

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

LEGAL AID TO DISPLACED PERSONS
THESSALONIKI, NORTHERN GREECE



*Providing legal aid to displaced persons
Defending the right to asylum*

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ELA's identity

Name:	Equal Legal Aid (ELA)
Status:	Non-profit association
Date of creation:	June 2019
Website:	https://www.equallegalaid.org/
Email:	contact@equallegalaid.org
Registration number (Fr):	W595935578
Headquarters:	9 Fabricants st., 59100 Roubaix, FRANCE - SIREN: 892475252
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Equal Legal Aid (ELA) is a not-for-profit organisation whose purpose is to provide information, guidance and individual support to asylum seekers and refugees in their various procedures within the European Union. In particular, the association provides **pro bono legal services to displaced persons in Northern Greece** in their asylum procedures.

Our goal: to defend the right to asylum

Equal Legal Aid defends and promotes **the fundamental right to asylum, which is now more than ever under threat in Greece and Europe**. In order to ensure access to this right, the association implements a comprehensive programme of legal services to support people in exile. In addition, our association is involved in advocacy and communication activities to inform people about asylum and the unacceptable attacks on this fundamental right.

Nos valeurs :

EMANCIPATION

The legal asylum framework has become so complex, especially in Greece, that it is impossible to navigate without the help of a specialist. Displaced people are paralysed at all levels: in their asylum procedure and in their integration. Our association aims to inform them of their rights so that they can make informed decisions, understand and play an active role in their procedure(s) and start to (re)build their future independently.



INDEPENDENCE

We are politically and financially independent of any government, ideology, economic interest or religion. Our independence guarantees our freedom of expression and action and strengthen our resilience.

SOLIDARITY

The reception and asylum crisis that Europe has been experiencing since 2015 jeopardises the fundamental right to asylum and calls into question the principle of solidarity. European civil society must unequivocally reaffirm the prevalence of the right to asylum and the dignity of displaced persons.

The context of our work

Equal Legal Aid operates in the northern region of 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. The city's central location makes it easy to reach the 15 refugee camps in the region.



The stark erosion of asylum rights in Europe

Across Europe, the right to asylum is being undermined in principle and in practice. The new European Pact on Asylum and Migration, adopted by the European Parliament on 14 May, is symptomatic of this clear step backwards. Intended to redistribute the burden of migration more fairly and to streamline asylum procedures, its provisions¹ go much further. They enshrine at European level some of the dissuasive measures already applied in Greece, with dramatic consequences. Greece has been at the forefront of implementing one of Europe's most harmful migration policies, of which the refugee camps - built with European money - have become the sad symbol.

Like Italy and Spain, Greece's geographical location makes it one of the gateways to Europe for people seeking protection. European law stipulates that an asylum application can only be examined by one country. Greece, often the first European country an asylum seeker enters, is responsible for examining the application.

Arrivals in Greece have been steadily increasing since 2022 and the end of the pandemic. 2024 is the second year with the most arrivals since 2015/2026.

Escalating violence against asylum seekers

Since its election in 2019, the party in power in Greece, New Democracy, has been using crude and brutal methods to achieve an obvious and claimed objective: to reduce the number of migrants

at all costs, something the Greek government boasts about at every opportunity, in the media and before European political bodies.

This objective is being pursued surgically, using every possible means: harassment of asylum seekers by the authorities, detention in dystopian prisons, bureaucratic harassment, deportations, criminalisation of solidarity and persecution of activists and defenders of migrants' rights, and finally extreme militarisation of the border with Turkey and mass illegal refoulements.

Institutional and police violence in Greece has reached a critical point and a climate of fear has crept into migrant communities and civil society

The urgent need to support exiles in Greece

In 2024, organisations supporting displaced persons once again faced a drastic reduction in their subsidies. This decline in funding can be explained as much by the emergence of new humanitarian crises in other regions of the world and the current inflationary context as by xenophobic policies in Europe. However, the basic services needed by asylum seekers (including legal assistance) are still just as pressing. The deterioration in living conditions and the systematic violations of human rights, despite countless appeals from civil society organisations, require unfailing vigilance and a relentless fight.

1. Read our comments on the Pact: [The new Pact on Asylum and migration, a threat to European values \(March 2024\)](#); Twists and Turns of the New European Pact on Asylum and Migration, [episode 1 : Crisis & instrumentalisation](#) (25 April 2023) ; [episode 2: Screening at the EU's external borders](#) (30 May 2023).

2. [Operational data portal, UNHCR, situation in the mediterranean.](#)

'Chaotic and undignified' conditions

The degrading living conditions in the overcrowded refugee camps imposed on displaced persons affect both their health and their dignity.³ Access to drinking water and food is grossly inadequate, well below recommended nutritional levels.⁴ This deliberate shortage exacerbates the widespread humanitarian crisis in Greek refugee camps.

Asylum seekers have been deprived of the meagre financial allowance they are due from May to September 2024. This financial assistance, amounting to €75 per person, is supposed to be paid to asylum seekers residing in refugee camps to enable them to meet their needs. Living in isolated camps, far from urban centres, this financial support is vital. The authorities have not explained the reasons for this interruption, which has left thousands of people in difficulty.

Finally, from May to December 2024, interpretation at the Greek asylum services and in the camps was interrupted because the Greek authorities' failed to pay their main service provider. The lack of interpretation has serious consequences: little or no access to information in the camps or asylum services, inability to apply for asylum, systematic delays in asylum procedures, no access to healthcare. In addition to the obvious impact on fundamental rights, the entire reception system is being shaken to its seriously compromised.

Rights at risk

Accessing asylum is more than ever an ordeal for those seeking protection:

- **Technical and administrative barriers:** Online platforms, supposed to facilitate the process, are often unusable, making it impossible to submit asylum applications. The recognition of vulnerable situations, essential for the adequate reception of displaced persons, is no longer guaranteed, without competent personnel. Through a combination of administrative inefficiency and technical barriers, the authorities deliberately restrict access to asylum.
- **Lengthy and complex procedures:** Endless delays, interviews postponed until the end of 2025, the procedures plunge exiles into prolonged legal uncertainty.

- **Inadequate legal aid:** Despite very short deadlines for asylum procedures, legal aid is dysfunctional and insufficient.

These practices and policies are not merely attacks on the right to asylum, but also flagrant violations of procedural rights and guarantees, including the right to a lawyer, to clear and comprehensible information in a known language, to an effective remedy and to a fair trial.

These repeated violations of the fundamental rights of the asylum-seekers illustrate the absolute contempt of the authorities towards them and the irresponsible management of European public funds, but also the arrogance of a government that has constantly violated European and international law since its election in 2019. These violations are part of a systematic escalation of abuses, often irreparable and always committed with impunity.

