

Integrated migration policy

and asylum policy

Humanely and Resolutely

Introduction

Cyprus and the Cypriots in 1974 experienced war and the plight of refugees and have first-hand knowledge of what it means to be a real refugee. It follows that we know very well when to lend a helping hand to our fellow human beings, who are in real danger.

Refugee is every man who has abandoned his country on account of justified fear that if he stays there, he will suffer persecution because of their race, religion, ethnicity or even for belonging to a particular social group.

This is the European Union definition of refugee. To this refugee we extend our solidarity and this is the refugee we are prepared to help, not on World Refugee Day only but also at any other moment he might need us.

However, not all asylum seekers who are today in Cyprus belong to this category. There are thousands who come from safe countries, they do not run any risk if they return to their countries but take advantage of the system and legal loopholes in order to stay in Cyprus.

We are here today to present the integrated migration policy of the government, which is being debated in the House. I would like to thank the House for their cooperation and call on all political forces to give us, the soonest possible, the necessary tools to handle humanely, yet resolutely the great challenge of migration.

It is humanly impossible for the Republic of Cyprus to receive, provide hospitality for and manage the current number of migrants.

The EU itself in 2018 refused entrance to 500.000 people. Our assets and capabilities are not inexhaustible and the aid we receive from the EU – and I am not referring only to the financial one – is not sufficient.

The facts

The basic aim of the EU is to have in place a long-term and integrated migration policy, based on solidarity and also a balance approach to both the legitimate and irregular migration.

In full respect of the European principles and values, Cyprus identifies completely with these positions. We are trying under extremely adverse conditions to handle the huge problem of migration flows. These conditions are mainly caused by the following:

1. The foreign occupation and the 180 km long cease fire line,
2. The proximity, as none other of the front-line countries, to the unstable area of the near and Middle East,
3. The fact that we are an island and have no land borders with other countries, and also because
4. We do not belong to the Schengen Area.

In the five-year period 2008-2013 the number of asylum seekers in our country reached 14.440 applications, according to Eurostat.

The humanitarian crisis, however, caused an explosion of the migration problem, resulting in the dramatic increase of new arrivals in Cyprus from 2014 until the first quarter of 2020. Their number reached 34.000, almost as many as the entire population of Paphos, making out country in proportion the first amongst all of the member countries of the EU in the number of asylum seekers. Today, asylum seekers in Cyprus make up 3.8% of the country's population.

It is stated indicatively that if this percentage were applied to Germany, the number of applicants would reach 1,120,000. At the same time, in the

remaining first line countries, that is, Greece, Malta, Italy and Spain, the asylum seekers percentages are below 1%.

The Diagnosis of the problem

Avoiding extreme positions, on either side of the political spectrum, the numbers are merciless and the capabilities of the state are limited. This is why there is an urgent and imperative need to implement the new migration policy, which is distinguished for the humane and at the same time resolute handling of the ills of the system for examining asylum applications, as well as of the distortions in a number of Legislative processes, in order for us to succeed in stemming and drastically reducing the number of migrants who are in our country today.

The scanning of the problem that Cyprus is faced with clearly shows that there are two venues for the entry of asylum seekers in the Republic today.

- Those that are under the absolute control of the state and concern virtual students and virtual weddings, but also those
- Which unfortunately cannot be effectively controlled and concern migrants who arrive in the government-controlled areas either from the occupied part or by sea.

I shall make myself clear: It is a dangerous mistake to cram all migrants into the same category.

It is indiscriminating and unfair, opening the door for the transformation of Cyprus into a huge hospitality centre. Some simply made a planned departure from their countries, with their relatives seeing them off at the airport, others escaped from war zones to save themselves and their families.

- Not all of them left their countries for the same reason

- Not all of them face life threatening danger if they return to their countries
- You cannot place in the same category the Syrian family man, who fled the war zone in Syria in order to save his family, with someone who came to Cyprus by air from a safe country under the pretext of studying and instead is asking for asylum, and indeed to appear as a protector of the wronged while failing to make this vital distinction.
- Or yet, to put on equal footing the family man and a suspect for connections with terrorist organizations.

