

# LESVOS SITUATION REPORT

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Quarterly Developments and Updates

**July - September 2024**



LEGAL  
CENTRE  
LESVOS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The situation of migrants in Greece remains dire with a continuation of persistent border violence, including a recent series of deadly attacks and escalated violence against migrant boats in the Aegean. These life-endangering and murderous actions of the Greek Coast Guard (HCG) continue to be documented with [articles](#) and [reports](#) emerging of the HCG [shootings at migrant boats and causing shipwrecks](#).

Data on recent arrivals confirm that the Greek government's coordinated attack on migrants through its [pushback policy](#) continues. Between July and September 2024, Greece witnessed a doubling in sea arrivals to the Aegean islands compared to the previous quarter, yet nearly 2,972 migrants were also forcibly pushed back by Greek authorities during the same period, according to [the Turkish Coast Guard](#).

In parallel, and likely as a result of these systemic attacks against migrants in the Northern Aegean, people on the move have shifted their [migration routes](#), with increasing numbers of people on the move taking longer and more perilous routes to reach the Greek islands which are not directly at the border with Turkey. In these non 'hotspot' islands, new arrivals frequently encounter a lack of adequate reception structures, leaving many stranded in the streets for days or weeks without shelter or immediate support.

Within the Lesvos Closed Controlled Access Center (CCAC), nearly 1,300 migrants remained in [inhuman living conditions](#), many without access to food and clean water following a persistent policy of discrimination based on legal status within the CCAC. This deprivation of the most fundamental rights has continued throughout the summer. In addition to that, delays in the provision of [cash assistance](#) since May 2024, has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of thousands of asylum seekers who rely on these funds to meet their basic needs.

In this context, as detailed below, the Legal Centre Lesvos continued its crucial work providing [direct legal support](#) and advocating for migrants' rights. Over the past quarter, LCL represented refugees, asylum seekers and detainees, including people seeking family reunification, appealing denied asylum claims, and facing criminal charges.

In August, the LCL continued to support two of the Pylos 9 survivors accused of the shipwreck, filing a claim for compensation in order to obtain damages for the time unjustly spent in detention. As a reminder, the Pylos 9 were unjustly detained in pre-trial detention for almost a year. Unfortunately, the claim was denied by the Court in Kalamata on 19 November 2024.

The LCL continues to support criminalised migrants, who are systematically prosecuted as smugglers under harsh and broad legislation and facing severe penalties, often without evidence.

# OVERALL SITUATION AND STATISTICS

## CHANGES IN MIGRATION ROUTES

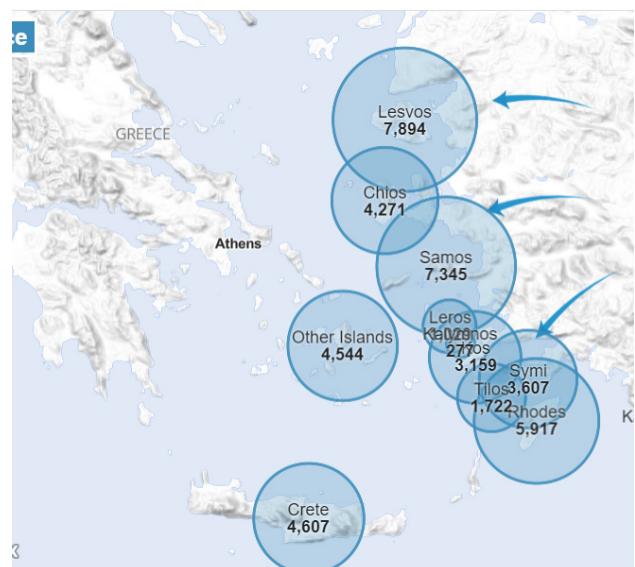
Between 1 July and 29 September 2024, arrivals by sea to the Greek islands of the Aegean doubled compared to the previous quarter, with [UNHCR reporting](#) a total of 17,034 migrants arrivals to Greece by sea. Out of these arrivals, 1,658 people arrived on Lesbos island, which is a clear decrease of registered arrivals compared to the previous year over the same time period (which counted 6,479 arrivals).

