

SNAPSHOT OF MIGRATION TO CYPRUS IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS

December 2024



BACKGROUND

Cyprus, historically, has been an island with a high geopolitical value, as it is situated at the crossroads of Europe, Africa and Middle East (MENA). Its rich and complex history is marked by periods of foreign rule and internal conflicts, something that is reflected in the culture, the current domestic and foreign policies, internal and external relations and population movements in the region. From EU Nationals, digital nomads, expats, golden visas, work visas (including domestic, construction and agricultural workers) to seekers of international protection and trafficking victims, Cyprus has a wide migratory demographic tapestry.

MIGRATION TO CYPRUS

Even though Cyprus has not been the first choice to those aiming to reach EU countries due to the lack of land borders with other EU countries, the progressive closing of other routes towards the EU has led to migratory flows towards Cyprus to increase, accessing the territory through the main entry points, but also irregularly by sea arriving directly at the ROC territories, as well as through the areas in the north that are not under the control of the ROC by crossing the "Green Line".

For the most part of the last decade, Cyprus has been hosting the highest number of refugees per capita, in comparison to any other EU country. Currently, Cyprus hosts 43314 refugees, 29541 asylum seekers, 98 stateless persons in the ROC and 142 persons of concern identified in the territories not under the effective control of the RoC.

In the Eurostat report on migration and migrant statistics showed that 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 in 2023.

POLICIES

Cyprus has made several policy changes over the last five years in response to population movements and trends shaped by regional situation and predicted influxes due to conflicts, economic migration, and geopolitical tensions. Aside from tightening its asylum and immigration policies, heightening border controls by land and sea, Cyprus has sought greater support and cooperation with the EU, while demanding from neighbouring countries to do their part in manage these challenges. While the policy changes reflect the efforts to tackle security concerns, they often leave the state exposed towards their humanitarian obligations. There is currently no active integration plan in Cyprus despite the ongoing discussion around it in the last five years.

In response to the rising number of asylum applications, in 2022 Cyprus started more intensely implementing accelerated procedures to process asylum applications. This process aimed to reduce the backlog of cases piled up over the years, decrease the deadline for appeal, as well as issue decisions on new applications faster, by utilizing the list of safe countries, stricter criteria to filter applications, and by prioritizing the return and deportation of individuals whose claims were rejected. Since April 2024, applications from Syrians have been suspended.

The use of detention centers and de facto detention has also been increased in the last five years. Aside from the Menoyia Detention Center, between 2020 to 2022, the First Reception Center Pournara was used as a de facto detention center. Anti Trafficking efforts have also seemingly been intensified, given the location of the island as a transit hub. However, even though new legislation has provisions for increased enforcement targeting traffickers, and victim support services envisioned to assist those affected by trafficking, there has been a lot of criticism about its implementation.

Currently in the RoC there are some 43,314 refugees (including 20407 Temporary Protection Holders from Ukraine), 29,541 asylum seekers, and 98 stateless persons, according to

the UNJCR Fact Sheet. Additionally, from October to 2023 until April 2024, Cyprus observed the highest numbers of arrivals by sea in the last 5 years, reaching 600 to 1000 people per month. Since May 2024, 159 asylum seekers have been pushed back in the Buffer Zone, with 75 of them still in the Buffer Zone by the beginning of September.

SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

Migration policies are in the center of public discourse, from the 'Cypriot problem' to the interior and foreign policies around the matter of 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. However, these narratives seem to be feeding each other.

There are many misconceptions relating to the number, origin, status, legitimacy, access to rights and benefits of refugees and asylum seekers. The role of media to this end has been heavily criticised. The negative narrative around migrants and refugees has contributed to the increase of xenophobic and violent attacks on the island. There was a significant surge in violence in the last few years against migrants in Cyprus, with incidents including pogrom-like demonstrations and violent attacks against racialized people, including migrants and refugees.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Irregular migration remains a challenge for Cyprus being in the frontlines of the EU. The current migratory and integration policies need to be updated, to not only reflect current and future needs internally (i.e. labour force shortages, the needs of persons of concern etc.) but also to be able respond to developments in the region.
- Even though border management and deterrence will continue to be a priority for the country, in line with the Pact on Migration and Asylum priorities, Cyprus needs to ensure that it upholds its international obligations and establish legal migratory pathways to ensure the safety, protection and human rights of those in need.

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ISBN: 978-9925-8195-2-2