



EQUAL LEGAL AID

2021 ANNUAL REPORT

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2021 HIGHLIGHTS

7 JUNE 2021

JOINT MINISTERIAL DECISION

The Greek Government adopts a joint ministerial decision designating Turkey as a "safe third country" for applicants from Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

4 SEPTEMBER 2021

NEW DEPORTATIONS AND RETURN BILL

The Greek parliament adopts a new bill on deportations and return, hindering the right to asylum and the safeguards in return procedures, the prevention of refoulement and the work of sea rescue NGOs and generalizing large-scale detention. The bill was instantly tackled by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights as violating the European Convention on Human Rights and the Refugee Convention.

22 NOVEMBER 2021

NEW CIRCULAR ON THE PROCEDURE TO ACCESS ASYLUM

This new circular requires anyone who enters Greece "illegally" to pre-register in one of the six reception and identification centers (RICs), only one of which, Fylakio, is located on the mainland near the Evros border. The Fylakio RIC has a very limited capacity (282 people) and is located in an area where a high number of pushbacks are recorded. It is not a safe or viable option for people in mainland Greece wishing to seek asylum. In practice, there has been no access to asylum for the majority of people on mainland Greece since 22 November 2021.

1 JULY 2021

END OF CASH ASSISTANCE FOR "SELF-HOUSED" ASYLUM SEEKERS

Succeeding UNHCR in the management of the housing programme for asylum seekers, the first decision taken by the Greek New Democracy government is to end the monthly allowance of €75/ person paid to asylum seekers, when they are "self- housed". Asylum seekers who do not reside in a refugee camp or in urban housing provided by the state no longer receive a monthly allowance from 1 July 2021. The type of accommodation an asylum seeker receives (or not!) is beyond their control. This decision introduces a completely unfair and discriminatory eligibility criterion in the allocation of this financial assistance, further ostracising homeless asylum seekers, who are now also destitute.

18 SEPTEMBER 2021

OPENING OF THE NEW DETENTION CAMP ON SAMOS

The new closed camp can accommodate 3.000 people and is the first of 5 new camps featuring stricter access measures (such as X-ray scanners, magnetic doors and surveillance cameras). This "closed" camp has been unanimously denounced by civil society actors as a "dystopian nightmare".

Context of action

The association Equal Legal Aid (ELA) is active in Northern Greece. This includes the regions of Thessaly, Thrace and Central Macedonia. ELA is based in Thessaloniki, the administrative capital of Central Macedonia, for reasons of convenience but also because this is where most legal needs are concentrated. Thessaloniki's central location allows to reach the 12 refugee camps in the region.



Due to its geographical position, Greece is one of the **main gateways to Europe** for displaced persons seeking protection. However, under the Dublin Regulation (which governs asylum issues within the European Union), an asylum application can only be examined by one European country. In principle, this is the first European country into which an asylum seeker has entered, which is Greece.

Arrivals have decreased overall since 2020 (especially since March 2020 and the beginning of the health crisis), with a total of 8,935 entries in 2021 by sea and land¹. However, these figures do not take into account the hundreds of refoulements at Greek borders documented and denounced by civil society actors.

Indeed, serious allegations that the Greek authorities have been carrying out pushbacks at their borders since March 2020 have been revealed².

According to UNHCR, the European Commission and the Council of Europe, these violations of international law and human rights must be urgently investigated by an independent body if the rule of law is to be respected in Europe. The European Commission recently announced that the establishment of a mechanism to monitor human rights violations at Greek borders was a precondition for the release of €15.83 million in funding³.

During the year 2021, 26,050 new asylum applications were lodged and 34,178 applications are still awaiting a decision⁴.

Thessaloniki, the second largest Greek city after Athens, is geographically placed on a migration highway: it is **both a transit centre and a bottleneck**.

Since April 2018, this region has become a major entry point for exiles following the eastern route and crossing the land border with Turkey. In fact, in 2021, the majority of entries into Greece took place at the land border.

In 2015, only 1% of arrivals were by land (in Evros). This figure increased to 18% in 2017 and 38% in 2020.

2021 marks the first time that there are more arrivals of people to Greece by land than sea (53% of new arrivals reached Greece via the mainland, in Evros).

In addition to these first-time entrants, there are asylum seekers transferred from the hotspots (i.e. the islands of Lesbos, Samos, Kos, Chios and Leros) to the 12 refugee camps in the north of the country. Moreover, all the northern European destinations envisaged by the exiles involve transiting through Thessaloniki, the first major urban centre in the region.

1 Source: UNHCR.

2 Source: <https://www.borderviolence.eu/response-to-greek-ombudsmans-interim-report/>

3 Source: <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/35526/un-expolicier-grec-de-levros-les-pushbacks-existent-jai-moimeme-renvoye-2000-personnes-vers-la-turquie>

4 Source: Joint NGO Briefing on the situation in Greece, 21 October 2021.

5 Source: Ministry of Asylum and Migration, data updated on 31.11.2021.

6 Source: UNHCR.

Conversely, Thessaloniki also receives people turned away by the "buffer" states of Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia and Bulgaria. **By choice or by force, the displaced persons are trapped in Thessaloniki and its surroundings in a very precarious situation.**

Despite the gravity and urgency of the situation described above, northern Greece suffers from a **structural lack of legal aid** and the progressive disengagement of the few actors present in the region. Legal assistance is essential during the asylum process and the need for assistance is still very high in the region. The procedure, which is constantly being reformed, is particularly complex and the procedural obstacles are legion. Free (or pro bono) legal aid is provided only by a few Greek and foreign multidisciplinary structures and the number of lawyers involved, which is constantly decreasing, is insignificant compared to the needs. The majority of asylum seekers do not receive the legal guidance and support they need to exercise their fundamental right to seek asylum⁶. This lack of legal aid is detrimental to the effective exercise of this right.

Finally, the **local political and legal context** has deteriorated considerably in 2020 and 2021 in a number of ways. Several measures were adopted by the right-wing New Democracy government tightening the legal framework for asylum, coupled with access difficulties due to the health situation.

The asylum service was interrupted for seven months, causing significant delays in the procedure and making access to information for displaced persons considerably more difficult.

Finally, and even though Afghanistan (re)fell to the Taliban this summer, Greece adopted on **7 June 2021 a new regulation declaring Turkey as a "safe third country" for 5 nationalities including Afghans**. This reform introduces a prior admissibility procedure for Afghans, but also for Syrians, Somalis, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, who have transited through Turkey. At the end of this procedure, as Turkey is now considered a safe country for these five nationalities, the applicants may be automatically sent back to Turkey, without ever having been able to explain the reasons for their exile.

This reform is not neutral: the 5 nationalities

concerned represented 65% of the asylum applications lodged in Greece in 2020. These nationalities also benefit from fairly high recognition rates. Thus, before the adoption of the reform, 73% of Afghan asylum seekers received international protection. Finally, the vast majority of these people transited through Turkey. Hence, the generalisation of this admissibility procedure to these 5 nationalities leads to the majority of applicants being denied access to the asylum procedure.

Seven months after its adoption, the long-term consequences of this new measure, which undermines the effective exercise of the right to asylum, are still uncertain.

At the same time, the **living conditions of displaced persons** have also been made worse by the new government measures. The accommodation program run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was handed over to the Greek New Democracy government, which immediately limited access to it to certain categories of applicants, while at the same time abolishing the monthly allowance for self-housed persons. Many accommodation centres were closed as a result of the cessation of UNHCR funding in Greece.

All of these measures have caused incomprehension and distress among the displaced people concerned, **many of whom are now homeless and without income**.

Since its election in 2019, the Greek government has launched a vast **movement of "encampment"** with the endorsement of the European Union, consisting of the generalisation of the detention of asylum seekers in closed refugee camps, access to which is strictly controlled (and forbidden to humanitarian workers and associations).

Civil society organisations and NGOs have suffered from the progressive disengagement of the UNHCR, the tightening of European and Greek asylum policy, the criminalisation of aid to exiles and the health situation. Many local NGOs and associations are facing serious financial difficulties and most pro bono legal service providers have reduced their intervention.

⁶ In January 2022, Equal Legal Aid published a report on this matter: [Access to legal aid for people on the move, Northern Greece, January 2022](#).

⁷ Third countries are said to be safe when they apply the same principles as those guaranteed to asylum seekers by European states. These principles include the principle of non-refoulement and the possibility to apply for refugee status or protection in accordance with the Geneva Convention. If a newcomer comes from a "safe country", their asylum application can be rejected solely on the basis that they have transited or stayed in such a country, without their claim for protection being examined on the merits.

In this troubled political and social climate, coupled with a very worrying health situation, human rights abuses are increasing amidst total indifference.

