to life

In September, Kostas Manioudakis died following alleged ill-treatment by police during a stop-and-search operation in the village of Vryses in Crete.

In October, a prosecutor proposed indicting a police officer for intentional homicide and illegally discharging his weapon in relation to the lethal shooting of a 16-year-old Roma, Kostas Frangoulis, in 2022 in the city of Thessaloniki.

In November, 17-year-old Christos Michalopoulos was fatally shot by a police officer in Leontari in Aliartos municipality following a car chase. The officer was charged with homicide with possible intent and illegally discharging his firearm.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

Human rights violations continued at Greece’s borders, including unlawful, summary returns, in some cases accompanied by violence.

On 14 June, several hours after its initial sighting by an aircraft of Frontex, the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency, , a boat carrying an estimated 750 people, including many children, sank off the coast of Pylos. Only 104 people survived. Survivors consistently told Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) that the Greek coastguard had towed the vessel with a rope, causing it to veer and then capsize. Independent reports by reputable NGOs and media sources described a similar version of events, but this narrative was strongly denied by the Greek authorities.¹ Amnesty International and HRW also documented serious failures by the Greek authorities in handling the rescue efforts, noting in addition that the subsequent investigations opened by the Greek authorities into the actions of the coastguard made little progress and that authorities may have undermined the integrity of key evidence. In November, the Greek Ombudsman opened an inquiry into the coastguard’s actions, citing their refusal to conduct an internal disciplinary investigation. In July, the EU Ombudsman announced an inquiry into the role of Frontex in search-and-rescue activities in the Mediterranean, including in the Pylos shipwreck. The incident highlighted the desperate need for safe and legal migration routes to Europe.

From July, there was a rise in refugees and migrants arriving by sea, bringing the total arrivals for the year to more than 41,000, compared with fewer than 13,000 in 2022. This exacerbated the already challenging living conditions in the reception facilities on the islands, such as in the “closed controlled access centre” (CCAC) on Samos, where the authorities imposed a regime of de facto detention on new arrivals. In January, the European Commission initiated infringement proceedings regarding Greece’s failure to comply with EU law on asylum and migration. This concerned obstacles to refugees’ access to social protection, and the practice introduced by domestic law in 2022 of depriving people in reception and identification procedures of their liberty for up to 25 days. In July, the EU Ombudsman opened an inquiry into how the European Commission ensures compliance with fundamental rights in the context of its support to CCACs.

In October, the European Court of Human Rights condemned Greece for failing to grant adequate medical care to an HIV-positive asylum seeker in two reception facilities.

Wildfires in the Evros region (see below, Right to a healthy environment) fuelled racist rhetoric and abuses against migrants and refugees.

A legislative amendment passed in December allowed undocumented migrants who had been in Greece for at least three years as of the end of November 2023, and who held a job offer, to apply for a three-year residence permit. The amendment also reduced the time asylum seekers were required to wait before being able to work from six months to 60 days from the time their asylum requests were lodged.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders continued to face criminalization for their work with refugees and migrants. Although misdemeanour charges against Sarah Mardini and Séan Binder were dropped in August by the Supreme Court, the following month they and 22 other defendants were indicted for four felonies including forming and membership of a criminal organization, and facilitating irregular entry.

Concerns remained about the criminal charges ongoing against Panayote Dimitras, spokesperson of the NGO Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM), and Tommy Olsen, head of the NGO Aegean Boat Report, in relation to their work assisting refugees and migrants at Greece’s borders and reporting cases of border violence and unlawful returns. In January, authorities imposed restrictive measures on Panayote Dimitras, although a ban on him working with the GHM was reversed in May. NGOs were also concerned about a smear campaign and judicial harassment of Panayote Dimitras.

Right to privacy

In July, an investigation by Greece’s data protection authority into the use of Predator spyware traced 350 SMS messages attempting to install surveillance software; 88 individuals were notified that their mobile phones had been targeted.

In September, civil society and members of the European Parliament expressed concern about the sudden replacement by the Greek parliament of several members of the Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy (ADAE) at a crucial time for the investigation of the spyware scandal.

In October, during a European Parliament committee hearing, the head of ADAE expressed his concern that a current and a former member of ADAE were subjects of a criminal investigation, while to date no one had been charged for spyware use.

Rights of people with disabilities

In September, a ferry captain and three of his crew were charged in connection with the drowning of Antonis Kargiotis, a ferry passenger. One of the crew was recorded using racist slurs about Antonis Kargiotis. Disability rights activists called on authorities to investigate a possible hate motive behind the case, due to the victim's reported health condition.

LGBTI people's rights

During the year, derogatory and harmful discourse in political and media spheres about LGBTI people sparked concern.

In April, the Racist Violence Recording Network reported 38 hate crimes in 2022 where the targets were LGBTI individuals or those defending their rights.

Freedom of expression

In April, it was reported that in December 2022 a court had accepted in part a civil lawsuit against journalist Stavroula Poulimeni and the independent media cooperative Alterthess, ordering the media outlet to pay EUR 3,000 in damages to a gold mining company's senior executive. An appeal was filed against the ruling. The case, bearing the hallmarks of a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP), stemmed from an alleged breach of data protection laws after Stavroula Poulimeni reported on the executive's conviction by a first instance court for environmental damage.

Women's rights

Between January and early December, there were 14 reported femicides. In its November report, the Group of Experts monitoring the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (GREVIO) expressed deep concern that the 2021 "joint custody" legislation lacked sufficient safeguards to ensure that incidents of domestic violence were taken into account in the determination of child custody and visitation rights.

In October, a prosecutor proposed indicting two police officers for the group rape of a young woman at Omónia police station in Athens in October 2022, and a third police officer as an accessory.

Conscientious objectors' rights

Conscientious objectors continued to face arrest and repeated punishment through fines and trials by military courts. According to information published in 2023, 67% of applications for conscientious objector status invoking non-religious grounds were rejected in 2022. Some of those discriminatory rejections were annulled by the Supreme Administrative Court, while others were pending before the court at year's end.

Greece still failed to implement the 2021 UN Human Rights Committee decision concerning the case of conscientious objector Lazaros Petromelidis, which found multiple violations of the ICCPR.

Right to health

In September, the Council of Europe's European Committee of Social Rights found admissible a collective complaint filed by Amnesty International. The complaint argued that the Greek

government had violated provisions of the European Social Charter on the right to health and the prohibition on discrimination due to the impact on the health system of austerity measures introduced after the 2009-2010 financial crisis.

During the year, health workers' unions reported significant challenges including persistent lack of staff and underfunding.

Right to a healthy environment

Despite reported progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuels still accounted for most of Greece's energy use. In December, three environmental organizations asked the European Commission to hold Greece accountable for systematically giving a "free pass" to oil and gas drilling off the country's coasts.

Human-induced climate change was found to increase the likelihood and intensity of extreme heat and floods in Greece. Between July and September, destructive wildfires and floods resulted in at least 38 confirmed deaths and the loss of natural habitat, the lives of thousands of animals and people's livelihoods. The wildfire in Evros region was the largest ever recorded in the EU and killed at least 20 people thought to be refugees and migrants.² Following the catastrophic wildfires, the World Wildlife Fund expressed concern at the failure of the national firefighting system and urged the authorities to adopt radical changes to protect forests.
