



Press Release
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Migration management in Greece and Italy: time to step up action to address disparities, say EU Auditors

The EU should step up action on asylum, relocation and return of migrants to better meet the objectives of its support, according to a new report by the European Court of Auditors (ECA). Emergency relocation schemes did not reach their targets and only partially achieved their main objective of alleviating pressure on Greece and Italy. Despite increased asylum-processing capacities in both countries, long handling times and bottlenecks persist, while returns of irregular migrants remain low and problematic across the EU.

The EU has seen unprecedented levels of migration in recent years, which peaked in 2015 and led to increased asylum applications, particularly in Greece and Italy. To address the crisis, the EU set up hotspots, introduced temporary relocation schemes and increased its funding. The auditors examined whether EU support for both countries achieved its objectives, relocation schemes reached their targets, and asylum and return procedures were effective and swift.

“EU migration management in Greece and Italy was relevant, but has not reached its full potential,” said Leo Brincat, the ECA Member responsible for the report. “It is time to step up action to address disparities between objectives and results.”

The auditors found that the **EU support actions** examined addressed the needs identified, but most projects had not fully achieved their targets. Registration and fingerprinting of migrants had improved significantly, but the situation in the Greek **hotspots** remains highly critical in terms of capacity and the situation of unaccompanied minors. The EU asylum support office’s operations (EASO) still suffered from a shortage of national experts, while the EU coast guard agency (Frontex) had actually deployed more staff than needed to the Italian hotspots, which were found to be empty or almost empty.

Of the initial target of 160 000 migrants, EU countries legally agreed to **relocate** 98 256. However, only 34 705 (21 999 from Greece and 12 706 from Italy) were relocated. The auditors say the schemes underperformed mainly owing to the very low share of potentially eligible migrants registered for relocation, as both countries’ authorities were initially unable to identify all potential candidates and successfully channel them towards applying for relocation. Once migrants were registered for relocation, efforts were more successful. Nevertheless, the auditors identified a number of operational weaknesses in the relocation process.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors’ special report. The full report is on eca.europa.eu.

ECA Press

12, rue Alcide De Gasperi – L-1615 Luxembourg

E: press@eca.europa.eu @EUAuditors eca.europa.eu

In Greece, an increased capacity for processing **asylum** applications was still not sufficient to tackle the increasing backlog. The 2016 EU-Turkey statement has had a major impact on arrivals. However, its cornerstone, the fast-track border procedure for examining asylum applications, is not swift enough: in 2018, instead of a few days, it took on average 215 days from an application to the first instance decision. Issues such as a shortage of doctors to conduct vulnerability assessments on Greek islands were a key factor in these delays. For the accelerated and regular procedures, the situation was even more problematic, with interview dates set for as late as 2021 and 2023 respectively. Moreover, a large caseload of negative first-instance decisions is moving to the already overloaded appeals stage.

Italy currently has sufficient processing capacity to deal with the sharply decreased arrivals and asylum applications at first instance, but not to process the high number of appeals. It took on average over 4 years for an asylum application lodged in 2015 to reach the final appeal stage. The auditors warn that support for judicial authorities is likely to become the Italian asylum system's most pressing need.

In both countries and the EU overall, far fewer migrants are actually returned than **return** decisions made. The main reasons are the lengthy asylum processes, absence of integrated return management systems, no mutual recognition or systematic recording of return decisions, insufficient capacity in detention centres, difficult cooperation with the migrants' country of origin or migrants simply absconding once their return decision is taken.

The auditors made recommendations to the European Commission and the two agencies in order to:

- use lessons learned for any future voluntary relocation mechanism;
- strengthen the management of emergency support, asylum systems and return procedures;
- enhance EASO's support for asylum procedures and adjust Frontex's return support and deployment of experts.

Notes to Editors

The EU allocated €703 million of emergency funding to Greece and €122 million to Italy by 2019 from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF EMAS), in addition to the €328 million and €394 million allocated to them respectively under the AMIF national programmes for 2014-2020.

The mandatory temporary relocation schemes were introduced by two Council decisions in September 2015 and ran from 24 March 2015 to 26 September 2017. Migrants relocated during this eligibility period represented around 4 % of all asylum seekers in Italy and around 22 % of those in Greece. The UK and Denmark exercised their opt-outs, and Hungary and Poland did not relocate any migrants. No consensus has yet been reached on a permanent relocation system. The rate of return of third-country nationals ordered to leave the EU was around 40 % in 2018 and around 20 % in both Greece and Italy. Return rates to countries outside Europe were even lower.

Special report 24/2019 "Asylum, relocation and return of migrants: Time to step up action to address disparities between objectives and results" is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages. In 2017, the auditors published a [report](#) on the migration hotspots in Greece and Italy.

Press contact:

Damijan Fišer – E: damijan.fiser@eca.europa.eu

T: (+352) 4398 45410 M: (+352) 621 55 22 24