This hostility against humanitarian workers, the widespread deportation of asylum seekers, their detention in unsanitary sites and the increase of racist and xenophobic attacks have entrenched the major political and ideological turn which has been taking place in Greece and in Europe in recent months, rendering it all the more essential to maintain an international humanitarian presence. To work for human rights but also to bear witness to the situation in the field.



Diavata camp after the construction of the perimeter wall, July 2021.

Photo credit : Régis Defurnaux

OUR IMPACT IN 2021

513



beneficiaries
assisted

239



cases
supported

437



legal consultations
provided

7



lawyers
deployed

85 %

of positive decisions
after a interview
preparation

162



interview
preparation sessions
offered

26



appeals submitted
to the Greek
administrative
courts

62 %

of positive
decisions on
requests for
interim measures
before the
Courts

Our beneficiaries

42 %



are women

66 %



are under 30
(34% are
underage)

34 %



are families

31



nationalities

EQUAL LEGAL AID



WOMEN LEGAL WORKSHOP

Preparation to interviews
Orientation during the procedure
General questions about your situation

QRT (Diavata)- WOMEN SPACE
WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 22nd, at 2pm



+30 697 001 7915



EQUAL LEGAL AID



Atolyeya Hîqûqî ya Jinan

Amadekarîya hevpeyvînan
Orientation di dema prosedûrê de
Pirsên giş ti li ser rewşa we

QRT (Diavata)- QADA JIN:
SAREDEM 22 PLON saet 14.00



+30 697 001 7915



OUR ACTION

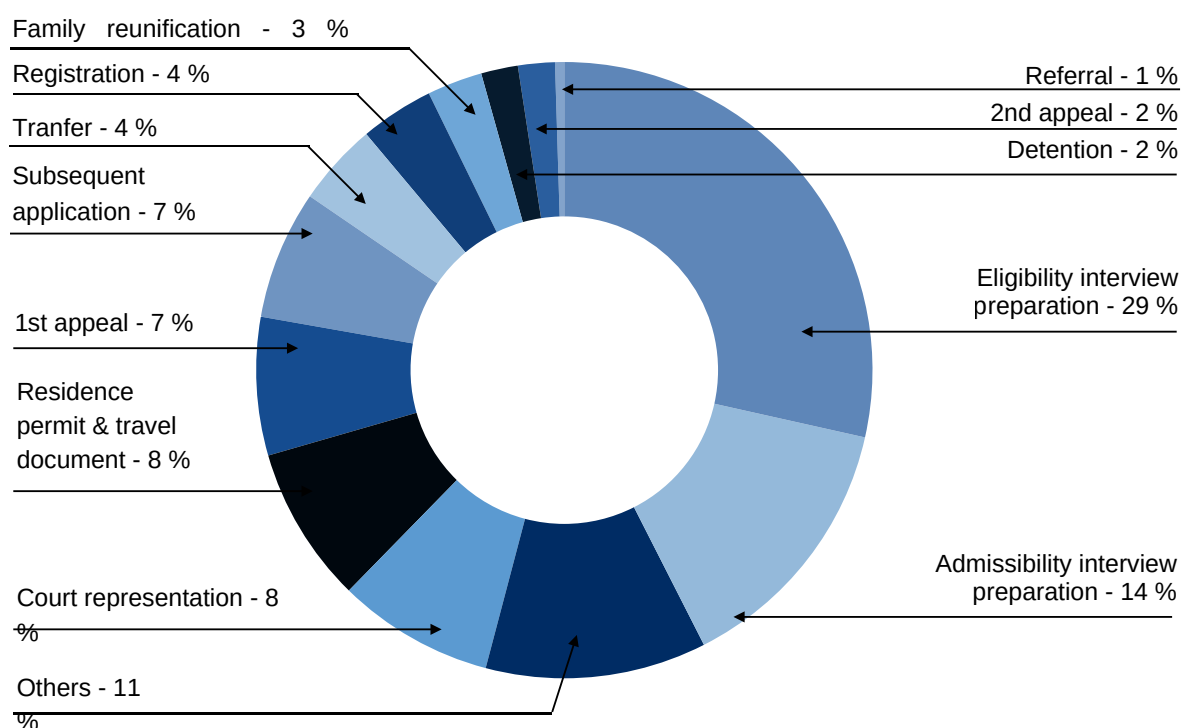
"Casa Base" Community center next to Diavata camp.

Legal aid services provided to displaced persons

In 2021, despite the extremely volatile health context, Equal Legal Aid mobilised all available resources to maintain and develop its activities. In the 12 months of implementation, 5 months took place in a context of national lockdown, with strict restrictions measures in place in Greece from 7 of November 2020 until end of May 2021. While the restrictions of movement, lockdowns and various limitations have impacted all aspects of the project and of the life of the association, the entire program has been reviewed in order to adapt to this new reality, maintain activities for our beneficiaries and comply with national and local regulations.

During the lockdown, legal services were provided remotely. In-person activities resumed gradually from June 2021 onwards. Legal services were therefore provided throughout the year without interruption, both remotely and face-to-face, at the premises of partner organisations and since September 2021 at the association's office.

From January to December 2021, Equal Legal Aid assisted 513 beneficiaries, supported 239 cases, provided 437 individual consultations including 162 interview preparation sessions. The cases supported related to the following themes:



Preparation for the eligibility interview

A simplified diagram of the asylum procedure in Greece is available page 14.

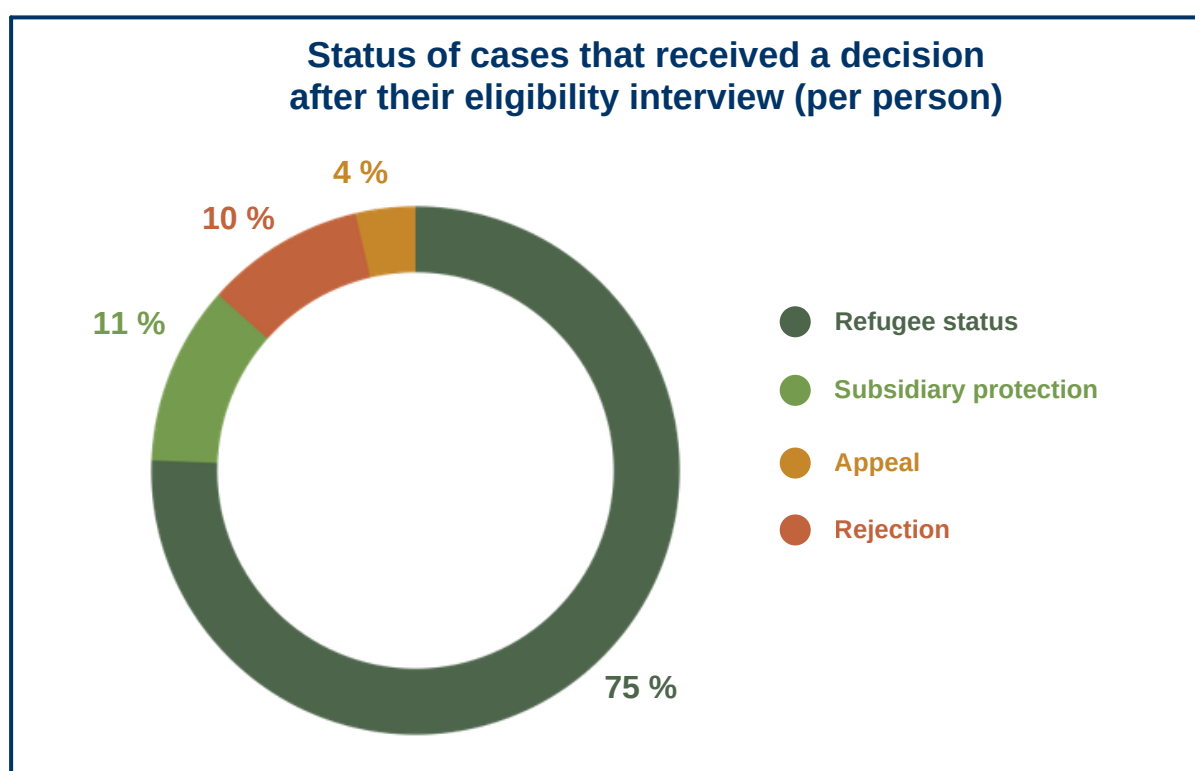
In 2021, our team provided legal assistance to a wide variety of cases, at all stages of the asylum procedure and particularly at the stage of the **individual asylum interview**. This interview has become the keystone of the procedure following the successive reforms of the asylum procedure in Greece over the last 2 years. During this interview, asylum seekers must explain in detail the reasons for their exile, so that the authorities can then decide on the application. If the application is rejected, the chances of obtaining asylum on appeal are extremely low: only 4% of applications on appeal are granted international or subsidiary protection. Applicants are no longer invited to testify in person on appeal and cannot add to the story initially submitted. As a result, the first interview is decisive and prior preparation is essential.

