



DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

COUNTRY REPORT: CYPRUS

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This report presents an overview of the migratory shifts and trends with a focus on Cyprus, situated at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (MENA), has a broad migratory demographic tapestry.



Having practically nonexistent integration policy for years, there seems to be a clear lack of interest in developing resilience scripts, promoted in an EU-level that are based on inclusion and integration.



An updated holistic approach to migration is greatly needed to not only provide for legal migratory pathways but also ensure ensure the safety, protection, and human rights of those in need.

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1

COUNTRY BACKGROUND

Historically, Cyprus has been an island with a high geopolitical value, situated as it is at the crossroads of Europe, Africa and the Middle East (MENA). Its rich and complex history is marked by periods of foreign rule and internal conflicts, all of which are reflected in the island's culture, its current domestic and foreign policies, its internal and external relations, and population movements in the region.

It is widely accepted that the Eastern Mediterranean is undergoing a period of systemic transition.¹ In the last decade, the region has experienced significant transformations due to interconnected factors such as geopolitical power shifts, regional and internal political instabilities, socio-economic challenges, and the effects of climate change. These have affected bilateral relations among states and external powers, population shifts, and the internal stability of the Middle East North Africa (MENA) Region.² More specifically, the region is still dealing with the aftermath of the 2013 global economic downturn and the Arab Spring protests and uprisings, while the ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are active and volatile situations. Since 7 October 2023, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has led to millions of Palestinians displaced and thousands dead,³ while it has also brought on wider regional tensions.⁴ Suppression of rights and freedoms, high unemployment, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and, lastly, the effects of climate change such as water scarcity⁵ and extreme weather conditions⁶ have also contributed to the growing insecurity and tensions in the region. Moreover, the involve-

ment of external powers continues to influence and shift the dynamics in the region.

The role of Cyprus in the region is both complex and multifaceted. Since its accession to the European Union in 2004, Cyprus's relations with the EU have been strengthened, while because of its its geopolitical position it has been and is used to bridge EU and MENA economic, cultural and political relations. At the same time, the island's divided status, marked by ongoing territorial disputes and deteriorating relations between the RoC and the territories in the north not under the control of the RoC, hinder the participation of Cyprus as a strong regional player. The discovery of the natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has caused further tension between the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and Turkey, as Turkey continues its gas explorations in a region the RoC considers its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).⁷ This energy dispute has involved several states in the region, and in 2019 resulted in establishment of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EastMed); Turkey did not join, as it preferred to pursue its own national interests and regional policies. Further, although the Cypriot economy is steadily recovering from the financial crisis of 2013,⁸ "Cyprus' small size and import dependence [have] made the country vulnerable to external shocks."⁹ And while the US and UK military bases on the island reinforce the geopolitical influence and visibility of Cyprus on a global level, they also impose stricter margins on RoC foreign policy.

The above-described situations have affected regional stability, and have led to one of the largest population movements ever recorded. Migration in the MENA region is linked to human insecurity due to conflict, socio-economic conditions and the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ In recent years there has been considerable migration within the region as well as towards the EU.

1 Spyridon, N. & Litsas, Aristotle Tziampiris (2016) , *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Politics and Power*, Routledge.
 2 Dabrowski, M. & Domínguez-Jiménez, M. (2021), Economic crisis in the Middle East and North Africa, *Policy Contribution* 02/2021, Bruegel.
 3 Human Rights Watch, World Report 2024: Israel and Palestine Events of 2023 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/israel-and-palestine>
 4 By the time of publication of this report, Israel has started offensive operations against Lebanon and Iran.
 5 Hall, N. (2024), Surviving Scarcity: Water and the Future of the Middle East , Center for Strategic and International Studies <https://features.csis.org/surviving-scarcity-water-and-the-future-of-the-middle-east/#:~:text=Decades%20of%20poor%20water%20management,sapped%20its%20limited%20water%20supplies>
 6 Wehrey, F., Dargin, J. ,Mehdi, Z., Muasher, M., Yahya, M., Kayssi, I., Hassan, Z., Andrews, M., Madain, M., Al-Mailam, M., Hamzawy, A., Yerkes, S., Clasen, H., and Yabi, G. (2023), Climate Change and Vulnerability in the Middle East, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/07/climate-change-and-vulnerability-in-the-middle-east?lang=en>

7 <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-cyprus-conflict-new-tensions-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

8 Country Report: Cyprus (2024), Alianze Trade https://www.allianz-trade.com/en_global/economic-research/country-reports/Cyprus.html#:~:text=Following%20the%20crisis%20in%20its,investment%2C%20consumer%20spending%20and%20tourism

9 https://www.allianz-trade.com/en_global/economic-research/country-reports/Cyprus.html#:~:text=Following%20the%20crisis%20in%20its,investment%2C%20consumer%20spending%20and%20tourism

10 "Region on the Move, Regional Mobility Report for the Middle East and North Africa, January-June 2021 (2021), International Organisation for Migration (IOM) https://mena.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1686/files/documents/region-on-the-move-8_1.pdf

2

MOBILITY PATTERNS AND SHIFTS

Considering its proximity to the MENA region, Cyprus's steady economic recovery since 2016 and the EU-Turkey Agreements of the same year have "made Cyprus once again an attractive destination for migrants."¹¹ From EU Nationals, digital nomads, ex-pats, golden visas, and work visas (including domestic, construction and agricultural workers), to those who seek international protection and as well as trafficking victims, Cyprus has a broad migratory demographic tapestry.

