

Greece culls migrant support groups in 'transparency' overhaul

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Critics warn that the new registration regulations will downgrade services to thousands of vulnerable and traumatised people that were, in many cases, already barely adequate.

The new registration process includes budget scrutiny and criminal background checks for workers and volunteers. (AFP file photo)

Athens: Dozens of groups helping asylum seekers in Greece risk being edged out in a government move to tighten what it calls "opaque" rules overseeing charities, sparking concern that crucial support will be cut.

Critics warn that the new registration regulations will downgrade services to thousands of vulnerable and traumatised people that were, in many cases, already barely adequate.

"We seek as much transparency as possible in the operation of NGOs, and of people working for, or cooperating, with them," Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi said in April.

Greece's conservative government, which was voted in nearly a year ago and whose policy is to make the country a "less attractive" destination to migrants, says that new NGO registration rules are needed because the groups have run projects in the last four years "in their own way" under an "opaque" framework.

But Minos Mouzourakis, legal officer for Refugee Support Aegean, is worried that the change could hamper the independent oversight role often played by NGOs.

NGOs highlight abuses

It is often support groups that highlight alleged abuses by coastguards or police and take legal action against the Greek state on behalf of asylum seekers, he noted.

"The ministry evaluates independent organisations that often criticise it... it should not have such (powers)... it's a question of impartiality," he said.

Mitarachi has complained that out of 1.5 billion euros (\$1.7 billion) in EU support funds for Greek migration projects between 2015 and 2019, the Greek state managed just 1.9 percent.

"Do you want to hand over the keys to NGOs? I don't want that," he told parliament this month.

The new registration process includes budget scrutiny and criminal background checks for workers and volunteers.

Each group's field performance in the last two years is also probed.

"This essentially helps NGOs themselves to know who is working for them," the ministry's asylum secretary Manos Logothetis told AFP.

"Shouldn't they know if, for instance, there is a paedophile working with minors?" he said.

On Wednesday, 22 out of 40 groups active in Greek camps were eliminated from a first approval phase.

Elected officials acknowledge that support groups were key at the height of Europe's migrant crisis, especially after other EU states shut their borders in 2016 and tens of thousands of asylum seekers were trapped in Greek camps.

More than a million migrants and refugees arrived in Greece in 2015 and 2016, according to the UN refugee agency. There are now around 120,000 in the country.

Yiorgos Kaminis, Athens mayor in 2011-2019, has noted that "without (NGO) contribution, the incompetent Greek state would have been overwhelmed".

But, insiders have noted, there was also significant overlap.

"Early on, you might have had five different groups running education programmes," one organisation member said.

According to an internal document seen by AFP, earlier this year there were more than 20 support groups in the largest Greek camp of Moria on Lesbos island.

Beyond medical and legal assistance, the help offered included laundry services, self-defence and yoga, classes in Greek, English, music and IT, and pregnancy healthcare.

One group handled plumbing for the heavily overcrowded camp of more than 16,000 people.

It was not immediately clear how many of these organisations have been allowed to stay on.

"The Greek government leads the refugee response, and the expertise and strengths of civil society and NGOs is still crucial," the UN refugee agency's spokesman in Greece Boris Cheshirkov said in a statement to AFP.

In frontline Greek areas bearing the brunt of migration management, some locals claim that NGOs have a vested interest in seeing the migration crisis drag on.

NGOs attacked on Lesbos

In March, refugee support groups on Lesbos were targeted in the worst surge of violence since mass arrivals began in 2015.

Angry mobs attacked cars with NGO markings after a new wave of migration encouraged by Turkey saw hundreds of asylum seekers arrive on Lesbos.

"We can understand that the new government wants to establish a register for NGOs, if this is to gain greater control over who is actually working with these vulnerable people," said Caroline Hervik, of Reaching, a small volunteer group of mainly Norwegian students working on the island of Chios.

But because the registration process is "complex" and requires a Greek representative, Reaching's work is currently on hold, she said.

- AFP