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UNIVERSITY
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ISLAND



COVID-19 Island Insights Series

No. 18, April 2021

Lesvos

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The COVID-19 Island Insights Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law & Governance (SCELG) and the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with Island Innovation. The initiative brings together critical assessments of how specific islands around the world have performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent to which their recovery plans can promote resilience and sustainability in the long term.

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Suggested citation: E. Sentas and T. Kizos, *Lesvos, COVID-19 Island Insight Series, no 18, April 2021*, University of Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law and Governance, University of Prince Edward Island Institute of Island Studies and Island Innovation.

ISSN 2563-6944

Lesvos is a Greek island located in the northeastern Aegean Sea.

The Island is 1,633 km² (631 sq mi) in size, making it the 3th largest island in Greece and the 7th largest island in the Mediterranean Sea.¹

Lesvos is also one of the five regional units that make up the Region of the North Aegean².

The population of the island is 114,880 (2020), a third of whom live in the capital, Mytilene.

COVID-19 data and timeline (as of 23rd February 2021)

Number of confirmed cases 2,041
(1.77% of the population)

Number of fatalities 41 (0.036% of the population)

Schools closed on March 10, 2020. Re-opened at September, closed again on November 14 and finally re-opened on February 15 (except adult education schools). Online learning was provided by public schools during all the time.

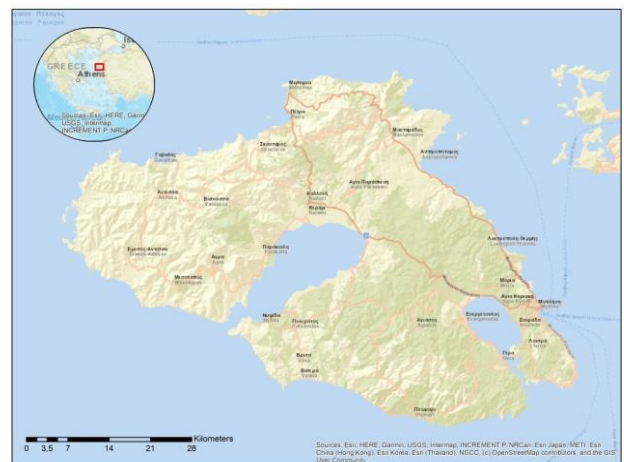
Travel restrictions began on March 9 (for North Italy) and up until now there are restrictions for some countries.

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¹ Retrieved on February 23, 2021 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesbos>

² Retrieved on February 23, 2021 from <https://www.enpe.gr/en/perifereia-voreiou-aigaiou-en>

COVID-19 on Lesbos – An overview

On 26 February 2020 Greece had its first COVID-19 case and the virus reached the shores of Lesbos Island on 9 March 2020. The start of this overview focuses on the national context because so much decision-making on the islands of Greece has been dictated at the national level. The description then shifts to the local situation on Lesbos. Health and state authorities issued precautionary guidelines and recommendations very quickly, while local authorities in the affected areas (not including Lesbos) had the responsibility to implement these measures. The first measure that the Greek government took for the country (on March 9, 2020) was to suspend all flights to and from neighboring Northern Italy, which was identified as the epicenter of the pandemic during those early days.

On 10 March, with 89 confirmed cases and no deaths in the country, the Greek government suspended the operation of educational institutions at all levels and then, on 13 March, closed all cafes, sports leagues bars, museums, shopping centers, sports facilities and restaurants in the country. On 16 March government decided to close the land borders to Albania and North Macedonia, except for the transport of goods and the entry of those who had Greek citizenship or resided in Greece. At the time, the government announced a series of measures worth a total of around 24 billion Euros, equivalent to 14% of the country's GDP, to support the economy.³ Two days later it was decided to close the EU borders and not allow entry to third-country nationals.

On March 22 2020, the Prime Minister announced that a nationwide lockdown would come into effect across all of Greece starting the next day. Greek residents were allowed to go out only to work, to buy food or medicine, visit a doctor, help a person in need, walk a pet or exercise by themselves or in groups of two. They had to carry identification and a special

document that explained the reason for their movements. Alternatively, they could obtain a declaration by text message free of charge.⁴ These measures lasted until May 4, when government began to gradually lift restrictions on movement and restart business activity. The measures put in place in Greece were among the most proactive and strictest in Europe and have been credited internationally for having slowed the spread of the disease and having kept the number of deaths among the lowest in Europe.