This preparation is an opportunity to explain what asylum is, under what conditions it is granted, to review with the applicants the reasons for their exile and to help them to gather the supporting documents to back up their application. Each session requires at least one lawyer and one interpreter in the relevant language. Except in the case of very short deadlines, our team devotes 2 to 3 individual sessions to each preparation.

Preparations are at the heart of ELA's activities and represent 37% of the legal consultations provided by the team last year: from January to December 2021, **119 individual preparations for the eligibility interview**, were carried out, corresponding to 68 cases. Almost half of these cases are still pending, as the authorities have not yet reached a decision on the asylum application.

For the cases on which a decision was taken, **86% of ELA beneficiaries received a positive decision on their asylum application** (71 persons). Unfortunately, 14% had their asylum application rejected (11 persons). Of these, 3 are now being assisted by the association on appeal.

Our team spent **188 hours** preparing applicants to their eligibility interview in 2021. This corresponds to an average of two 1h30 consultations per case, i.e. **three hours of individual consultation for each case**.



Preparation for the admissibility interview

A simplified diagram of the asylum procedure in Greece is available page 14.

Since June 2021 and the designation of Turkey as a safe third country for asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the association also prepares people for the admissibility interview (see above). Like the eligibility interview preparations, the admissibility interview preparations require several sessions in the presence of a lawyer and an interpreter.

In 2021, our team conducted **43 individual admissibility interview preparation sessions**, which corresponds to 10% of the total legal consultations offered and 30 cases. More than half of the admissibility cases are still awaiting a decision. In the cases where a decision was made, **84% of ELA's beneficiaries** were considered eligible and called for an interview on the merits (26 persons). They were then prepared by ELA's legal team for the eligibility interview (see above). Unfortunately, 2 applications were found inadmissible. Our team lodged an appeal against the decision for both cases. These 2 appeals are still pending.

From July to December 2021, our team spent **83 hours** preparing applicants to their admissibility interview. This corresponds to approximately 1 or 2 consultations per case, i.e. **3 hours of individual consultation devoted to each case**.

Representation before the courts: litigation

A simplified diagram of the asylum procedure in Greece is available page 14.

Since June 2021, our team is able to assist asylum seekers who have received a rejection decision at first and second instance, by lodging appeals and drafting memos.

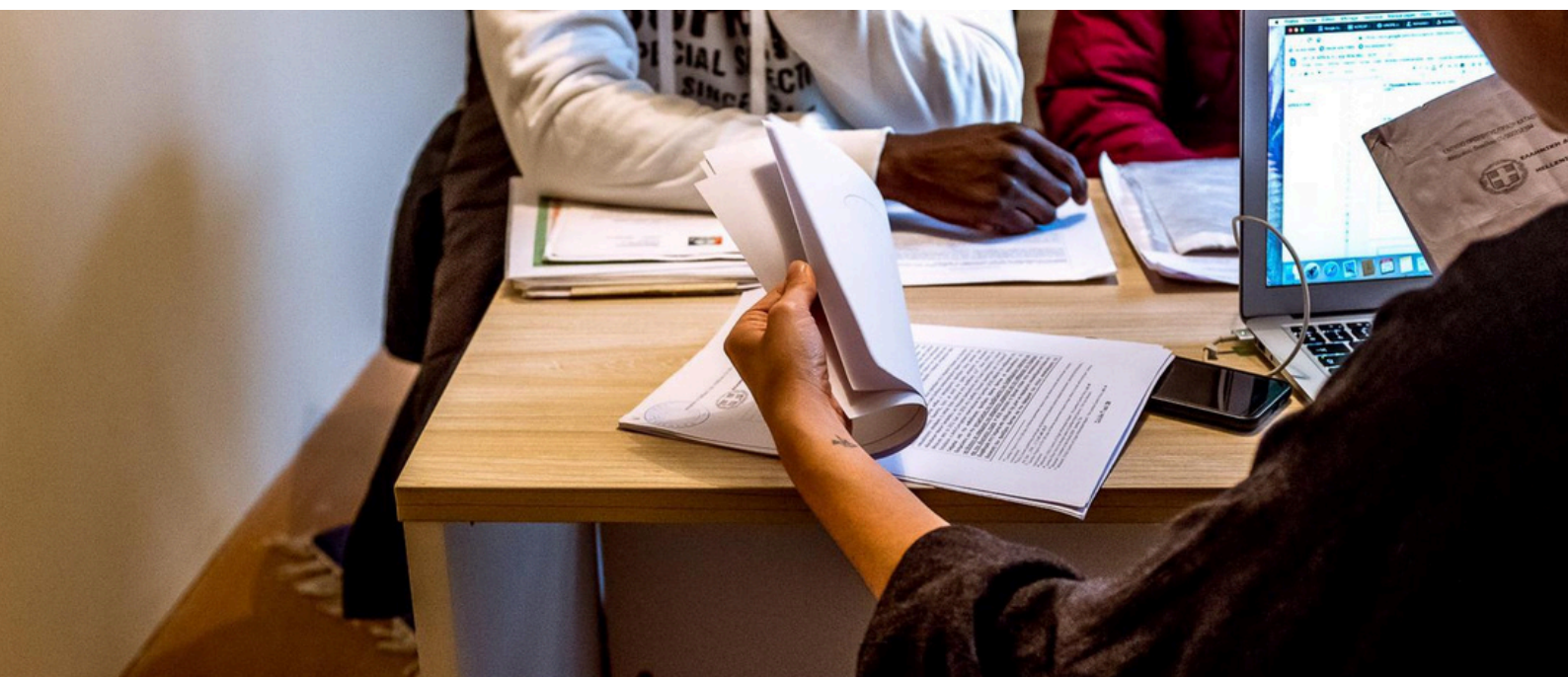
- **Cases supported on appeal before the Appeal Committees after a first rejection decision**

In 2021, **11 first instance appeals were filed by our team against decisions rejecting asylum applications**. Of these appeals, 9 cases are pending before the competent Appeal Committee (82%) and 2 cases have been rejected (18%). Following these rejection decisions, a second appeal was lodged before the Administrative Court of Appeal by our team (see below).

The work of the lawyer for each appeal is substantial and time-consuming: it is necessary to interview the beneficiaries, analyse the rejection decision issued by the asylum authorities as well as the minutes of the interview on the merits, and draft an appeal brief with supporting documents. Since the 2019 reform, beneficiaries are no longer called to testify in appeal. The decision of the Appeal Committee is therefore based solely on the first asylum interview and the appeal brief drafted by the lawyer. This brief must be as complete as possible. As a reference, 92% of the appeals filed in Greece in 2020 were rejected on the merits by the Appeal Committees⁸.

- **Cases supported on appeal before the competent Administrative Court of Appeal after a first instance rejection decision (Appeal Committee)**

Equal Legal Aid is one of the few associations to represent in court asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected by the Appeal Committee. More specifically, in 2021 ELA's team drafted and lodged applications for annulment against rejection decisions, together with application for interim measures (suspension of deportation) before the competent administrative courts. As a reference, from June to December 2021, **13 cases were supported by ELA in appeal before the Administrative Court of Appeal**: our team lodged 13 applications of annulment and 13 applications for interim measures (suspension of deportation).



Legal consultation. Photo credit: Jérôme Fourcade

⁸ Source : AIDA report On Greece (last update: June 2021).

The **application for annulment is often inseparable from an application for interim measures**. The first consists of requesting the judge to simply annul the decision rejecting the asylum application. This is a "substantive" procedure, lasting several months or even several years. It is because the annulment procedure is particularly long that it is important to lodge an application for interim measures in parallel. If the interim measures are granted by the judge, the applicant's deportation is "blocked", pending a final decision on his/her asylum application is made. In other words, the person is allowed to stay on Greek territory until the final decision.

Out of the 13 requests for interim measures lodged by ELA, 8 have been granted by the judge (62%) and 5 are still pending (38%). So far, none of the applications for interim measures lodged by ELA have been rejected by the judge, which is considered as a real success for our team. Following these positive decisions, the asylum cards were returned to the applicants, pending a decision on the annulment application.

