INTRODUCTION:
Overview of a Humanitarian Crisis

Since 2015 over a million refugees and asylum seekers have arrived in various European Union (EU) countries through Greece (known as the Eastern Mediterranean migratory route). The majority of those who fled came from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Following a sharp rise in the number of arrivals between the summer and autumn of 2015, the EU decided to implement a plan that would reduce the number of arrivals to the EU, and to re-start talks for an EU-wide migration policy. On 8 March 2016 the EU and Turkey agreed a plan to limit migration to the EU—the EU-Turkey Statement. Although the number of people who reached the EU fell, the EU-Turkey Statement did not stop migratory movements in the region but, rather, led to a shift in migratory routes.

Despite Cyprus’s close proximity to the Middle East, the island never received large numbers of refugees and/or asylum seekers. There are several explanations for this, including the (illegal) status of the northern part of the island, the country’s distance from the rest of the EU, and the fact that Cyprus is not a member of the Schengen Zone. More specifically, because Cyprus is not part of the Schengen Zone, migrants’ movements are restricted, and they are not guaranteed the safe treatment provided in the Schengen Border Code (Carr 2016). However, in 2018 and 2019 Cyprus experienced a large increase in the number of people arriving as refugees/asylum seekers, and this has consequently led to a backlog of asylum applications. By examining data provided by the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) and media analyses of the latest developments in the country, this policy brief will investigate two questions: can the increased number of arrivals of refugees and migrants in Cyprus be described as a crisis; can this increase have an impact on settlement of the Cyprus Problem.
EU-Turkey Statement

On 18 March 2016 the EU and Turkey agreed on a common line to curb migration. According to the EU-Turkey Statement, all new migrants arriving in Greece after 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey in accordance with international law. Everyone who arrives via the Aegean Sea, however, will have the right to apply for asylum in Greece. In addition, for every Syrian refugee who is returned to Turkey, another Syrian refugee will be resettled in an EU member state. At the same time Turkey is responsible for patrolling its borders and preventing any new sea or land migratory routes. In return the EU will allocate three billion euros to Turkey for projects targeted to people under temporary protection. (European Council 2019)

Current State of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Cyprus

The year 2019 saw a significant rise in refugee/asylum seeker arrivals in Cyprus, despite the fact that the country is not a popular Mediterranean migratory route. While in 2016, a total of 2,871 people sought asylum in Cyprus, by 2017 this number had almost doubled, reaching 4,459; in 2018 it reached 7,713, and by the end of September 2019, there were 9,700 migrants who had requested international protection (UNHCR 2019b). The latest statistics indicate that the number of asylum seekers will only increase and, in fact, will significantly surpass the numbers of previous years.

Asylum Applications in Cyprus until September 2019

Data from UNHCR Cyprus

![Asylum Applications in Cyprus until September 2019](source: UNHCR 2019b)

Until June 2019, the vast majority of asylum seekers came from Syria, followed by Georgia, India, Cameroon, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam, Egypt, Sri Lanka and Nigeria (UNHCR 2019b). Since 2002, the majority of asylum seekers who received international protection received subsidiary protection. Thus, since 2002, when the UNHCR started monitoring the situation in Cyprus, 56% of Syrians (who account for the largest number of asylum seekers) received protection while only 2% were awarded refugee status (UNHCR 2019b). The sudden increase in asylum seekers in Cyprus has made the country one of the top five receiving countries per capita (Connelly 2019).

This increase has created a backlog of asylum applications—a backlog that the Cypriot system is unable to handle. While between 2015 and 2017 there was a stable but small increase in pending applications, in 2018 this number grew to 10,307, while at the end of September 2019 the number reached 15,254 (UNHCR 2019b). Such an increase indicates that the Cypriot asylum system is heading towards a crisis.

The Cypriot government has taken a number of measures to deal with the high numbers of asylum seekers, while in January 2019 the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) offered the island a new operational and technical assistance plan. This plan aims to contribute to four distinct result outcomes in Cyprus (EASO 2018):

1. Improved registration system and better access to procedures
2. Enhanced reception conditions
3. Increased capacity to manage and reduce asylum backlog
4. Improved databases for backlog management systems

On 18 June 2019 the International Protection Administrative Court that was created to deal with asylum application appeals began operations (European Website on Integration 2019). In a letter sent to the EU in August, Cyprus Minister of the Interior Constantinos Petrides asked the EU to relocate 5000 asylum seekers (Barigazzi 2019). A month later the EU Commissioner for Migration noted in a letter that the EU would continue to help Cyprus financially and operationally (Karakoulaki 2019). More recently, Cyprus joined Greece and Bulgaria in releasing a statement seeking further support from the EU amid concerns of increased arrivals due to Turkey’s operations in Syria (ECRE 2019).