Those who today put everybody indiscriminately in the same sack may think that they are scoring points against the government, by allegedly presenting Cyprus as a violator of human rights; in reality, they only succeed in being unfair to refugee migrants, who are in real need of our solidarity and care.

Those in great number who fool the system by being in our country without facing the least danger if they return to their country, are depriving assets from those who are in danger if they return to their countries.

New migration policy

Faced with this overwhelming flow of migrants into our country and with the resulting consequences, the Council of Ministers have approved the suggestions by the Minister of the Interior for the handling of the immigration problem as a whole.

Fictitious students

One of the ruses used in making an asylum application is to register as a student in a tertiary education college. In this way, during the three-year period 2017-2019,

- 3,214 persons applied for asylum and another
- 2,239 performed a wedding with European citizens, justifiably described as virtual weddings.

In the context of the new policy, the decisions jointly arrived at by the Ministries of Education and the Interior, set stringent requirements and drastically reduce loopholes in the system.

As from the next academic year, requirements for college registration will include:

- Submitting a bank confirmation for the ability to pay in full the tuition fees for the first year of studies,
- A statement that the person is not travelling to Cyprus because his life is in danger,
- Confirmation of good knowledge of the English language, either by furnishing internationally recognized certificates or by undertaking an oral examination,
- The right to work shall be confined to the context of acquiring practising experience within the course of study or in a related field, whilst
- The number of registrations in the same academic year shall not as a whole exceed the maximum number of allowed places allocated by the Ministry of Education.

Virtual weddings

The other way of claiming stay in the Republic, in which we intervene determinately through three amendment bills already being debated in the House of Representatives, is the prevention of performing fictitious weddings.

It is estimated that in the three-year period 2017-2019 almost 4,000 fictitious marriages were performed, mainly by specific municipalities.

While completely protecting the institution of wedding tourism, the provisions of the three Bills envisage, amongst other things, that from now on a freedom certificate must be obtained from the civic registrar of the Interior Ministry for a civil wedding to be performed. The same requirements are introduced for the Civil Cohabitation Law.

Our determination to put a definite stop to this phenomenon is demonstrated by the intention to take away from any Municipality the possibility to perform civil weddings if proven that they are involved in fictitious ones.

Crossing through the occupied areas

- The occupation of 38% of our country's territory, the great length of the ceasefire line, the unwillingness of Turkey to cooperate with the Republic of Cyprus in any way whatsoever, as well as a number of other parameters, make up the other venue of entry into the Republic through which more than 75% of all asylum seekers pass.

Even though the fact of the disproportionately large flow of immigrants from the occupied areas is widely acknowledged by the EU itself, we are criticised for:

- The long period it takes to process asylum applications
- The limited application of fast-track procedures for the examination of manifestly groundless applications; applications, that is, concerning asylum seekers from safe countries.
- Furthermore, our European partners censure us for the small number of returns to safe third countries.

In order to address these weaknesses of the system, we have tabled four amendment bills to the House, including an amendment of the Constitution.

- Relying on the provisions of Directive 2013/32 we established a list of safe countries about which we have already informed the European Commission.
- Applications from citizens of the 21 safe countries included in the list shall be considered as being manifestly groundless, unless the applicant justifiably proves that his life will be at risk if he returns to his country of origin.

In 2019, the total number of pending asylum applications in the Republic reached 19,000. Approximately another 2,500 asylum seekers are waiting for their appeal to the Administrative Court to be heard. To these numbers must be added 11,600 persons to whom the status of international protection has been granted.

The total number alone of 33,000 persons demonstrates the necessity of shortening the examination time for the applications, with particular reference to the manifestly groundless ones.

Moreover, as of 1st July, we are reinforcing the examiners' unit with 30 additional personnel, so as to render feasible the aim of examining each groundless application within 10 days at most.

Through the proposed Legislative amendments, which, we hope, will be enacted into Laws, we shall succeed to reduce the time of appeal to the Administrative Court from 75 days to 15 days, while by the recent strengthening of the Court, which now numbers five judges with the prospect of being increased to 10 after yesterday's decision of the Council of Ministers, the effort is to conclude the hearing of manifestly groundless applications in 2 to 3 weeks.

