

## ANNUAL REPORT 2021 ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM IN CYPRUS

### NATIONAL REPORT

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Article 9(1) of Council Decision 2008/381/EC establishing the EMN, each EMN NCP is required to provide an annual report describing the migration and asylum situation and developments in the (Member) State as well as statistical data.

##### 1.1 SCOPE OF THE EMN ANNUAL NATIONAL REPORT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM 2021

The EMN Annual Report on Migration and Asylum 2021 will cover the period 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021.

A National Report (Part 2) will be prepared by all EMN NCPs in the Member States and Norway, and optionally by EMN NCPs in Georgia and the Republic of Moldova.

##### 1.2 STRUCTURE

To this aim, these common specifications are for the production of the EMN Annual Report on Migration and Asylum 2021. To meet the requirements of both COM and the Member States, in terms of both information requirements and timeliness, the reporting process for 2021 has again been split into two separate activities:

- The National Report (Part 1) and Statistics Annex
- The National Report (Part 2)



**ANNUAL REPORT 2021 ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM**  
**IN CYPRUS**  
**NATIONAL REPORT (PART 2)**

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

EMN NCPs may wish to state the aims of the report as related to their national audiences, making references to the methodology and definitions given in Annex to your National Report (where applicable).

This European Migration Network (EMN) National Annual Report on migration and asylum, covers the period of 2021 and all the developments occurred in the aforementioned fields in Cyprus.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this National Report, is to provide all relevant information to the national audience, interested parties, public bodies, organisations and individuals regarding the latest developments occurred in the fields of asylum and migration in Cyprus specifically for the period 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021. Interested parties seeking the corresponding information on an EU level, for the same period, shall also consult the EMN Annual Report on Migration and Asylum which covers the main policy developments on the aforementioned fields in each Member State, within the EU context.

The year 2021 has been crucial for Cyprus in the field of asylum yet, a year of progression and implementation of additional developments for the management of migration flows seeking international protection. In addition, it has also been a year of progression in the field of legal migration for third country nationals.

The effort of this report is to provide all relevant information regarding the increasing numbers of irregular arrivals in the country, the implementation of additional actions as a response to the crisis, from all competent authorities working in the field of asylum, as well as the vital support from EU agencies on the implementation of additional procedures that could facilitate not only the competent authorities but also the persons of concern in the whole asylum procedure. It shall also present all relevant and major developments occurred in the field of legal migration, the new supportive measures for the welcoming of new companies, and individual experts wishing to implement a business plan in Cyprus.

Notably, this report will provide an analysis on all related actions, developments and outcomes in the fields of international protection, unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups, integration and inclusion, borders, visas and Schengen, irregular migration including migrant smuggling, trafficking in human beings, return and readmission. The topics shall be covered in a precise manner thus to provide sufficient information.

The European Migration Network (EMN) was set up on 14 May 2008, by Council Decision 2008/381 /EC, with the purpose to provide objective, reliable and comparable information on migration and asylum, with the ultimate aim of developing a common migration policy in the European Union. In view of the need to exchange information on migration and asylum, and on the promotion of a common asylum and migration policy, the European Commission has considered the development of a European information exchange system on asylum, migration and migrants' countries of origin. The EMN aims at the joint analysis of migration phenomena (collection, provision, exchange and effective use of up-to-date information, between Member States). It also aims to improve the availability and comparability of existing information, as well as to contribute to efforts formulating a common migration policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The provision of information for the fields presented in this report, have been provided by the expert staff members of the public institutions, departments and ministries as requested from the National Contact Point of EMN Cyprus during the first and second quarter of 2022.

The EMN consists of the European Commission and the National Contact Points (NCPs) of each Member State.

The National Contact Points shall carry out the tasks of the EMN at national level and in particular:

1. conduct national reports, including the reports requested under the Article 9 of Council Decision 2008/381 /EC;
2. contribute by providing national information to the information exchange system as requested in Article 8 of Council Decision 2008/381 /EC;
3. develop the ability to make ad-hoc queries and respond promptly to similar queries from other national contact points;
4. establish a national migration network, consisting of a wide range of organizations and individuals actively involved the field of migration and asylum. Members of the national migration network may be invited to contribute to the activities of the EMN, in particular under the Articles 8 and 9 of Council Decision 2008/381 /EC.

