

Generalities

Cyprus is located on the east part of the Mediterranean Sea. It shares its maritime borders with Turkey (north), Lebanon and Syria (east), the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel (south-east) and Egypt (south). The island is situated at the crossroads of the African, Asian and European continents. In 2020, the total population was approximately 1.2 million.

The Republic of Cyprus (RC) gained independence from the United Kingdom in October 1960. A "Treaty of Guarantee" was concluded between the British, Turkish and Greek authorities to allow the island to maintain territorial and political autonomy¹. In 1967, a coup d'état took place in Greece resulting in the establishment of a military dictatorship that continued until 1974. That same year, under the impulse of an armed Cypriot group linked to the Greek junta, the democratically elected Cypriot President Mikhaíl Khristodoúlou Moúskos (Makarios III) was forced to withdraw. In reaction to this attack - invoking the 1960 "Treaty of Guarantee" - and in order to protect the Turkish-Cypriot community, Turkey invaded the north of Cyprus in August 1974. Since then, despite the restoration of democratic rule by Mikhaíl Khristodoúlou Moúskos, the north is still occupied. In 1983, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was proclaimed. This "*de facto*" country is only recognised by Turkey and represents 36% of the island's total territory (see map p.2).

Since 2004, Cyprus has been a member of the European Union (EU). However, EU law is suspended in the north of the island. The TRNC signed an association agreement with Turkey in 1997. Cyprus is not a member of the Schengen area, but has started the accession process.

Since these events, the island has been divided in two distinct political and territorial entities separated by the Green Line. It's now a demilitarised zone under the control of the United Nations peacekeeping forces. There are two British military bases on the island (see map p.2). Checkpoints provide access to the two different parts of the island.

Due to its geographical position, the island of Cyprus is the destination or a transit point for various migratory movements. In 2021, 13,773 asylum applications were filed². The Lebanese state being close (about 150 km), boats leave from its coasts to reach Cyprus. On board, the majority of the exiles are Syrian. They represented 22% of the applications for international protection lodged in 2021. Applicants for international protection from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria accounted for 12% and 11% respectively of the filings in 2021. For the year 2022, on the 20th of January, the Cypriot authorities stated that approximately 700 people had applied for international protection on the island³.

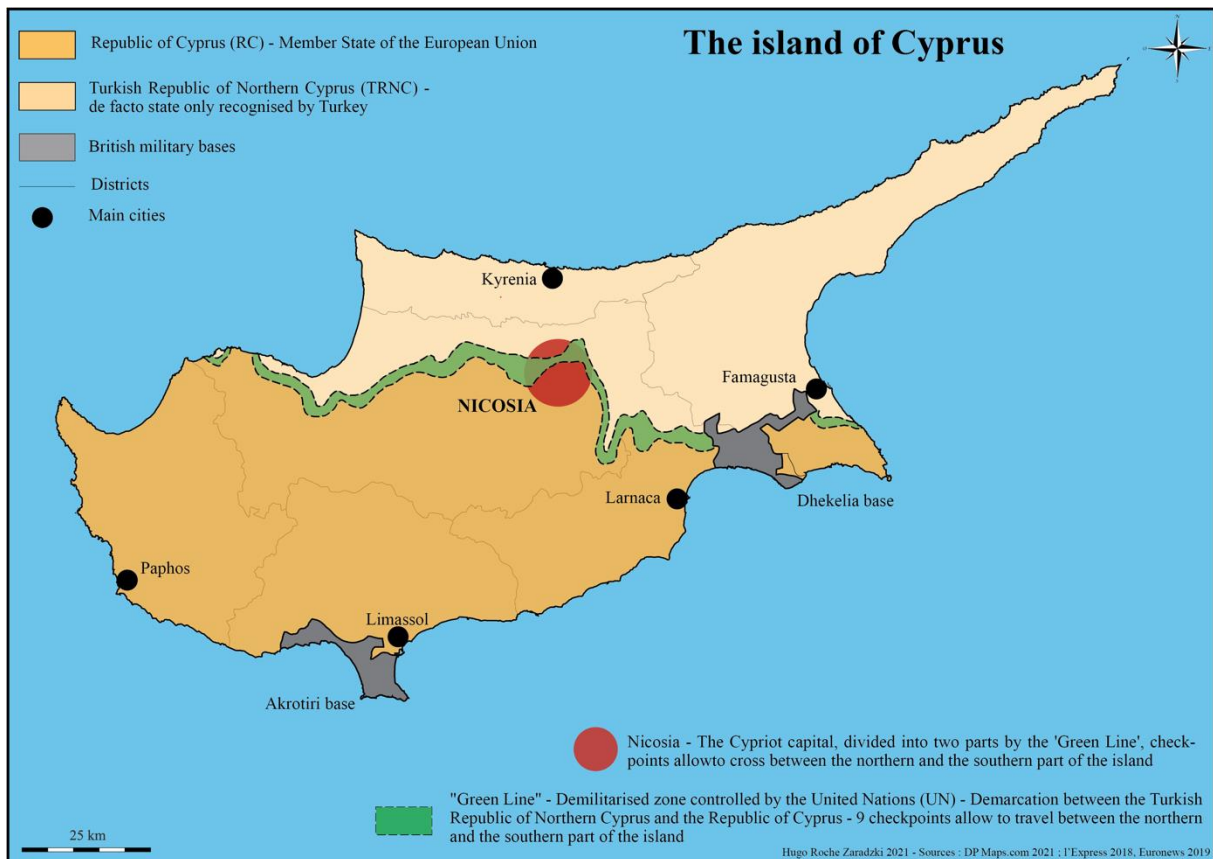
The separation of the island in two political entities exacerbates the geopolitical aspect of migration issues. Indeed, the Cypriot authorities regularly accuse the TRNC and its Turkish ally of instrumentalising the exiles by facilitating their arrival in the northern part and then their passage to the south, in order to destabilise the RC. As an answer to what it considers as