Once the hearing date for the annulment application is set, our team prepares a supplementary memo and the lawyer in charge of the case defends it in court. At the end of the hearing, the administrative court of appeal decides either to confirm the contested rejection or to refer the case back to an appeal committee for reconsideration. Indeed, the court cannot decide to grant asylum: it can simply refer the case to an Appeal committee, which will re-examine the elements of the asylum application. In other words, the procedure does not stop and the committee can decide a second time to reject the case. This is why it is important to obtain interim measures: so that the procedure is suspensive until the committee's decision and the person does not risk deportation during the 2-3 years that this legal procedure may last.

To date, **the 13 applications for annulment on the merits lodged by ELA are still pending.**

- **Other proceedings supported before the Court of Appeal by ELA**

ELA also assists asylum seekers in parallel proceedings to the asylum application. For example, our team assisted an applicant in a guardianship proceeding currently pending before the court. This case comes after one of our beneficiaries (a widowed mother) was granted international protection with her children. However, in the absence of the father or a death certificate, it is impossible for her to obtain the children's papers from the asylum authority. We felt it was essential to challenge this refusal at the Court of Appeal.

Indicative fees for proceedings before the Administrative Court of Appeal covered by ELA					
Interim measures	135 €	Bailiff's fees (notification of the request by a bailiff)	43,40 €	Fees for the attendance to the oral hearing of the case	203 €
Application for annulment	267 €	Notarisation of the authorisation to take legal action	50-70 €	Fees for the lodging of an additional memo	85 €

Given the prohibitive cost of litigation, each request for assistance before the court of appeal is assessed collectively by our team to determine the relevance of support at this stage.

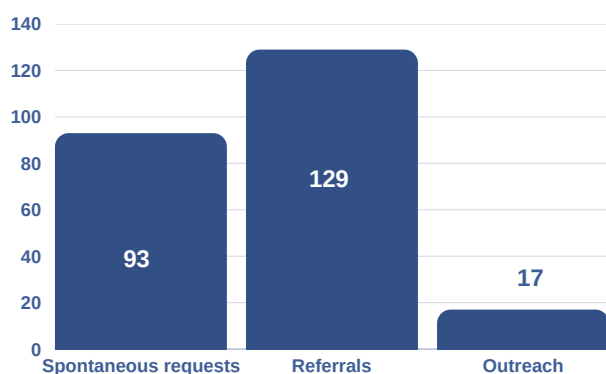
Other legal services provided by the association

In 2021, our team also provided guidance prior to filing an asylum application, when registering with the authorities, after a first or second rejection, or with a view to preparing a new asylum application (or re-examination) when new elements justify it. Assistance was also provided to statutory refugees, including the issuance of their residence permits and travel documents.

Our team also supported the beneficiaries in their administrative procedures with the Asylum Service, with which contact has become very difficult, almost impossible, especially in the current health context.

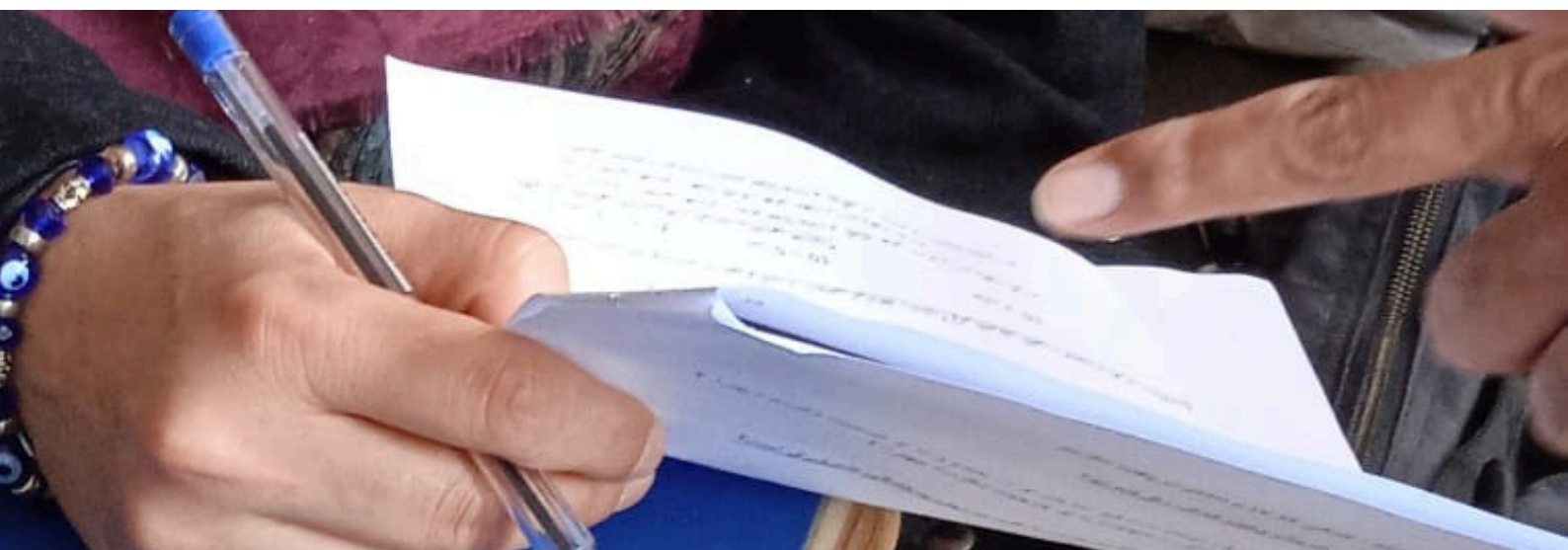
Finally, our team accompanied the beneficiaries in the use of the new online platform of the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum Services, on which the applicants can complete certain administrative procedures. The aim of the team's intervention is to encourage self-reliance and to help beneficiaries to re-appropriate the procedure. In particular, we assisted with transfers of files from one asylum office to another, registration and updating of personal data, or requests for copies of files.

At each stage of the procedure, the legal team ensured regular follow-up of all cases, staying in close contact with the applicant or the asylum office. **The cases follow-up represents 22% of our activities.**



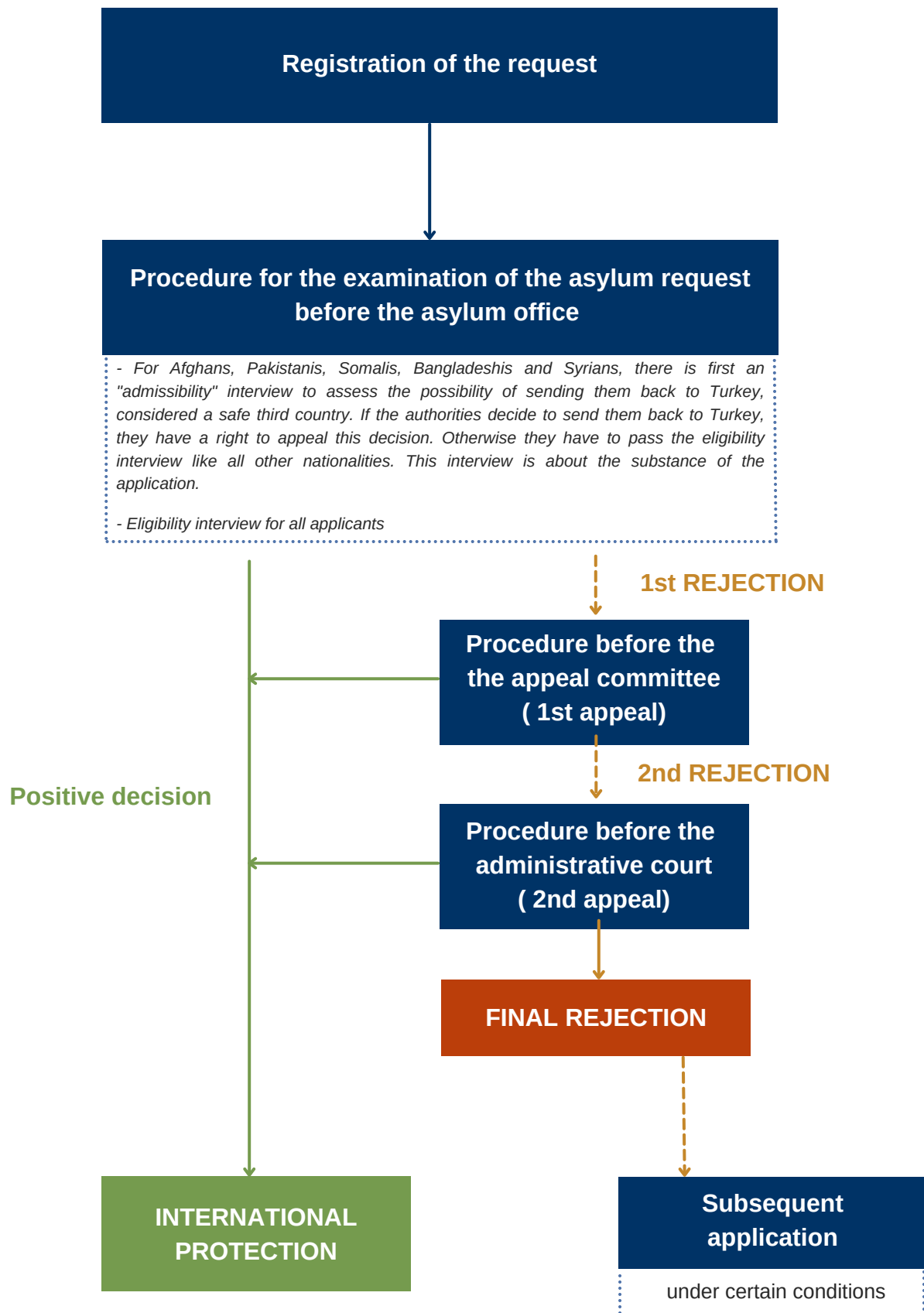
*Origin of cases (by number of cases)
Total from January to December 2021*