## 2 OVERVIEW OF ASYLUM AND MIGRATION POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

### General overview

In 2021, a number of policy changes occurred in Cyprus in the fields of asylum and migration. The revision of the National Scheme for the issuance and renewal of residence and employment permits for third country nationals working in companies of foreign interests that are registered in the country, has been a significant development in the field of work-related migration. Yet the New Strategy for Attracting Business and Talent which has been introduced during the last quarter of the year, has also been a promising step towards progression. The amendment of the Aliens and Immigration Law regarding the prevention of labour exploitation, has been a legislative change towards the elimination of exploitation of people and the promotion of legal work that secures the rights of the employee.

The reporting year has also been a period whereas the country faced the increased numbers of irregular arrivals reaching the country by sea and land (through the Green Line), posing an additional burden on the already overburdened national asylum system, stretching the reception capacity to its limits. Taking into consideration the increasing numbers of asylum applications, the competent authorities worked towards the amelioration of the situation in terms of accommodation, processing of the applications of persons of concern, alternatives to detention and the implementation of new programs that would sustain and support the asylum process in general. Moreover, with the support and expertise of EU agencies requested to contribute in the matter, important and major developments such as the conducting of the Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) have been under implementation. All new developments in the field, are predicted to assist and likewise accelerate the procedure of examination of the asylum applications in general.

The introduction of the SOPs is also designed to assist all competent authorities in charge of unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups seeking asylum in Cyprus. In this field, developments such as the eligibility for voluntary return and reintegration, the operation of semi-independent housing structures to support the smooth transition of unaccompanied minors to adulthood, have also been introduced during the reporting period. Yet educational programs aiming on the integration of this target group, continued their successful implementation throughout the year.

Integration strategies also continued to be implemented during the reporting period. However, a new project that initiated in June 2021, aims to contribute to the integration of migrants in a range of areas through the creation of regional integration networks created in the five cities of Cyprus, Famagusta (Paralimni), Larnaca, Limassol, Nicosia, and Paphos, based on the concept of Intercultural Cities of the Council of Europe.

Developments related to border management have also been developed during the reference year. As the rising flows of migrants continued, additional support by a number of EU agencies, was provided to the competent authorities in Cyprus. Yet, developments have also been occurred in the field of Schengen governance.

Operations for the prevention of smuggling and irregular stay in the territory of the Republic of Cyprus, continued during the reporting period. The operations were set-up with the close collaboration between the Cyprus' authorities and EU agencies and their expert staff members who have been deployed in several positions at the two international airports of the country, and the office units of the competent authorities.

Moreover, additional trainings were provided to all officers working in the field of asylum and migration, regarding the detection and identification of victims of human trafficking. As the number of migrants was increasing, incidents of potential victims of trafficking in human beings, became more visible and in need for additional support.

Finally, in the field of returns, notable developments occurred with the successful cooperation of related public bodies notably the Civil Registry and Migration Department (CRMD) and return experts from Frontex deployed in Cyprus. As a result, a number of Vietnamese nationals returned voluntarily to their country of origin under the Voluntary Return Operation. In addition, IOM Cyprus continued the implementation of the national Assisted Voluntary Return

and Reintegration (AVRR) program. Yet the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Cyprus Refugee Council (CyRC) continued the implementation and close collaboration with the public authorities on the alternatives to detention, a co-funded project that runs successfully via the provision of suggested solutions that would improve the detention capacity through the proposition of more options other than the obligatory reporting to a police station.

It is clear that the year 2021, has been a year of improvement, where progressive actions and additional developments in the fields of migration and asylum have been occurred. As the topics of migration and asylum need further attention and strategic response not only on a local level but also on an EU level, all related developments occurred in Cyprus, aim on the amelioration of the processes in general. Yet the outcome of the pandemic of Covid-19 and all related precaution measures obtained in the island, shall not be neglected from the development of those progressive measures towards the sustain operation and control of all related asylum and migration aspects.