¹ For more information see [here](#).

² Report from ECRE/ Aida 2021 – [Country report Cyprus](#) - p.7

³ Infomigrants, on the 20th of January 2022 – [More than 700 migrants have reached Cyprus this year](#) [EN]

disproportionate arrivals, the Cypriot state has developed violent responses: repulsions and the use of violence, detention of exiles, inhumane living conditions in the camps, non-inclusion and rejection of people by society, etc.



Foreigner's legislation

The Republic of Cyprus signed the United Nations Convention of the 28th of July 1951 and the Protocol of 31st of January 1967 relating to the Refugees Status. It has also ratified the two Conventions - 97 and 143 - of the International Labour Organisation adopted in Geneva. However, like all other European states, it didn't sign the 1990 UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families⁴.

The Aliens & Immigration Law regulates the foreigner's rights in Cyprus⁵. The text dates from the British colonial period (1952) and has been amended several times. The detention of applicants for international protection is prohibited.

However, detention is permitted if a person is declared as a "prohibited migrant"⁶. In this case, exiles are punishable by a three-year prison sentence. The Ministry of Interior can also issue detention orders on various grounds such as identification of the person, examination of the elements of the application, especially if there is a risk of escape, protection of national

⁴ See previous Migreurop Country report about Cyprus (2013) available [here](#) [FR].

⁵ Available [here](#) [EN].

⁶ A person is considered as a "prohibited migrant": if he/she has entered the territory of the RC in violation of a prohibition or restrictions included in the law; if he/she is considered "prohibited" according to the Law on Foreigners (e.g. in case of rejection of an application for international protection); if he/she is convicted of having committed a criminal act (AIDA / ECRE, 2021, p.107).

security⁷. Illegal residence is punishable by a prison sentence of a maximum of three months, after which exiles may be detained for a much longer period pending deportation.

As a member of the EU, the Cypriot authorities have to apply the European law relating to the status of asylum seekers. This law is set out in various European directives and regulations and has been transposed into national legislation:

- Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of the 16th of December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, available [here](#).

- Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of the 13th of December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast), available [here](#). This directive was transposed into Cypriot law in 2014⁸.

- Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of the 26th of June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast), available [here](#). This directive was transposed into Cypriot law in 2016 (*ibid*).

- Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of the 26th of June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast), available [here](#). This directive was transposed into Cypriot law in 2016 (*ibid*).

- Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 (Dublin III) of the European Parliament and of the Council of the 26th of June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast), available [here](#). This regulation has been implemented in Cypriot law since 2016 (*ibid*).

Asylum

Countries of origin considered as safe

According to the European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA)⁹, Cyprus considered 29 states as "safe"¹⁰ in June 2021¹¹. It is the second EU member to have such a large list¹². The RC is the only European state to consider Nigeria, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Vietnam as "safe".

In June 2020, the Cypriot government claimed that 50% of the exiles who have applied don't need international protection¹³. In order to speed up the processing of these cases, the authorities

⁷ For a more exhaustive list, refer to the report (AIDA / ECRE of 2021, p.106)

⁸ Report ECRE/ Aida 2021 – [Country report Cyprus](#) - p.145

⁹ It replaced the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in January 2022.

¹⁰ EASO – [Situation Update on Safe Country Origin lists](#) – 9th of June 2021.

¹¹ That year, the Cypriot authorities added 8 states: Armenia, Benin, Kenya, Kosovo, Moldova, Mongolia, Togo and Ukraine (excluding Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk).

¹² Following the Netherlands.

¹³ Infomigrants, on the 19th of June 2020 – [Chypre revoit sa politique migratoire pour diminuer les demandes « infondées »](#) [FR]

presented a list of 21 countries including for example Nigeria, Egypt or Bosnia. The processing of applications from citizens of these states will be accelerated and all of them will be considered as "unfounded" and rejected. In 2020, except Syria and Cameroon, all countries of origin of applicants for international protection in the RC were considered as safe¹⁴.

Some of the exiles who come to the country have a work or student visa. According to the authorities, once the residence permit expires, people decide to stay in the territory of the RC and apply for international protection. In order to prevent this, foreign students must now provide bank documents proving that they can pay for their first year of study. They must also sign a declaration stating that they are not in danger in their country. This will prevent a possible future application for international protection¹⁵.