In an increasingly restricted civic space and in the face of incessant attacks on exiles at sea and on land, the work of organisations like ELA is essential. Today, it is impossible to obtain refugee status without the help of a lawyer. We are more determined than ever to provide it.

Since 2020, **60 people** have contributed to this project as part of our organisation. We extend our heartfelt thanks to them, as well as to our supporters and donors.

We must continue to fight for the rights and dignity of every person who arrives in Europe.

We must ensure that the rights to life, safety and freedom are absolute, everywhere and for everyone.

We will continue to provide legal aid to asylum seekers and defend the right to asylum.

3. Joint reports to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe submitted by Equal Legal Aid, I Have Rights and Mobile Info Team in August 2024 and January 2025, as part of the periodic control of execution of the M.S.S. v. Greece case.

4. Report from the Council of Europe anti-torture Committee, July 2024.

5. Read our joint CSOs statement, published in September 2024.

Our impact in 2024



78 legal clinics



**839 requests handled
on our hotline**



**38 referrals from
partners**

#1 Access to asylum and outreach



**723 asylum seekers
assisted**



**542 procedures
undertaken**



**904 consultations
provided**



14 lawyers deployed



**308 asylum interview
preparations**



**132 appeals before the
Greek authorities**

#2 Legal assistance and representation



**3 publications and
expert reports**



7 newsletters

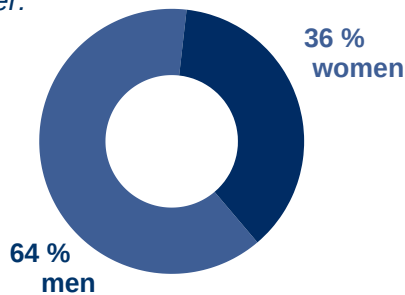


**6 communication
campaigns**

#3 Advocacy and communication

The participants*

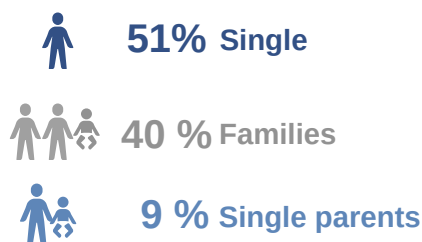
Gender:



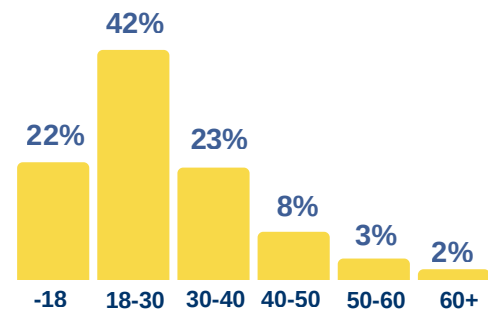
Location in Greece:



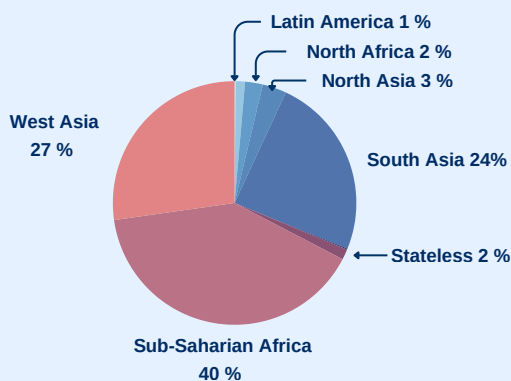
Family status:



Ages:



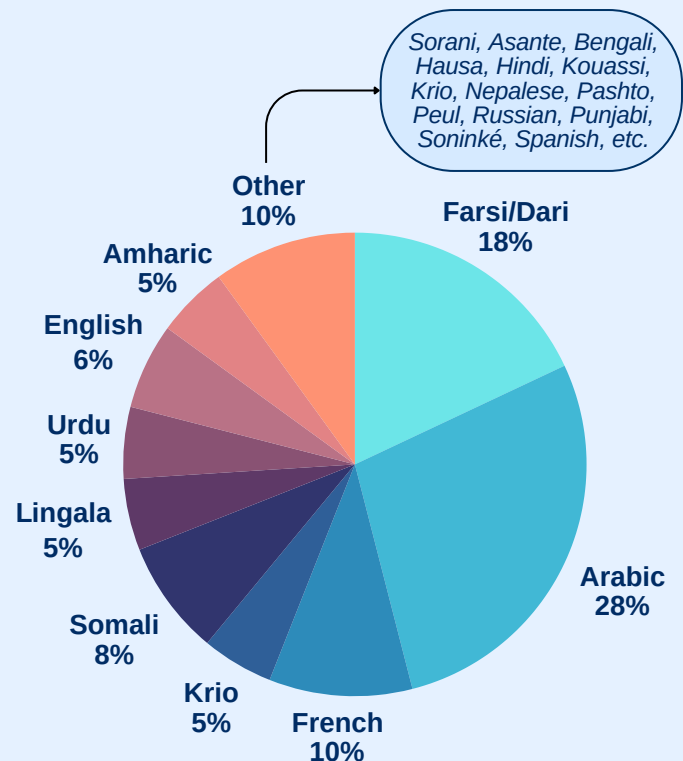
46 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN



MAIN COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Syria - 17 % | 4. Sierra Leone - 7 % |
| 2. Afghanistan - 16 % | 5. Irak - 7 % |
| 3. DR Congo - 7 % | 6. Somalia - 7 % |

37 LANGAGES SPOKEN



*Data collected from January to December 2024, broken down by number of participants.

2024 Highlights

In Greece and in Europe

May 2024

Suspension of the payment of the monthly allocation to asylum seekers

From May to August 2024, no monthly allowance was paid to asylum seekers in Greece. The financial assistance programme is funded by the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). It aims to enable Greece to meet its obligations and provide asylum seekers with dignified material reception conditions. This situation has affected thousands of people, including families and vulnerable individuals, who depend on cash assistance while living in remote camps, far from urban areas and without reliable public transport.

[Read the press release published in September 2024 by ELA and 18 organisations](#)

14th May 2024

Adoption of the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum

After lengthy negotiations and despite the concerns of NGOs, the Council of the EU has finally adopted the European Pact on Migration and Asylum. The Pact comprises a complex set of ten legislative dossiers aimed at reforming the EU immigration and asylum system by establishing a 'European solution' to the challenges of migration. The focus is on 'safer European borders', 'faster and more efficient asylum and return procedures' and 'greater solidarity with Member States at the external borders'. In practice, the Pact endorses the 'Greek-style' reception model and its violations of rights. It has been heavily criticised by rights advocates and civil society actors, who see it as a text that profoundly violates human rights.