### 3 LEGAL MIGRATION TO THE EU MEMBER STATES, NORWAY, GEORGIA AND MOLDOVA

#### Work-related migration

In 2021, significant developments occurred associated with work-related migration such as the revision of the National Scheme for the issuance and renewal of residence and employment permits for staff from third countries employed by companies of foreign interests registered in the Republic (Council of Ministers, decision date 7.10.2020). Policy changes as those, had a direct impact on migration through the improvement of the economic and business environment, the creation of growth dynamics and conditions for long-term strengthening of the Republic's economic prosperity.

In detail the Scheme allowed the employment of third-country nationals under the new category of Specialized Personnel, without undergoing a market test, provided a salary threshold was met. The quota for Specialists could reach 200 third-country nationals per company, depending on the turnover of the employer. The Policy stipulated that for such employees there was no maximum allowed duration of stay in the Republic and allowed access to family reunification. Between October 2020 and March 2021 and despite the Covid-19 restrictions, there was an increase in the number of applications submitted by 10% compared to the corresponding pre-Covid-19 period (November 2019 – March 2020). The change of policy and in particular the creation of the new category of Specialized Personnel acted as a pole of attraction for the transferring of the headquarters of companies to Cyprus from abroad. Notably, in 2021 there was an increase on the number of valid residence permits of approximately 25%, compared to 2019 and 2020.

As of 24/03/2021 the Ministry of Interior has introduced a revised program for granting an Immigration Permit (national permanent residence permit) to applicants who are third country nationals and invest in Cyprus, with which the investment criteria expand to other areas beside the residential real estate sector. The new criteria include investment in other real estate properties (e.g. hotels, shops, offices), investment in Cyprus Company's share capital with business activities and personnel in the Republic and investment in units of Cyprus Investment Organization of Collective Investments.

In addition, in 15.10.2021, the Council of Ministers decided the implementation of a New Strategy for Attracting Business and Talent. The New Strategy cancelled the then existing quotas for third-country nationals employed in managerial/specialised positions at companies of foreign interests operating in Cyprus. Companies could now freely employ any number of highly skilled third country nationals, without undergoing a market test, however under some certain conditions and prerequisites regarding qualifications and salary thresholds. Eligible companies falling within the specifications of this strategy, shall have to commit to invest 30% of their total personnel in Cypriot and EU nationals, in a five-year timeframe. This strategy also encourages family reunification. Spouses of highly skilled third country employees can now benefit free and direct access to paid employment under family reunification, without having to undergo a market test. The New Strategy was set into force on 2.1.2022 therefore further analysis on its impact, will be presented in the impending report of the following year.

#### Prevention of labour exploitation

A significant development has also been occurred In the area of prevention of labour exploitation. An amendment of the Aliens and Immigration Law came into force on April 2021 aiming to eliminate exploitation of people and promote legal work. The amendment entails modifications on the sanctions for the illegal employment of Third Country Nationals. In case of a first violation the administrative fine imposed is €1 500 (from €854). A further violation of the law is fined with €3 000 (from €3 417). Furthermore, the penalties for smugglers have increased to 15 years (from 8 years) imprisonment and/or a fine of €100.000 (from €34 170).

Yet, as a measure for the elimination of the exploitation of people and the promotion of legal work concerning third-country nationals who are currently residing in Cyprus for work or study purposes, the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance published during the summer of 2021, a ministerial decision regarding third-country national students who are allowed to work in certain fields of employment with the prerequisite that an official contract in full details will be issued by the employer and evaluated by the Labour office.

### **Public employment services' online platform**

For the sufficient and responsive management of the registration of job seekers due to the increasing numbers of asylum applications received, yet as a response to the outcome of the covid-19 pandemic and its measures of protection, during the reporting year, the Department of Labour has announced the operation of an online platform for the Public Employment Services. The platform has been designed as a medium of acceleration on the process of accessing the labour market and applying for employment opportunities.

In general, all citizens legally residing in Cyprus, including third-country nationals and asylum seekers, who are eligible to access the local labour market, can register through this platform as job seekers, search for job vacancies and assistance in job hunting.