It is interesting to note that **54% of the cases supported in 2021 were referred to ELA by other organisations, associations and local partners**. 39% of the cases are spontaneous requests through our hotline. Finally, 7% of the cases are the result of prior outreach work carried out before or between the restriction measures (legal clinics and outreach work). It is also interesting to observe the monthly progression of the proportion of cases referred to ELA over the year (page 16).



Legal clinic in Nea Kavala. Photo credit: Priscille Duflos

Simplified diagram of the asylum procedure in Greece



Some cases supported by ELA's team in 2021

Kossi* is from Togo. He applied for international protection in Greece, afraid of being persecuted for his political ideas and sexual orientation (LGBTQI+). His application was rejected, as the Greek authorities considered Togo to be a safe country for Kossi, even though he was at risk of persecution there. ELA helped him to appeal this decision. The judge has not yet ruled on the case.

Saif* belongs to the Ahmadiyya community, a persecuted religious minority in Pakistan. When his asylum application was rejected by the Appeals Committee in Greece, ELA filed a request for annulment and a request for interim measures. The latter was granted by the judge who considered that Saif's deportation to Pakistan could cause him serious harm. The application for annulment is pending.

Mohammed*, Ibrahim* and Marius* are from Guinea and came to Greece as minors. After their asylum applications were rejected, they requested from the State free legal aid to lodge an appeal. The asylum service appointed a lawyer to handle their cases free of charge, but did not provide them with the lawyer's contact details. The three young men never met or spoke to the lawyer. The three appeals were subsequently dismissed by the Appeals Committee due to procedural errors by the lawyer which rendered the appeals inadmissible. ELA appealed against these decisions on the basis of the right to an effective remedy, guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Charter of Human Rights. These cases are still pending.

Amir* is from Afghanistan. He came to Greece in 2018 as a minor. His application for asylum was rejected this summer even though the Taliban took over the control of Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. The authorities considered the province Amir comes from to be safe because it is controlled by government forces. However, this information is based on reports from 2019! ELA filed a request for annulment of this decision and a request for interim measures which was granted by the judge. The application for annulment is still pending.

Fazal* and his family are from Afghanistan. They were among the first to be subjected to the new eligibility procedure introduced in Greece in June 2021. Their asylum application was rejected as inadmissible on the grounds that Turkey would be a safe country for them. However, they have not been able to obtain protection in Turkey. And deportations between Greece and Turkey have been suspended since the start of the pandemic in 2020. This means that after a rejection decision, and with no possibility of deportation to Turkey, Fazal and his family, like so many others, are condemned to precariousness and to survive without papers. ELA has appealed against this decision and the procedure is ongoing.

Ali* was a human rights activist in Pakistan. He had to leave his country in 2016 after a powerful Quranic school convicted him of apostasy. Ali first asked for asylum in Bulgaria, before arriving in Greece a few months later. The Greek authorities ordered his transfer to Bulgaria, but did not transfer him within the legal timeframe. After a long dialogue, the Greek asylum service was finally declared competent to examine his asylum application and rejected it. ELA filed a request for annulment of this decision and a request for interim measures, which was granted by the judge. The request for annulment is pending.

Boris* is from Cameroon, that he left after being arrested and tortured by the police because of his sexual orientation. Boris submitted official documents to support his asylum application, which was however rejected by the Greek authorities. ELA filed a request for annulment and a request for interim measures, which was granted. The judge considered that Boris' deportation to Cameroon could cause him serious harm as LGBTQI+ people are persecuted there. The request for annulment is still pending.

Li* is a member of an unrecognised Christian congregation in China that is banned by the authorities. Li had to leave her country fearing imprisonment or torture for her religious beliefs. Her application for asylum was rejected in Greece and ELA filed a request for annulment and a request for interim measures, which was granted. As in the case of Boris, the judge considered that Li's deportation to China could cause her serious harm as she could face persecution there. The application for annulment is still pending.

Outreach activities

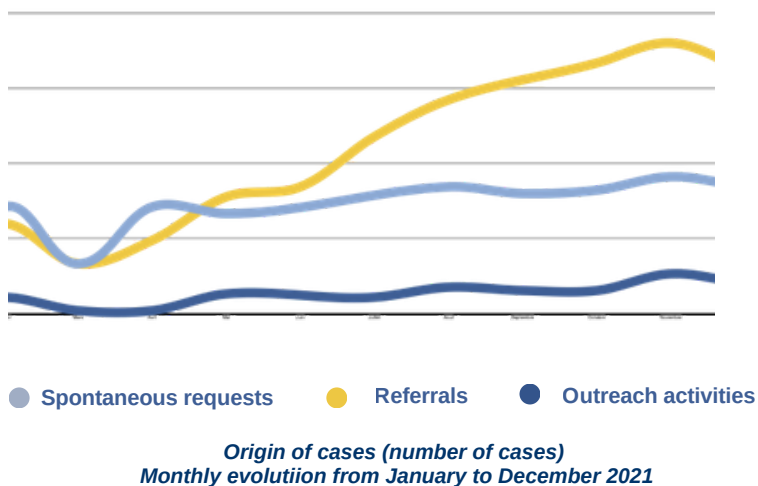
In order to reach those who are not very mobile due to their isolation, vulnerability and the health context, the association has established a regular presence in informal living areas, neighbourhood community centres and nearby camps. These activities could not be carried out during the first 5 months of 2021 due to the strict lockdown imposed in Greece.

As soon as the restriction measures were lifted in May 2021, our team organised outreach activities again, in partnership with other projects active in our field of intervention and in compliance with health protocols.

In collaboration with our partners Mobile Info Team, WAVE and Medical Volunteers International, our team participated in a weekly food distribution in the suburbs of Thessaloniki, providing free legal advice to migrants and asylum seekers. For ELA, providing assistance at this specific meeting point is essential as it allows a particularly excluded community to access information. Indeed, it is difficult for newly arrived asylum seekers and displaced persons whose asylum claim was rejected to access legal services in town. This activity also provide an opportunity to identify urgent cases that require immediate attention. In total, ELA has participated in **21 street-lawyering sessions** from July to December 2021, each time mobilising a lawyer from the permanent team, a lawyer/volunteer lawyer and two interpreters.

In addition to the street-lawyering activity, ELA also set up a bimonthly legal clinic near a refugee camp in the small town of Diavata. Diavata refugee camp hosts 730 asylum seekers according to the latest figures from November 2021. The camp is located only 10 km from the city centre of Thessaloniki, but it has become increasingly difficult for the camp's residents to access legal aid due to the health crisis of course, but also due to the securitisation of the camp (through the construction of a 4-metre high fence wall and the installation of security gates in June 2021) and the decrease of legal aid projects in the area. Therefore, ELA was asked by a local partner, hosting a community centre opposite the refugee camp, to organise a legal clinic there to provide information and support to its residents when needed. The team organised **8 legal clinics from September to December 2021**, including a workshop for women. Each clinic requires the presence of at least one lawyer, one volunteer lawyer and one interpreter.

Besides these two regular activities, our team has also visited several times partners' community centers nearby refugee camps in the towns and villages of **Nea Kavala** (1 hour drive from Thessaloniki), **Kavala** (2 hours drive from Thessaloniki), **Lagkadihia** (45 minutes drive from Thessaloniki), and **Serres** (1 hour and 15 minutes drive from Thessaloniki) in order to organise legal clinics or consultations in their premises. These consultations are set up more spontaneously, in order to meet specific needs and with the aim of simplifying access to legal assistance for beneficiaries who are geographically very isolated.



