

European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL) – Project Description

ELIL is an NGO working in Greece and Poland. It was founded in 2016 by Bar Associations and Law Societies from across Europe (together representing over 1 million lawyers).

ELIL was inspired by belief in the fundamental importance of upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights and ensuring meaningful access to legal assistance. We believe that all refugees should receive free legal support, from an independent lawyer, before their asylum interview.

ELIL's work is founded on an innovative model that combines the expertise of local asylum lawyers, volunteer lawyers and private sector lawyers to provide high-quality legal aid to refugees. We have 17 full-time asylum lawyers and over 600 lawyers from 19 countries have supported ELIL's work, demonstrating its effectiveness in bridging the gap between the private sector and humanitarian legal aid.

We work in Greece and have offices in Lesvos, Samos, Athens and Thessaloniki. We also work in Poland, providing free legal assistance to refugees crossing the Belarus border and those arriving from Ukraine. Since 2016, we have assisted over 35,000 people, including 8,000 children.

Our work has real impact: last year, 74.5% of those we have assisted in Greece were granted asylum, compared to a national average of 48.5%. In Poland, we have a 98% success rate in preventing pushbacks.

ELIL's work has been recognised in the form of various prestigious awards, including the [UIA/LexisNexis Rule of Law Award](#), the [PILnet Pro Bono Publico Award](#) and the [Financial Times Social Innovation Award](#). Recently, ELIL was named as the [Best Pro Bono Initiative](#) at The Lawyer European Awards 2023 and won the Pro Bono Award at the [2024 LexisNexis Awards](#).

Greece

ELIL has been providing legal assistance to refugees in Greece since 2016. We work from offices, community centres and camps on the Aegean Islands (Lesvos and Samos) and on the mainland (in and around Athens and Thessaloniki).

The situation for refugees in Greece remains extremely challenging, and the need for legal assistance remains high. Almost 62,000 refugees arrived in Greece in 2024, over 25% higher than the previous year. Arrivals have increased every year since 2021, with the vast majority (88%) reaching the Aegean Islands.

Refugees in Greece face a harsh and restrictive asylum system marked by hostility and eroding safeguards. In 2025, the government suspended asylum registration for refugees arriving from North Africa. Moreover, new laws and policies have been introduced that expand detention, fast-track deportations, and criminalise irregular stay.

NGOs and civil society groups supporting refugees face growing pressure, tighter controls, and threats from the government. Coupled to a severe lack of funding, many are being forced to scale back or withdraw. This shrinking space for humanitarian and legal actors leaves refugees with fewer sources of support and information, while the legal context is becoming more hostile. There is no state legal aid system for asylum seekers in Greece. Refugees therefore often do not know their rights, understand the process, or have access to legal support when preparing their asylum claims. The need is particularly acute for children and families: children make up over 25% of the refugee population in Greece, and most refugees are families with children.

Looking ahead, the situation is likely to deteriorate further. The new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum will make asylum procedures even faster and more restrictive. Combined with Greece's new asylum and return measures, this will significantly reduce access to fair procedures and legal support.

In this challenging environment, ELIL's work is more vital than ever. We are seeking to expand our teams across Greece in order to:

- Assist more people immediately upon arrival on Lesbos and Samos.
- Continue supporting people when they are transferred to camps on the mainland, through our Athens and Thessaloniki offices and our mobile teams.
- Further develop our mobile teams to reach refugees in remote camps and detention centres.
- Engage more effectively in advocacy and awareness-raising, particularly in relation to the EU Pact, the restrictive new measures (including the suspension of the right to apply for asylum), and the increasing restrictions on NGO operations.

During 2024, ELIL provided legal assistance to 5,135 people in Greece, including 163 unaccompanied children. We anticipate that the need for our services will continue to grow. We estimate that through our work, we will provide legal assistance to at least 500 people each month, ensuring that at least 40% are female and 30% are children.

By providing free, high-quality legal assistance and information, ELIL ensures that people seeking protection in Greece are able to exercise their rights, access fair procedures, and make informed decisions about their futures.

Poland

ELIL has been providing legal support to refugees in Poland since 2022. We assist refugees who have crossed the Poland-Belarus border, both at the border itself and in detention centres across the country.

The situation at the border remains extremely serious. Around 30,000 people crossed into Poland from Belarus in 2024, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iran and Sudan, with a significant increase in families and children. Crossing the border is extremely dangerous; people must climb a 10m steel wall or cross fast-flowing rivers through dense forest and swamp terrain. Temperatures drop as low as -20 °C in winter. Those found by border guards on either side face severe physical and psychological violence. Despite repeated condemnation by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and other international bodies, these practices continue.

Access to asylum in Poland has effectively been dismantled. In 2025, Poland suspended asylum applications, first at the Belarus border, then nationwide, leaving people, including children, unregistered, detained, or pushed back to Belarus. At the same time, deportations, even to countries like Afghanistan and Syria, have risen in clear breach of non-refoulement and the rule of law.

ELIL is the only organisation with lawyers permanently based at the Poland-Belarus border, providing high-quality legal assistance to defend rights and uphold the rule of law. By bringing cases at the European Courts, we work to challenge increasingly restrictive policies and drive systemic change.

Our work focuses on:

- Border assistance and prevention of pushbacks
- Detention and release
- Emergency legal action and interim measures before the ECtHR
- Asylum and protection procedures
- Support for vulnerable groups

We also continue to assist refugees from Ukraine in Warsaw. With over 1.85 million Ukrainians registered in Poland, the need remains high. However, many shelters have closed and the government is reducing access to financial support and long-term residency for Ukrainians.

During 2024, ELIL provided legal assistance to 4,230 people in Poland, including 73 unaccompanied children. Despite the unpredictable and fast-changing situation, the need remains high - we have assisted almost 300 people per month so far in 2025 (53.2% female).

Through our work at the border, in detention centres and across Poland, ELIL remains one of the very few organisations still ensuring that refugees have access to justice, legal protection and dignity - even as the legal and humanitarian environment becomes increasingly hostile.

For more information, please do not hesitate to contact ELIL's Managing Director, Philip Worthington (pworthington@elil.eu / + 30 694 505 1969).