While Lesbos remains the first point of arrival for migrants along the Eastern Mediterranean route so far in 2024 (6399 arrivals total as of the end of September 2024), islands like Samos (6,516 arrivals) have seen nearly the same number of arrivals as Lesbos since the start of the year.

During the same period of time 5,171 people arrived and were registered on Rhodos island and an additional 8,000 people on the move arrived and were registered on the remaining Greek islands in the southern Aegean and Mediterranean, indicating a consistent change in migration routes. As most of these islands are further from the Turkish coast, this also means that migrants are increasingly undertaking longer and even more perilous crossings, reaching islands in the Cyclades and Crete, in order to seek protection in the EU.

## LACK OF FIRST RECEPTION SUPPORT

As migration routes have shifted, the Greek government has been slow to adapt and respond. On islands like Rhodos, which saw an escalation of arrivals this summer, people who arrived from Turkey wishing to seek asylum were forced to sleep outside in the streets without shelter, support of any kind, or the ability to continue their journeys to mainland Greece. In some cases it took the authorities several weeks to register their arrival and asylum claims. Furthermore, many of these islands do not have a Reception and Identification Services, meaning that even when registered, asylum seekers are detained in police stations in deplorable conditions. At the end of September, the Legal Centre Lesbos was contacted repeatedly by a group of Syrians, including a pregnant woman, who had arrived in Rhodos and remained unattended, sleeping in the street outside the police sta-



Screenshot of [UNHCR Operation Data Portal](#), showing arrivals to Greece from Turkey in 2024 as of 7 November 2024.

tion for more than two weeks, despite appearing at the police station daily requesting to apply for asylum.

## PUSHBACK TRENDS

People crossing the Aegean sea border over the last months have faced new levels of violence as Greece persists with its policy of preventing the arrival of migrants at any cost. During the summer - Greece's peak tourist season for the Greek islands - there was an increasing number of incidents of migrant boats capsizing after being pursued by Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) vessels, use and threatened use of firearms against migrants, and severe beatings. These tactics are deadly, and given the clandestine nature of pushback operations, it is unknown the number of people who have been killed as a result. Following are just a few incidents that have been reported:

- On 8 July, migrants who had been left adrift in the Aegean sea close to Chios island following a pushback operation crashed into a rocky island, causing their vessel to capsize, [killing eight people on board](#).
- On 23 August, near Symi island, the HCG shot at a migrant boat it was pursuing, [killing a 38 year old man](#) on board. Over the summer, there have been [several additional reports](#) of migrant boats being shot at by the HCG, with the HCG publicly admitting that it is using lethal force on migrant boats at sea.
- On 17 September, [one migrant drowned](#) after the boat he was in capsized after being pursued by the HCG.
- On 23 September, [at least four people - three women and a child - were killed](#) following a shipwreck off Samos Island. The cause of the shipwreck is unknown.
- On 27 September, [one woman was killed](#) following a shipwreck near Kos island. Likewise, the cause of this shipwreck is unknown, however, what is tragically evident in this and every case is that borders kill.

Greece's violent pushback policy, when it doesn't kill, continues to terrorise thousands. Between July and September 2024, 2,972 people were subjected to unlawful pushback operations by Greece in the Aegean sea in at least 145 incidents, and over 10,000 people were apprehended by Turkish authorities attempting to cross to Greece, according to [data of the Turkish Coast Guard Command](#). This data indicates that over 40 percent of the people attempting to cross the sea border to Greece are still being prevented from doing so either by Greek or Turkish authorities.