14th May 2024

Suspension of interpretation services at asylum offices

In May 2024, the interpretation service provider, the NGO Metadrasi, suspended its activities after months of late payments from the Greek Ministry of Migration. The Ministry was unable or unwilling to resolve this issue, which was ongoing early January 2025. In practice, the suspension of interpretation services had disastrous consequences, causing serious disruptions in the possibility of introducing and processing asylum applications, as well as delays and postponements of asylum interviews, leaving people in legal limbo and creating a huge backlog of cases. The lack of interpretation services has had other negative consequences: without an interpreter in the refugee camps, access to healthcare has been severely hampered. Similarly, the vulnerability of asylum seekers cannot be detected without proper interpretation, which affects the protection of and access to care for people suffering from chronic illnesses or with urgent or complex medical needs.

[Read the letter sent to the authorities in November 2024 by ELA and 35 organisations](#)

9th June 2024

European elections

In the European elections in June, the centre-right and conservative parties came out on top, well ahead of the Greens and the Left. These results are alarming. Although still in the minority, the meteoric rise of the far right in France, Germany, Italy, Belgium and Austria has enabled it to win more seats and will play a crucial role in shaping the future leadership and policies of the EU.

1st July 2024

Launch of the Hippocrates programme in Greek refugee camps

The programme aims to provide medical and psychosocial care to asylum seekers in Greek refugee camps under the responsibility of the Greek Ministry of Migration and the International Office for Migration (IOM), and is funded by the AMIF. While the initiative seems laudable at first glance, its implementation has been laborious. Months into the programme, there are many problems, including a severe shortage of staff, which is affecting access to care.

11th November 2024

Suspension of legal aid for asylum seekers

The Bar Associations of Athens and Thessaloniki have declared that they will not provide legal aid in asylum cases until further notice. This decision follows the Greek Ministry of Migration's failure to pay legal aid lawyers since November 2023. The abstention aims to denounce the lack of payment, despite the fact that EU funds earmarked for legal aid have been paid. The abstention was declared on 11 November 2024 and extended three times until 24 January 2025. In practice, this means that asylum seekers have not received legal aid for appeals since the beginning of November 2024.

7th January 2025

Greece condemned by the ECHR for illegal refoulement

On 7 January 2025, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ordered Greece to pay 20,000 euros in compensation to the victim of an illegal pushback to Turkey. This is a landmark judgement as it finally condemns a well-documented harmful and deadly practice that has been strongly denounced by civil society for years.

4th October 2024

Preliminary ruling of the CJEU on Turkiye as a safe third country

In February 2023, the Greek Council of State referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) a request for a preliminary ruling on the designation of Turkey as a safe third country for asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This decision, taken by the Greek state in 2021, has led to a Kafkaesque situation in which asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected on this basis cannot be readmitted to Turkey and are stuck in a legal limbo.

On Friday 4 October, the ECJ ruled that Member States cannot reject an asylum application on this basis if they have established that readmission is not possible. However, the Court accepted that a country can be designated as a safe third country even if it has suspended the admission or readmission of asylum seekers to its territory.

December 2024

Syrian refugees in Europe in limbo after the fall of Bashar al-Assad

As soon as the regime of Bashar al-Assad fell, several European countries suspended the asylum procedures of Syrian applicants. This decision, justified by the need to reassess the situation in Syria, raises several concerns. First, it violates the principle of non-refoulement, which is central to international law and prohibits the expulsion of people to countries where they face persecution. It also exposes asylum seekers to prolonged uncertainty and precarious living conditions, despite their acquired rights. This decision also seems premature as the situation in Syria remains volatile and many regions of the country are still devastated by the conflict. ELA expresses its strong opposition to these practices, which threaten the safety and rights of Syrian refugees in Europe.

Access to asylum and outreach

Community outreach involves providing professional services, or specific expertise, to a group of people who may not otherwise have access to it. It is performed where those in need are located. A key component of outreach is that the group providing it is not stationary, but mobile.

Current situation

In light of changes to Greece's legal framework on asylum and the reception of asylum applicants, **detention in closed or semi-closed facilities** has become the norm for all asylum seekers, regardless of vulnerabilities. But the withdrawal of many international organisations from refugee camps makes access to essential services scarce or non-existent within these camps. The **isolation** of asylum seekers is exacerbated by transport difficulties as the majority of refugee camps are not served by public transport. The situation is worse for rejected asylum-seekers who try to appeal: **without valid documents, they risk illegal pushback and are simply unable to move around.**

What about legal aid in refugee camps?

Legal support is no longer provided inside reception facilities by the authorities and international organisations in charge of site management. This has led to significant gaps in legal assistance across the country, leaving asylum seekers struggling to find reliable information and individual support, particularly given the increasingly complex asylum procedures. These issues have worsened following the suspension of interpretation services after May 2024, as there were no interpretation available in most refugee camps in mainland Greece.

Needs assessment

Asylum seekers need access to **accurate and timely information** about asylum procedures, particularly at the early stages of their application. Their restricted mobility, coupled with their frequent transfers from one facility to another and the rapid processing of asylum claims, pose a **significant hindrance to accessing legal services**. As a result, outreach activities have become more crucial but also more challenging. Proof of this is that requests for legal assistance to our helpline skyrocketed by 30% in 2024, starkly illustrating the shortcomings and needs in terms of information dissemination.

At ELA, we have always been committed to investing time and resources in outreach activities, ensuring our organisation is agile and can swiftly and efficiently offer information where and when it is needed. This is part of our organisation's DNA and today this aspect of our programme is essential. The effectiveness of our outreach initiatives is also tied to our presence in the communities and our local partners' understanding of our scope.

CHALLENGES

- Overcoming geographical distance, and managing our time and resources efficiently;
- Ensuring a regular presence within reach of sites where access to legal information is particularly difficult (i.e. the most isolated camps);
- Processing new requests for legal assistance in a timely manner and managing emergencies and short deadlines;
- Maintaining the same level of quality and care in the legal services provided, despite a surge in the number of cases we support.

Project #1

Objectives:

- Enhance legal literacy or awareness in communities
- Improve access to asylum in northern Greece
- Improve understanding of the asylum procedure and the European framework of asylum
- Enhance the visibility of our project and the understanding of our scope to maximize impact

Activities:



A hotline available from 9am to 6pm, for asylum seekers to contact lawyers directly



Several legal clinics every month, near refugee camps



Consultations provided to asylum seekers to inform on procedures and rights



Group information workshops (organised with our local partners)

Main evolution 2023/2024: In order to cope with the significant increase in enquiries to the hotline, two volunteer lawyers, under the supervision of our coordinator and the lawyers on the team, process requests on a daily basis to ensure timely responses are provided as well as up-to-date information.