On 24 October 2020, four levels of precautionary measures were defined, in proportion to the epidemiological status, from low (green), to medium (yellow), to high (orange) and very high (red). Lesbos was initially placed in the highest category but six days later was reclassified into the medium category. More recently (January 2021) the country was divided into two zones: yellow (Level A – Surveillance) and red (Level B – Increased Risk), according to the epidemiological evidence associated with each regional unit.

On 7 November 2020, and following a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases, Greece entered its second national lockdown with new measures and restrictions on movement and business activity. The measures were:

- Wearing a mask was mandatory everywhere in public (indoors and outdoors).
- A 24-hour restriction on movement (exceptions by time zone apply).
- People were allowed to leave their homes only for specific reasons and must notify authorities by sending a text.
- Teleworking (i.e., working from home) was mandatory for half of employees both in the public and private sectors.

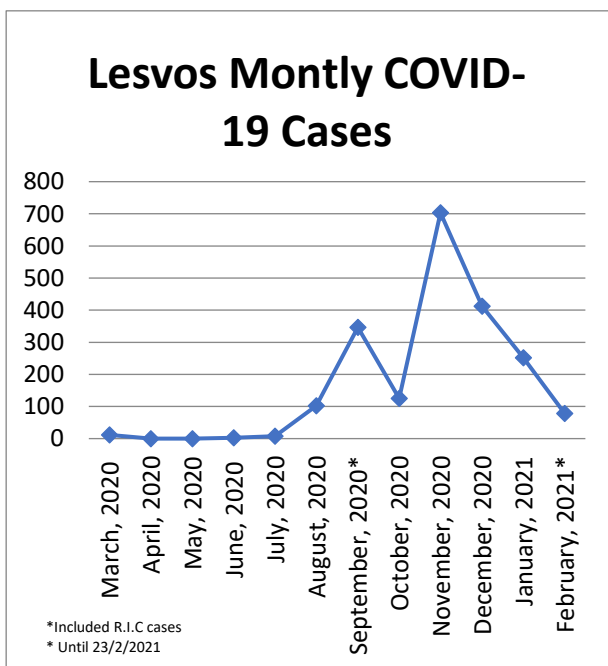
³ Retrieved on February 23, 2021 from <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

⁴ Retrieved on February 23 from <https://forma.gov.gr/en/>

- A number of businesses, including retail stores, bars, cafes and restaurants, would remain closed.

Unlike the first lockdown in March 2020, while middle and high schools switched to distance learning, kindergartens, primary schools and special schools initially remained open. In November 2020, primary schools and kindergartens closed, initially for two weeks, and since then have switched to distance learning.

In December of the same year the Greek government announced a “click-away” method to accept orders by consumers made online or via telephone. To pick up a purchase, a consumer must have an electronic receipt or a text message (from the store) which provides the name of the store, its ID number, the consumer’s name and the exact time the order will be ready. Only one person is allowed to pick up each order.



Due to the high COVID-19 infections in Lesvos, in January 2021 the government decided to implement stricter measures, including a curfew banning non-essential movement from 6pm until 5am. Movement during the curfew was allowed only for work reasons, and workers had to show the necessary documentation from their employers. In addition, all movement off the island was banned, except for health reasons.

Due to the high viral burden of Lesvos during January (i.e., at the time, 7 deaths and 252 cases), the island was placed on the Level B zone described above (i.e., Increased Risk). This means that, in addition to the common measures for the whole country such as wearing a mask indoors and outdoors, distance learning in higher education schools and traffic restriction using texts, Lesvos maintained a night curfew, restricted all but the middle schools from operating face-to-face, and allowed the “click away” and “click in a shop” methods of purchasing goods from stores.

In February 2021, after a month of strict measures, Lesvos finally made it to Level A status, meaning that the night curfew could be relaxed and high schools were now able to operate face-to-face.

Key socioeconomic pressures in the Lesvos during COVID-19

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the Greek economy had just managed to recover from a deep recession, due in part to the economic crisis that started in 2008⁵. Early in the pandemic, there was a widespread concern about what to expect in the near future, which led to an increased demand for everyday essentials such as food, hygiene products and antiseptics. Although the government, as well as the stores,

⁵ Retrieved on 27 February 2021:
https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ip144_en_1.pdf
<https://www.bankofgreece.gr/en/news-and-media/press-office/news-list/news?announcement=49748136-1841-47d7-b5a5-e6a49bc99b6d>

https://assets.ey.com/content/dam/ey-sites/ey-com/el_gr/ey-covid19-potential-economic-scenarios-for-greece-june-2020.pdf
<https://www.nordeatrade.com/en/explore-new-market/greece/economical-context>

assured people that the supply chains were efficient and there was no need for hoarding, people queued in the first days outside supermarkets to purchase basic products in large quantities.

