



HELLENIC MINISTRY OF MIGRATION AND ASYLUM

Statement of Greece delivered by Manos Logothetis Secretary General of Reception of Asylum Seekers

Mr. Director General, Excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen,

Allow me first to express my best wishes to IOM on its 70th birthday.

Almost two years since the beginning of the COVID -19 pandemic, with continuing uncertainty as to the future, the focus of this special session comes very timely.

The pandemic has impacted movement of people and thus all migration procedures. The most urgent problems regarding movement of persons have been tackled efficiently. A number of provisions and rules were introduced to address issues of overstay or expired travel and residence documents.

In Greece, besides all measures for the general population, a series of legislative interventions has been necessary in order to ensure access to testing and vaccination for migrants not registered, but also to minimize the impact of the restrictive measures on the life of migrants and their families. In all national responses to the pandemic, the needs of migrants and refugees were taken into consideration.

Due to the activation of the National Crisis Management Plan in all Reception and Identification Centres the transmission of Covid -19 was limited. Targeted measures were put in place for vulnerable groups, projects for medical assistance, and 2.000 unaccompanied minors have been transferred from reception centers in border areas to shelters in the mainland. At the moment, all reception centres on the islands are accommodating migrants below their capacity.

Greece has faced the challenge with active policies, such as the ongoing effort of the country's digital transformation, including in migration and asylum procedures. The response to the pandemic and the need to adjust to the new reality has also been an opportunity to design innovative solutions in the legal migration and asylum procedures and introduce or expand the implementation of digital tools.

In spite of Covid-19 pandemic, the backlog of pending asylum cases until September 2021 was reduced by 53% compared to 2020 with 42.000 cases still pending. The asylum procedures were accelerated because of legislative and procedural changes and the digitalisation of asylum processes such as the electronic self-registration, electronic submission of applications on various administrative issues, remote interviews, so as to safeguard the protection against the covid19 spread out.

In times with limited mobility due to the pandemic, Greece introduced the “Digital Nomads” as a new migration category, thus facilitating and also attracting these emerging types of entrepreneurs – teleworkers to Greece.

Without physically crossing borders, digital nomads’ visas can secure the needed workforce for the labour market of a country through telework, something which needs to be further encouraged.

During the pandemic, there was a decrease in the number of attempted border crossings. This resulted, in combination with more efficient border protection and a fair but strict migration policy, to lower numbers of irregular arrivals in the country. In 2021, the arrivals of third country nationals at the Greek islands of Eastern Aegean decreased by 52% compared to 2020 and by 90% compared to 2019, which had an impact at the decrease of asylum applications by 40% in 2021.

On the other hand, returns of illegal migrants were in practice almost suspended due to COVID-19 measures.

The contribution of IOM during the pandemic should be highlighted. IOM has been established as a valuable partner in the migration management in Greece offering assistance and expertise during the refugee and migrant crisis and under difficult conditions.

A series of projects have been implemented or are still ongoing, just to mention the HELIOS Project for the integration support for beneficiaries of international protection, the voluntary relocation scheme, the assisted voluntary returns or the support in managing the national reception system, as well as the project for enhancing the health system’s response to COVID-19 in accommodation structures for migrants and Unaccompanied Migrant Children.

At international level, it is important to ensure a strong role for IOM and especially with regard to Afghan crisis where its potential in offering humanitarian support and assisting evacuations or relocation of people should be utilized.

Greece managed to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the life of third country nationals. However, COVID – 19 is still here and addressing its effects remains crucial for all countries.

In this endeavour, cooperation and solidarity among States is of significance in order not only to put in place effective health responses but also to restore the proper implementation of the migration process to the benefit of migrants and states.

To conclude, COVID-19 pandemic has been the route of many forced changes in migration, but it can also be the force of positive change and a lesson learnt for future challenges.