As a member of the [Recording Mechanism of Informal Forced Returns](#), the LCL continues to take the testimonies of people on the move who have been pushed back through violent, deadly pushback operations, which published its [2023 annual report](#) in June 2024. Between July and September 2024, four new testimonies were submitted by the Legal Centre Lesbos

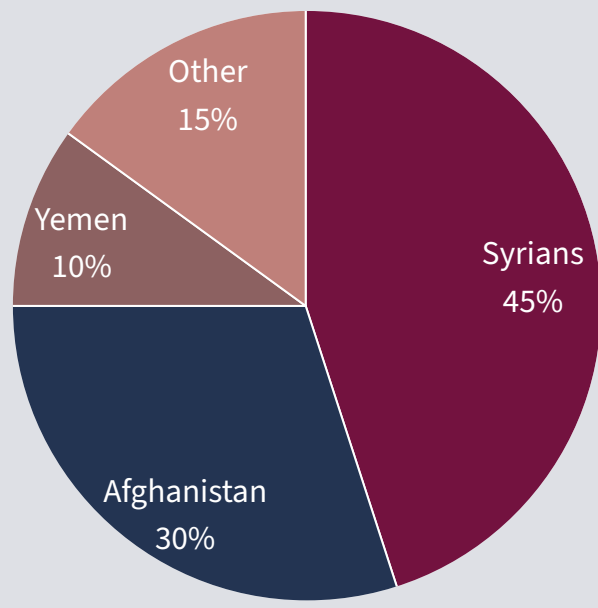
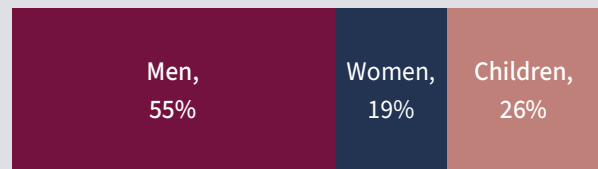
## INSIDE LESVOS CCAC

For most of the last eight years, asylum seekers who arrived to Lesbos from Turkey were generally confined to the island due to geographical restrictions until their asylum claim was assessed. People were often trapped for months, or even years on the island. Over the past year, however, Greek authorities have started lifting geographical restrictions much sooner, and in some cases before the asylum procedure is completed. Other asylum seekers have seen their procedures accelerated, and refugee status granted within a few weeks of arrival in Greece. This continued this summer, in particular with nationals of Afghanistan and Palestine being interviewed within a few days of arrival and receiving refugee status a few days later. This policy shift is welcomed and follows years of advocacy by LCL and other humanitarian and human rights organisations operating in Greece, who have long denounced the inadequate, overcrowded, and inhuman conditions asylum seekers were confined to on the Greek islands, and the needlessly prolonged asylum procedures.

As a result of this shift in policy and decrease in arrivals, at the end of September, 1,285 refugees and migrants were residing in the Lesbos Closed Controlled Access Center (CCAC). For the first time since 2016, Syrians made up the largest population of the camp (45%), followed by nationals of Afghanistan (30%) and Yemen (10%). Many of LCL clients from Syria stressed that they were forced to migrate to Europe this year given the deteriorating situation for Syrians living in Turkey, who are facing [racist violence](#), marginalisation, and risk forced deportation to Syria. Despite the increased problems faced in Turkey, Syrians, however, are still having their asylum claims rejected on the basis that Turkey is a safe third country for them, so often are trapped for longer on the island. Men make up 55% of the camp's population, women 19% and children 26%.

## LESVOS CLOSED CONTROLLED ACCESS CENTRE IN NUMBERS AT THE END OF SEPTEMBER

**1,285**  
REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS  
RESIDING IN THE CCAC



## FOOD AND WATER INSECURITY CONTINUES

This year's Greek Summer was particularly difficult for the hundreds of migrants who – beyond being forced to live in the Lesvos CCAC – were also denied access to clean water and food. One month after receiving asylum, people are cut off from all governmental assistance, including food and water distributions. Likewise, asylum seekers rejected with a final decision are cut off from all assistance.