In November 2021, considering the number of applications for international protection to be too large to process and "unmanageable", the RC government filed a request to the European Commission to suspend the filing of asylum applications for people who entered its territory "illegally"¹⁶. This request has not yet been answered.

Procedure

Once they entered the RC territory of the RC, the exiles have to go to the Pournara camp (20 km west of Nicosia). This is the only Cypriot first reception centre. Generally, exiles who have entered the territory of the RC through ways considered legal by the Cypriot authorities are not forced to go to Pournara. They can go directly to the immigration office corresponding to their district of residence in order to file their application for international protection.

People who enter through unauthorised border crossings must be registered by the camp administration in order to apply for international protection. In November 2021, some exiles reported waiting outside Pournara for several weeks as they were not allowed to register because they did not have their original identity documents¹⁷. However, in order to access the food and water distributions and to be placed in the camp facilities, it is necessary to be registered on these lists.

Once the application for international protection is registered by the camp administration, each exile receives an Alien Book with an Alien Registration Number¹⁸. These numbers will become his identity for as long as he is present in the territory of the RC. The exile's ARC is systematically requested in every procedure or in every contact with the administration.

In theory, the processing time for asylum applications should not exceed 1 year and 9 months from the date of filing¹⁹. In reality, some people are forced to wait several years. Each year, the number of pending cases is still very high. It was 18,808 in 2021, 18,995 in 2020 and 17,171 in 2019²⁰. In 2021, 81.4% of applications for international protection received a negative response at first instance²¹. Decisions differ depending on the country of origin of the persons. For example, in the same year, out of 3,051 Syrian exile applications processed, only 6 received a

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ CyprusMail, 14th of novembre 2021 – [EU law determines refugee protection in Cyprus](#) [EN].

¹⁷ When they arrive in Pournara, the majority of exiles don't have their original documents and have only photos or photocopies.

¹⁸ These identification numbers are abbreviated as ARC: Alien Registration Certificate.

¹⁹ Report ECRE/ Aida 2021 – [Country report Cyprus](#) - p.29

²⁰ See again the statistics provided by the Cypriot authorities, available [here](#) and the report ECRE/ Aida 2021 – [Country report Cyprus](#) - p.7

²¹ Report ECRE/ Aida 2021 – [Country report Cyprus](#) - p.7

negative response²². The others were granted refugee status (24) or subsidiary protection (1,913). Inversely, in 2021, the rejection rates at first instance was very high for applications from Congolese (95.5%), Nigerian (98.2%) and Pakistani (99.8%) citizens²³. In this case, the exiles have 30 days to make an appeal against the negative decision to the Supreme Court of Cyprus (Administrative Court of International Protection).

Several options are available to exiles. They can apply for free legal aid, as the presence of a lawyer during the assessment interviews with the authorities is mandatory. For this, a file must be submitted to the Court. In theory the procedure takes two weeks. This means that the exile's file is supposed to be processed before the maximum time limit for filing an appeal has passed. In case of acceptance, the costs of filing an appeal (96€) will be covered by the Cypriot State, as well as the lawyer's fees. In case of rejection, the exiled person has to finance all costs personally. Due to the lack of information, most people appeal to the Court without knowing that they can apply for assistance. After paying the application fee, these exiles go alone to the summonses to assess their cases²⁴. The authorities then ask them to bring a lawyer the next time and postpone the interview. However, even if the interview does not take place, it is still considered honoured. In some cases, exiles have had all their interviews postponed/refused and then received a negative response to their appeal²⁵.

Some people hire a lawyer without financial support from the Cypriot state. In this case, various abuses can be observed. Sometimes no contract is signed between the applicant for international protection and his/her representative. Thus, even if both parties have agreed on a sum of money²⁶, the lawyer can take advantage of the situation to claim more money. In some cases, the lawyer does not provide any proof of payment to the person and then claims the same amount again. Other lawyers no longer make the required representations²⁷ and threaten to withdraw the appeal if payments are not honoured²⁸ or if their clients question their work and seek to change their representative²⁹.

If the procedure is rejected in the second instance, the persons are declared "illegal" in the territory. They can be arrested at any time and detained or deported. As a last resort, an exile may apply to reopen his or her application for international protection if he or she is able to provide new evidence to "improve the case".

Reception conditions during the procedure

Social Welfare Services

To leave the Pournara camp, exiles have to provide an address. In most of the cases people don't have one. Then they have to apply to the Social Welfare Services (SWS)³⁰ to start

²² *Ibid*

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ There are three.

²⁵ Observations made during my mission in Cyprus from October 2021 to March 2022.

²⁶ This usually amounts to €800.

²⁷ They may, for example, no longer go to court to continue with the administrative steps of the proceedings.

²⁸ The financial situation of the exiles is extremely difficult. The financial support received is not sufficient and rarely reaches them in time. Generally, the lawyers are well aware of this, but still agree (at first) to defend the cases of the people.