Interpretation

In 2021, ELA could count on the support of 12 interpreters speaking the following languages: Arabic, Farsi, Dari, Urdu, Pashto, Kurmanji, Sorani, Somali and Lingala. The role of interpreters is fundamental: it is through them that stories and testimonies are collected. The interpreter enables people in need of legal assistance to communicate with ELA's lawyers.

In 2021, **50% of our consultations took place with an interpreter**. To this must be added all the other activities for which their presence is indispensable (outreach, follow-up, hotline responses, etc.). In 2021, ELA's legal team used the assistance of an interpreter for **254 legal consultations**, which corresponds to **more than 630 hours** of interpretation.



Legal clinic in Nea Kavala. Photo credit: Priscille Duflos

"Clear communication in legal terms is very essential, the interpreter carries tons of responsibility. It is not just about their language fluency. An interpreter is well aware of all the cultural nuances, and subtleties of the language. These two factors are very critical for communication during meetings with beneficiaries.

Caseworkers or lawyers can better appreciate through proper interpretation the beneficiaries' requests, and through interpretation, his/her remarks can allow others understand the real concept of his speech.

As Farsi speaking interpreter I had the honour to announce the positive decision of families and indeed it makes me very happy, but it is not always like that. Difficulties on the interpretation for people with different levels of understanding, different levels of knowledge and lack of rights in the country of origin, makes me sad that as an example: an old lady (who needs to think about how to spend her time in a good manner) has to explain her sexual abuse, harassment, raped by different men and forced to leave her country, needs to keep her emotions up to be good for an interview."

Farhad, Farsi/Dari/Greek interpreter

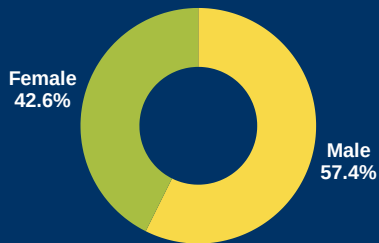
"Firstly, my time with ELA has helped me improve my language skills in French, English and in Arabic. It's really good for me to practice and improve. I also feel I'm using my skills for the right purpose - helping people access the information they need to navigate the asylum system and helping them to integrate into society. It feels good to practice my languages while contributing to this work.

I'm proud of ELA's work because it is very vital to guide vulnerable people along the right path, give legal information, and help. As a migrant myself, my own experiences have helped me understand people stories, and I know how they feel without papers or a home. For this reason, I know how important this work is, and I want to say thank you to ELA for all the efforts you make to give people hope. I'm happy to be a part of your team and I hope that you continue this important and sometimes difficult work."

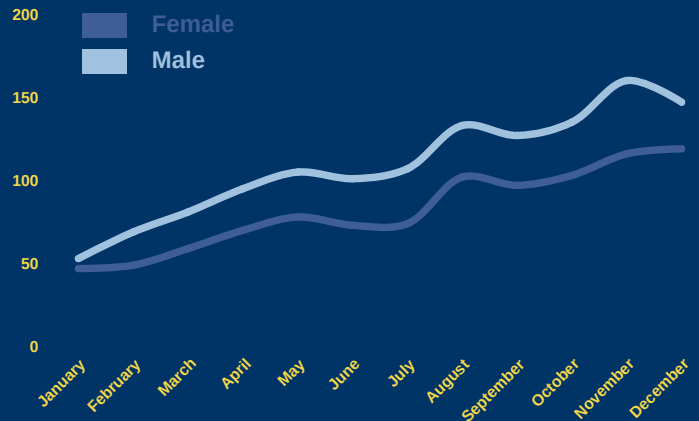
Medhi, Arabic/English/French interpreter

OUR BENEFICIARIES

GENRE

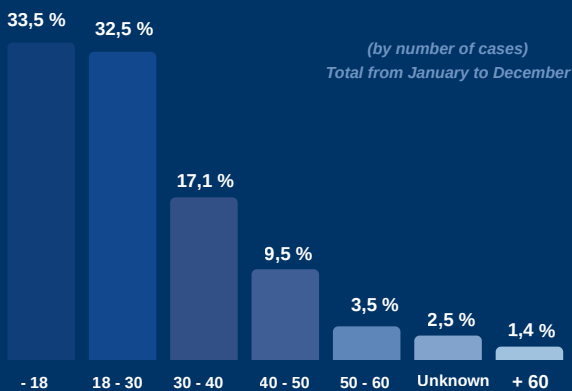


(by number of beneficiaries)
Total from January to December



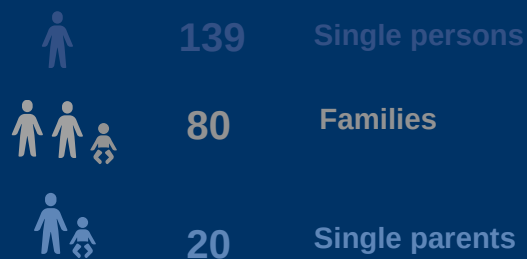
(by number of beneficiaries)
Total from January to December

AGE



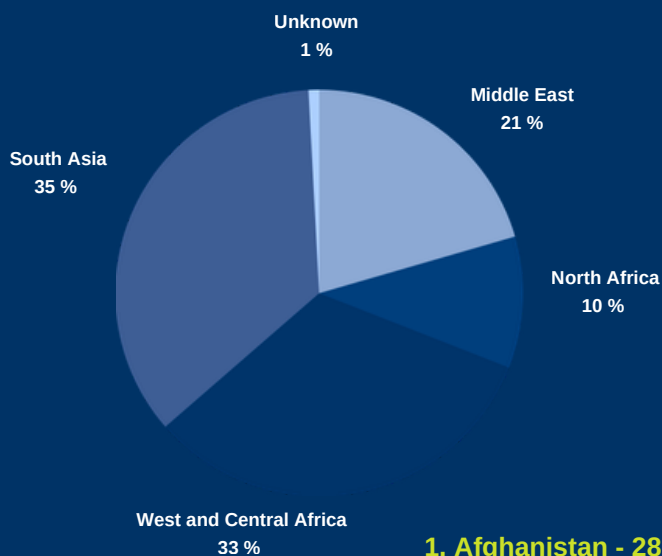
(by number of cases)
Total from January to December

FAMILY STATUS



(by number of cases)
Total from January to December

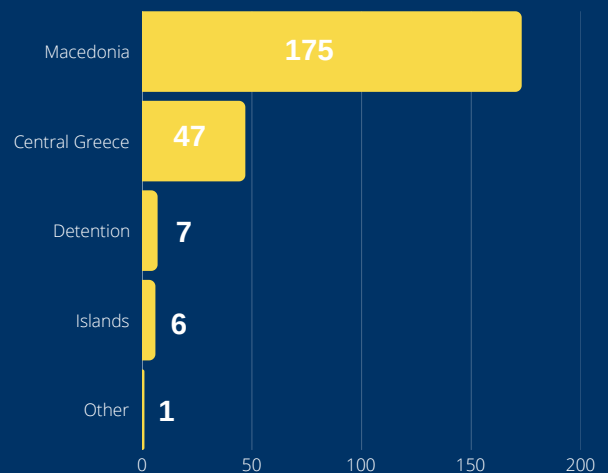
ORIGIN



(by number of cases)
Total from January to December

1. Afghanistan - 28 %
2. DR Congo - 10 %
3. Irak 7 %

LOCATION IN GREECE



(by number of cases)
Total from January to December

Networking and partnerships

The services that Equal Legal Aid provides are designed to complement those provided locally by partner initiatives. Ensuring **synergy and effectiveness of the project requires an understanding of the local environment**: the type of services provided by existing initiatives and the gaps that could be filled by new initiatives in order to best serve the interests of displaced persons.

Given the previous experience of the project's lawyers over the past few years, the association created and developed **close links with the local environment and particularly with associations throughout Greece**. The association can rely on **informal partnerships that have been established for a long time** (in particular with Alkyone Community Center - located in the same building -, Mobile Info Team, Medical Volunteers International and WAVE, with which ELA collaborates during the weekly streetwork sessions, as well as IRIDA community centre). The **value of collaboration** is well reflected in the number of cases referred to ELA. In 2021, 54% of our cases were referred to ELA by partner organisations. Finally, the association participates in **monthly coordination meetings** bringing together the structures active in the region.

In addition, the association is a member of a **collaborative network of legal aid associations active in Greece** (recently created by Equal Legal Aid's executive director) **which includes 9 structures**. Its objective is to strengthen the collaboration between its members by focusing on case referrals so as to ensure adequate follow-up after transfers (islands - mainland). It also aims to develop relationships and mutual support between its different members by sharing intellectual resources, organising legal training, and ideally developing a European joint advocacy strategy.