In June 2024, [77 percent of the approx. 1,300 residents of Lesvos CCAC](#) were either recognised refugees or had their asylum claim rejected, and thus were subject to being cut off from food and water distribution in the middle of the Summer's heat wave, while temperatures reached up to 40 degrees Celsius.



Photo: Outdoor water distribution points in the Lesvos CCAC. Source: camp resident.

The LCL joined [local civil society's efforts](#) to denounce this discriminatory policy, which amounts to inhuman and degrading treatment. As highlighted by a [coalition of UN Special Rapporteurs](#), the food insecurity created by this policy should be seen in conjunction with the persisting housing insecurity and the inability to access work or social support (including cash assistance), which are endemic problems within the population [forced to live in Greece's CCACs](#).

This cutoff policy constitutes a clear violation of people's human rights, disregarding the universally recognised rights to health, to food and clean water and to life. The Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum has an obligation to protect people who, while forced to live in CCAC's structures, are [dependent on the authorities for their most basic human needs](#). It must end the

discrimination of migrants based on their legal status and immediately reinstate the distribution of food and water to all people living in the CCACs.

## DELAYS IN CASH ASSISTANCE CONTINUED

Cash assistance for asylum seekers, a program [funded by the EU](#), is essential for ensuring that asylum seekers have dignified living conditions, especially since asylum seekers are not allowed to work during their first two months in Greece. However, since the Greek government took over the program from UNHCR in 2021, delays and missed payments have been frequent.

Since May 2024, asylum seekers in Greece are facing severe hardships due to delays in cash assistance payments. This situation has left many without an income to [meet basic needs](#), particularly affecting vulnerable groups, including families and individuals living in CCACs. There has been no communication from the Ministry of Migration and Asylum regarding the reasons for the delay, or a timeline for resuming payments and back payments.

As of June 2024, only 43% of eligible asylum seekers were receiving assistance, with thousands remaining without support. The payments, when received, are in any event insufficient to cover basic living expenses.

In September, the LCL joined [18 organisations](#) to call on:

- **the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum to immediately resume payments, ensure backdated assistance for missed months and improve management of the cash assistance program.**
- **the European Commission to ensure that EU funds for this purpose are effectively managed to meet legal obligations and support the basic needs of asylum seekers.**

## CLOSURE OF MEGALA THERMA DETENTION SITE

During August, the rudimentary camp site of Megala Therma, situated in Northern Lesvos, [was finally closed down](#). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the camp was officially used as a quarantine site for all new asylum seekers arriving to the municipality of Western Lesvos.

As shown in LCL's [report on the conditions for migrants in Greece during the pandemic](#), Megala Therma was in reality one of the numerous detention sites for migrants on the island, in which new arrivals were kept in unsanitary conditions, far from the eyes of civil society actors. MSF, who provided weekly healthcare services in Megala Therma, [described the conditions there](#) as “grossly undignified and inhumane” and reported a “serious and systematic neglect in the provision of essential services, protection and proper access to specialist healthcare.” [As reported by GCR](#), a group of asylum seekers held in Megala Therma were also illegally expelled back to Turkey on 18 February 2021.



The LCL filed multiple complaints to the Greek Ombudsperson to uphold the rights of clients detained in Megala Therma who were denied medical care, including unaccompanied children detained there with unrelated adults in dreadful conditions. Despite the lifting of quarantine measures in Lesvos and throughout Greece in 2022, **Megala Therma was still used as a detention site for newly arrived migrants up until May 2023**. While the camp has remained in disuse for the past year, the official closure of this detention site is welcome and one step towards the abolition of housing migrants in camps.

