

World Report 2024



Greece

Events of 2023

Syrian survivor Mohammad, 18, who was rescued with other people after their boat, the Adriana, sank off the Greek coast, hugs his brother Fadi, who came to meet him from Netherlands, as they reunite at the port of Kalamata, Greece, June 16, 2023.

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During 2023, abuses against asylum seekers and migrants continued, including violent pushbacks, abuses in detention, and vigilante violence. The government also smeared and judicially harassed civil society groups working with asylum seekers and migrants. Media freedom curbs continued to raise concerns about the rule of law, as did a surveillance scandal. Victims of hate crimes were reluctant to report attacks to the police. The New Democracy Party was returned to government following June elections.

Attacks on Civil Society

The European Commission's [2023 Rule of Law Report](#) noted shrinking space for civil society. CIVICUS, a nongovernmental group assessing civic freedoms globally, [downgraded](#) civic space in Greece from “narrowed” to “obstructed” due to “the repeated targeting of civil society and activists working with refugees and asylum seekers, disproportionate responses to protests and continuous legal harassment and surveillance of journalists.”

United Nations special rapporteur on human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, [noted in a March report](#) to the UN Human Rights Council that migrant rights defenders “have been subjected to smear campaigns, a changing regulatory environment, threats and attacks and the misuse of criminal law against them, to a shocking degree.”

Judicial review [applications](#) challenging a problematic 2020 regulatory legal framework for nongovernmental groups working with migrants were pending before the Council of State—Greece’s highest administrative court—as of late October.

At the end of 2022, Greek authorities brought [unfounded charges](#) against two migrants’ rights defenders, Panayote Dimitras and Tommy Olsen, for their work shedding light on human rights violations taking place at Greece’s borders and seeking justice for those affected. In May 2023, Dimitras [learned via leaks](#) in the media that Greece’s Anti-Money Laundering Authority had ordered a freezing of his assets pending an investigation of alleged misuse of European Union and other funding related to his organization’s work. He was notified of the decision to freeze one bank account in July.

In January 2023, the Court of Appeal of Mytilene [found procedural flaws](#) in what a European Parliament report called the “largest case of [criminalization of solidarity](#) in Europe” against Sarahardini, Séan Binder, and 22 other defendants, and it rejected part of the case. The case relates to efforts in 2018 to help rescue migrants and asylum seekers in the Aegean Sea.

In February, the prosecution appealed the decision, and an appeal hearing took place in May. In June, the Supreme Court recognized that there had been major procedural flaws and rejected the prosecution’s appeal. A linked [investigation](#) against a group of humanitarians, including Sarahardini and Binder, for alleged smuggling and money laundering was ongoing at time of writing.

In January, Council of Europe human rights commissioner, Dunja Mijatovic, [warned](#) against the prosecutions of Dimitras, Sarahardini, and Binder and urged Greek authorities “to ensure that human rights defenders and journalists can work safely and freely, by providing an enabling environment for their work and publicly recognizing their important role in a democratic society.”

Freedom of Media

For the second year in a row, [Greece was last among EU countries](#) in Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) 2023 World Press Freedom Index. Problems include a major ongoing [surveillance scandal](#), government interference, and abusive lawsuits. A government spokesperson dismissed RSF as “[unreliable](#).”

In its *Rule of Law Report* [published in July](#), the European Commission noted that threats and attacks against journalists persist.

In a [resolution](#) adopted in June related to an ongoing major spyware scandal and revelations that the government surveilled [independent journalists](#), an [opposition leader](#), and [others](#), the European Parliament found Greek authorities had contravened EU law and urged them to conduct urgent reforms to tackle the illicit use of Predator spyware. According to a media report, the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) opened an investigation in April into Greece’s illegal use of Predator spyware in the wiretapping scandal.

In July, the Greek Data Protection Authority [announced the initial results](#) of its investigation into the use of Predator spyware, confirming that attempts were made to install spyware on multiple peoples’ devices. So far, the DPA has not identified those responsible.

In a European Parliament plenary debate in February, [numerous Members of the European Parliament \(MEPs\)](#) [warned](#) against a backsliding of the rule of law in Greece, particularly due to the spyware scandal and state of media freedom.

In a development [welcomed](#) by media freedom organizations, authorities [announced](#) in April the arrests of two suspects in connection with the 2021 murder of crime reporter Giorgos Karaivaz. RSF [added](#) that full accountability for the murder of Karaivaz requires that “all those responsible for the crime including the mastermind must be apprehended.”

A September [report](#) by press freedom groups criticized Greek authorities for inaction and inadequate investigations into the unsolved 2010 murder of journalist Sokratis Giolias. The groups called on the authorities to independently review the Giolias and Karaivaz cases and improve investigative practices in all cases involving crimes against journalists.

Migrants and Asylum Seekers

Over 38,400 asylum seekers and migrants [arrived by sea and land](#) from January to early November, compared with 18,780 in all of 2022.