2024 IN NUMBERS



Refugee camps in northern Greece

Legal clinics

78 legal clinics organised with our partners, in **5 locations** (Thessaloniki outskirts during food distribution, Ioannina, Kavala, Polykastro, Lagkadikia)

Hotline

839 enquiries processed on our hotline, with a **+30%** increased in requests in 2024, compared to 2023.

Referrals from other actors

38 referrals to ELA from other actors in the field, out of which **73%** relates to vulnerable applicants.

Review and retrospectives of the year

The number of requests for legal assistance handled through the hotline, in person during legal clinics or following a referral is very high at ELA. As in 2023, the majority of requests received in 2024 concerned preparation and support for asylum interviews, representation in appeals and subsequent applications, confirming **clear and stable needs year-to-year**. 88% of the requests received were consistent with the association's geographical and material scope of intervention, demonstrating a good understanding of our programme by our partners and within communities. The majority of requests were from **Syrians** (27%), **Afghans** (9%) and **Somalis** (7%), with a significant increase in requests from **Eritreans** (6%) and **Sierra Leoneans** (11%).

35% of requests resulted in **long-term legal assistance** from our team. 38% were resolved quickly by providing relevant legal information. 12% were referred to other, more competent organisations for matters outside the scope of ELA's work. Finally, 12% of requests were not followed up due to lack of resources and availability.

Legal assistance and representation

Current situation

Recent changes in the Greek asylum legal framework have resulted in an increasingly complex procedure: procedural obstacles have increased, as have admissibility procedures. The 'ordinary' asylum procedure now only applies to a minority of cases, while most cases are assessed under exceptional procedures. Without access to legal services, asylum seekers are unable to adequately present their case. The number of cases rejected on procedural or admissibility grounds have peaked, with asylum seekers being denied protection without their case ever being heard by the authorities. But finding legal representation remains a challenge. And legal fees in Greece are still incredibly high, which is another obstacle to accessing justice.

What does legal aid and representation involve?

Legal assistance covers a wide range of services, from the provision of general legal information to representation in court. First, it means providing legal advice and guidance to a person according to their individual circumstances. Beyond the initial legal assistance, representation may be necessary after a negative decision when the case goes to court. Legal assistance and representation follow a **person-centered approach**, where services are tailored to the needs expressed by the person.

Needs assessment

Asylum seekers must have access to legal assistance and representation in order to exercise their right to asylum and to effective remedies. Ideally, legal assistance should be provided by the same representative at each stage of the procedure and be gender-sensitive. Assistance should also be provided in a timely manner, as deadlines are usually short. In summary, legal aid should be accessible, prompt and comprehensive. It is also important that access to legal assistance and representation is unconditional, i.e. universally available, without any criteria based on the claim, gender or age of the applicant. For ELA, the provision of legal assistance and representation is the logical continuation of our outreach activities, accompanying asylum seekers from the first steps of the procedure until a final decision is reached.

CHALLENGES

- Increase in 'late' requests for legal assistance and representation, i.e. requests made after an initial application has been unfairly rejected, without a lawyer ever being involved;
- The prohibitive cost of legal representation, which weighs heavily on our budget, while representation is a necessary part of the programme;
- Increase in the number of cases under the jurisdiction of the Athens Administrative Court.

Indicative rates for the costs of proceedings before the administrative courts of appeal ⁶

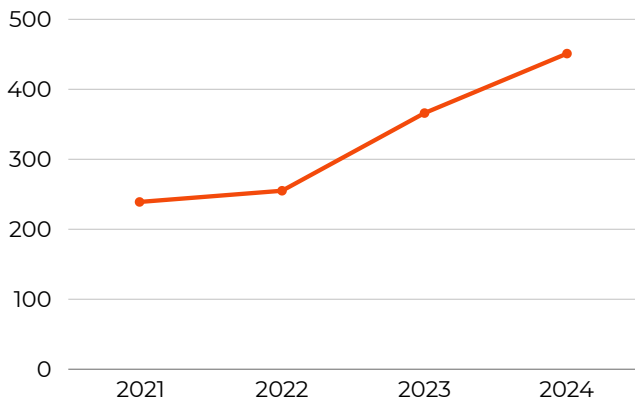
Interim measures	135 €	Bailiff notification	43,40 €	Pleading fees	203 €
Request for annulment	267 €	Notarized power of attorney	50-70 €	Fees for submitting an additional memo	85 €
Average cost of a legal remedy: 505 €			Cost of an appeal with pleading : 708 €		

Project #2

Objectives:

- Reduce the gap in legal services provision in northern Greece
- Provide assistance at every stage of the asylum procedure
- Safeguard asylum seekers' rights during the asylum procedure
- Improve the fairness of asylum procedure by contesting ill-motivated decisions and holding the authorities accountable

2024 IN NUMBERS:



Cases supported by ELA since 2021

Overall, **+26%** more procedures undertaken by the team compared to 2023

+58% more asylum interview preparations provided

+240% more admissibility procedures undertaken

+80% more subsequent applications supported

Main evolution 2023/2024: In order to better represent our cases on appeal, one of the team's lawyers was based in Athens in 2024. This enabled us to increase our efficiency and improve the quality of our representation. We were unable to continue the collaboration after July 2024 due to a lack of funding.

Activities:



Individual consultations and support in asylum procedures



Interview preparations and accompaniment to the asylum office

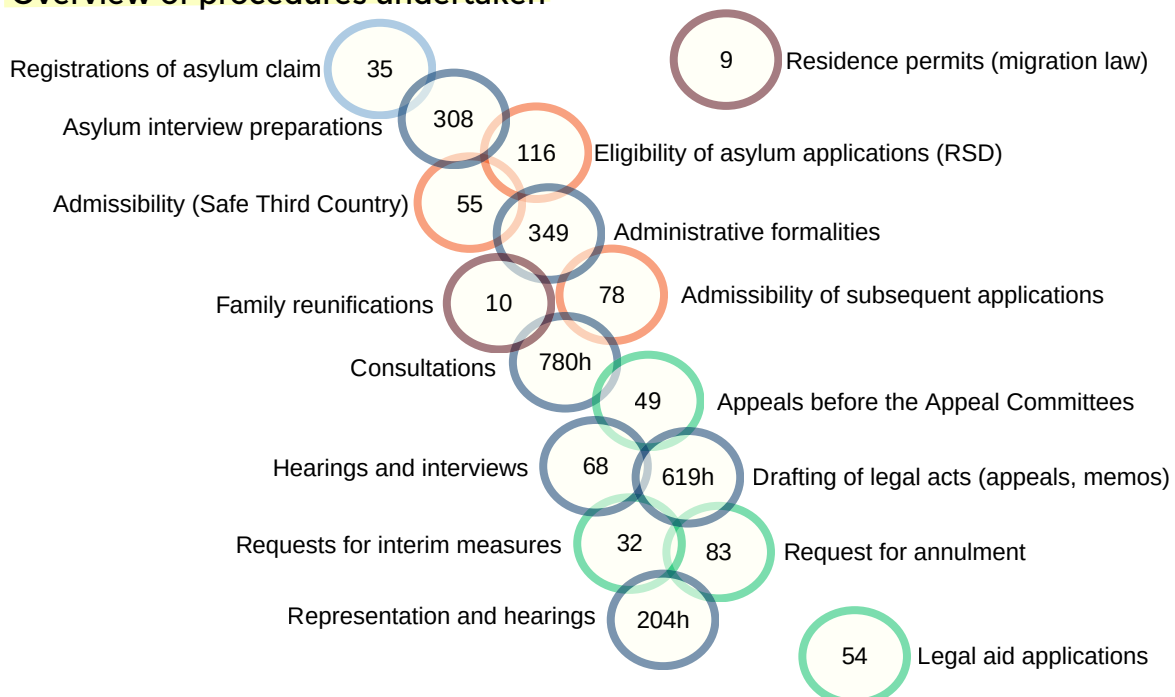


Representation on appeal and pleading before the competent courts



Defence of individual rights through litigation

Overview of procedures undertaken



Review and retrospectives of the year

The year 2024 has been devastating for the rights of displaced persons in Greece, due to the deterioration of reception conditions, the breakdown of the civil society network and the multiplication of obstacles to asylum. **The impediments to asylum are now prevalent** at all stages of the procedure, whether it be:

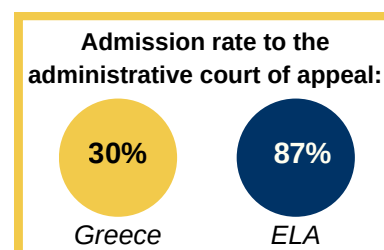
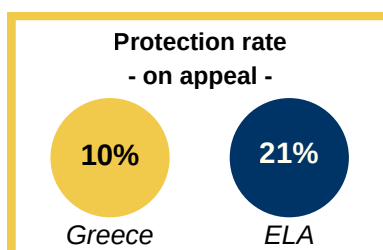
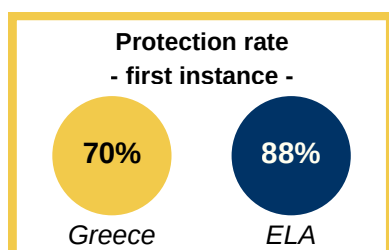
- The extension of procedures which allow the authorities not to examine the merits of asylum applications and to reject them after a **sham procedure**. People are then forced to make a second application for asylum, which is subject to stricter procedures, stricter conditions and an uncertain outcome;
- Persistent difficulties in submitting an asylum application due to the multiple malfunctions of digital tools designed to facilitate dialogue with asylum services;
- The absence of interpretation services for most of the year due to the lack of resources allocated by the authorities;
- The normalisation of the de facto detention of asylum-seekers, regardless of their vulnerability, in **squalid and overcrowded** places without access to medical or psychosocial care.

The resultant insurmountable difficulties leave asylum-seekers in a legal limbo, without status, without papers and without shelter, inexorably plunging them into precariousness, vulnerable to trafficking and abuse. Paradoxically, there are fewer and fewer organisations providing assistance to asylum seekers. For our association, too, the obstacles are many: first, the **geographical distance**, the **increased needs**, but also the **complexity of the procedures**, the increase in wrongful rejections and, inevitably, the more time-consuming appeal procedures. We struggle to respond to all the requests for legal aid that we receive. 12% of requests this year had to be turned down due to a lack of availability and resources to undertake them, even though they fell within our scope. Yet, the options for referral to other organisations are becoming more limited every year. The people who come to us have spent weeks or even months wandering around without adequate support, the lack of it having irreversibly affected the outcome and the chances of being granted protection. We also know that people we cannot support are unlikely to find a lawyer, posing an impossible dilemma for our team.

In these circumstances, the work of ELA lawyers and others is more important than ever to ensure effective access to asylum and to challenge these abusive practices.

Indicators	2021	2022	2023	2024
People assisted	513	503	543	723
Lawyers deployed	7	10	13	14
Consultations provided	437	738	706	904
Cases undertaken	239	255	366	451
Registrations of asylum requests	10	31	44	35
Admissibility procedures undertaken	30	50	39	133
Eligibility procedures undertaken	68	75	84	116
Appeals supported	11	46	50	49
Request for annulation supported	13	36	61	83
Requests for interim measures supported	13	29	32	32

ELA's legal assistance and representation programme and its results



Comparison of protection rates: Greece vs. ELA rates in 2024 ⁷

7. Greek rates, sources: [2024 Annual Report](#) of the Greek Ministry of Asylum and Migration. The ELA rates refer to individuals represented by the association, in cases where a decision has been issued by the authorities. Note: Appeals are procedures in which legal representation by a lawyer is mandatory. All rates mentioned therefore concern procedures with legal counsel.

Immersion in our work

Musa* is a young man from Eritrea who arrived in Greece in February 2024, where he applied for asylum. He was forced to leave his country for fear of being forcibly conscripted into the Eritrean army. He did not want to serve in the army of an authoritarian government that killed his parents when he was 8 years old.

His asylum claim was rejected at first and second instance because the asylum authorities did not believe he was Eritrean. Musa was allegedly unable to provide sufficient information about Eritrea and his life there, so the authorities declared him to be Ethiopian.

Musa's case is not exceptional: he is one of the (too) many Eritrean nationals who are wrongly considered to be Ethiopian, resulting in the rejection of their asylum application. The problem arises at the very beginning of the procedure, when asylum seekers apply for asylum in Greece: the authorities carry out a nationality assessment and register a nationality other than that declared by the person concerned. Unfortunately, this practice is widespread and ELA lawyers have dealt with dozens of similar cases over the past year. Musa's case is particularly shocking because, unlike the others, he has never been to Ethiopia.

In addition, while preparing the appeal to the Administrative Court, ELA lawyers discovered that the case was marred by numerous violations of procedural guarantees which, unfortunately for Musa, had a major impact on the outcome of the case. For example, Musa was never provided with the services of an interpreter during the initial assessment of his nationality in Lesbos. He was therefore unable to express himself at this critical stage of the process. Later, after Musa's application had been rejected for the first time, he applied for legal aid to appeal. The appeal filed by the legal aid lawyer was immediately rejected as inadmissible because it was too general and vague. The appeal did not refer to any specific facts or elements that would distinguish the case from others. Once again, Musa was denied a fair examination of his case.