Greece has taken various measures to support the labour market and avoid an economic catastrophe. The national government initially suspended employment contracts, which meant that companies experiencing a reduction in turnover could now suspend their employees' contracts in order to avoid firing them, and in return the government would provide emergency financial support to the employees.

The "Syn-Ergasia" program was also adopted, with which the employer could reduce by up to 50% the working hours of its employees. Once a company joined this program, the company would be required to pay only half of the monthly salary and the employee would receive 60% of the rest of their salary from the government.⁶

In addition, Lesbos has been facing a refugee crisis for the last decade with thousands of refugees and immigrants on the island. In September 2020, a series of fires ravaged the Moria Reception and Identification Center (R.I.C.), leaving 12,000 people in the streets, while COVID-19 cases were increasing. In the refugee camps, the COVID-19 outbreak considerably impaired the daily life of the residents. This was due to limits on mobility, the restricted number of visitors allowed, and the small quantities of provisions available, such as soap and hand sanitizer. Confining thousands of people in overcrowded facilities, living in unacceptable conditions and having insufficient access to protective equipment, has made it impossible to comply with the regulations and to isolate the confirmed cases.

⁶Retrieved on February 27 from <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/finance/story/1691065/yperg-15-metra-gia-ti-stiriksi-tis-agoras-ergasias-kata-tin-pandimia-tou-koronoiou>

⁷ Retrieved on February 27 from <https://www.itep.gr/en/review/the-impact-of-covid-19-pandemic-on-the-hotel-sector-in-2020/>

The pandemic's severe impact on Greek tourism is clearly depicted by the 78% decline recorded in tourism receipts during the first nine months of 2020, compared to the same period in 2019.⁷ This includes suspension of most of the flights from the Athens and Thessaloniki airports, as well as the few direct flights from other European countries. Additionally, Greek airports saw a 72% drop in international air traffic during the first ten months of 2020. During the July to September period – the traditional peak of the tourism season in Greece – the hospitality sector's occupancy rate did not exceed 30%, with an average of 23% per month (in contrast to 71% one year earlier). The financial tools that government took to support the hotel industry have so far covered 1/3 of the average of the total liquidity needs of the hotels.⁸

As of November 11, 2020 all people traveling to Greece from foreign countries were required to have a negative molecular test result (PCR) for COVID-19, performed up to 72 hours before their entry to Greece. This included air and land arrivals to Greece.⁹ All passengers entering Greece from any foreign country, including European Union member states, was required to self-isolate either at their home (for permanent residents) or at the place of temporary residence for 7 days. If they were to stay in Greece for a shorter period, the temporary restriction was valid for the entire period of their stay. Also, as for domestic air travel, it was restricted to essential journeys only (i.e., for health purposes, business purposes, family reunification, or returning to permanent residence).

Specific to Lesbos, there was a much greater decline in the number of flights and tourists. Domestic flights during 2020 decrease by 47.3%, which translates into 171,529 fewer people. International flights have been hit even harder, with a decrease of 88.9% in arrivals.¹⁰

⁸ Retrieved on February 27 from <https://www.iefimerida.gr/oikonomia/koronoios-i-epidromi-stin-eyropehtypa-ton-toyrismo>

⁹ Retrieved on February 27 from <https://travel.gov.gr/#/>

¹⁰ Retrieved on February 27 from https://www.mjt-airport.gr/uploads/sys_nodeIng/2/2890/Mitilini_12_Traffic_2020vs2019.pdf

Post Covid-19 recovery on Lesvos: A different approach

How will life on Lesvos look like after this pandemic? It is fair to say that the end of the pandemic is not going to be as abrupt as its start and the virus will be part of everyday life and work for a few more years, hopefully with declining severity, presence, and more available activities and mobilities. For an island such as Lesvos, this raises three different questions:

- 1) The migration situation. Will flows of refugees return to pre-COVID levels? This is a very difficult question to answer. The planning for refugees at the moment is for one so-called “closed” structure that will house newcomers until their status is determined. It is unlikely that this will remain “closed” for long and there are questions regarding its capacity. In this regard, local government has not control over the number of migrants housed on the island. Those receiving refugee status will have to leave the island, but it is unknown where in the EU they will go and when this will happen. In retrospect, it seems increasingly likely that the “COVID years” may be viewed as a “respite”.
- 2) Tourism flows. Tourism is expected to rebound once the vaccination process is well under way. This is where steps towards a different approach in managing attractions, resources and tourism flows can be sought. Lesvos has largely been spared the mass tourism flows and mass tourism structures associated with some of the more commercialized Greek islands. This has kept the island as a “hidden gem” for many that appreciate a more relaxed and less crowded destination with many natural and cultural assets. What is lacking is an agreed upon approach to sustainable tourism management at the island level so that Lesvos does not experience the overtourism that is rampant elsewhere. Can this be achieved?
- 3) Social and demographic aspects. The island’s population is among the oldest in Europe and the natural balance (births minus

deaths) has been negative for more than forty years. In fact, if not for the steady influx of people that work for the University, the regional government and many other public services, the population over the past generation would have been declining rather than holding steady. The long-term effects of the pandemic may encourage more young people to stay on or return to the island. It is expected that forms of distance work and economic activities will at least partly replace the pre-COVID economic model. Perhaps there is an opportunity to make the island more attractive to this younger generation of educated residents who obtain their degrees locally and have opportunities to stay and work on the island. It should be noted however that this is an aspirational goal of many small islands. If there was a simple solution to youth out-migration, it would have taken place by now.

Post Covid-19 recovery and the Sustainable Development Goals

In addition to its catastrophic impact on human life and economic activity, the COVID-19 crisis may be a chance for a transition towards a more sustainable economy and society, one that would be more closely aligned to the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A post-COVID-19 recovery roadmap is being developed by the national authorities that will use EU pandemic recovery funds and a plan that was developed last year just prior to the start of the pandemic (the so-called “Pissaridis Committee Plan”). That being said, the SDGs are not mentioned directly in this plan.

This lack of planning for sustainability was inexplicable prior to the start of the pandemic, when management of public health and the economy was dire. After one year of fluctuating restrictions, it is even more critical that some of these changes need to be discussed and debated. This includes discussion surrounding mobilities and distance-based activities, where less travel may be beneficial in the long term for

residents of the island, but only if this is combined with better infrastructure and opportunities to live and work remotely. It also requires a serious discussion about the tourism sector and related service industries. What type of tourism do we want and need on the island? How can we link these activities sustainably to the rest of the local economy and how can we keep Lesvos a popular destination without succumbing to the problems associated with overtourism? The answers to these questions hold the key to a more sustainable tourism sector in the future and an improved quality-of-life for Lesvos residents.

Useful Sources

Note that we could find no links with material in English that is specific to Lesvos. The English language items listed here are at a national (Greece) level.

- <https://eody.gov.gr/en/>
- <https://travel.gov.gr/#/>
- <https://covid19.gov.gr/covid-map/>
- <https://www.statistics.gr/en/sdgs>
- http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/home/about_covid_19
- <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/covid-4/coronavirus-greece>
- <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/greece/>
- <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/gr>
- <https://covid19.healthdata.org/greece?view=total-deaths&tab=trend>
- <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/greece>
- <https://www.dimitrisk.gr/covid19/myplots.html?fbclid=IwAR2LFa5goG43hG8jr9q7BY6HioEaCB4gG07CFFpaTPK0PZxtFy588kWxJYY>
- <https://www.covid19healthsystem.org/countries/greece/livinghit.aspx?Section=3.1%20Planning%20services&Type=Section>
- <https://etr.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s12544-021-00481-7>

Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

- #1. Malta. November 2020
- #2. Egadi Islands. November 2020
- #3. Grenada. November 2020
- #4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020
- #5. Shetland Islands. November 2020
- #6. Åland Islands. November 2020
- #7. Guam. December 2020
- #8. Okinawa Islands. December 2020
- #9. Mauritius. February 2021
- #10. Seychelles. February 2021
- #11. Aotearoa New Zealand. February 2021
- #12. Hawai'i. February 2021
- #13. Barbados. March 2021
- #14. Jamaica. March 2021
- #15. Newfoundland and Labrador. March 2021
- #16. Prince Edward Island. March 2021
- #17. Iceland. March 2021



With thanks to the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF), creators of the *COVID-19 Rural Insights Series*, for kindly giving us permission to use "Insights Series" as part of our series name