A fishing vessel carrying an estimated [750 people](#) sank on June 14 off the coast of Pylos. In the aftermath, several of the 104 survivors [alleged](#) that the vessel sank after being towed by a Greek coast guard boat. [Greek authorities have denied these claims. Forty survivors filed a criminal complaint](#) in September against Greek authorities, alleging that they failed to take adequate rescue measures and towed the vessel, causing it to capsize and sink. The survivors have demanded an immediate, thorough, and reliable investigation into the shipwreck.

In a July [letter](#) to the prime minister, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatovic noted Greece’s legal obligation to conduct effective investigations into the Pylos shipwreck to establish the facts and, where appropriate, to ensure the punishment of those responsible.

In response to the Hellenic Coast Guard’s decision to forgo an internal disciplinary investigation into the actions of its personnel during the Pylos shipwreck, the Greek Ombudsman’s office [initiated an independent inquiry](#) in November to examine the acts and potential omissions of coast guard members. Human rights commissioner Mijatovic [commended this action](#) and urged Greek authorities to provide full cooperation with the Ombudsman’s investigation.

[Reporting in May](#) by the *New York Times* on the pushback from Lesbos of 12 migrants, including children and an infant, added to [mounting evidence](#) of collective expulsions by Greek authorities. The European Commission called for a “proper follow up” by authorities. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis [called](#) such practices “completely unacceptable” and referred to separate investigations being conducted by Greek prosecutors, the Ombudsman, and the National Transparency Authority (NTA). The European Parliament’s [LIBE Committee](#), its [PEGA inquiry committee](#), [and nongovernmental groups](#) have raised concerns about the NTA’s independence and effectiveness.

In May, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, MSF) [called on](#) Greek authorities to investigate reports of hundreds of missing migrants and allegations of people being threatened, abducted, and ill-treated on Lesbos. In a November [report](#), MSF highlighted an alarming pattern of violence against individuals reaching Greek shores, adding to the already overwhelming evidence of violence and pushbacks at Greek borders.

A March report by the Greek Council of Refugees [found](#) that pushbacks of asylum seekers and migrants to Türkiye are widespread and involve illegal detention, intimidation, physical and sexual violence, and the arbitrary confiscation of personal belongings. Greece’s migration minister [reported](#) in April that the Greek police prevented 260,000 people from entering the Evros land border in 2022.

At [least](#) 20 asylum seekers [reportedly](#) died, including [two children](#), during major forest fires in the [Evros](#) region in August, highlighting an additional risk to people on the move who are already facing violent pushbacks by authorities and attacks by vigilantes.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), after [expressing concern](#) about the ongoing criminalization of human rights defenders providing lifesaving assistance to migrants, [urged](#) Greece in August to “ensure a transparent and impartial investigation” into alleged violations of nonrefoulement and the right to life involving Greek law enforcement personnel, including the Hellenic Coast Guard.

In September, a [Greek court awarded](#) €15,920 in compensation to an Afghan asylum seeker unjustly imprisoned for three years on charges of smuggling and causing a shipwreck. [According to lawyers](#), the case is one of thousands, with people charged or convicted of smuggling making up the second largest prison population in Greece.

Nongovernmental groups PRO ASYL and Refugee Support Aegean in May [denounced](#) conditions in the EU-funded Closed Controlled Access Centres in the Aegean islands, calling them prison-like facilities that fail to meet human rights standards. In a May report, INTERSOS Hellas, HIAS, and the Greek Council for Refugees published their findings that refugees and rejected asylum seekers in Greece face widespread food insecurity due to complex and lengthy procedures coupled with [discriminatory criteria](#) that, in practice, exclude them from most social benefits in Greece.

The UN working group on the use of mercenaries [issued a report](#) in July based on a visit to Greece in December 2022. The report, which examines the role of private security companies and security personnel in the migration context, calls for additional “government efforts to strengthen existing complaint mechanisms and ensure the prevention of human rights violations and protection of vulnerable groups.”

In January, the European Commission [issued](#) infringement letters against Greece, including over the arbitrary detention of asylum seekers during screening procedures.

In February, the Council of State [submitted](#) preliminary questions to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) regarding Greek legislation designating Türkiye as a safe third country for asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Racism and Intolerance

In April, the Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) [reported](#) 74 incidents of racist violence in 2022 and noted that underreporting of racist violence continued.

In August, racist violence escalated in Evros against asylum seekers and migrants, whom vigilantes accused, without presenting evidence, of being responsible for forest fires. Numerous [reports and videos](#) about vigilante “militias” targeting asylum seekers and migrants emerged as well as a viral [video](#) showing a civilian holding [13 migrants against their will](#) in his truck while calling for a pogrom against them. He was [arrested](#) along with two alleged accomplices.

Women’s Rights

According to a [March report](#) by the Mediterranean Institute for Investigative Reporting, Greece recorded the highest annual increase in reported femicides among 20 European countries during the pandemic, with an increase of 187.5 percent in just one year, from 2020 to 2021.

Refugee Support Aegean [reported](#) in July that Afghan single mothers seeking asylum in Greece face challenges and protection risks.

In an April [ruling](#) concerning the living conditions of a pregnant woman in a reception center for asylum seekers, the European Court of Human Rights found that Greece had violated the prohibition on torture or inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment by forcing the woman to live in conditions that violated her human rights.