²⁹ Observations made during my mission in Cyprus from October 2021 to March 2022.

³⁰ Official website available [here](#).

receiving financial assistance³¹. The amounts vary according to the district and the person's situation. In theory, the processing of the application takes a month, leaving the exiles with no resources during this period. Then, a social worker takes over the case and contacts the person. New documents must then be provided. Regularly, exiles don't receive their cheques, without even knowing why, and try to contact their social workers. Generally, social workers are overworked and don't pick up the phone, forcing the exiles to go directly to the SWS headquarters. As the Cypriot social services close at 2pm, some people start queuing overnight to hope to get in in the morning. Private security guards³² are stationed at the entrance of the building and control who comes and goes. They sometimes receive directly the files and other documents deposited by the exiles. In the vast majority of cases, they are never transmitted and disappear. Fights regularly take place between exiles near the building, and cases of violence perpetrated by security agents have also been reported³³.

It happens that after two months of waiting, people don't receive any news about the processing of their file³⁴. If the exile cannot prove that he or she has already submitted a file, all the steps have to be taken again. This also implies waiting at least one more month before receiving the first financial support³⁵.

Department of labour

One month after registering at SWS, exiles must register as jobseekers with the Cypriot Ministry of Labour. This is crucial, because they must provide proof of registration or their financial support will be suspended. Access to the labour market for exiles is extremely complicated. Indeed, only specific professional sectors are open to applicants for international protection: agriculture-livestock-fishing; waste management; food³⁶... The majority of exiles are unemployed because they are discriminated in employment.

If registration at the Ministry of Labour is apparently quite simple, it quickly becomes quite complex. Indeed, exiles must speak English and have the technical means to do so: an internet connection, a working computer or telephone, an email address and a home address. Many people do not have these resources or the necessary technical skills³⁷.

Access to healthcare

As applicants for international protection, people are entitled to reimbursement of medical expenses in public hospitals. They must apply for a medical card from the Cypriot Ministry of Health. This involves having a residence address where the card will be sent.

Housing

Once the exiles have left the Pournara camp, some look to rent a flat. In fact, renting implies the payment of a deposit and a first month's rent. However, as access to the labour market is very difficult, people have no income except the financial support provided by the state. In the majority of cases, people save the money from the first cheques (thus depriving themselves of

³¹ In the Nicosia district a single person can claim monthly: 186€ for clothing and food; 75€ for water and electricity bills; 100€ for rent. That is a total of 361€ to survive. The different amounts are available [here](#).

³² The majority are men.

³³ Observations made during my mission in Cyprus from October 2021 to March 2022.

³⁴ In general, people hand over their files or documents to the security officers at the entrance. They almost never hand them over to the social workers. Naturally, the exiles are not informed of this and consider that they have submitted the necessary documents. They wait again for news from the SWS, but it never arrives.

³⁵ Observations made during my mission in Cyprus from October 2021 to March 2022.

³⁶ Full list of sectors and details of authorised trades available [here](#).

³⁷ Observations made during my mission in Cyprus from October 2021 to March 2022.

food and water) to pay for the rent. The presentation of a signed contract by the landlord to SWS initiates financial assistance for the rent.

Many cases of landlord abuse are regularly reported. Some of them don't provide a contract, others collect the rent without providing proof and repeatedly claim the money (claiming not to have been paid). In other cases, after paying the deposit and the first month's rent, landlords do not allow the exiles to access their accommodation. Like some lawyers, some landlords do not hesitate to take advantage of the exiles vulnerability to make a profit³⁸.

Detention, imprisonment

Pournara - First "reception" centre

The Pournara camp (west of Nicosia) was initially built to accommodate 600 people. Today, about 2,500 exiles are (over)living there in extremely difficult conditions. If the main camp's gate is guarded by police officers and private security guards, the other entrances are open and uncontrolled. Anyone can enter and leave freely. The number of sanitary facilities is not sufficient. Toilets and showers hygiene is deplorable, to the point that epidemics have occurred. Some tents are occupied by 15 people, the majority of them sleep on the ground without mattresses or blankets. In November 2021, many people (mostly men) were forced to stay outside the camp because the guards refused to register them³⁹. As winter approached, temperatures hovered around 10 degrees, yet these exiles had no clothing suitable for the cold and the majority wore shorts, t-shirts and flip-flops. Around 300 unaccompanied minors are accommodated in Pournara, in containers where some of them are packed with 30 people. The areas reserved for women and minors have almost no security, leaving space for all imaginable abuses. Cases of drug trafficking and prostitution around the camp have also been reported.

Due to the overcrowding of the camp, many cases of violence are regularly reported. In January 2022, a clash broke out between French and English-speaking communities. About 600 people were involved and 35 were injured, 28 of whom were taken to hospital⁴⁰.