ELA has taken charge of his case and has lodged an appeal. We hope that Musa's case will finally be heard in its entirety and that the risks to which he is exposed will be recognised by the authorities.

Amani* is an Iraqi single mother of four whom we represent at ELA. Forced into marriage, she fled Mosul in 2014 when Islamic State took control of the city. In 2015, while pregnant with her fourth child, her husband disappeared. Alone with her children, she spent 10 years in a refugee camp in northern Iraq.

Amani faced enormous challenges as a single mother raising four children in a refugee camp. In the absence of the father, she was unable to register the birth of her newborn child. She was also the victim of sexual harassment. In addition, living conditions in the camp were appalling and her children were deprived of any form of education. Amani and her children applied for asylum in Greece in 2024 and are currently living in another refugee camp.

This case, the situation of Amani and her children, touched me deeply. In Greece, Iraqi asylum seekers have a very low protection rate. But if this family were sent back, they would have nowhere to go and would face inhuman and degrading treatment. Amani, a single mother, would be the victim of discrimination by the state and society. Her two older daughters would be at risk of being forced into marriage as she was. The youngest, who has never received a birth certificate, is effectively stateless. They all present different forms of vulnerability and face different forms of persecution.

Amani had her asylum interview in Greece on 20 January 2025 and the decision has not yet been made. I hope they will be granted protection so that they can finally leave the refugee camps and start a normal life.

**Names have been changed.*

Advocacy and communication

Current situation

A political and social shift is occurring in Europe, leading to an increase in hostile rhetoric towards asylum seekers and migrants. The European and national frameworks on asylum have been tightened, and the New European Pact on Asylum and Migration is particularly harsh, promoting inhumane treatment and widespread detention throughout Europe. Unfortunately, this shift has already had disastrous effects on human rights and lives. As experts in asylum and migration, we have noticed a worrying trend of misinformation and instrumentalisation in the public discourse, as well as an increase in racist and hate speech. Furthermore, political discourse is completely disconnected from the realities of asylum and migration at Europe's borders, which we witness on a daily basis.

Needs assessment

In this hostile environment with antagonistic propaganda is widespread, it is essential to provide the public with verified quantitative and qualitative information on the right to asylum and asylum procedures. This will evidence how the right to asylum has been systematically deprived of its substance in recent years and how asylum seekers are being weaponised.

As an expert organisation, we hold a privileged position with in-depth knowledge of European policies on asylum and migration, as well as operational information. Our goal is to contribute to a healthier and more pragmatic public discourse through field analysis and specialised report. We aim to disseminate well-sourced and verified information to the public, share our practical knowledge and legal engineering with our peers in Europe and beyond.

Objectives

- **Share verified and up-to-date information on the legal framework on asylum**
- **Improve the public's understanding of asylum, its triggers and hidden realities**
- **Raise awareness on the issue of fair and dignified access to asylum in Europe**
- **Improve the legal framework on asylum through strategic litigation and targeted submissions to stakeholders**

What does advocacy and strategic litigation mean in practice?

At ELA we try to bring about change in asylum procedures and the treatment of asylum seekers and people on the move in Europe. We advocate for fairer asylum procedures, respect for the dignity and rights of people regardless of their background. We also advocate for the possibility for asylum seekers and people on the move to be defended and accounted for at a time when they are invisible and dehumanised. In short, we seek to change policies and broader patterns of hostile behaviour.

Strategic or impact litigation is part of our advocacy. It complements our legal services and is distinct from individual representation. It involves the careful selection of a case and the development of a legal strategy to challenge recurring systemic violations of rights and to promote their affirmation, respect and fulfilment. Litigation is strategic when it advances not just the rights of an individual, but the rights of many, with broader social changes.

Project #3

Activities:



Weekly communication on social media



Monthly newsletter providing expert opinions on relevant news



Participation in local and European networks, conferences and seminars



Advance asylum seekers' rights through strategic litigation



Strategic litigation
initiated by ELA



3 written submissions



6 communication
campaigns

In 2024, our team increased its advocacy activities to raise awareness of the problems faced by displaced people in Greece and in Europe and to advocate for systemic changes. In an increasingly hostile environment, we work to ensure that asylum procedures are fairer and respect the dignity of people, regardless of their origin. We advocate for people living in exile to be defended, represented and heard at a time when they are constantly being made invisible. Finally, we seek to change hostile policies, attitudes and rhetorics. Our advocacy work is divided into three strands:

- Developing strategic litigation and sharing best practices with legal professionals;
- Documenting and raising awareness of violations of the rights of exiles and their defenders;
- Raising public awareness of the right to asylum and infringements of that right.

1 Strategic litigation

In 2024, our team invested more than ever in strategic litigation, identifying and simultaneously pursuing numerous proceedings before the Greek authorities, in cases involving particularly flagrant rights violations.

Two cases with a positive outcome

On 20 June 2024, we celebrated our **second victory at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)**. An LGBTQ young man from Sierra Leone, a survivor of child prostitution, had his asylum application rejected, leaving him without housing, food or access to medical care. Our team had filed a request for annulment, which is still pending today. As this person urgently needed medical care, and his request for interim measures to recover his asylum seeker card was still pending, we filed a request with the ECHR for this beneficiary to receive adequate care. We received a positive decision on 20 June. After numerous exchanges between the European Court and the Administrative Court of Athens, this young man finally received his asylum seeker card, as well as housing and medical assistance.

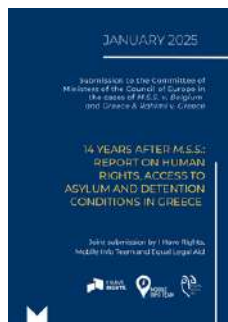
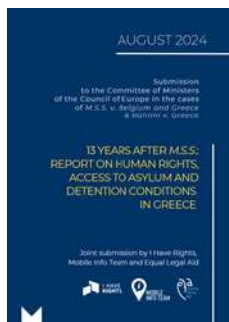
Abel is from Eritrea, a country he fled for Ethiopia, just after the independence war. Orphaned at the age of 7, he lived alone in precarious conditions. Abel is Tigrinya, a persecuted community in Ethiopia. Unable to obtain papers, Abel has been detained more than 20 times. Each detention resulted in an outburst of violence. Abel applied for asylum in Greece in July 2023. During his **nationality assessment**, the agent wrote that he was Ethiopian. This is an illegal practice: if an asylum seeker has no papers, it is their declared nationality that counts. However, two nationalities appear in his file: one 'presumed' (Ethiopian) and the other 'declared' (Eritrean). His asylum application was therefore rejected on the grounds that it was not credible, because his declared nationality was not his true nationality, **a practice tragically frequent since 2023**.

