

Field trip to Greece Report

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Transnational Exchange VI delegation with IOM Greece staff members outside IOM headquarters in Athens.

Aim of the trip

Transnational Exchange VI project organised the first field trip to Greece from the 7th until the 10th of March for six European return counsellors from Finland, Netherlands, Portugal, Belgium, Switzerland and Germany. The aim of the trip was to get a good overview of the Greek immigration and assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) counselling system and to compare it with other European systems. The host for the Transnational Exchange VI delegation was IOM Greece.

IOM Greece

On the 8th of March, we received a warm welcome by IOM Greece in their headquarters in Athens. The Chief of Mission Gianluca Rocco gave us a welcome note followed by a comprehensive overview of the AVRR structure in Greece by the Senior Project Coordinator Betty Ferentinou and her team. Mr. Rocco highlighted that Greece has high return numbers considering the fact that Greece is the first contact point in Europe for many refugees. IOM is the only AVRR counselling provider in Greece and thus a very interesting and relevant player in the field of migration.

IOM Greece started implementing AVR counselling projects in 2010. They have supported more than 57,800 returnees since then. Reintegration assistance was added to the program in 2012 providing reintegration assistance to more than 10,700. There have been over 3,000 return cases a year in Greece in the last 4 years. Most migrants enter Greece at the following islands: Lesros, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos. The cash assistance for returnees is 500€ from the islands and 1,000€ from the mainland (+ possible reintegration support).

To implement the AVRR program in Greece, IOM has developed a system to reach out, counsel and guide beneficiaries in their return process by creating different units responsible for a part of the return process. The units are the following and will be discussed briefly below: Outreach, Reintegration and Cultural Mediation, Protection Unit, Health Division, Movement Unit, Pre-departure Unit and Reintegration Unit. IOM provides food and accommodation for returnees in the OCAVRR Open Center. The entire IOM Greece team consists of 90 staff members.

Information and Outreach Unit

IOM Greece has its own outreach team of 21 people. IOM is present within reception and identification centers, pre-removal centers and migrant communities. They are part of a network with local authorities, international organizations, NGO's, European institutions, the Asylum Service, the Reception and identification Service, migrant communities, the Hellenic Police and other organizations active in the field of migration which are operating in Greece.

Furthermore, the outreach team enhances the cooperation between different stakeholders in Greece, sheds light on the AVRR program and informs both stakeholders and migrants on the program. IOM Greece is present in 14 cities throughout Greece and is also available for remote counselling through means as e.g. WhatsApp and Viber. The outreach staff makes sure that information is adapted to the individual needs of the potential beneficiary and that the procedures are clear.

Registration and Cultural Mediation Unit

Registration officers are responsible for the registration of beneficiaries for AVRR, documentation in the internal Mimosa System - giving detailed explanation of the assistance offered and making referrals to the different units (Reintegration, Protection, Reintegration, OCAVRR Open Center), as well as exchanging information with Greek authorities such as the Hellenic Police if needed. They furthermore organize emergency travel documents in cooperation with embassies for migrants in detention. Registration and cultural mediators are present in different centers throughout Greece. Cultural mediators are responsible for providing information in the language of the beneficiary when needed, offering translation services, escorting beneficiaries to e.g. hospitals or other services when needed. There are 10 cultural mediators in the Cultural Mediation unit.

Protection Unit

The protection unit is responsible for the vulnerability screening, referrals for further assistance (such as to the medical unit, OCAVRR), communication with the receiving mission, the family and follow up and monitoring of the beneficiary. Every beneficiary will receive a vulnerability assessment. Specific vulnerable groups are highlighted such as children/unaccompanied minors, victims of trafficking, migrants with health needs and migrants with disabilities. A referral to OCAVRR is possible when needed, where counselling and (mental) health care is available in-house.

Migrants Health Division

The medical team consists of 4 doctors (1 present at OCAVRR), 6 nurses (whereof 2 at OCAVRR) and psychologists. The Health Division is responsible for the PEC (Pre-Embarkation Check) which all migrants receive 24 to 48 hours before departure, Fit-to-Fly (FTF) checks and referrals to either public or private hospitals. The Medical unit has seen an increase of (mental) health cases and need of medical escorts. Currently, they assist around 10 medical cases per month. Migrants can, if needed, stay at the OCAVRR to stabilize. In general, this takes around 15 days but can be prolonged. The reintegration allowance can be used for medical purposes. Medication will be prescribed for up to 2 months after return. The health division is responsible for contacting the receiving missions informing them about the returnees' medical needs and a possible follow-up. The team provides also medical escorts and arranges medical equipment for the return trip.

Movement Unit

The Movement Unit consists of four people responsible for AVRR. They are in charge of booking the (charter) flights, contact with embassies and consulates, airlines and airport authorities. They make use of the AMADEUS booking system. For flights with Aegean air company, IOM Greece has an own system in which they have full control over the entire ticketing and booking process. Beneficiaries will be supported at the airport by the Movement Unit staff. The cash allowance of respectively 500€ or 1000€ for all beneficiaries will be disbursed at the airport by a finance officer of IOM under surveillance of the airport police.