IRREGULAR MIGRATION

Even though Cyprus is not the first choice of those aiming to reach EU countries, due to the island's lack of land borders with other EU countries, the progressive closing of other routes to the EU has led to an increase in migratory flows towards Cyprus. Immigrants access the RoC territory through the main entry points, and also irregularly by sea and by illegally crossing over from the northern part of the island.

For the greater part of the last decade, Cyprus has hosted the highest number of refugees per capita among all EU countries. Throughout the last decade a steady increase in new arrivals has been observed—apart from 2020 when, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the numbers dropped to half of the usual flow: the total number of first applications for international protection dropped to 7,094 from 13,259 in 2019.¹² In 2021, the number returned to 2019 levels with 13,773 applications registered. While in 2022 the number of first applications rose to 22,182,¹³ in 2023 the numbers dropped again, to 10,662.¹⁴ By the end of June 2024, 4,899 applications were registered, which includes unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) among those who applied for asylum. According to the June 2024 Cyprus Fact sheet, published by UNHCR Cyprus, "some 22,516 persons are currently regis-

tered as international protection beneficiaries in the RoC; 4,123 have been granted refugee status, and 18,393 have been awarded subsidiary protection."¹⁵ In 2022, there were some 925 UASC applications for asylum; in 2023 there were 380. EASO data reports that in 2023 "1,015 UASC were registered as having arrived at Pournara First Reception Center."¹⁶ From January to June 2024, there were 474 UASC applications for asylum¹⁷ Furthermore, in 2022, following the invasion of Ukraine, 15,275 individuals¹⁸ were offered temporary protection¹⁹ in Cyprus, a number that rose to 20,020 by the end of March 2024.²⁰ By the end of 2023, the number of pending applications for international protection had risen to 26,599.²¹ It is important to note that by June 2024, there was 65% increase in migrants arriving by sea in comparison to June 2023.²²

For the last five years the main countries of origin have primarily remained the same, although numbers per country have varied from year to year. Syria remains the top country of origin for applications in the last decade. From the total number of cases examined annually, on average 95% receive subsidiary protection. By the end of June 2024, 3,801 new applications were registered, while 12,801 applications are still pending.²³ For this same period, the top five countries of origin for new applications were the Syrian Arab Republic,

¹¹ Kantaris, M & Theodorou, M. (2022), "Cyprus' ongoing migration challenge", ESPN Flash Report 2022/01, European Social Policy Network, European Commission.

¹² Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2021), Asylum Information Database: Cyprus Country Report -2020 Update https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AIDA-CY_2020update.pdf

¹³ Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2023), Asylum Information Database: Cyprus Country Report -2022 Update https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AIDA-CY_2022update.pdf

¹⁴ Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2024), Asylum Information Database: Cyprus Country Report -2023 Update https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AIDA-CY_2023-Update.pdf

¹⁵ UNHCR Cyprus_Country Fact Sheet_2024.06_ENG.pdf <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/110242>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ European Migration Network (2023), Annual report on Migration and Asylum 2022 ,EMN-Inform [https://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/CRMD/emnncpc.nsf/All/8CBAE29D3C99A16FC22589E80032043E/\\$file/EMN_INFORM_ARM2022_FINAL_050723.pdf?OpenElement](https://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/CRMD/emnncpc.nsf/All/8CBAE29D3C99A16FC22589E80032043E/$file/EMN_INFORM_ARM2022_FINAL_050723.pdf?OpenElement)

¹⁹ Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2022.071.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=O-J%3AL%3A2022%3A071%3AFULL

²⁰ Governance of migrant integration in Cyprus (2024) ,European Website on Integration https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/country-governance/governance-migrant-integration-cyprus_en

²¹ Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2024)

²² EUROPE SITUATIONS: DATA AND TRENDS, ARRIVALS AND DISPLACED POPULATIONS (2024), Regional Bureau for Europe.

²³ UNHCR Cyprus_Country Fact Sheet_2024.06_ENG.pdf <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/110242>

the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Afghanistan, and Nigeria.²⁴ Applications from Afghani and Nigerian migrants increased in 2022 and 2023, while applications from countries such as India, Pakistan, Georgia and Bangladesh fell significantly. The amended Refugee Law, Article 12D, in force since 12 October 2020, specifies “that an application may be examined under the accelerated procedure and is prioritised within 30 days from the date of submission of an application.”²⁵ The accelerated procedure applies to countries that are considered safe,²⁶ and was piloted in 2019 for applicants of Georgian nationality, while in 2020, the list grew from one safe country to 21.²⁷ It is important to note that prior to this new procedure, almost 100% of these cases were rejected.