Outside of this Greek-based network, the association has established links with **similar structures** operating in the Balkan region, Italy, the Netherlands, France and Luxembourg in order to exchange on good practices, legal and legislative developments and ongoing programmes (advocacy and/or research activities in other European countries). These links provide Equal Legal Aid with insight into the challenges and efforts of similar projects throughout Greece and Europe. At the same time, these links pave the way for future cooperation on advocacy campaigns and strategic litigation.

In parallel, ELA benefits from the support of other entities at the European level, in particular the **law firm DLA Piper**, which has assisted our team on numerous occasions, and **BNP Paribas**, which provides pro bono support to the association, in particular in terms of taxation and human resources.

The association is in regular contact with local, international or Greek structures and international law firms as well as with the **French Bar Associations** and the **French National Council of Bar Associations**.

In October 2021, the association had the honour of being a finalist for the **Henri Leclerc prize in the pro bono awards organised by the Paris Bar Association**. Participating in this event was an opportunity for the ELA team to recall the situation of exiles at the Greek borders of Europe but also to meet Parisian lawyers specialising in asylum law and to relay to them the issues and obstacles encountered by displaced persons in Greece.

By constantly working to develop its knowledge of the field, its network and its partnerships, Equal Legal Aid aims to improve its activities in order to better serve its beneficiaries, increase its results and impact, and ensure the sustainability of the project. For this reason, the development and strengthening of Equal Legal Aid's network and strategic partnerships is an integral part of its main objective, in line with the efforts already undertaken since the beginning of the project.

Awareness-raising and advocacy

While in 2021, the ELA team focused mainly on providing legal services, developing a network of partners and strengthening the structure of the association, the association also started to **raise public awareness**. Since May 2021, for example, the association has been participating in monthly advocacy discussions with local actors (associations and NGOs). These meetings are exciting platforms for exchange and an opportunity to discuss the legal and structural issues faced by asylum seekers. They allow the association to keep abreast of the various awareness-raising and advocacy initiatives carried out by local actors.

During the second half of 2021, the association **stepped up its activities and started to raise awareness and communicate online**.

Firstly, our team launched a **collective project involving 5 female students at Sciences Po Paris**. The theme of this collective project is the **dematerialisation/digitalisation of the asylum procedure in Greece and the resulting obstacles for asylum seekers**. The students participating in this collective project will learn about the asylum procedure in Europe and in Greece, the dematerialisation and its stakes and, above all, its practical aspects and obstacles. With the support of ELA's team, the students will have to present an awareness-raising/advocacy project on this topic in May 2022, the format of which is not yet known.

In parallel, and given the rapid deterioration of the situation at Europe's borders, it is essential for ELA to **communicate on the reality on the ground and to relay the difficulties faced by asylum seekers** as well as the human rights violations it witnesses on a daily basis. Since June 2021, the association is more active on social media (Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn), and shares press articles and legal information. In addition, ELA now communicates through a bimonthly newsletter on its actions, in order to raise awareness on issues and legislative developments in Greece.

Finally, ELA wanted to give a voice to asylum seekers in Greece and conducted a survey between June and December 2021 on **access to legal aid in northern Greece** (see the box).



1 STUDY ON ACCESS TO LEGAL AID IN NORTHERN GREECE

The first awareness-raising project carried out by the association is a **large-scale survey on access to legal aid in Northern Greece for displaced persons**. It consists of an anonymous questionnaire available on the internet and in hard copy in 9 languages. Its aim is to assess access and difficulties in accessing legal aid on the mainland, by directly interviewing asylum seekers. With the support of local partners, our team was able to circulate the survey to a large sample of the population, residing in several camps in the region as well as in urban areas. The results of this study enabled the association to adapt its field of intervention and to have updated empirical data to raise awareness of the problem of access to the legal assistance for exiles. This is the first study of its kind conducted in mainland Greece. A total of 181 testimonies were collected. **The results of the survey were published in January 2022.**

SOME FIGURES

42% of the displaced surveyed **did not have access to legal assistance** during their asylum application. **49%** of them only received **one legal consultation**.

In 77% of cases, respondents considered that access to legal aid **was essential or necessary** in the context of their asylum procedure. Another **75%** said that it was **very difficult or difficult** to find such assistance.

Challenges

Development of the association delayed by lockdown measures

The annual project was implemented under difficult conditions. Out of the 12 months of the development of the project, 5 were spent in lockdown, as Greece took strict isolation measures until the end of May 2021.

The **restrictions on movement and confinement have impacted all aspects of the life of the association**. The entire programme was reviewed in order to maintain activities compatible with the governmental provisions and health protocols in force. This meant that in-person activities had to be abandoned and the entire programme converted to remote services until early June 2021. To this end, our team has adapted and created new tools that allow us to easily stay in touch with our beneficiaries, offer services while respecting the confidentiality of each individual and work remotely as efficiently as possible. A hotline has been set up via a free online messaging application. The full remote approach has enabled our team to continue to provide legal services to displaced persons, although not without difficulty, as this mode of operation is not suited to the provision of legal services.

Inevitably, **the development of the association has been delayed by the restrictions measures**. Firstly, it was impossible to mobilise volunteers in the field. Without field experience and training, remote volunteers cannot intervene in legal proceedings. It was up to our permanent team to deal with all the cases, without external support, until June 2021. This was compounded by the interruption of the administrative procedures necessary to register the association in Greece.

After the restrictions were lifted at the end of May 2021, a few more months were needed for the situation to stabilise in northern Greece. During the second part of the year, our team focused on clearing the backlog: not only on activities but also on organisational development (such as renting office space) as well as establishing partnerships with local organisations. **Within a short period of 6 months, Equal Legal Aid welcomed 2 new staff members, 3 regular consultants, 5 volunteer lawyers. Our team also renovated and moved into its offices in Thessaloniki, and resumed its activities in person, in addition to maintaining the hotline.**



Legal clinic in Diavata, October 2021

Deterioration of the local political and legal context

The **local political and legal context has deteriorated considerably in 2020 and 2021**, in various aspects. A number of measures were adopted by the government tightening the legal framework for asylum, coupled with access difficulties due to the health situation. The asylum service was interrupted for five months, causing significant delays in the procedure and making access to information for displaced persons very difficult. They have great difficulty in accessing their file, receiving decisions on their application or filing appeals, for example. Procedural delays suddenly accelerated after the lifting of the lockdown at the end of May 2021: applicants are now called for their interview with only 3 to 7 working days notice, while at the same time the legal services offered by local NGOs have been reduced to a minimum.

As of 7 June 2021, **Afghan, Syrian, Somali, Pakistani and Bangladeshi asylum seekers are now required to undergo an admissibility interview to determine whether Turkey is a safe third country to which they can be deported** without a substantive examination of their claim. Our team moved very quickly to expand its services and offer these applicants preparations for the admissibility interview, in addition to preparations for the eligibility of their claim. The long-term consequences of this new measure, which undermines the effective exercise of the right to asylum, are still uncertain. This legislative development had a strong impact on ELA's daily operations: our team saw a huge number of cases referred to us by other organisations not able to absorb this surplus of cases in such a short time.

In addition, the Greek authorities issued a **new circular in November 2021 which, in practice, prevents asylum seekers from registering an asylum application on the mainland**. To do so, they must now go to the authorities in the border area of Evros, where the only reception and identification centre on the mainland (called Fylakio) is located. It is precisely in this area that the (countless) pushbacks take place. This circular was the culmination of a year of devastating measures for displaced persons, adopted with the stated aim of dismantling the right to asylum.

The **living conditions of displaced people have also worsened** due to government measures, as described on page 5.

Finally, **border violence** multiplied exponentially, as denounced by numerous reports, surveys and articles produced by civil society organisations (CSOs) and relayed by the international media outlets.

Reduction of staff and services available to asylum seekers

Local CSOs and NGOs suffered from the gradual disengagement of UNHCR, the tightening of European and Greek asylum policy, the criminalisation of assistance to displaced persons and the health situation. Many local CSOs and NGOs are facing serious financial difficulties and most of the organisations providing pro bono legal services reduced their intervention. **This reduction in pro bono legal services, alongside an increase in procedural complexity, is of great concern.** The result is an increase in referrals to ELA and a change in the demographics of the association's usual beneficiaries: more people in vulnerable situations, including families. The reduction of legal staff in all local projects makes it even more essential to maintain and increase the programme implemented by ELA as the need for legal aid is constantly increasing.

In conclusion, the overall context of our intervention has changed considerably in 2021 and we are more determined than ever to continue our work for the rights of displaced people.

ELA's team

The continuity and quality of Equal Legal Aid's action is based on its team: European, mixed and committed. Composed of lawyers, jurists and interpreters, the association benefits from both the expertise of a permanent team and the energy and fresh outlook of middle and long-term volunteers.