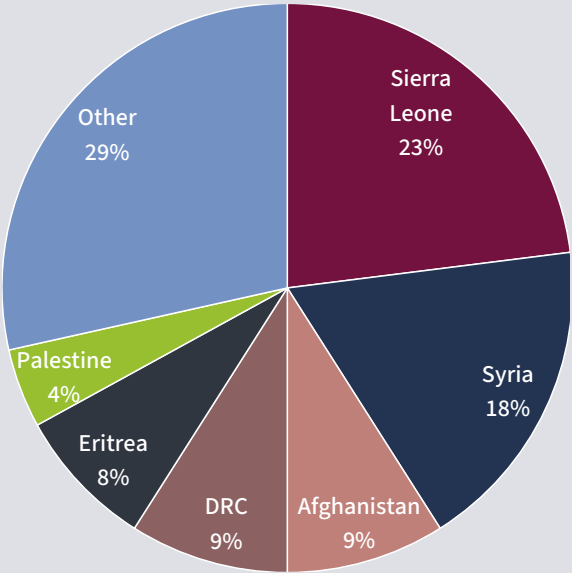


Photo: Tents of Megala Therma. Source: Ministry of Migration and Asylum

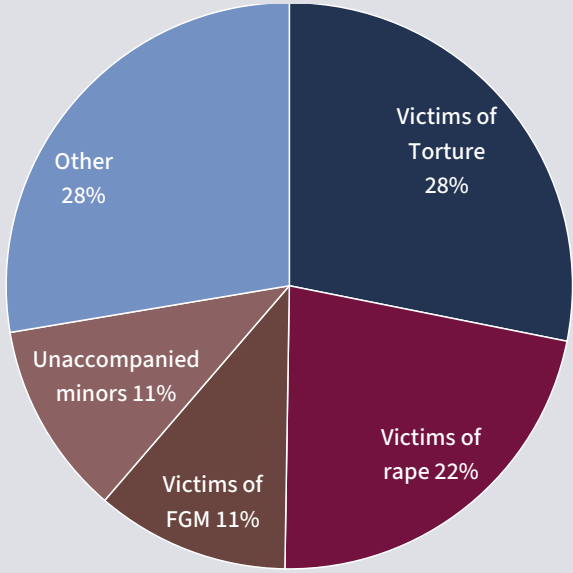
# OVERVIEW OF THE LEGAL CENTRE LESVOS' WORK

## 304 PEOPLE SUPPORTED

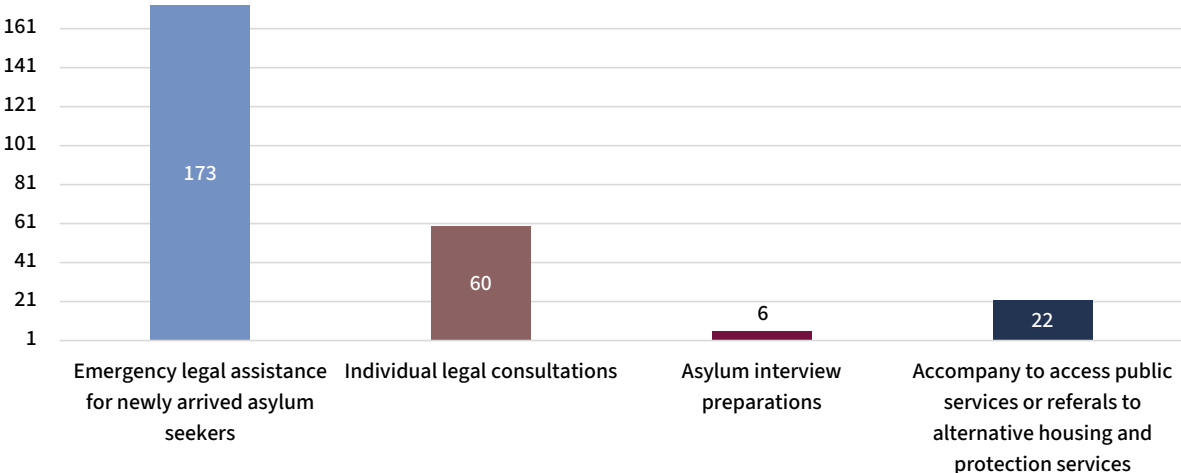
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN<sup>1</sup>