According to the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, in June 2023 there were 735 arrivals by sea, a number that rose to 1,717 by the end of 2023. At the end of June 2024, that number declined to 170 sea arrivals.²⁸ Importantly, we cannot examine arrivals by sea without discussing those who do not make it. For the year 2024, a total of 78 persons were declared dead or missing in the Eastern Mediterranean; in 2023 there were 171, and in 2022, 383 persons- the highest number recorded since 2015 and 2016, with 804 and 434 persons, respectively.²⁹

The identified trafficking cases in Cyprus reveal the main purposes to be forced labour (including agricultural and domestic work) and sexual exploitation, primarily targeting vulnerable individuals, women, unaccompanied children, Roma, and asylum seekers. The 2024 report on trafficking in persons Cyprus³⁰ also noted a serious exploitation of domestic and foreign workers in the country over the past five years. “Foreign victims identified in Cyprus in 2023 were from Bangladesh, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Greece, India, Nepal, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Russia. In previous years, victims were also from Cameroon, the People’s Republic of China, Czech Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Moldova, Romania, Sri Lanka, Syria, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.”³¹ The numbers reported are being questioned by civil society organisations (CSOs) working in this field, who refer to the authorities’ of lack of interest and effort in tackling the issue.³²

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ <https://euaa.europa.eu/easo-asylum-report-2021/433-accelerated-procedures#:~:text=In%20Cyprus%2C%20the%20amended%20Refugee,of%20submission%20of%20an%20application.>

²⁶ Επίσημη Εφημερίδα της Κυπριακής Δημοκρατίας, Αρ. 5703 -1381, Αριθμός 202 [https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/gpo/gazette.nsf/7727D72567EC96F4C225884F00233AD8/\\$file/5703%2027%205%202022%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf](https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/gpo/gazette.nsf/7727D72567EC96F4C225884F00233AD8/$file/5703%2027%205%202022%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf)

²⁷ Drousiotou ,C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2021),

²⁸ Displacement Tracking Matrix (2024), IOM <https://dtm.iom.int/content/europe-migration-arrivals-dashboard>

²⁹ Displacement Tracking Matrix (2024) , IOM <https://dtm.iom.int/europe/dead-and-missing>

³⁰ Trafficking in Persons Report: Cyprus (2024), US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/cyprus/>

³¹ Ibid

³² Kades, A. (2024), Trafficking numbers far worse than reports suggest, Cyprus Mail [https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/03/10/trafficking-](https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/03/10/trafficking-numbers-far-worse-than-reports-suggest/)

LEGAL MIGRATION

In addition to those fleeing conflicts and persecution, applying for asylum or visas on the merits of humanitarian reasons, Cyprus receives a steady increase in victims of trafficking, exploitation, domestic violence, again with a certain decline during 2020 and 2021 owing to the COVID-19 travelling restrictions. The country offers are two permit categories, temporary residence and permanent residency. Most temporary permits are issued for the purposes of work, study, family reunification, and visiting. For permits issued for the purpose of work, some prominent trends have been identified. A significant number of persons from Greece and Eastern Europe, facing economic difficulties, moved to Cyprus for better employment opportunities. Especially for Greeks, Cyprus became a favorable destination due to cultural and language similarities. Since its accession to the EU, Cyprus has been a favorable employment destination for individuals from Eastern European countries. Additionally, the island hosts a large community of south Asian nationalities employed under various work visas, but predominantly for domestic and agricultural work. The majority of these individuals are from the Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Vietnam, whose access and visas are usually facilitated by agents. In a 2020 study on the status of foreign domestic workers in Cyprus conducted by the University of Central Lancashire Cyprus and the Commissioner for the Administration and the Protection of Human Rights (Cyprus Ombudsman), it was found that, among other things, foreign domestic workers are at the margins of immigration and employment policies.³³

The latest Eurostat Migration and Migrant Population Statistics Report stated that “as of 1 January 2023, there were about 90,500 third-country nationals (TCNs), representing 9.8% of the population, and another 93,100 EU citizens (10.1%) living in Cyprus at the time [...] while by March 2024 the number of temporary protection holders from Ukraine reached 20,020.³⁴ More specifically, the UNHCR Cyprus Fact Sheet states that in the RoC there are currently 43,314 refugees (including 20407 persons from Ukraine), 29,541 asylum seekers, and 98 stateless persons, while in the north of the island there are 142 persons.³⁵

Cyprus is also one of the few countries to offer citizenship by investment scheme,³⁶ also known as the Golden Visa/Passport Scheme. The program was reinstated in the beginning of

[numbers-far-worse-than-reports-suggest/](#)

³³ Hadjigeorgiou, N. & Mertekka, D. (2020), Report on the Status of Foreign Domestic workers in Cyprus, University of Central Lancashire Cyprus, Commissioner for Administration and protection of Human Rights <https://equineteurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Cyprus-Domestic-Workers.pdf>

³⁴ Governance of migrant integration in Cyprus (2024), European Commission https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/country-governance/governance-migrant-integration-cyprus_en#statistics

³⁵ Bi-annual fact Sheet 2024 09: Cyprus (2024), UNHCR <https://www.unhcr.org/europe/media/bi-annual-fact-sheet-2024-09-cyprus>

³⁶ Άδειες Μετανάστευσης Επενδυτών, Τμήμα Μετανάστευσης, Υφυπουργείο Μετανάστευσης και Διεθνούς Προστασίας https://www.mip.gov.cy/dmmip/md.nsf/immigrationpfi_el/immigrationpfi_el?OpenDocument

2024, after a scandal in 2020 shut it down. Further, in late 2021, the Council of Ministers launched a new scheme for digital nomads.³⁷ This scheme follows an EU-wide trend³⁸ that offers a temporary residence permit for up to 2 years, and includes the applicant's family. Cyprus imposed a limit on the number of such visas, which increased to a 500 cap in March 2023.³⁹ There are also other migration permits for third country nationals (TCNs),⁴⁰ for whom specific criteria apply. Unfortunately, official data/information on the number of permits and visas issued is not available publicly, nor is there any further data⁴¹ related to country of origin, gender, age, etc.