The Migratory Journey: Impact on the Cyprus Conflict

Despite its proximity to the Middle East, Cyprus is not a traditional migratory route across the Mediterranean. The Cypriot conflict and the fact that Cyprus is a small island country at a substantial distance from all other EU member
states play a role in that situation. However, this scenario seems to have shifted in the last few years, and refugees and migrants are now travelling to Cyprus in two ways: by boat to both the south and the north, or by plane through northern Cyprus. Reaching the country by boat, however, poses several dangers. Due to the status of northern Cyprus it is impossible for Cyprus and the EU to operate search and rescue missions; this means that this operation is the responsibility of Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriot administration. Considering Turkey’s unreliable stance on migration, this leaves refugees and asylum seekers at great risk. Due to the non-recognition status of northern Cyprus migrants who arrive in the north have three options: seek asylum in the Republic of Cyprus (RoC); risk living in limbo in northern Cyprus; be sent to Turkey. In addition, the sea route off the southern coasts of Cyprus can deliver migrants to the Sovereign Base Area, Akrotiri and Dhekelia, all of which are part of the British Overseas Territory in Cyprus. This situation can and has left people in a state of bureaucratic limbo (Demetriou 2019).

However, the majority of people who seek asylum in Cyprus arrive by plane at Tymbou (Ercan) airport in northern Cyprus, especially those who do not need a visa to travel to Turkey. Due to the increase in arrivals via this route, RoC Minister of the Interior Constantinos Petrides accused Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriots of facilitating migration to the island, and also suggested that they were involved in smuggling and trafficking of people (Ekathimerini 2019a). These dynamics have created a new discourse that could negatively impact the Cyprus talks.

**Migration and the Cyprus Conflict**

The connection between the current refugee crisis and the Cyprus conflict has not yet been explored in detail (Demetriou 2019). However, the current crisis could potentially impact the Cyprus conflict and vice versa. The fact that the majority of refugees and asylum seekers arrive from northern Cyprus has put an extra strain on relations between the two communities. The RoC accusation—without concrete evidence—of the Turkish-Cypriot administration’s involvement in migrant trafficking and smuggling into the Republic has created a negative rhetoric that exacerbates the climate of fear and mistrust between the leadership as well as among the population. Due to the division of the island the RoC cannot implement similar security measures at its borders as do other EU countries, which leads to uncertainty (Ekathimerini 2019b).

At the same time, migrants who remain in the north of the island cannot be legally/officially recognised as asylum seekers—a plight that could lead them to seek ways to cross to the RoC-controlled territories, including through trafficking networks. Such practises could lead Cyprus to be seen as unable to provide safety to asylum seekers.

Although the EU-Turkey Statement is controversial, the fact that the RoC is not a party to it means that it has sole responsibility for curbing migration flows to the island, including search and rescue operations in the areas it controls. However, the sea route off the northern coasts is left unmonitored, a situation that could potentially lead to perilous journeys for migrants.

For this reason the two communities, together with the EU and the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces in Cyprus, should find a common line of cooperation that would benefit both sides and would guarantee that those who attempt to cross through the checkpoints are treated fairly.

The EU, Cyprus and Turkey should work together to devise a plan that will ease relations between the two sides and will improve conditions for refugees and asylum seekers.

**Recommendations**

- The RoC and the Turkish-Cypriot administration should consider working together to monitor migrant crossings through the Green Line.
- The Turkish-Cypriot administration should provide guarantees to the RoC that it does not condone or assist migrant smuggling from the north to the south.
- The UNHCR, the EU and UNFICYP should facilitate talks between the two communities and urge them to collaborate on search and rescue operations as necessary.
- The EU, UNFICYP, the RoC and the Turkish-Cypriot administration should work together to monitor Cyprus’s external borders and to guarantee safe passage and fair treatment to migrants.
- The EU should provide more asylum assistance to Cyprus through EASO.
- The RoC should improve its asylum system. The creation of the Administrative Court was a first step but more personnel should be hired and current staff needs to be educated on the national and international legal frameworks.
- Asylum service personnel should be taught country-specific expertise; this can ensure the fair examination of asylum requests.
- The EU should include in its migration policy plans and strategy.
Further Reading


THE AUTHOR

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