## 4 INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION IN THE EU MEMBER STATES, NORWAY, GEORGIA AND MOLDOVA

### Applications for international protection

The year 2021, has also been crucial one due to the increasing numbers of asylum application received. As previously mentioned, in the reporting year, 13.235 new asylum applications were submitted, contrary to 7094 in 2020. The 81% (10782) of the applications were from persons who arrived illegally on the island, mainly from the areas not under the effective control of the Republic of Cyprus.

Dating back at the end of 2020 (Oct. 2020), a significant legal development has been fully implemented in 2021 in order to reduce the backlog of cases and establish an efficient system of management of the migration flows to Cyprus in the wider spectrum. The Republic of Cyprus decided to increase the number of judges of the Administrative Court for International Protection, to appoint new staff members at the Asylum Service, Civil Registry and Migration Department and the Law Office of the Republic. The aforementioned necessary legal amendments and changes in the national procedures, are now considered a prerequisite for the acceleration of the examination of abusive asylum applications in particular, aiming to increase the return rates.

Moreover, for the efficient operation of all -access to the asylum- related procedures, the Asylum Service with the contribution of the EASO/EUAA initiated the conducting of the Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) regarding the registration procedures of potential beneficiaries of international protection. The drafting of the SOPs shall clarify the role of each competent authority during the registration procedure. This development arose as the need for a better coordination of the competent authorities involved and the establishment of a clear and effective procedure became more evident with the increasing number of asylum applications received.

In addition, a sustain progression regarding the procedures of registration and data management and the inter-communication among competent departments and ministries took place on the examination of individual cases. During the reporting period, the Asylum Service proceeded on the upgrading of the Cyprus Asylum Service System (CASS) where new data will be registered thus providing up-to date information regarding the status of an applicant, additional personal information (contact details, etc), the status of the examination of an asylum application and other relevant information useful for all public competent authorities working within the asylum sector. This database, accessible to all relevant departments (i.e. Administrative Court of International Protection, Aliens and Immigration Service, Labour Office, Social Welfare Services, the CRMD, etc.) aims to support and accelerate the everyday procedures falling within the international protection scheme on an individual basis. It is predicted that the database will be finalised in October 2022.

The digitisation of the files of applicants for international protection has also been considered a major step towards the facilitation of the procedures and the up-to-date efficient provision of information concerning the applications received. It is estimated that this process will eliminate the challenges occurred especially regarding remote examinations of asylum applications (e.g., by officers posted in various work spaces outside the Asylum Service's main offices). Yet it will promote the rationale of a paper-free working environment.

### Reception of applicants for international protection

On July 19 2021, the first workshop on the development of a Reception Strategy for Cyprus took place with the support of the EASO Nicosia Office and the EASO Reception Team. Gathering representatives from the Cypriot Asylum Service, the Social Welfare Services, the Civil Registry and Migration Department, the European Funds units and other stakeholders such as the representation of the EU in Cyprus, this event marked the launch of a process which will culminate

with the approval of a fully-fledged Reception Strategy for Cyprus. Three more workshops took place on 27 September, 21 October and 16 November alongside newly created working groups on topics such as referral mechanisms, housing and planning, guidance on allocation mechanisms, individual housing, vulnerable groups and outflow, making the link between needs expressed in Cyprus and promising practices identified within EU+ countries.

Regarding the reception of applicants for international protection, a major development occurred as it has become clear that additional reception spaces were needed in the country to adequately meet the needs of the continuous migratory flows. In 2021, the new Hosting Centre 'Limnes' started its operation in the area of Menogia, Larnaca. The new centre can host up to 800 persons and it significantly increases the national capacity, since it is the second accommodation centre that operates in the country with relatively higher hosting areas than the Kofinou Reception Centre which can host up to 450 persons.

### **Alternatives to detention**

Emphasis was also given on the need for the development and support of alternatives to detention for applicants of international protection. In an effort to improve this framework and add more options other than the obligatory reporting to a police station, the local NGO CyRC, continues the implementation of a co-funded project of Case-management as an Alternative to Detention. In the year of report several cases were referred from the CRMD, the national authority to the project, to CyRC as part of an alternative to detention measure.