A topic that has been increasingly discussed in recent years is the student visas issued by universities operating in the north (the TRNC), which are speculated to facilitate trafficking and exploitation.⁴² There have been similar discussions about students from third countries attending universities in the ROC, and it has been alleged that many are using their student status to seek employment or to apply for asylum. To address these issues, in 2020 the Council of Ministers tightened entry requirements,⁴³ while in July 2024 the Cabinet approved a Ministry of Education proposal to cap the number of students admitted to private higher education institutions for the academic year 2024-2025.⁴⁴

HUMAN INSECURITY

As it is seen as a relatively safe country, Cyprus continues to play a significant role in the broader context of migration within the Eastern Mediterranean, MENA and the EU. The 2022 'Special Report of UNDP: New threats to human security in the

Anthropocene' explores 15 dimensions and subdimensions of the index of Perceived Human Insecurity, identifying challenges relevant to insecurities due to political instability and violent conflicts, socioeconomic insecurities and personal and community insecurities, noting that "human security is about living free from want, free from fear and free from indignity. It is about protecting what we humans care most about in our lives."⁴⁵ Threats to human security include poverty, inequality, hunger, environment, disease, violence and prosecution, political repression and human rights violations,⁴⁶ all of which are prominent issues in the region.

Considering political instability and violent conflicts, we can observe several ongoing situations that influence population movements towards Cyprus. The civil war in Syria has resulted in widespread displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and economic hardship for its people, most of whom have been displaced internally but many of whom have taken refuge in nearby countries. The conflict in Yemen has also led to significant displacement and forced migration, while the situations in Libya, Iraq and Lebanon have also contributed to population movements. And although Ukraine is outside the region, its recent invasion by Russia has also led to forced migration, and can explain the Ukrainian community on the island. Finally, the situation in Gaza as well as the recent Israeli offensives against Lebanon, will likely bring a new wave of immigration to Cyprus.

From a socioeconomic point of view, many of the countries in the region that face political instabilities and conflicts also face economic downturns, inflation and market crashes; these often produce financial inequalities, poverty, unemployment and scarcity of resources. Many countries neighboring Cyprus currently face such struggles, which especially affect the younger generation,⁴⁷ encouraging them to look for better prospects elsewhere. Their vulnerability resulting from such issues is easily exploited, and the numerous smuggling and trafficking networks operating in the region are testament to this.

Finally, migration in the region is driven by personal as well as societal insecurities, including human rights abuse such as ethnic or other discrimination, prosecution and violence, arbitrary detention, torture, and even fear for one's life. What is relatively new- and will affect population movements in the years to come- is environmental insecurities. The geography and climate of the region, significantly worsened by recent climate changes such as increasing temperatures, shifting of atmospheric systems, increased droughts and

37 Τμήμα Μετανάστευσης (2022), Cyprus Digital Nomad Visa Scheme, Υφυπουργείο Μετανάστευσης και Διεθνούς Προστασίας [https://www.mip.gov.cy/dmmip/md.nsf/All/9207F50B0EEC8F87C-2258921002C8333/\\$file/DIGITAL%20NOMAD%20VISA%20SCHEME%20-%20EN.pdf](https://www.mip.gov.cy/dmmip/md.nsf/All/9207F50B0EEC8F87C-2258921002C8333/$file/DIGITAL%20NOMAD%20VISA%20SCHEME%20-%20EN.pdf)

38 Digital Nomads Policies in the European Context, Talent Hub project, IOM Denmark and IOM Germany, https://denmark.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1306/files/documents/TalentHub/overview.-digital-nomad-policies-in-the-european-context_clean.pdf

39 Digital Nomads and family members, Τμήμα Μετανάστευσης, Υφυπουργείο Μετανάστευσης και Διεθνούς Προστασίας <https://www.mip.gov.cy/dmmip/md.nsf/all/BF9908B541BFF7D-3C22587EA003CD306?opendocument#:~:text=The%20%22Cyprus%20Digital%20Nomad%20Visa%22%20Scheme%20allows%20nationals%20from%20non,through%20telecommunications%20technology%20for%20companies>

40 Κατηγορίες άδειων μετανάστευσης, Τμήμα Μετανάστευσης, Υφυπουργείο Μετανάστευσης και Διεθνούς Προστασίας <https://www.mip.gov.cy/dmmip/md.nsf/All/C3BEADF8B9D534B0C-22587CE0030CFD2?OpenDocument>

41 On the EMN publications there is a specific disclaimer about relevant data missing from Cyprus.

42 Cleaver, T. (2024), Cyprus raises alarm over link between north universities and people smuggling, *Cyprus Mail* <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/06/17/cyprus-raises-alarm-over-link-between-north-universities-and-people-smuggling/>

43 Cyprus opens door to cheap labour by changing rules for foreign students (2024), *Philenews* <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/insider/cyprus-opens-door-to-cheap-labour-by-changing-rules-for-foreign-students/>

44 Cyprus sets limits on third-country students in higher education (2024), *Philenews*, <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/insider/cyprus-sets-limits-on-third-country-students-in-higher-education/>

45 Tapia, H., et al. (2022), New Threats to Human Security in the Anthropocene -Demanding greater solidarity, UNDP Special Report, <https://hs.hdr.undp.org/pdf/srhs2022.pdf>

46 Human Security Handbook (2016), United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/h2.pdf>

47 OECD (2022), Youth at the Centre of Government Action A Review of the Middle East and North Africa https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/bcc2dd08-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/bcc2dd08-en&_csp_=6e439cfc8350d8ddeb8dbc0a4f96be40&item-IGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#chapter-d1e1438

desertification, are certain to affect migration patterns.⁴⁸ Food insecurity, diseases and loss of livelihood are already disproportionately affecting many resource-poor countries and will become an even more significant security topic in the near future.