On the ground, **6 members of the permanent team** were involved in the project in 2021, namely,

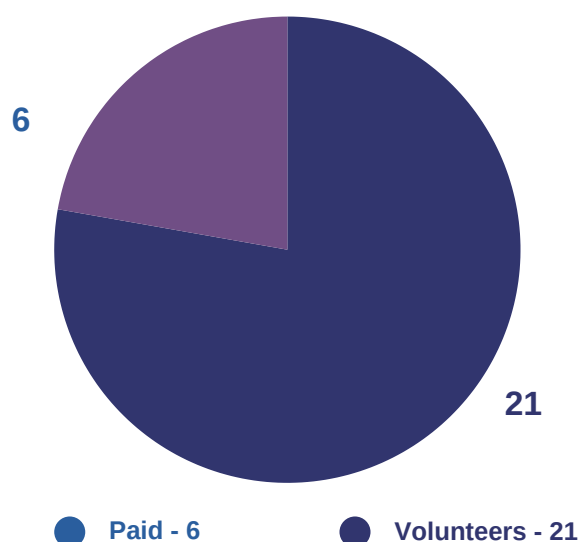
- 2 lawyers respectively director and coordinator of the project;
- 1 jurist responsible for finance and partnerships;
- 2 Greek registered lawyers collaborating with ELA;
- 1 cultural mediator working in Farsi/Dari with the association's Afghan beneficiaries.

At their side, **21 volunteers** supported our actions:

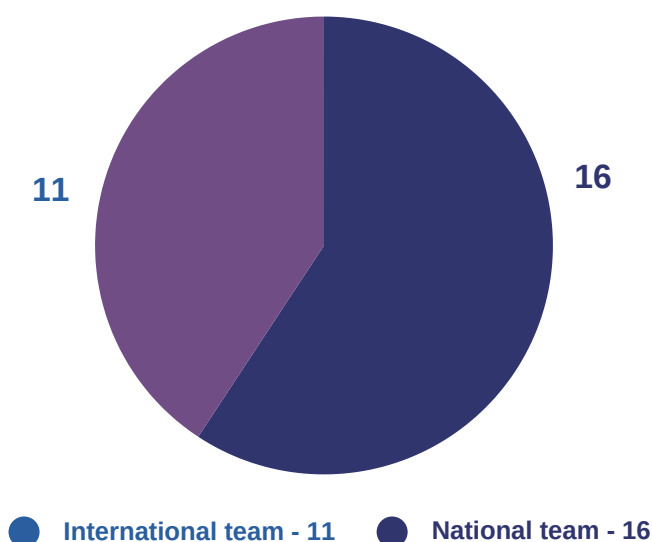
- 3 registered lawyers, president/members of the Board of Directors
- 4 lawyers/legal experts;
- 2 trainee-lawyers
- 9 interpreters;
- 3 translators.

A total of **4,942 volunteer hours** were dedicated to the association during the year.

A team of paid and volunteer staff



A team of national and international staff

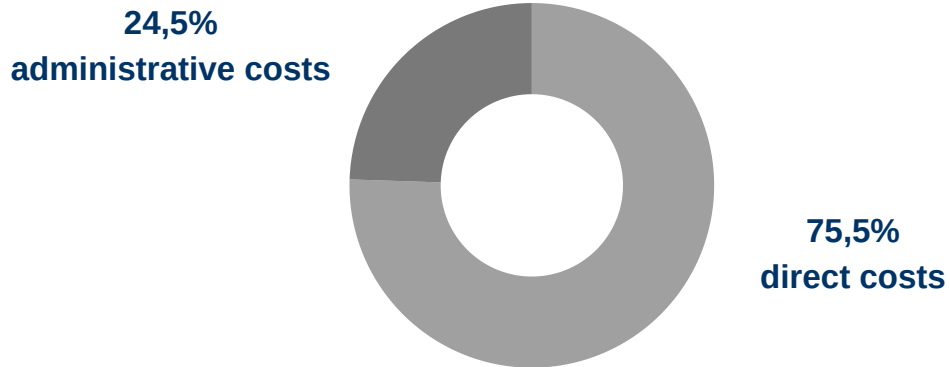


In parallel, the association hired **external consultants** specialised in accounting, communication and fundraising, a lawyer for the registration of the association in Greece and an auditor for its audit.

Finances

Budget line	Projected budget	Costs
1. Personnel costs		
1.1. Permanent team		
Executive director/lawyer (FR) - Full-time	20 472	21 167,08
Project coordinator/lawyer (FR) - Full-time	30 660	29 485,45
Trainee-lawyer (GR) - internship	4 620	2 210,67
Registered greek lawyer (GR) - Full-time position	14 320	16 905
Interpreter Farsi, Dari (GR)	9 450	12 600
Interpreter Arabic (GR)	9 450	0
Internship Science Po	4 200	3 989
Fundraising and donor reporting (FR) - full time	4 652	3 792,85
1.2. Volunteer staff		
Volunteer Interpreters	2 900	1 269,83
Volunteer subsistence expenses	2 700	2 749,53
Travel expenses	600	472
Volunteer translator	1 750	0
Sub-total personnel costs	105 774	94 641,64
2. Operating costs		
2.1. External consultants		
Lawyer (GR) fees	2 000	822
Official translation fees	1 000	504
Accountant (GR)	1 050	0
Accountant (FR)	1 050	5 895,59
External financial audit	4 000	4 800
ISO Certification	5 000	0
Consultancy: grant management and donors relations	4 500	4 395,39
Consultancy: Fundraising campaign 2021/2022	5 000	0
Consultancy: Communication	3 500	5 000
2.2. Office costs		
Rent	4 000	2 822,08
Utilities	1 200	894,82
Insurance costs	1 200	0
Office supplies	2 400	1 348,87
Domain and hosting services	100	47,47
Banking costs (FR)	84	141,26
Banking costs (GR)	84	25
Sub-total operating costs	36 168	26 696,48
3. Start-up costs		
Office design	2 000	1 354,14
Office supplies	2 000	4 065,52
Sub-total start-up costs	4 000	5 419,66
4. Specific mission costs		
Car rental and petrol	700	1 309,72
Representation fees	7 000	5 902,57
Sub-total specific mission costs	7 700	7 212,29
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS	153 642	133 752,40
Cash reserve (5%)	7 682,10	0
TOTAL	161 324,10	133 970,07

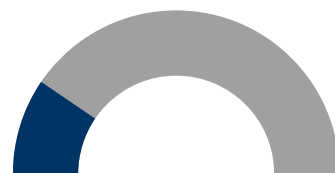
ADMINISTRATIVE ET DIRECT COSTS



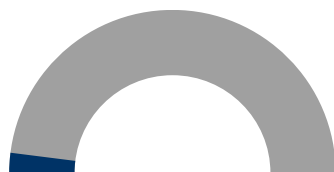
BUDGET PER CATEGORY



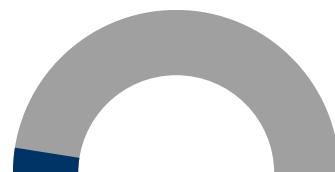
71 %
personnel costs



20 %
operating costs



4 %
start-up costs



5 %
specific mission costs

Thank you

In 2021, the association's financial needs were covered thanks to the support of many partners entities: **Aid Hoc**, the **Lyon Bar Association**, the **Marseille Bar Association**, **DLA Piper**, **BNP Paribas**, **Ubisoft**, **Choose Love**, **European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM)**, the **Gratitude Foundation**, the **Lucq Espérance Foundation**, the **PAM Foundation**, the **UMPT Foundation**, the **Inkermann Fund**, **Henkel**, the fund for **Global Human Rights**, **Secours Catholique**, **SolidariTee** and **Grand-Orient de France Foundation**.

We also received **45 individual donations** through our [HelloAsso page](#).

We would like to warmly thank all the people who believed in our project and offered their support in 2021, allowing us to continue to develop our actions in favor of displaced people. Every euro counts to ensure our independence. Your support is precious.



Thank you Alexia, Amro, Anne-Sophie, Benjamin, Bertrand, Camille, Caroline, Cecilia, Charles, Charlotte, Charlotte, Clément, Cova, Denis, Dominique, Dounia, Elise, Eliza, Emmanuel, Farhad, Geoffrey, Hélène, Laure, Léa, Lucie, Lucile, Martin, Mélanie, Michiel, Nicolas, Pauline, Samantha, Séverine, Sophie, Sophie, Stéphane, Thierry, Tom, Viktorija and Yann.



2021 Annual Report

Equal Legal Aid

Non-profit association in accordance
with the French Law of 1901

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