We lodged an appeal against this decision and in July 2024, Abel was finally recognised as a refugee.

Project #3

2 Documenting violations of asylum seekers' rights

Submissions and reports



Two joint submissions to the Council of Europe, in August 2024 and January 2025

I Have Rights, Equal Legal Aid and Mobile Info Team submitted two joint reports to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe documenting persisting shortcomings in reception conditions and asylum procedures in Greece. The Committee of Ministers monitors the implementation of the historic judgment *M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece*, which resulted in the condemnation of Greece for the undignified reception conditions of asylum seekers on 21 January 2011. 14 years later, Greece has still not complied with the Court's decision and rights violations persist, as documented by our three organisations.



Contribution to the EU Agency's 2024 report (forthcoming)

The EUAA annual report presents an overview of developments in the field of asylum at the regional and national levels. The report also includes the perspectives of various stakeholders, including experts from EU+ countries and civil society organisations.

Conferences and events

On 13 May, the screening of our documentary series at the Olympion cinema in Thessaloniki was followed by a Q&A session, during which our team answered questions from a large audience of professionals and lay public.

Early June, ELA's director and the communications officer ran a workshop on advocacy and communications in relation to the right to asylum, during the international congress organised by the Heinrich Böll Foundation of Thessaloniki, '*Shipwrecked: Rethinking migration and asylum in Europe*'.



Late June, our association was invited to participate for the second time in the 25th edition of the *anti-racism festival in Thessaloniki*. This year, the festival organisers wanted to screen our docu-series in the open air on the second day of the festival.

In September, our association had a stand at the '*Connected we stand*' festival in Thessaloniki. The festival promotes local cultural, environmental and social initiatives and this year invited around a hundred civil society organisations - including ELA - to showcase their work.

In November, ELA's director took part in the webinar '*The Borders from within: The EU external borders, a mirror to European migration policies*', organised by the association Center for legal aid Bulgaria. She presented the legal framework for asylum in Greece, as reflected in the provisions of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Immersion in our work

Maitham*, an Iranian man, married with two children, took part in a demonstration in August 2022 against the strict dress code (*hijab*) imposed on women by the Iranian regime and in favour of women's rights. The demonstration was brutally repressed by the police. Maitham was beaten and almost arrested, but other demonstrators managed to wrestle him away from the police. Maitham lost his mobile phone at the scene of the beating. The police found it and his details. They searched for him that evening, first at his home and then at his father's. Maitham managed to evade arrest and leave Iran. Soon after, the international media began to publish brief reports of the executions of demonstrators accused by the Iranian regime of attacking the security forces and 'enmity against God' (*moharebeh*).

Maitham applied for asylum in Greece, but his application was rejected. The asylum authorities ordered his forcible return to Iran. The Appeals Committee found his testimony to be credible in all respects, citing reliable international sources describing the persecution suffered by those who took part in the demonstrations in Iran in August and September of 2022. The Committee referred to the arrests of thousands of demonstrators by the Iranian police, their imprisonment, torture and execution by hanging. Then, with unprecedented inconsistency, the Committee concluded that Maitham had no reason to fear persecution because his political activism did not justify imprisonment, torture or execution.

It is shocking that the Greek authorities deny the authoritarian nature of the Iranian regime. Men and women of all ages risk persecution, arrest, imprisonment, torture and even execution at every demonstration. With the help of ELA lawyers, Maitham has appealed against the decision and asked for his case to be re-examined. The court's decision is still pending. The court accepted the merits of Maitham's case and granted him temporary protection, ordering the asylum service to suspend his forced return to Iran.

I met Selam* at one of the first legal clinics I attended with ELA. Selam is from Ethiopia and belongs to the Amhara tribe. In August 2023, a new conflict broke out between Amhara militias and Ethiopian government forces. Racial hatred against the Amhara intensified and government forces targeted them for ethnic cleansing. In this general political context, Selam was arbitrarily arrested, detained and tortured by the Ethiopian authorities, and the family home was demolished. According to international sources, during the same period, the homes of tens of thousands of Amhara families were destroyed and thousands of Amhara citizens were imprisoned and tortured on racial grounds.

Unfortunately, the Greek asylum authorities who conducted the interviews and made the first and second instance decisions were unaware of the situation in Ethiopia in the spring of 2023. As a result, they did not follow Selam's account and found his testimony to be incoherent.

During our first meeting, Selam showed us the decision rejecting his asylum claim. He was desperate because the deadline to appeal had passed. He had been notified of the decision by email, but as a homeless person he did not have access to the internet and had not seen it in time.

With the support of ELA's team, Selam appealed to the Administrative Court, requesting the annulment of the rejection decision and a re-examination of his case in the light of updated data.

The court's decision is still pending. In the meantime, the court has granted him temporary protection and ordered the Asylum Service to suspend his forced return and continue to provide him with the protection guaranteed to asylum-seekers. At the same time, Selam has decided to submit a new asylum application in the hope of getting a second chance and finally being granted refugee status.

*Names have been changed.



Project #3

3 Awareness-raising on the fundamental right to asylum

Our docu-series *"Lost in a legal maze"*

the importance of letting people speak for themselves

As asylum lawyers, we receive testimonies from people in exile every day. Beyond the persecution and difficulties they fled in their country of origin, beyond the deadly and traumatic journey they had to take to reach our shores, what strikes us is **the constant legal obstacles** that are deliberately put in their way to prevent them from accessing protection and justice. In fact, **this system is meticulously designed to fail them**. And everything happens behind the sealed doors of the refugee camps and asylum offices.

We wanted to break this **wall of silence** and allow the people we support to tell their stories in their own words. Thanks to the efforts and dedication of eleven participants, the entire ELA team and film director Sideris Nanoudis, and with the support of the Heinrich Böll Thessaloniki Foundation, our video project *'Lost in a legal maze'* was born.

In November 2023, these eleven people, supported by ELA lawyers, recounted their legal ordeal on camera. Refoulements, interpretation difficulties, lack of information, abusive rejections are some of the many obstacles they face every day. In addition to this constant struggle to prove their persecution and the reasons for their exile, they have to face the contempt of the administration and the frustration of living in a legal limbo, undocumented and homeless. This situation plunges them inexorably into insecurity and makes them vulnerable to trafficking and abuse.



Behind the scene © Sideris Nanoudis, 2024.



"When I was with you, I felt reassured."