Health and access to adequate medical care and protections also affect human security. COVID-19 was a great reminder of this, causing a significant impact on population movements globally. After the initial temporary decline in mobility due to the various travel restrictions and lockdowns, the pandemic also triggered shifts in migration patterns. Due to loss of employment, marginalization and subsequent increase in vulnerability, some economic migrants returned to their countries of origin. In the same way, many Cypriots living abroad decided to return to Cyprus during the pandemic, while travel restrictions on the island, including the closing of the check points, hindered movement across the divide again, after 17 years.⁴⁹ As traditional migration routes were disrupted, an increase in irregular migration was observed.

The wider regional insecurity, but also more specifically the ongoing offensive in Gaza and neighboring Lebanon, could well lead to further movements in the region, both legal and irregular.

⁴⁸ Wehrey, F., Dargin, J., Mehdi, Z., Muasher, M., Yahya, M., Kayssi, I., Hassan, Z., Andrews, M., Madain, M., Al-Mailam, M., Hamzawy, A., Yerkes, S., Clasen, H., and Yabi, G. (2023), Climate Change and Vulnerability in the Middle East, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/07/climate-change-and-vulnerability-in-the-middle-east?lang=en>

⁴⁹ Lyritsas, L. (2020), Coronavirus tears Greek and Turkish Cypriots apart — again, DW <https://www.dw.com/en/cyprus-greek-turkish-cypriots-coronavirus-restrictions/a-55132876>

3

POLICIES AND DOMESTIC PREFERENCES

In the last five years, Cyprus has implemented several policy changes in response to evolving mobility trends and regional dynamics. These changes have been made in an attempt to manage migration flows, address security concerns and deter further movement towards the island, and to respond to the geopolitical shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In response to the rising number of asylum applications, in 2022 Cyprus began to step up the ‘accelerated procedure’ to process asylum applications.⁵⁰ This process aimed to reduce the backlog of cases that had piled up over the years, shorten the deadline for appeal, and decide the status of new applications more quickly by using the list of safe countries and stricter criteria to filter applications and prioritizing the return and deportation of individuals whose claims were rejected.⁵¹ Thus, in the last five years there have been more cases of detention and deportation, while applications from Syrians were suspended in April 2024.⁵² It is interesting to note that while this has been the general policy, refugees from Ukraine were treated significantly different in Cyprus – as well as in Europe. With the Temporary Protection Directive⁵³ activated EU-wide and transposed into the national refugee law in March of 2022, the process for application for temporary protection, issuance of residence permits and their automatic renewal until March 2025 ensured their immediate protection, including access to rights, immediate access to the labour market without restriction, and access to education.

The use of detention centers and de facto detention centers has also increased in the last five years. Aside from the Melenia Detention Center, the Pournara Reception Center was used as a de facto detention center between 2020 and 2022, where “the stay at the Centre is supposed to be for 72 hours and for the purpose of registration, lodging asylum applications, and medical and vulnerability screenings. Instead, for this period, persons remained for much longer periods, in

many cases ranging between three to five months. Furthermore, the terms for release from the centre were often unclear, changed arbitrarily or were impossible to meet (e.g., proof of a rental agreement). The situation had led to a significant rise in the number of persons in the Centre, initially from 350 to 700.”⁵⁴ The government has also sought to increase the number of returns. In 2023, Cyprus had the highest percentage of returns among EU countries, while it ranked fourth in absolute numbers (9,193 persons in 2023; 5,800 in 2022).⁵⁵

Furthermore, beginning in 2020, the RoC government has aimed to improve its border control measures. Aside from increasing patrols (land and sea), the government also sought to physically reinforce the “Green Line” with barbed wire,⁵⁶ while also tightening controls at crossing points and making stricter checks. The RoC has installed new surveillance technology,⁵⁷ while it cooperates with Frontex to monitor and secure maritime and land borders; this includes registration, return-related support using a team of forced return and support officers,⁵⁸ and document fraud detection.⁵⁹ There has been a growing concern around the above policies, especially in regard to land and sea pushbacks. Regarding the situation where migrants were forced to stay in the buffer zone for several weeks, the UNHCR stated that the migrants had managed to cross and then were pushed back.⁶⁰ This was a significant issue in the summer of 2024, creating tensions between the Cypriot authorities, UNFICYP and UN-

⁵⁰ Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2023)

⁵¹ Article 12A IPAC Law

⁵² Postponing the assessment of asylum applications for persons of Syrian nationality (2024), PhileNews <https://www.philenews.com/politiki/article/1459234/proedros-anastellete-i-exetasi-etiseon-asilou-se-oles-tis-periptosis-prosopon-siriakis-katagogis/>

⁵³ Temporary protection, European Commission https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en

⁵⁴ Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2023)

⁵⁵ Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2024)

