

COUNTRY VISIT

Greece: immediate action needed to protect human rights of migrants

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Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović meets with beneficiaries of a semi-independent living programme for unaccompanied minor in Athens, Greece. ©CoE/2018/Giorgos Moutafis

“The humanity and hospitality that Greece’s people and authorities demonstrated towards migrants in recent years is truly commendable. In spite of these efforts, however, the situation remains worrying and much more needs to be done to protect the human rights of those who have had to flee their country”, said today Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, at the end of her five-day visit to Greece, which also focused on the impact of austerity on human rights.

Noting the significant decrease in arrivals of migrants to Greece in the last two years, the Commissioner stressed that while current numbers remain difficult to manage for Greece alone, Europe as a whole can handle them without major difficulties. “It is high time that all member states of the Council of Europe united around its foundational values and address this issue in a spirit of collective responsibility and solidarity”, said Commissioner Mijatović.

Rapid action by the Greek authorities is required to improve migrants' reception conditions, especially in the hotspots. The geographical restriction imposed on arriving migrants put the Eastern Aegean islands (on which the hotspots are located) and their population under heavy pressure, as the Commissioner could observe in Lesbos. "I am very concerned by the substandard living conditions prevailing in the Reception and Identification Centre of Moria, which is running at well over three times its capacity and has already expanded informally into the surrounding area, putting the human rights of its residents at risk. The combination of overcrowding, insecurity, poor hygienic conditions, the approaching high summer temperatures, and residents' uncertainty regarding their future may lead to very serious problems if not addressed immediately", said the Commissioner, who also warned about the increasing tensions that this situation inevitably causes both among the residents of the Centre and within the general population of the island. Underlining the need to act quickly, the Commissioner called on the Greek authorities to transfer more people to the mainland. She also called on the Greek authorities to speed up the processing of asylum applications, whilst ensuring all necessary safeguards for fair procedures are in place, increase the capacities of reception facilities across the country, and improve their quality. "Temporary camps can meet the standards, as I could observe at the Open Hospitality Centre for Refugees and Migrants 'Kara Tepe' run by the Municipality of Lesbos; however, given the length of the asylum procedure, there is also a need for more reception facilities adapted to prolonged residence," she said. The Commissioner also praised the invaluable work of civil society actors and international partners in this field.

Commissioner Mijatović also insisted on the need to improve and speed up the vulnerability assessment procedure, in order to better protect the rights of all vulnerable people, including victims of trafficking and of sexual and gender-based violence, persons with disabilities, and persons with mental health conditions, the latter becoming increasingly common due to a prolonged stay in substandard conditions in a reception centre. In addition, with most of the 3,500 unaccompanied minors currently in Greece still waiting for adequate care and accommodation, the Commissioner expressed concern that many of them are reported homeless, or are deprived of their liberty under the 'protective custody' regime. "The recent adoption of a law on foster care is a positive step and I look forward to its implementation in practice. A rapid transfer of children who are entitled to family reunification elsewhere in Europe would also help address this worrying situation. I also encourage the authorities to develop alternative care arrangements, such as the semi-independent living programme run by the NGO METAdrasi, some of whose beneficiaries I met", she added.

Finally, the Commissioner observed that, after having been a transit country, Greece has also become a country of destination. "In this context, integration is of utmost importance for both the migrants and Greece's social cohesion. NGOs run a number of projects in this field, and I note that the Ministry of Migration Policy intends to develop more integration programmes. I welcome these initiatives and encourage the Greek authorities and their partners to intensify their efforts to provide language and vocational training, family reunification, and access to long-term residence and eventually naturalisation" said the Commissioner.

As regards the impact of austerity measures, Commissioner Mijatović noted that a number of human rights have been adversely affected by those measures, especially the rights to health and to education. Severe

budget cuts in the healthcare sector, coupled with cuts in patients' wages and pensions have hampered access to health care, at a time when the economic crisis generated an increase in the need for certain medical care, especially mental health care. "In such a difficult context, the adoption in 2016 of a law on universal medical coverage has been a major step forward. However, as I could observe during my visit to the Metropolitan Social Centre of Elliniko, a number of patients still do not have access to the health care they need. Therefore, I encourage the authorities to improve the implementation of this legislation in practice and to remove the barriers to accessing health care," said the Commissioner.

The consequences of austerity on the right to education have also been severe. "Mergers and closures of school units, cuts in budget and staff, and reduction of teaching hours have raised important issues regarding both the access to education and the quality of the education during the economic crisis. I welcome the increase in the education budget decided in 2017 and 2018, and I encourage the authorities to intensify their efforts in this field so as to ensure full access to high-quality level and inclusive education for all," said the Commissioner.

"The end of the third economic adjustment programme creates an opportunity to reverse the negative effects of the austerity on human rights, which should not be missed," stated the Commissioner Mijatović. "I call on the Greek authorities to take advantage of these new circumstances to enhance the effective protection of the rights to health and to education, and to conduct human rights and equality impact assessments of any new measure to be taken," she said.

In the course of her visit, the Commissioner met with the President of the Hellenic Republic, the Speaker of the Parliament, the Ministers of Justice, Transparency and Human Rights and of Health and the Deputy Ministers of Education, Research and Religious Affairs and of Migration Policy, as well as with the Ombudsman and the National Commission for Human Rights. She also met local authorities and representatives of civil society and international organisations.

The Commissioner's report on her visit to Greece is forthcoming.