

Legalization of Over 1 Million Immigrants Under Way in Europe

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European governments launched mass legalization programs. Madrid would regularize the legal status of irregular migrants and asylum seekers, while Rome would grant visas to nearly half a million guest laborers. Athens, however, announced in Spring 2025 that it would halt¹ mass legalization.

Migrant workers are “indispensable for the national economic and productive system and not otherwise available”, said the Italian government² by way of explaining the increased quota announced for the period 2026-2028. Rome will grant work visas to 497,500³ foreigners from outside the EU over these three years, compared to the quota of 452,000 set for the period of 2023-2025. The Italian government is confident that the decision will promote controlled immigration and reduce illegal employment. In 2026, 164,850 non-EU citizens will be able to enter Italy⁴ for purposes of work.

The quota of nearly half a million for 2026–2028 is divided into two categories: 230,550 visas are available for investors and permanent employees, while the remaining 267,000 places are available for seasonal workers, including those in agriculture and tourism. Applications will be submitted in several rounds: from January 12, 2026, applicants for seasonal agricultural work can submit their applications, and in the second round, which began on February 9, applicants for seasonal jobs in the tourism sector and hotel industry can apply. Although applications can be submitted until December 31, 2026, depending on the number of places available, there is already significant oversubscription in several sectors, including in nursing and care.

The Italian legalization program received mixed reactions. Coldiretti, an organization representing farmers’ interests, welcomed⁵ the quota increase, saying that guest workers are needed to ensure Italy’s food production. Leader of the liberal More Europe party Riccardo Magi, however, pointed out that the measure could easily become useless if it is limited to increasing the numbers in the decree and does not result in the issuance of actual employment contracts and residence permits, as has happened in the past. According to data from the “Ero straniero” (“I was a stranger”) campaign run by a network of civil society organizations supporting migrants, in 2024, only 7.8% of the entry quotas set by the government resulted in work permits and stable, legal employment.

On January 27, 2026, Spain’s left-wing government also decided to legalize irregular migrants *en masse*. Their decree⁶, which is expected to come into force in April, is estimated to affect at least 500,000 people, but their number could be as high as 800,000. Applicants must prove that they have no criminal record and that they lived in Spain continuously for at least five months before December 31, 2025, or that they applied for international protection. Documents required to prove eligibility include, for example, medical reports or proof of money transfers. Those who meet the conditions will receive a one-year residence and work permit which can be made permanent later, as well as access to the public health system. However, they do not acquire citizenship or voting rights, with the exception of local elections.

This is the first large-scale regularization of migrants in Spain for twenty years. According to the government, the measure aims to enable foreigners living in Spain to work and pay taxes legally. The country’s prime minister stresses immigrants’ contribution to the economy and the social security system, and his left-wing allies tend to emphasize migrant rights and the need for humane treatment of arrivals.⁷ The government’s decision met with fierce political opposition, including calls for the mass deportation of irregular immigrants and accusations that the socialist government is working to systematically replace the local population. However, as the proposed measure is approved by royal decree, it does not require parliamentary ratification.

The move for regularization initiated in Spain goes against the grain in Europe where governments are currently leaning towards tighter immigration control. Greece announced on May 30, 2025, that it would halt the mass legalization of migrants. At the end of June, it decided to send two frigates and another

ship to the waters off Libya to deter migrants from heading for the Greek coast. In September, legislation came into force that expressly prohibits⁸ any form of legalization of illegal residents in the country. Toughened measures mean that deported migrants who remain in the country can be sentenced to a minimum of three years in prison⁹, and the maximum period of detention for those arriving without the proper documents is now 24 months¹⁰ instead of the former 18. While pressure decreased on most migration routes to the European Union over the past year as a result of agreements between EU governments and various North African governments, Greece found itself under increased pressure as the bilateral agreements rerouted migrant traffic onto Greek shores.

¹ Derek Gatopoulos, “Greece threatens rejected asylum seekers with jail under tougher new migration policy”, AP News, May 30, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/greece-migration-europe-deportations-296dc5da631895bea339dc225df9be7a>

² “Italy: Government approves 500,000 work visas over next three years”, InfoMigrants, July 2, 2025. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/65507/italy-government-approves-500000-work-visas-over-next-three-years>.

³ DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DEL CONSIGLIO DEI MINISTRI 2 ottobre 2025, Programmazione dei flussi di ingresso legale in Italia dei lavoratori stranieri per il triennio 2026-2028 [DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS October 2, 2025, Planning of legal entry flows of foreign workers into Italy for the three-year period 2026-2028.]. *Gazzette Ufficiale* n.240, October 15, 2025. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2025/10/15/25A05656/sg>.

⁴ Francesco Rodorigo, “Decreto Flussi: click day il 9 febbraio per il lavoro stagionale”, *Informazione Fiscale*. <https://www.informazionefiscale.it/decreto-Flussi-2026-click-day-stagionali-turismo-alberghi>

⁵ “Italy: Government approves 500,000 work visas over next three years”, *InfoMigrants*, July 2, 2025. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/65507/italy-government-approves-500000-work-visas-over-next-three-years>.

⁶ Inés Fernández-Pontes, “Spain to approve ‘extraordinary regularisation’ of half a million migrants”, *Euractiv*, January 27, 2026. <https://www.euractiv.com/news/spain-to-approve-extraordinary-regularization-of-half-a-million-migrants/>.

⁷ Guy Hedgecoe, “Spain plans to give half a million undocumented migrants legal status”, *BBC*, January 27, 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62n6gw1dp9o>.

⁸ Bill Giannopoulos, “Plevris Rejects Claims of Legalizing 90,000 Illegal Immigrants as ‘Fake News’ – Bill Targets Only Legal Residents”, *Greek City Times*, January 19, 2026. <https://greekcitytimes.com/2026/01/19/plevris-fake-news-90000-illegal-immigrants-legalisation-bill>.

⁹ “Greece tightens immigration rules — Age limits, benefit cuts, and tougher deportation measures”, *Proto Thema*, August 11, 2026. <https://en.protothema.gr/2025/08/11/greece-tightens-immigration-rules-age-limits-benefit-cuts-and-tougher-deportation-measures/>.

¹⁰ Helena Smith, “Greece passes draconian legislation with prison terms for rejected asylum seekers”, *The Guardian*, September 3, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/03/greece-passes-draconian-legislation-with-prison-terms-for-rejected-asylum-seekers>.

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