⁵⁶ Cypriot government to remove barbed wire fence along Green Line (2024), E-Kathimerini.com <https://www.ekathimerini.com/politics/foreign-policy/1244388/cypriot-government-to-remove-barbed-wire-fence-along-green-line/>

⁵⁷ Ισραηλινό σύστημα επιτήρησης με κάμερες και drones στην Πράσινη Γραμμή στην Κύπρο (2021), Πρώτο Θέμα <https://www.protothema.gr/world/article/1178210/israilino-sustima-epitirisis-stin-prasini-grammi-stin-kupro/AMP/>

⁵⁸ Frontex deploys return team to Cyprus (2022), Frontex <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-deploys-return-team-to-cyprus-K2qjVl>

⁵⁹ Frontex support in Cyprus (2022), Frontex <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-support-in-cyprus-jAjSaN>

⁶⁰ ‘Buffer zone migrants’ lead to clash between government and UN (2024), *Cyprus Mail* <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/06/23/buffer-zone-migrants-lead-to-clash-between-government-and-un/>

Cyprus does not have bilateral agreements in regard to employment; these are not standard policy in Cyprus, according to the Department of Labour.⁷³ However, some bilateral agreements do exist, notably in regard to the transference of social insurance contributions to the country of origin. One such an example is that signed with Egypt in 1988, which also covers cases of old age, disability and death.⁷⁴ Similar agreements exist with the following countries: Canada, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Syria, the Netherlands, Australia, Austria, Czech Republic, Greece, Quebec, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. "The bilateral agreements that Cyprus has concluded with member states of the EU have been replaced by the EU Regulations 883/04 and 987/09, which coordinate the social security systems of the member states" (Social Insurance Services, Cyprus).⁷⁵

73 Bilateral Agreements, Department of Labour, Cyprus https://www.mlsi.gov.cy/mlsi/dl/dl.nsf/page5c_en/page5c_en?OpenDocument

74 Study on Bilateral Labour And Social Security Agreements In North Africa (2017), International Labour Organisation <https://www.ilo.org/publications/study-bilateral-labour-and-social-security-agreements-north-africa>

75 Social Insurance Services, Bilateral Agreements, https://www.mlsi.gov.cy/mlsi/sid/sidv2.nsf/page92_en/page92_en?OpenDocument

4

PERCEPTIONS

Policies at the center of public discourse in Cyprus range from the ‘Cyprus Problem’ to the domestic and foreign policies related to migration and refugees. The topic of migration is also heavily politicised, especially in the run up to any elections, with the most recent example being the elections for the European Representatives, and previously for the presidential elections, with campaigns vilifying migrants and refugees in an effort to gain the popular vote. In fact, such narratives seem to be feeding each other.

A 2022 study conducted by the University of Cyprus on behalf of UNHCR Cyprus⁷⁶ revealed many misconceptions about the number, origin, status, legitimacy, access to rights and benefits of refugees and asylum seekers in Cyprus. The study also pointed to the role of the media in the dissemination of misinformation, with over one-third of participants getting their information from the TV, and more than one-fourth from social media and other internet sources. It is important to note - in comparison to a similar study conducted in 2018-⁷⁷ an increase in the percentage of participants who support policies that advocate the return of refugees to their countries of origin, transferring refugees to other countries and putting a cap on the number of refugees that Cyprus can host. At the same time the study revealed a decrease in the percentage of participants who support refugees’ right to Cypriot citizenship after five years on the island. Interestingly, despite the large number of refugees from Ukraine, study participants did not consider them refugees. Furthermore, the same report showed that 41.1% of participants felt that refugees and asylum seekers negatively impact the economy, while 38% believe their presence threatens Cypriot culture.⁷⁸

Additionally, the survey showed that over one-third of participants believe, that Cyprus currently hosts over 50,000 refugees and asylum seekers, the majority from African countries (47.8 %) followed by various Middle Eastern countries (29.8%).⁷⁹ Participants’ concerns “focus mainly on the small size of Cyprus which, in their opinion, makes the country incapable of hosting ‘so many’ migrants, in both 2018 and 2022, with percentages of 61.8% and 57.3%, respectively. There also appears to be a small increase from 2018 to 2022 regarding concerns over possible changes in the island’s demographics (34.4% and 39.3%, respectively) and fear of criminal/violent behaviour (35.9% and 42.5%, respectively).”⁸⁰

The negative narrative around migrants and refugees has contributed to an increase in xenophobic and violent attacks on the island. According to the 2023 AIDA Report on Cyprus, “in 2023, there was a significant surge in violence against migrants in Cyprus, with incidents including pogrom-like demonstrations and violent attacks against racialized people, including migrants and refugees.”⁸¹ Following incidents in Chloraka and Limassol where migrant-owned shops were destroyed and several people were attacked by mobs, Amnesty International urged “authorities in Cyprus to take immediate measures to tackle racist rhetoric and abuse, which have been on the rise in the country for years.”⁸² Emmanuel Achiri, Policy and Advocacy Officer for the European Network Against Racism further noted that “the latest attacks on racialised migrants is a direct consequence of government policies encouraging racism, hate speech, xenophobia and intolerance within Cypriot society. We urge the authorities to take decisive action to stem violence against racialized migrants and to hold those responsible for encouraging it to account. We strongly denounce the total silence of EU Member States in the wake of yet another wave of violence against migrants.”⁸³