The amendments which we have tabled to the House also include the reduction of the time of appeal before the full bench of the Supreme Court

from 42 to 10 days, as well as the issuing of the expulsion order simultaneously with the negative decision of the Director of the Asylum Service.

The expulsion order will be issued but its implementation will be suspended until the decision is heard by the DDDP.

Once the negative decision has been issued, the repatriation of the applicant to his country of origin will go ahead, irrespective of whether the applicant intends to file an Appeal in the Supreme Court, as is provided for in our agreement with FRONTEX of the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen

In order to make possible the implementation of such a fast-track process, which for the groundless applications we want to see completed in a time period of no more than 50 days, the appropriate infrastructures are needed.

Besides the first reception Centre of Pournara, which has resumed normal operation as a First Reception Centre as of Monday 15 June, we are going ahead with the construction of a new hospitality venue at Menoyia, at the site of the old installations of the Grain Commission. All asylum seekers without exception will remain at the new Centre until the examination of their application is completed.

Construction work is under way with the aim of delivering the Centre in September.

As regards the crucial issue of repatriation for those whose applications are rejected, notwithstanding the fact that we are asking for the European Union itself to negotiate return agreements with third countries, the Republic of Cyprus has already carried out returns by the use of chartered

flights to a specific country, while other flights are scheduled in the coming weeks.

I wish to say it again. Our political approach is to counter resolutely those applicants who abuse the system and our hospitality.

We are saying it in order for it to be heard inside the country and by those who seek to turn the migration issue into an opposition tool.

We are also saying it for our partners in the European Union to hear it as well.

We demand support from the EU

Because we have no other choice than to seek improvement of the new European asylum and migration policy, which is due to be discussed in the coming weeks.

Cyprus is urgently asking for the following:

- To include the obligation of member states for the automatic relocation of applicants, on the basis of a permanent and predetermined percentage and also to limit access to European funds for those countries that refuse to participate.
- We want the EU to negotiate from a central position the possibility of returns with third countries
- To claim from Turkey the upholding of the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016 concerning the retention in her territory of refugees for whom millions are being paid.

As an equal member state, we are seeking support and help, but we want to keep our destiny in our own hands.

Unfortunately, the excessive number of migrants in our country is already leaving inedible imprints in our country.

The example of Chloraka being turned into a ghetto, the miserable living conditions of people in old Nicosia, the exploitation to which foreign workers are subjected, are only few instances of weak handling of these numbers.

This is why the approval and implementation of the new migration policy is both necessary AND urgent.

It will enable us to continue to handle humanely the cases of the refugees who are really at risk if they return to their countries; their families, their children as well as the socially vulnerable groups.

We must acquire the legislative tools, which will drastically limit the asylum applications and by extension the arrivals of those who abuse the system.

Being the government, we have the responsibility of providing conditions of security for all those who reside lawfully in our country.

We shall not achieve this by turning Cyprus into a migration paradise.

Before closing, I should like to air a grievance.

We live in a Republic and the right to criticism and dynamic free speech is both inalienable and non-negotiable.

Yet, nobody has the right to mislead and misinform.

It is glaringly unfair and offensive to our officers in the hospitality Centres, to highlight during the coronavirus period the alleged lack of soap, and yet at the same time to say nothing at all about there being not a single case of coronavirus in both hospitality Centres Pournara and Kofinou. On this, I wish to congratulate the competent officers.

Even more, it is hypocrisy, to say the least, to criticize the Interior Ministry for containing the movement of migrants staying in the Centres, while in the same period the whole of Cyprus was under lockdown.

Or is it not a biased approach to down-play the findings of the Ombudsman's report, so anxiously anticipated by some, simply because it did not suit them?

Neither has anything been said of the extension in record time of the two Centres, which made it possible to observe the provisions for the safety and health protocols.

No mention either by our critics of safe catering mechanisms having been adopted at a far greater cost.

Dear Friends

We are today presenting our integrated policy for managing the migration issue, only a few hours ahead of the debate on a European level of the new European asylum and migration policy.

We continue to be open for dialogue with all of the political parties, the parties concerned and also with each citizen separately; with those who want to contribute with specific suggestions, so that we may address humanely yet resolutely the migration problem in our country.