On the 13rd of December 2021, members of the Human Rights Committee of the Cypriot Parliament visited the area. The MPs described the situation as a "ticking time bomb" and urged the government to act⁴¹. They declared that the Cypriot state should speed up the processing of asylum applications in order to limit the time spent in the Pournara camp. The authorities should also seek to integrate children into society by ensuring their access to education, as well as decent living conditions. MPs also denounced the unfairness of the EU's "Dublin" regulation, which blocks exiles in the countries of first arrival. In March 2021, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights had already expressed her "concerns about the human rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Cyprus⁴²".

³⁸ Observations made during my mission in Cyprus from October 2021 to March 2022.

³⁹ The camp authorities claimed that these people were not able to prove their identities, as many exiles only had photos of their documents.

⁴⁰ Infomigrants, 13rd of January 2022 – [Cyprus : injuries after fights break out at overcrowded migrant camp](#) [EN].

⁴¹ Cyprus Mail, 13rd of December 2021 – [MPs shocked at state of Pournara refugee centre](#) [EN] and Infomigrants on the 17th of December 2021 – [‘A ticking time bomb’ : Cypriot MPs shocked by visit to Pournara migrants shelter](#) [EN].

⁴² See the letter published on 18 March 2021 available [here](#).

Other places of detention

Menogia (or Menoia), in the district of Larnaca is a detention centre for exiles. People are locked up there while waiting for their deportation. The living conditions are difficult. Some people said that they have been held there for years⁴³. In March 2022, a man who was supposed to be deported resisted. He was severely beaten by the police and deported⁴⁴.

In June 2021, the Cypriot authorities announced the opening of a 'multi-purpose centre' in Limnes. At that time, the Polish government gave 80 "modular houses" to the Cypriot state to upgrade the camp, increasing its capacity to 240 places⁴⁵. The Polish state presented this as a sign of solidarity in order to realise "the important aspect of the humanitarian aid and migration policy⁴⁶" pursued by the country. With a capacity extended to 800 places, the camp should have an open space as well as a closed space⁴⁷. It would be used to "accommodate" exiles whose application for international protection is being processed in an accelerated way. People awaiting deportation could also be detained there⁴⁸. In view of its recent opening, few details have been released about the living conditions inside the camp. Nevertheless, it would appear that they are difficult⁴⁹. In December 2021, some people were moved from Pournara to Limnes because of detected cases of Covid-19⁵⁰.

Built in 2004, Kofinou is the only reception centre for applicants for international protection in Cyprus⁵¹. It has 400 places and has been operating at full capacity since January 2016⁵². Kofinou was expanded during the Covid-19 pandemic to receive exiles from Pournara. Actually, people housed in the camp are mainly families and single women⁵³.

Externalisation and border monitoring

The Green Line is not considered as a border of the EU in the true sense. The fact that the RC is not a member of the Schengen area turns the southern part of the island into an open-air prison. Indeed, once they arrive, exiles are forced to wait for months or even years for their case to be processed.

According to the RC authorities, 85% of migrants arrived in the southern part from the TRNC⁵⁴. The Cypriot state is therefore seeking to secure the Green Line to stop the migrant's arrivals, which is considered too important. In November 2021, an agreement was signed between the Cypriot and Israeli authorities⁵⁵. 27.5 million, it will be implemented by the security company Elbit System⁵⁶. The agreement aims at reinforcing security along the 180 kilometres of the ceasefire line: installation of cameras, sensors and radars; use of drones; creation of fast

⁴³ Observations made during my mission in Cyprus from October 2021 to March 2022.

⁴⁴ These events were reported during my mission in Cyprus from October 2021 to March 2022.

⁴⁵ Cyprus Mail, on the 16th of June 2021 – [New migrant housing to held speed up asylum bids](#) [EN]

⁴⁶ See the Polish state statement available [here](#).

⁴⁷ See [here](#).

⁴⁸ UNHCR, 31st of December 2021 – [Cyprus, reception capacity](#) p.5 [EN]

⁴⁹ See [here](#).

⁵⁰ Infomigrants, 23rd of December 2021 – [Cyprus : Hundreds transferred after coronavirus outbreak at overcrowded migrant camp](#) [EN]

⁵¹ See the information provided by the Cypriot authorities, available [here](#).

⁵² UNHCR, 31st of December 2021 – [Cyprus, reception capacity](#) p.2 [EN]

⁵³ See [here](#).

⁵⁴ Infomigrants, 25th of March 2002 – [Cyprus asks for EU help to control migrant arrivals](#) [EN]

⁵⁵ Cyprus Mail, 4th of November 2021 – [Buffer zone surveillance deal signed with Israel](#) (Updated) [EN]

⁵⁶ This company is active in the occupied Palestinian territories and on the border between Mexico and the United States. It is allegedly involved in the deaths of civilians. See the 2019 report by Investigate available [here](#).

intervention units⁵⁷ etc. In March 2021, the authorities had already announced the deployment of 30 kilometres of barbed wire to the west of Nicosia⁵⁸. It is important to underline that this agreement concluded with the Israeli government and Elbit system has a double utility. It will indeed permit to the Cypriot authorities to fight against what they call "illegal immigration". However, it will also be a means of monitoring the behaviour of TRNC troops, because although the conflict has now been halted, no peace agreement has been reached. Thus, the issue of securing the Green Line is central for the Cypriot authorities as different issues overlap.