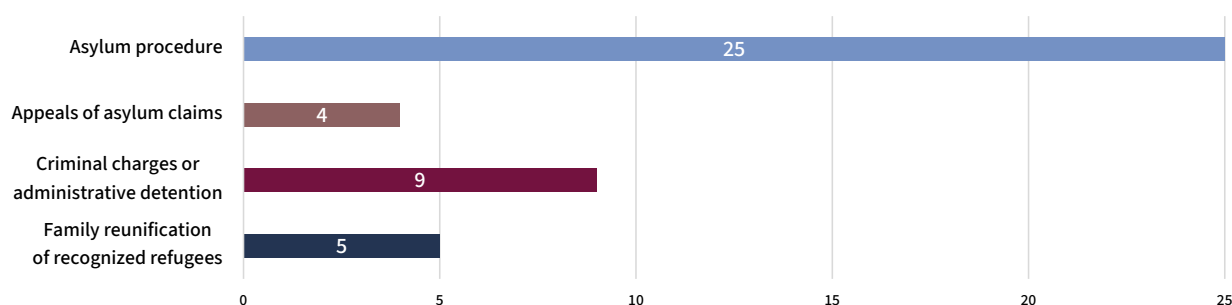
VULNERABILITIES<sup>2</sup>



### LEGAL ASSISTANCE AND INFORMATION PROVIDED INCLUDED:



## LEGAL CENTRE LESVOS' LAWYERS TOOK ON THE REPRESENTATION OF:



## NOTABLE CASES

### ASYLUM CASES

An Eritrean man finally had his asylum interview in August, after waiting for over one year and received refugee status shortly after. This LCL client's case was delayed due to the fact that he was unjustly accused of causing a shipwreck upon his arrival to Greece.

A Syrian man, who had fled his country as his life was at risk after deserting the Syrian army, received refugee status in August after receiving legal support from the LCL. This outcome stands out as Greece continues to reject most asylum claims of Syrians as 'inadmissible' on the grounds that Turkey is a safe third-country for them. Turkey, however, [does not meet on either factual or legal grounds](#) the criteria to be considered safe and has not accepted any formal deportations from Greece since March 2020.

### CRIMINAL CASES

7 people, represented by LCL, were released from detention since the start of 2024 thanks to our work in defense of criminalised migrants and migrants held in administrative detention.

On 16 September, LCL represented [A.B.](#), from Iraq who was charged with smuggling after arriving by boat in Lesvos in March 2020. Despite video footage showing him as a passenger, not the driver, he continues to face criminal charges in Greece. Unfortunately, his trial in Mytilene was postponed for the third time, until 10 March 2025 – in this instance due to a lawyers' strike. A.B. is waiting for over four years for his trial, a time during which his asylum claim is also suspended. Such delays are all too common, prolonging the injustice and uncertainty faced by criminalised migrants.

1 Other countries are primarily: Egypt (4.5%), Turkey (4.5%) and Somalia (3%)

2 Other vulnerabilities are primarily: people suffering from PTSD (5.5%), single parents with minor children (5.5%), pregnant women (5.5%), victims of serious forms of violence or exploitation (5.5%) and elderly people (5.5%)



Photo: Legal Centre Lesvos at the Info Point of Parea Community Centre for the weekly permanence. Source: Parea Community Centre

## DEFENSE OF MIGRANTS' RIGHTS IN LESVOS AND BEYOND

- On 1-2 July, LCL attended and presented during a [two-day workshop on Gender, Migration, and Digitalization](#) organised at Cologne University.
- On 10 September, LCL presented on the Pylos 9 defence, and our work defending migrants rights in an event on the criminalisation of migration organised by [Medico International in Frankfurt](#) for the launch of the [Freedom of Movement Fund](#).
- LCL carried out two presentations on pushbacks and the situation in the Aegean Sea for 55 visiting volunteers on the island.

