

Cyprus' ongoing migration challenge

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MARIOS KANTARIS & MAMAS THEODOROU – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

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Migration flows to Cyprus have increased dramatically in recent years. The number of asylum applications and irregular migration have increased significantly in 2021. Cyprus is struggling to respond to this crisis, with its social, economic, demographic, and political repercussions, and has recently asked the European Commission and the Member States for assistance.



Description

The recovery of the economy from 2016 has made Cyprus once more an attractive destination for migrants. In addition to economic migration, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East have led to a dramatic increase in the number of political asylum seekers and refugees. This has led to a crisis that has prompted key EU bodies such as the Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), FRONTEX and the EU Med Group to recognise Cyprus as the current leading country for political asylum seekers in the EU.

The increase in asylum applications has led to overcrowding in reception and accommodation centres and detention facilities and has put considerable pressure on government departments and local authorities, due to the need for additional human, material and infrastructure resources and effective management. Cypriot taxpayers have been burdened with an additional €178 million for services and infrastructure creation (on top of the €117 million provided by the EU in 2014-2020), which is equivalent to approximately 0.83% of 2020 GDP. Due to the deteriorating situation in 2020, the government had to spend an additional €38 million on food and housing allowances. Local communities living near one of the persistently overcrowded migrant reception centres have long campaigned for respect for migrants and their rights, as inadequate migrant integration strategies have led to the economic decline of their region, an increase in crime and a threat to public health (Philenews, 2021).

The recently revised Migration and Asylum Strategy of Cyprus (Republic of Cyprus,

2020) is an attempt to stem the increasing influx of people seeking asylum and refugee status by introducing stricter criteria and procedures, shortening the time for approval or rejection of asylum claims, and sending back people coming from countries classified as safe (29 countries mainly in Asia and Africa). This strategy was severely affected by the emergence of COVID-19, as hearings were suspended, leading to further delays and an increase in the backlog.

Following the general EU framework on migration, Cyprus has also recently announced a new National Plan for the Integration of Migrants (2021), co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. The plan aims to address some of the previously discussed aggravating factors and to facilitate the social integration and employability of third-country migrants, as well as to ease their cultural integration, improve their knowledge of the health and social system and their general experience in the new host society. The plan is new and ambitious, and its impact remains to be seen.



Outlook and commentary

Today, according to government officials, the share of asylum seekers as a percentage of the population in the areas controlled by Cyprus is 4.4% (December 2021), while it does not exceed 1% in the other EU countries of first entry. The number of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants arriving in Cyprus in the last two years has increased rapidly. According to the Cypriot Minister of the Interior, 8,954 asylum seekers arrived in Cyprus in 2019 and 6,323 a year later in 2020, despite the closure of the country's "gates" due to the COVID-19 crisis. In

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2021, more than 10,868 asylum applications were filed (3,856 in October-November). These figures are considerably higher than those of other Member States. In 2020 alone, Cyprus had the highest number of asylum applications in the EU relative to its population. In its annual asylum report for 2021, EASO placed Cyprus at the top of the list of countries where asylum and reception systems are under the most pressure (EASO, 2021).

Mass irregular migration across the UN buffer zone is described by the Cypriot government as a matter of national security. Only recently it announced that Cyprus should set four priorities to address this problem: 1) drastic measures to tackle the problem of illegal arrival of migrants in Cyprus; 2) measures and actions aimed at preventing entry into areas controlled by the Republic of Cyprus and at monitoring all points used as entry gates; 3) measures for the return of migrants when the Court decides that the criteria for residence and asylum are not met; and 4) integrated social policies for migrants and asylum seekers, in terms of access to benefits and to the labour market.

However, there is another equally important dimension that fosters strong migration flows to Cyprus, namely migration from countries classified as safe. Cyprus' geographical location at the south-eastern tip of the EU, and the fact that it is a divided island with no central control over its entire

territory, act as further draws. In addition, the Cypriot government raises the issue of instrumentalisation of migrants, as a large proportion of asylum seekers enter the Republic-controlled territory irregularly through the demilitarised zone (Asylum Information Database, 2020). In any case, this reality continues to cause several problems and challenges affecting the society and the economy.

According to the Minister of the Interior and the government spokesperson, the new strategies and revised plans alone are not enough. What is really needed is more EU solidarity, especially from mainland Europe and Schengen Member States, to take in more migrants for resettlement. In November 2020, another package of measures was adopted by the government, to encourage European solidarity by: 1) setting up an inter-ministerial committee composed of the Ministers of Defence, Interior and Justice to propose specific measures to address the emergency caused by increased migration flows; 2) setting up an administrative unit with operational capabilities under the supervision of the National Coordination Centre for Search and Rescue; 3) immediately informing the European Commission of the deterioration of the situation, the need for urgent measures and urgent assistance to address the problem in line with similar previous decisions; 4) requesting the European Commission to take

measures in favour of Cyprus, in accordance with Article 78 (3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, including the right to suspend the asylum applications of persons entering the country irregularly; and 5) requesting the immediate relocation of a number of asylum seekers to other Member States or, in accordance with the relevant agreements, back to their countries of origin.

Further reading

Asylum Information Database (2020), "Country Report: Cyprus", Cyprus Refugee Council.

Cyprus Times (2021), [Almost 4 thousand asylum applications in the last 2 months](#) (in Greek).

EASO (2021), "EASO Asylum Report 2021", EASO.

National Plan on the Integration of Migrants, (2021), "tcnintegration.com.cy", Republic of Cyprus.

Philenews (2021), [Residents protest in the area of Pournara accommodation centre](#) (in Greek).

Republic of Cyprus (2020), [Integrated migration and asylum policy](#) (in Greek), Ministry of Interior.

Author

[Marios Kantaris](#) (Health and Social Services Research Centre & American University of Cyprus [Larnaca]) and [Mamas Theodorou](#) (Open University of Cyprus)

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