On the 21st of February 2022, the Cypriot government and the European Commission agreed on a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) about the implementation of an Action Plan for "Migration Management" on the island⁵⁹. This agreement is a development of an action plan previously concluded between Cyprus and EASO in December 2020⁶⁰. The main objectives put forward in the MoU are: the improvement of first reception capacities; the improvement of material reception conditions; the improvement of the speed of processing of applications for international protection; the improvement of the return system (with the assistance of Frontex) and the increase of EU funds allocated to Cyprus for the period 2021-2027. The European agencies Frontex, Europol and EASO are also signatories and will support the RC.

In December 2021, EASO's operational support plan to the Cypriot State was extended⁶¹. At that time, 113 experts from the agency were deployed on the island to speed up the processing of applications for international protection⁶². On the 17th of February 2022, former Frontex Executive Director Fabrice Leggeri visited Cyprus and stated that he was ready to increase the agency's support to the RC. Today, 29 officers are reportedly deployed on the island and three operations are underway⁶³. Frontex officers would be involved in the implementation of deportations since 2019⁶⁴ and would also be present in the Pournara camp⁶⁵. Until February 2022, no information was available on the presence of the European agency in Cyprus.

Readmission agreements

Cooperation with the Lebanese State – Pushbacks

Due to the geographical proximity between Lebanon and Cyprus (about 150 km), boats of exiles regularly leave the Lebanese coast in order to reach the RC. Between January 2020 and June 2021, 1,162 people have left Lebanon for Cyprus, but only a third of them managed to land on the island⁶⁶. To limit access to their territory, the Cypriot authorities regularly push-back boats at sea. During the year 2020, about 700 exiles were pushed-back to Lebanon or Turkey during

⁵⁷ See this article from October 2021 available in Greek (but translatable into English): [The cameras are coming to the counter-line](#).

⁵⁸ Infomigrants, 10th of March 2021 – [Chypre déploie des barbelés pour éviter l'afflux de migrants depuis la partie turque de l'île](#) [FR]

⁵⁹ The text can be found [here](#).

⁶⁰ Operating Plan agreed by EASO and the Republic of Cyprus – December 2020, available [here](#). The original plan is available [here](#). See also the EASO press release available [here](#).

⁶¹ See the EASO document on Cyprus for the period 2022-2024 available [here](#).

⁶² Report ECRE/ Aida 2021 – [Country report Cyprus](#) - p.19.

⁶³ See Frontex press release dated 17th February 2022, available [here](#).

⁶⁴ See Frontex press release dated 24th June 2022 available [here](#).

⁶⁵ See Infomigrants, on the 2nd of February 2022 – [Cyprus streamlines migrant returns with EU, Frontex](#) [EN] and Knews on the 17th of February 2022 – [Agreement reached between Cyprus and Frontex for migrant repatriations](#) [EN]

⁶⁶ This number was 290 in 2019 and 490 in 2018 according to UNHCR figures quoted here by IEMed, 2021 – [Migrants from Lebanon Continue to Set their Sights on Cyprus, but for Most It Is a Hopeless Mission](#) [EN]

8 operations⁶⁷. These practices were denounced by the UNHCR representative on the island, Katja Saha⁶⁸. In 2021, according to the associations, at least 386 people were pushed-back⁶⁹. Faced with the generalisation of these practices, in March 2021, in her letter to the Cypriot authorities, Dunja Mijatovic, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, called for the opening of independent investigations into the accusations of pushbacks at sea⁷⁰.

To justify these illegal practices, the Cypriot authorities invoke a readmission agreement concluded with Lebanon - in "compliance with EU rules"⁷¹ - allowing the return of exiles. In reality, this agreement dates of 2002 but its operationalisation has been discussed again since 2020⁷². The official document is not available, but many references are made to it in press releases or articles. According to the authorities, the agreement provides in particular for a reinforcement of security along the Lebanese coast and the possibility for the Cypriot authorities to send back boats that are proven to have left Lebanon⁷³.

This cooperation is denounced by rights organisations because of the possibility of a chain of refoulements that it induces. Indeed, the agreement contains a clause allowing the Cypriot authorities to return non-Lebanese people to Lebanon. However, the majority of the exiles on board are of Syrians⁷⁴. Moreover, in September 2019, the Lebanese High Defence Council decreed that all Syrian exiles who entered the country illegally after April 2019 could be directly sent back to Syria, without any judicial procedure or possibility of appeal. According to the Lebanese authorities, 2,477 Syrians were deported between the 13rd of May and the 9th of August 2019. Some of them were subjected to violence and torture in Syria⁷⁵. Finally, it is important to highlight that cases of pushbacks to the TRNC have also been documented. These regularly result in deportations to Turkey, which may also lead to returns to Syria⁷⁶.