# LITIGATION AND CRIMINAL DEFENSE

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## WHAT REDRESS FOR THE PYLOS 9 SURVIVORS?

Since their acquittal and release from detention in June 2024, the 9 Egyptian men wrongly accused of causing the Pylos shipwreck and of being smugglers, have claimed asylum in Greece and are waiting for decisions in their asylum procedures. Two of the Pylos 9 represented by LCL's lawyers have filed a criminal complaint against the Greek authorities responsible for the shipwreck in July 2024 in order to join the other survivors' complaint. The investigation into the responsibility of the Coast Guards is currently ongoing.

In August 2024, the LCL also supported two of the Pylos 9 survivors to file a compensation request before the Kalamata Three Members Appeal Court in order to obtain damages for the time unjustly spent in detention. Unfortunately, this compensation request was rejected by the court on 19 November 2024. After surviving one of the deadliest shipwrecks in the Mediterranean, spending almost a year in prison and facing several life sentences for a crime they were wrongfully accused of, it is questionable what redress would now look like for the 9 survivors.

We demand that international protection be granted to all of the survivors of the Pylos massacre and that a serious and thorough investigation is conducted into the causes of the shipwreck so that those who are truly responsible for the tragic death of over 600 people at sea are brought to justice.

## #FREEHOMAYOUN: OUTCOME OF THE APPEAL TRIAL

On 24-25 September 2024, the Legal Centre Lesvos, Aegean Migrant Solidarity (AMS), the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), the European Lawyers for Democracy and Human Rights (ELDH), borderline-europe e.V., and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC), [attended the Appeal Trial of Homayoun Sabetara in Thessaloniki](#) as observers.

Together with the Captain Support Network and several other organisations, LCL [called for the release of Mr. Sabetara](#), who had received in the first instance judgement of 2021, an 18-year prison sentence for “facilitating illegal entry” by driving across the border. Mr. Sabetara's conviction was upheld on appeal, however, his sentence was reduced to seven years due to the aggravating circumstances being dismissed, as well as the consideration of time served and mitigating circumstances, allowing him to apply for his early release on parole soon.

Just like the Pylos 9 trial, Mr. Sabetara's case exemplifies a broader trend where migrants, often asylum seekers who have received no material gain, are prosecuted as smugglers under Greece's broad and harsh anti smuggling legislation based on EU regulations. This criminalisation is exacerbated by violence from authorities at the Greece-Turkey border, and many pros-

ecutions and convictions rely solely on police or coast guard testimonies - the very authorities who are involved in attacking migrants at Greece' borders.

The systematic criminalisation of migration must stop. People on the move who enter Greece in order to apply for asylum should not be accused of smuggling - and the thousands of migrants currently jailed in Greece prisons on smuggling charges must be released.

# THE LEGAL CENTRE LESVOS CALLS ON:

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## THE GREEK GOVERNMENT TO:

- **Ensure that new arrivals have, notwithstanding their place of arrival, immediate access to the registration of their asylum procedure and are provided with shelter and support to prevent them from being stranded without protection and being exposed to pushbacks.**
- **Stop violent, unlawful and deadly pushbacks practices, including the use of firearms to shoot at migrants boats and carry out thorough investigations into allegations of border violence to hold perpetrators accountable and ensure the HCG's actions comply with maritime law and international human rights standards.**
- **Put an end to discriminatory practices that deny food, clean water, and other basic necessities to migrants, based on their legal status inside the CCAC, and to offer them a safe environment with access to shelter and adequate living and to resume cash assistance payments, including back payments for months missed.**
- **Stop the systematic criminalisation of migrants and to ensure that the Greek Courts respect the fair trials principle for migrants facing criminal charges.**

## THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO:

- **Ensure Greece adheres to human rights obligations by monitoring the way in which EU funds are allocated for asylum and migration support and border maintenance, and immediately suspending the financing of any operation demonstrated to be violating the fundamental rights of migrants in Greece, including any funds or vessels allocated to the Hellenic Coast Guard.**