The top 5 countries of return from Greece have been Georgia, Pakistan, Iraq, Bangladesh and India from September 2019 until January 2023 (IOM).

Pre-departure Unit

The Pre-departure Unit consists of four staff members. They will meet all beneficiaries 48 hours before the departure (even those clients who registered on the islands will travel to Athens first and then return to their home countries). The IOM staff explain the booking and details regarding the departure. All returnees will receive an IOM bag and will be counselled about the entire process. The Pre-departure Unit receives the information from all other units. Different units communicate flexibly with each other on daily basis since all units are located in the same building. All information on beneficiaries is also added to MiMOSA, a common IOM database. This helps the communication between units as all information can be shared through one system.



IOM Greece headquarters in Athens

Reintegration Unit

Since 2012, the reintegration component has been added to Greek AVR. More than 10,700 migrants have been assisted with reintegration ever since. The reintegration assisted is offered in a total of 45 countries. All migrants will discuss their reintegration plans with the unit; however, approval depends on the vulnerability of the migrant and the feasibility of the

plan. Unaccompanied minors, medical cases and single parents are more likely to receive reintegration assistance. The budget is 1,500€ in-kind (funded by AMIF). The reintegration support is mostly used to set up small businesses. The EEA grant also funds reintegration for vulnerable migrants (1,700€ per individual/ 2000€ per family in-kind), however, not for those staying in the OCAVRR. The unit is also responsible for the post-arrival assistance related to reintegration and monitoring hereof.

For undocumented migrants, who don't have a legal status in Greece might be put in "Administrative Detention". It means that migrants stay in closed removal centers. Voluntary returns or better said in this case "assisted" return can be organized from the detention centers as well. In this case, the police is in charge of escorting the beneficiaries to embassies, hospital etc. A social insurance number is needed for medical treatment in Greece. IOM has the possibility to apply for funds for medical cases, though. Otherwise, the treatment has to take place after return in the country of origin.

OCAVRR – Open Center in Attica

A special source of pride for IOM Greece is the OCAVRR, Open Center in Attica. The OCAVRR provides temporary accommodation to migrants registered for assisted voluntary return and reintegration project and planning to return to their home country with IOM's assistance. The approximate staying time in OCAVRR is 1-2 months. The AVRR beneficiaries who can stay at OCAVRR are vulnerable returnees such as pregnant women, medical cases, single parents, elderly and destitute returnees, who have don't have accommodation in Athens.

There are 18 staff members working in OCAVRR (of which seven from the ministry). The initiative to establish such a center came from the Greek government. The Ministry owns the property, but IOM is running the location. The Open Center has a capacity for 100 beneficiaries, but up to 120 persons can be accommodated if necessary. In March 2023, there were 45 returnees staying at the center. Migrants residing at the Open Centre are mainly from Bangladesh, Georgia and Iraq. The migrants can enter and leave the centre whenever they want to during the day.

For the entire duration of their accommodation in OCAVRR in Attica and until the departure from Greece, the accommodation at the Open Centre will allow the migrants to benefit from the following types of support:

- Safe place to stay in Greece until their return
- Access to legal services
- Three meals per day
- Modern facilities (hot individual showers, laundry rooms, a recreation room, Wi-Fi, telephone)
- Toiletries, sanitary items and clothes
- Medical care/ psychological care

There is a variety of different psychosocial services available in OCAVRR to support the migrants. Individual or family needs assessment is done along with individual or group counselling. Focus group discussions and psychoeducational sessions support the pre-departure process. The beneficiaries are additionally referred and linked to further services at OCAVRR.

Psychological assistance is provided in the Open Center on daily basis. Migrants can talk to a trained psychologist, whose office door is always open. The current psychologist Irini reaches out to beneficiaries proactively. She explained that it is important to create a connection already in the beginning of the stay so that the beneficiary can later come to her office to talk when needed. It is often important to help the migrants understand their situation, for example that they have been lied to when they got promised a good job or they were left somewhere by the smuggler without help or support. More severe cases are referred to medical team with psychiatrics.

A medical doctor is also permanently based in the Open Center. First medical check-up takes place right after the beneficiary has arrived. The purpose is to detect any medical issues that need to be attended before the return trip.

IOM is simultaneously doing further case management for migrants while they are residing in the Open Center. Vulnerability assessment, communication with the receiving mission and mediation with the family are some of the tasks of IOM at Open Center. The handover process is coordinated with the counsellors and case managers in the country of origin, who receive relevant documentation and social reports. The continuity of care is ensured in the country of origin (especially for migrants in vulnerable situations).