State of mobilisation

Criminalisation of solidarity – KISA

Because of its commitment to exiles and its stance against the government's racist practices, the KISA NGO is regularly targeted by the extreme right, as well as Cypriot authorities. In December 2019, the Ministry of Interior directly accused the association of "maintaining links

⁶⁷ NGOs estimate the number to be 15. See here: Joint submission Euromed Rights / KISA, March 2021 - [Input for the Special Rapporteur's report on pushback practices and their impact on the human rights of migrants and refugees, with a focus on pushbacks from Cyprus to Lebanon and Turkey](#) [EN] - The various cases are listed here: Report ECRE/ Aida 2021 – [Country report Cyprus](#) - p.15 / See here the Human rights watch publication of the 29th of September 2020 – [Cyprus : Asylum Seekers Summarily returned](#) [EN]

⁶⁸ See DW, on the 16th of September 2020 – [Refugee pushbacks by Cyprus draw attention from EU, UN](#) [EN]

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p.16.

⁷⁰ Available [here](#).

⁷¹ See the letter of the Cypriot Minister of Interior Nikos Nouris (in response to Dunja Mijatovic's letter) available [here](#).

⁷² See the document published by Euromed Rights and signed by several organisations on the 3rd of June 2021 – [Pushbacks from Cyprus to Lebanon lead to chain refoulement to Syria](#) [EN]

⁷³ CyprusMail, 6th of October 2020 – [Cyprus and Lebanon to up shared strategies in fight against illegal arrivals \(updated\)](#) [EN]

⁷⁴ IEMed, 2021 – [Migrants from Lebanon Continue to Set their Sights on Cyprus, but for Most It Is a Hopeless Mission](#) [EN]

⁷⁵ See again the document published by Euromed Rights and signed by several organisations on the 3rd of June 2021 – [Pushbacks from Cyprus to Lebanon lead to chain refoulement to Syria](#) [EN]

⁷⁶ Joint submission Euromed Rights / KISA, March 2021 - [Input for the Special Rapporteur's report on pushback practices and their impact on the human rights of migrants and refugees, with a focus on pushbacks from Cyprus to Lebanon and Turkey](#) p.3 and 4 [EN]

with Islamic terrorist organisations”⁷⁷. In August 2020, the government amended the Cyprus Law on Associations and Foundations. With this legal change - approved by the House of Representatives - the Ministry of Interior can designate an organisation as inactive. Within two months of the entry into effect of this new law, associations were forced to hold statutory/electoral meetings and submit audited accounts⁷⁸. On the 14th of December 2020, during the the coronavirus epidemic, the Cypriot Ministry of Interior removed KISA from the national register of associations even though the financial statement had been filed and a general assembly was coming a few days later. On the 17th of December, in response to the arbitrary and illegal decision of the Ministry of Interior, KISA filed an appeal. This was rejected two weeks later. On the 8th of January 2021, a new appeal was filed by the association with a request to temporarily suspend the decision⁷⁹. After the first hearing on the 20th of January 2021, it was decided that KISA's situation would be examined under an accelerated procedure. On the 21st of February 2021, on the basis of an order issued by the Ministry of the Interior to terminate KISA's activities, the association's bank accounts were frozen, preventing any transactions and therefore the payment of salaries⁸⁰. Nevertheless, in order to continue its activities and pending the court's decision, the association changed its status to a non-profit company. Since the December 2020 decision, many international associations and networks have expressed their support to KISA in the face of repeated government attacks⁸¹. Furthermore, in her letter to the Cypriot government in March 2021, Dunja Mijatovic recalled the obligations of the Cypriot authorities to maintain a positive environment and a favourable legal framework for associations⁸². Finally, in June 2021, five UN reporters expressed their concerns⁸³ about the deteriorating general climate for NGOs in Cyprus, as well as the various persecutions suffered by members of associations⁸⁴.

Examples of mobilisations against and in favour of exiles

On the 4th of January 2022, a clash broke out between two groups of Syrian exiles in the Paphos area on the west of Cyprus. About 150 people were involved and riot police had to intervene. The incident took place near the tourist complex of Saint Nicholas in the municipality of Chloraka, where about 600 exiles are housed. Immediately afterwards, the local authorities and the extreme right wing exploited this incident and initiated a wave of hate and intimidation against foreigners in the Paphos area. On January the 7th, a demonstration was organised by the Cypriot far right supported by the local population to require the closure of the complex and the departure of the people. They considered that the exiles presence is the cause of a demographic change and the latent insecurity in the municipality⁸⁵. During the rally, members of the protest went to the front of the St Nicholas complex. They insulted and threatened the exiles, calling them "terrorists". One exile was attacked by members of the far-right ELAM

⁷⁷ See the Migreurop press release of the 19th of January 2021 – [State xenophobia and criminalisation of solidarity in Cyprus](#) [EN]

⁷⁸ See the KISA press release of the 17th of December 2020 – [KISA denounces the new act of repression by the government](#) [EN]

⁷⁹ See the KISA press release of the 10th of January 2021 – [KISA appeals to the Court against the violation of its Freedom of Expression by the government](#) [EN]

⁸⁰ See the KISA press release of the 23rd of September 2021 – [KISA denounces the Minister of Interior for violating Freedom of Expression](#) [EN]

⁸¹ See the KISA press release of the 4th of March 2021 – [Amnesty calls on Cypriot authorities « to restore the registration of KISA and allow society organizations to operate freely and safely. »](#) [EN]

⁸² See the letter of the 10th of March 2021, available [here](#).