Together with our partner, we organised the launch of *'Lost in a legal maze'* in Thessaloniki on 13 May, with an exclusive screening of all 11 episodes followed by a Q&A session at the Olympion cinema. The screening was sold out, with a very receptive audience. We are particularly grateful to **Aisha*** and **Michael***, two of the participants in the documentary series, who attended the screening with us and spoke about their personal situation and shared their frustrations with the audience. After the event, Aisha, one of the participants, wrote to us: *"It was a real pleasure, I had a great time with you. When I was with you, I felt reassured. It was like having bodyguards watching over me. I wasn't afraid of anything. That's why I wasn't afraid to express myself in public. You were all by my side. So thank you!"*

**Names have been changed.*

Alongside the event, the documentary series was the subject of a **social media communication campaign** ahead of the **European elections** on 9 June. We wanted this series to contribute to the re-humanisation of people in exile, and to be able to broadcast it to a wide audience in a short format accessible to a novice audience. The 11 episodes, edited into a documentary film, were also screened in Berlin and Brussels, and a second time in Thessaloniki. We would like to thank ELA's partners, supporters and volunteers for organising these screenings.



The trailer of the docu-series

Other publications and campaigns



Rights in peril, justice in action

In December 2024, we joined forces with four partner organisations and launched a collective awareness-raising and fundraising campaign. Our five organisations are committed to fighting for the rights of exiles and combating systemic injustices to guarantee effective access to rights in Greece.



Why is it still urgent to supported displaced people in Greece, Nov/Dec. 2024



Human rights on trial

1. Criminalisation of asylum seekers
 2. Criminalisation of solidarity
 3. The pact on asylum and migration
- August 2024



Women facing the asylum system, Ahead of international women's day, March 2024



World refugee day

Milo*, interpreter for asylum seekers in Greece for 9 years, tells about the challenges he faces, June 2024

Bimonthly newsletters

- In **February**, When Justice is done
- In **March**, The new asylum and migration pact, a threat to European values
- In **May**, Lost in a legal maze, or the importance of letting people speak for themselves
- In **July**, A sharp turn to the right for Europe, towards the intensification of externalisation
- In **September**, 4 year of providing legal assistance in northern Greece
- In **November**, A 'chaotic and undignified' reality, why is it still urgent to support people in exile in Greece (part 1)
- In **December**, Rights in Peril, why is it still urgent to support people in exile in Greece (part 2)



Development

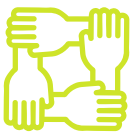
In 2024, our team created and consolidated its formal and informal partnerships, participated in coordination and advocacy networks, and developed its skills.

Capacity building



- **March 2024: Airtable training to enhance management and reporting at ELA**
Our finance officer completed a month-long intensive programme on the functionalities of Airtable, a powerful no-code tool. Thanks to this comprehensive training, our officer has improved our efficiency and our tools in terms of reporting, fundraising and data management.
- **April 2024: Awareness raising and capacity building on human trafficking - ONG A21**
- **May 2024: The Therapeutic Legal assistance model - AMERA INTERNATIONAL**
ELA volunteers attended a 3-day training course in Athens, aimed at improving lawyers' practices towards vulnerable people and better understanding mental health challenges, such as re-traumatisation or vicarious trauma.
- **May 2024: Protecting and promoting the fundamental rights of migrant women in Europe**
This 2-days training, provided by the European Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) as part of the 'FULFIL' Project (cofunded by the EU), aims at building capacity and knowledge among European lawyer on how to better use the EU Charter on Fundamental rights to protect migrant women rights.
- **September 2024: The evolving role of Courts in adjudicating barriers to accessing asylum**
This 2-day training course was provided by the University of Bologna as part of the EU-funded project 'ACCESS'. Using a socio-legal approach, ACCESS analyses court decisions relating to asylum, and in particular whether the judgments contribute to restricting access to it.
- **October 2024: ODYSSEUS conference on the European pact on asylum and migration**
This two-day conference brought together European researchers, judges, lawyers and legal experts at the Université Libre de Bruxelles to examine the upcoming changes in European legislation.
- **November 2024: Psychological first aid - projet "PANDORA"**
- **October and december 2024: Seminars on the European pact on asylum and migration**
The aim of these seminars, provided by the 'ACCESS' project to legal practitioners, is to explore the provisions of the pact in greater depth and understand their impact on asylum and the role of courts.

Operational partnerships



Once again this year, our partners welcomed us into their community centres in Ioannina, Kavala, Lagkadikia, Polykastro and Thessaloniki, so that we could provide information to asylum seekers in the best possible conditions. Our warmest thanks to **Be Aware And Share (BAAS)**, **Habibi.works**, **Northern Lights Aid**, the **Intereuropean Human Aid Association (IHA)**, **Wave**, the **Open Cultural Center**, **Mediquiliteam** and **Mobile Info Team** for your ongoing support and hospitality.

Networks



ELA is a member of various **working and coordination groups** in Greece, including the national advocacy working group, the **monthly legal meetings of the UNHCR** in Thessaloniki and Athens, and the **Legal Aid Network**, a network of nine organisations providing legal assistance to refugees in Greece. These groups and networks are necessary and relevant forums for exchange, enabling the sharing of knowledge and good practices and the organisation of joint advocacy actions.



In June 2024, we had the honour of receiving the **Prix Medici for Equality**, awarded by the Parisian law firm Medici, which rewards and supports projects fighting against discrimination.

Financial situation in 2024

Budget in 2024
286,380 EUR

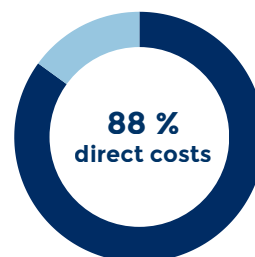
Expenditures in 2024*
279,560 EUR

Income in 2024
258 748 EUR

Budget implementation
98%

Direct costs are those that are essential to the implementation of the programme and the purpose of the association: volunteer expenses, team wages, legal fees, court costs, travel expenses and office rent and charges.

Indirect costs are those administrative costs that do not directly contribute to the activities of the organisation, but are essential to its survival and the fulfilment of its legal obligations.



2024 expenses by categories

60 %
Legal services



16 %
Advocacy and networking



11 %
Management



9 %
Finances



In 2024, many partner organisations have renewed their support and confidence in ELA's projects and new funders have joined:

18 charities, funds and other entities

The Foundations Gratitude, Pour un Autre Monde (PAM), Grand Orient de France (GODF), Un Monde Par Tous (UMPT), the Funds Inkermann, le Secours Catholique, Choose Love, the Fund for Global Human Rights,, le CCFD-Terre Solidaire, Humanity Now, Project Elpida, GLS Treuhand, Solidaritee, Unifor Social Justice Fund, Haella and the Fund Lush UK, the Marseille Bar Association and the Fund Medici for Equality.

We are very grateful to all the people, organisations, partners and sponsors who contribute and support our project!



Equal Legal Aid

Non-profit organisation

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The asylum procedure in Greece