⁷⁶ Psaltis, C., Nicolaou, A., Perivolaraki, M., Anastasiou, E., Karakondylou, M., Georgiou, V. (2023), Perceptions of Cypriots about Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants, University of Cyprus on behalf of UNHCR Cyprus, https://www.unhcr.org/cy/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2023/03/UNHCR-Opinion-Poll_Full-Report_March-2023.pdf

⁷⁷ Psaltis, C., Kadianaki, I., Nicolaou, A., Panayiotou, E. (2019), Perceptions of Cypriots about Refugees and Migrants, University of Cyprus on behalf of UNHCR Cyprus https://www.unhcr.org/cy/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2019/03/Perceptions_FULL-REPORT-FINAL_8March2019.pdf

⁷⁸ Psaltis, C., Nicolaou, A., Perivolaraki, M., Anastasiou, E., Karakondylou, M., Georgiou, V. (2023), Perceptions of Cypriots about Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants, University of Cyprus on behalf of UNHCR Cyprus, https://www.unhcr.org/cy/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2023/03/UNHCR-Opinion-Poll_Full-Report_March-2023.pdf

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2024), Asylum Information Database: Cyprus Country Report -2023 Update https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AIDA-CY_2023-Update.pdf

⁸² Cyprus: Authorities must protect migrants and refugees from racist attacks (2023), Amnesty International <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/cyprus-authorities-must-protect-migrants-and-refugees-from-racist-attacks/>

⁸³ Ibid

Cyprus has made several policy changes over the last five years in response to the recent population movements and trends. Aside from tightening its asylum and immigration policies, increasing border controls by land and sea, the country has sought greater support and cooperation with the EU, while demanding that neighboring countries assist in managing these challenges. The ongoing situation on the island (i.e., the unresolved conflict) and the tense relations with authorities in the north and with Turkey continue to be central issues, affecting both domestic and external policy making. While these policy changes reflect the efforts to tackle security concerns, they often leave the state exposed as negligent in their humanitarian obligations.

PROTECTION AND ACCESS TO RIGHTS

The rights of third country nationals heavily depend on their status, i.e., whether they are refugees, recognised refugees, subsidiary protection holders, or asylum seekers. Whereas refugees enjoy similar rights as nationals,⁸⁴ asylum seekers face many limitations, especially in the employment sector. They all have one important common right, however- the right to non-refoulement. This is a fundamental right for all refugees and asylum seekers, and it means that no matter how they have arrived on the island, they are protected from deportation or return before a decision is issued on their refugee application. However, as we noted earlier, there have been several cases of pushbacks over the last five years.

Refugees' employment/access to the labour market has been an important issue and the topic of ongoing discussions. After many years of advocacy from civil society and the private sector due to the need for additional labour force in specific sectors, in 2018 several favourable changes were enacted, such as earlier access to the labour market (after one month from the date of application) and an increase in the eligible employment sectors. However, in October 2023, after the Ministerial Decision 312/2023, access to the labour market was pushed back to 9 months, while a new administrative process for hiring asylum seekers was stipulated.⁸⁵ Such actions not only affected asylum seekers' access to the labour market, it also alienated the private sector. At present only recognised refugees and subsidiary protection holders have full access to the labour market.⁸⁶ Access to social benefits also depends on legal status; again, while recognised refugees and subsidiary protection holders have same rights as nationals, asylum seekers have only limited access. Furthermore, a single person is allowed a maximum benefit of 361 euros per month, which includes rental allowance (100 EUR).⁸⁷

Cyprus offers healthcare and education to all refugees and asylum seekers while their applications are being processed. And yet asylum seekers cannot access the National Health System (GESY), despite the fact that when they are employed, contributions to GESY are automatically deducted from their salaries. Education is mandatory for everyone under the age of 15 years, regardless of legal status or lack thereof, as outlined in the Guide to Education in Cyprus available at the Ministry of Education website.⁸⁸

The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) points out that integration in Cyprus is categorised as 'immigration without integration', since the policies on the island do not reflect the reality; in fact, for the year 2020 Cyprus scored a mere 41 out of 100 points.⁸⁹ This has not really changed over the last five years. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior, a consortium was assigned through EU funding to develop a new Strategic Integration Plan. This was put off until 2023, as there were suggestions that the plan was being revised.⁹⁰ Finally, in March 2024 the new strategic integration plan, which includes a 50-point action plan, was unveiled.⁹¹ Nevertheless, the plan is not available to view online and implementation is still pending.

Despite the various rights and protections enshrined in national and European law, many refugees and migrants remain at the margins of society in Cyprus, regardless of the length of time they have been in the country. Naturalisation is also a big issue for many refugees and migrants who wish to apply for Cypriot nationality. The 2023 amendment to the Law on citizenship⁹² significantly increased requirements, to the extent that the vast majority of international protection holders (mainly Syrians) do not qualify. Among other changes are the additions: having a good character (must not show disrespect for that constitute ones good character include among other things, the applicant has not showed any lack of respect towards the Republic, has not entered through an illegal point; has not behaved in any way that constitutes acceptance of the illegal administration of the areas not controlled by the Republic.⁹³

ROLE OF THE EU SCRIPT IN DEVELOPING RESILIENCE AND CAPACITY IN CYPRUS

On an EU level, and despite the clear transition towards a more conservative EU parliament and policies over the past 5