Visit to Athens Airport with IOM Greece Airport Operations Team

With the collaboration of IOM Greece Airport Operations Team, the group of eight members of the Transnational Exchange VI visited Athens Airport Elefthérios Venizélos with the purpose of accompanying and observing the IOM's airport assistance.



At the Athens Airport Elefthérios Venizélos, observing the IOM assisted check-in

The usual meeting point for beneficiaries and IOM staff is at gate A1 at the Departures area. Colleagues wearing the IOM blue jacket and airport security badge meet the beneficiaries who are clearly identifiable by the IOM plastic bags previously received upon their pre-embarkation meeting at the IOM office. They then head inside where they sit down, hand out and explain all necessary documentation for the following procedures, namely flight tickets, Covid-19 test results (if applicable) and emergency travel documents issued by the respective consulates. Passengers also receive Covid-19 protection masks if required for their trips. IOM Voluntary Return candidates have an IOM issued identity card which is to be returned to the staff in order to be posteriorly destroyed. After this briefing, they head for the check-in where the IOM staff is standing by for any clarification and help needed.

For regular boarding procedures, the meeting at the airport is set for 3 hours before departure time. This way, all formalities take place in a calm manner and any delays are already accounted for. Vulnerable beneficiaries staying at the OCAVRR may have an IOM organized transfer procedure, otherwise all beneficiaries are responsible for their transportation to the airport.

The usual IOM Greece operation entails an average between 5 to 15 passengers daily, although it's not uncommon to have groups of 30 passengers on organized charter flights which require an unusual number of IOM staff to be present and assisting with the airport formalities. There are five IOM staff members working permanently on airport services and for more than three passengers per boarding, it's standard procedure to have an optimum number of two staff members; an embarkation of 30 persons per one flight requires all staff members to be present.

After the check-in, the beneficiaries go through the border formalities – a rather quick procedure with the Greek authorities who retain the police document that the beneficiaries hold which refers to the asylum request in the country. Past the border gate, another IOM staff in charge of the financial procedure meets the returnees and is responsible for disbursing the in-cash assistance of 500€ or 1,000€ to the clients. This formality takes place in the presence of the Greek border authorities and under the surveillance cameras registering the payment moment for safety reasons. For bigger embarkations, a dedicated border police booth will be attributed to IOM passengers only.

After border control, all passengers and staff go through regular security procedures and head for the boarding gate where the IOM staff member will wait with them for the boarding procedures to start. In general, IOM staff members wait for boarding to be completed and for the plane to be off blocks and on the runway before they return to the IOM airport office.

IOM Greece has a small office on the 1st floor of the airline and staff area where all bureaucratic and operation procedures take place, namely sending the departure notification for the transit and arrival missions in order to secure proper assistance for all beneficiaries. The airport team is in constant communication with the police authorities, the airlines and the airport security office, allowing them to streamline the procedures and cultivate a good relationship between all parties involved. The benefits are clear for beneficiaries and staff: reduction of waiting times and mitigation of time-consuming incidents.

Our tour to the airport was guided by Thanos Georgiou, IOM Airport Operations Team Leader, and ended with a visit to the IOM Athens airport office.



Visiting the Ministry of Migration & Asylum: from left to right: Esther Reinmann (IOM Switzerland), Laurens Coessens (Caritas International Belgium), Sónia Pinto (IOM Portugal), Salomé Maxeiner, Malale Schokory (Evangelisches Zentrum für Beratung und Therapie, Germany), Ina Oenema (IOM Netherlands), Riikka Schenk and Mohammed Chahrour (Finnish Immigration Service)

Ministry of Migration & Asylum

On the 9th of March, the visit to the Ministry of Migration & Asylum took place. Mr. Kaleas at the Ministry shared his perspective on voluntary return. He shared that it is “a major issue” that the return numbers are too low. The challenges are versatile. Contacting the authorities in the country of return is often problematic as well as the identification process by the consulates.

Mr. Kaleas told that they actively ask themselves at the ministry how to improve the return numbers. The abuse of the asylum system is a problem that needs to be better addressed (applying for asylum several times/ reopening the cases). The asylum seekers have to be reached at the right, critical point, which is often after the final negative decision. There are seven pre-removal detention centers in Greece, which are important physical places to reach out to the target group. Money is not the driving motivator for a voluntary return according to Mr. Kaleas. The Ministry had increased the reintegration amount to 2,500€ in the past but it didn't increase the return numbers.

The visit at the ministry was an interesting addition to versatile learnings about Greek AVRR system.



At the Asylum Service in Ministry of Migration & Asylum

Information on Transnational Exchange VI:

This project is implemented by the Caritas Association for the Diocese Augsburg and is co-financed by the European Union. The title of the project is called “European AVRR counsellors in training”. From October 2022 until September 2025, European assisted voluntary return and reintegration counsellors can benefit from workshops, conferences and field trips offered by the Transnational Exchange VI project to enhance their counselling quality.



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