⁸³ See the letter of the 31th of March 2021, available [here](#)

⁸⁴ See KISA press release of the 10th of June 2021 – [5 UN Special Rapporteurs express their concern about NGOs in Cyprus and KISA's deregistration](#) [EN]

⁸⁵ See the KISA press release of the 8th of January 2022 – [Solidarity and respect of human rights : the solution to the situation in Chloraka](#) [EN]

party⁸⁶. A few days after the rally, the municipality of Chloraka cut off the water supply to the complex and declared it unsafe and unfit for habitation⁸⁷. A policy of intimidation began to force people to leave the complex. Many flats were inspected, usually at night, outside of any legal framework. The anti-terrorist police were also sent in, officially to find weapons, unofficially to scare the exiles into leaving. On the 11st of January, members of the association and exiles went to the municipality's headquarters to demand the restoration of the water supply, but the authorities didn't allow them to enter. The Cypriot Ministry of Interior then issued a decree requesting the departure of the exiles from the St Nicholas complex and ordering the police to enforce this measure. Legal action was taken to have the water supply restored. As of March 2022, this was still ongoing. Finally, on the 15th of January another demonstration of the far right took place. New hateful slogans were chanted, and some demonstrators threatened to come back with weapons to chase away the exiles⁸⁸. One of KISA's members went there to document the events. He was attacked while taking pictures of the demonstrators and was asked by police officers to come to the police station after the demonstration. Later, he learned that he was being prosecuted for violating the Personal Data Act⁸⁹.

In March 2022, a group of approximately 30 unaccompanied minors escaped from Pournara camp to stay in front of a church in Nicosia centre⁹⁰. They wanted to protest against the bad living conditions in the camp and the length of their detention. SWS officers and representatives of the Pournara administration tried to convince them to leave. Some of them agreed, but a small group of young exiles decided to stay in front of the church as a sign of protest. They said they were more comfortable in the street than in the camp. Although the priest in charge of the church was willing to accommodate them - the weather conditions were very bad - but the SWS refused to allow the teenagers to sleep in the shelter, forcing them to spend the night outside. For several weeks, other groups of unaccompanied minors came to the church. Despite this mobilisation, the living conditions in the camp never changed. In desperation, one of the teenagers tried to commit suicide and was hospitalised.

To conclude

Exiles who manage to reach the island of Cyprus face many difficulties and a complex geopolitical context. The recent conflict with Turkey and the crystallisation of tensions around the Green Line has reinforced an already existing xenophobic feeling. The exiles become the instruments of an indirect confrontation between the RC and the TRNC: the first accusing the second of facilitating the passage of migrants in order to destabilise the country. Faced with what it considers as too many arrivals, the Cypriot government has developed a racist and discriminatory policy towards the exiles. Numerous cases of pushbacks have been documented, the situation in the camps (especially Pournara) is deplorable, access to international protection is almost impossible... People who are waiting for their applications to be processed have to deal with a faulty system that seems designed against them. The steps to be taken are complex and the procedures long. The lack of information and the opacity of the administrative system

⁸⁶ See the KISA press release of the 12nd of January 2022 – [KISA condemns the racist, violent and hate speech attack against the Syrian refugee in Chloraka](#) [EN]

⁸⁷ See the KISA press release of the 8th of January 2022 – [Solidarity and respect of human rights : the solution to the situation in Chloraka](#) [EN]

⁸⁸ See the KISA press release of the 21st of January 2022 – [Refugees in Paphos faced with racism and pogroms](#) [EN]

⁸⁹ See the KISA press release of the 16th of January 2022 – [Backing racists and persecution of activists by the Cyprus Police](#) [EN]

⁹⁰ Observations made during my mission in Cyprus from October 2021 to March 2022.

leave exiles in complex and precarious economic situations. The limitation of access to the labour market for applicants for international protection deprives them of resources and prevents any integration into Cypriot society. The high vulnerability of exiles is reinforced by the various forms of violence they are regularly subjected to. The government's assumed hostility supports the extreme right-wing groups already well established on the island. The latter are multiplying violent and racist attacks and the impunity they enjoy strengthens them. In this poisonous climate, the few associations defending rights and supporting exiles - such as KISA - also become targets. As the only dissident voices and accused of being "complicit in terrorism", they are repeatedly attacked by a government that seeks to silence them. The Republic of Cyprus can nevertheless count on the support of European states. Despite some principled rebukes after the denunciation of proven cases of refoulement, the EU remains ready to provide funds and human resources (through its agencies such as Frontex and the EUAA) to strengthen border surveillance and speed up removals. The non-accession of Cyprus to the Schengen area has turned the island into an open-air prison where exiles remain condemned to wait indefinitely.