⁸⁴ UNHCR Help Page: Cyprus <https://help.unhcr.org/cyprus/>

⁸⁵ Ministerial Decision 312/2023, pursuant to art. 9Θ(1)(b) of the Refugee Law available in Greek, at: <https://tinyurl.com/ycycztjy>

⁸⁶ UNHCR Help Page: Cyprus – Refugees rights and duties <https://help.unhcr.org/cyprus/refugees-rights-and-duties/refugee-rights/>

⁸⁷ UNHCR Help Page: Cyprus – Asylum Seekers rights and duties <https://help.unhcr.org/cyprus/applying-for-asylum/your-rights-and-duties-as-an-asylum-seeker/>

⁸⁸ Οδηγός Υποδοχής στην Κυπριακή Εκπαίδευση, Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο, Υπουργείο Παιδείας και Πολιτισμού https://www.moec.gov.cy/odigos-ekpaidefsis/documents/greek_odigos_ipodoxis.pdf

⁸⁹ Governance of migrant integration in Cyprus (2024), European Commission https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/country-governance/governance-migrant-integration-cyprus_en

⁹⁰ Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis M. (2024), Asylum Information Database: Cyprus Country Report -2023 Update https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AIDA-CY_2023-Update.pdf

⁹¹ Charalambous S. (2024), Cyprus: New action plan for migrant integration, European Commission, https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/news/cyprus-new-action-plan-migrant-integration_en

⁹² Civil Registry Law – Amendment of 2023

⁹³ Drousiotou, C. & Mathioudakis, M. (2024)

years, the European Union continues to play a significant role in developing Cyprus's resilience and capacity to manage population movements. Despite criticisms and feedback from civil society across Europe, in April 2024 the EU parliament adopted the new Pact for Migration and Asylum that aims to provide a roadmap for member states dealing with migrant issues. In addition to its revision of the current system, the EU has pledged a significant investment in terms of capacity, finances and infrastructure. One such example is the financial support given to Cyprus to develop and improve its infrastructure, migrant access to healthcare and education, as well as extra personnel, such as that of EUAA and Frontex, to assist in migrant related issues. This aid will strengthen the capacities of local staff and reinforce the administrative and operational capabilities of involved local agencies. The EU has established various solidarity mechanisms, such as relocation and return schemes, that aim to share responsibility for refugees across member states to alleviate the pressure on countries that receive disproportionately high numbers. However, it is important to note that there is much justified criticism of the pact from civil society and other actors. As ECRE Director, Catherine Woollard, has noted, "all these decisions collectively reflect an underlying strategy of limiting access to protection for refugees in Europe, which is embodied in the reforms in multiple ways."⁹⁴

This resilience script also includes action plans and strategies promoting refugee and migrant integration and inclusion. These focus on the fundamental areas of access to education, employment and social support, and aim to develop self-resilience of the migrant and refugee communities, while contributing to the wider society. The plan has an in-built flexibility and adaptability in order to respond to both an ever-changing social environment and unforeseen challenges (e.g., COVID -19). Furthermore, the EU funding available to the civil society reinforces the collaboration between state and non-state actors on the ground, as well as the capacity of many NGOs working in the field to support migrants and refugees in various areas.

As an EU member state, Cyprus should make every effort to adopt these resilience scripts. The implementation seems selective, following the hard lines easier than developing scripts that focus on resilience, inclusion and integration. In Cyprus most efforts are made by civil society organisations with financial support from international organisations and EU funding programs. The various policies and initiatives taken to support the integration of migrants and refugees, including in areas such as language, learning, education, employment and psychosocial support fall short of actual needs and lack continuity and long-term planning.

⁹⁴ Woollard, C. (2024), Editorial: All Pact-ed up and ready to go: EU asylum law reforms, ECRE <https://ecre.org/editorial-all-pact-ed-up-and-ready-to-go-eu-asylum-law-reforms/>



CONCLUSION

Despite its potential to play an important role in the current migration situation, Cyprus currently does not meet ongoing regional needs. The island's internal politics, as well as the growing EU narrative aimed to protect its borders, have prevented Cyprus from taking a more decisive role. The country's migratory and integration policies need to be updated, to not only reflect current and future needs internally (i.e., labour force shortages, etc.) but also to be able to respond to developments in the region. In the wider framework, Cyprus needs to uphold its international obligations and establish legal migratory pathways to ensure the safety, protection and human rights of those in need.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annagrace Messa has over 12 years of experience working in civil society in Cyprus, the majority of which as a practitioner in the field of Asylum and Migration. Focusing primarily on the integration of refugees in Cyprus, Messa has also been working as an Advocacy and Case officer, as well as Researcher and Project Manager. Currently, Messa is involved in the Asylum/Migration field, and civil society in general, as a consultant and a volunteer.

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COUNTRY REPORT: CYPRUS

Cyprus, an island with a vast migratory history, situated at the crossroads of three continents, currently struggling with keeping up with the migratory flows. Deterrence efforts applied for years, have not yielded the envisioned results, yet the efforts seem to continue towards this end, reinforced by an EU shift in policy. Developing scripts enshrined in resilience, inclusion and integration greatly lack in momentum and will

from the authorities, despite the growing needs and the changing demographics on the island. Cyprus seems to be at crossroads again, this time between being a modern country that not only is in line international obligations but also one responds to the current and future challenges, and one that is remaining in the past with a narrow-minded and outdated view of migration.