Persons who are in detention and/or at risk of detention including asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers irregular third country nationals are benefitted from this project. The Case-management as an Alternative to Detention includes social counselling, mediation with competent authorities, psychological support, legal advice, and referral to other organisations/services to cover basic needs. Through this process the CyRC is in frequent communication with state authorities and services in order to address the needs of beneficiaries and exchange up-to date information with the aim of contributing towards timely case resolution. The holistic approach of the project encourages trust, engagement and collaboration working towards case resolution that can potentially reduce detention.

For the last two consecutive years, the two bodies are in constant collaboration and communication on the topic sharing information based on screening interviews conducted by a CRMD officer appointed to proceed likewise and promote the scope of alternatives to detention for applicants of international protection as well as undocumented migrants.

### **Relocation and resettlement**

During 2021, two relocation operations took place in Cyprus. 30 vulnerable applicants for international protection were transferred to Finland under the relocation mechanism. Moreover, under the same mechanism, 25 applicants were transferred to Italy following the visit of Pope Francis to Cyprus, who took the initiative to accept and host them in Vatican. In the same framework, a total of 50 applicants will be transferred to Italy as it has been agreed. The transferring is scheduled to be completed during 2022.

### **Education and training**

Within the reporting period, the Adult Education Centres (AEC) of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth (MoECSY) offer free of charge courses to detainees in the Detention Center for Undocumented Migrants in Menogeia and the detainees in the Kofinou Reception Center. A variety of courses including painting, chess, English language, Greek language, gymnastics, music and Greek dances are offered to the residents for education and training purposes.

### **Access to the labour market**

On October 4, 2021 a new [decree](#) by the Minister of Labour simplified the access to labour market for Asylum Seekers. As of that date, asylum seekers are allowed to be employed temporarily, based only on a simple affirmation letter by their employer, until the final approval of the Department of Labour is received. The objective of this development is the facilitation of the relevant procedure required to be followed in regards to the access to the labour market for asylum seekers.

## 5 UNACCOMPANIED MINORS AND OTHER VULNERABLE GROUPS

### Identification and Registration

The asylum procedure especially for minors is often considered a field where additional emphasis and improvements are needed. The increasing flows of migrants seeking asylum in Cyprus, stressed the need for the implementation of certain guidelines that would safeguard the best interest of the child throughout the asylum procedure. In collaboration with experts from EASO/EUAA commissioned in Cyprus, the Social Welfare Services have proceeded the drafting of the Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) on vulnerable persons including accompanied and unaccompanied minors. The guidelines shall be used by all competent services actively working in the First Reception Centre 'Pournara'.

Besides the work on the SOPs, a child friendly information leaflet concerning minors in asylum procedures has been developed in a draft version. This type of information has also been disseminated among officers working at the First Reception Centre 'Pournara', thus to ensure that all necessary information is provided throughout the asylum procedure.

### Age Assessment

In light of the case of the Administrative Court for International Protection, Y.D.M.O. v Republic of Cyprus, through the Asylum Service, Case No. 601/16, 31 December 2021, further discussions initiated between the competent authorities, concerning the age assessment procedure for unaccompanied minors. The Court questioned the role of Social Welfare Services as the minors' guardian and the way the age assessment is performed thus to modify and adapt the procedure according to its findings.

### Voluntary return and reintegration

Unaccompanied minors are eligible for voluntary return and reintegration support under the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme implemented by IOM Cyprus, co-funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the Republic of Cyprus. Following information provision and migrant's consent on the voluntary return, IOM ensures that a family assessment and a Best Interest Determination report are concluded, as part of the return procedure. The programme runs on two-year basis (implemented during October 2020 to the end of June 2022).

### Transition to Adulthood

IOM Cyprus under the coordination of the Social Welfare Services, is also leading the implementation of a project on the provision of hosting premises to unaccompanied minors who are over 16 years old. The increasing numbers of unaccompanied minors seeking international protection in Cyprus, as well as the need for sustain solutions on the provision of shelters adequate to cover the augmenting needs of the target group in concern, reported an important development in 2021.

Two new shelters for hosting unaccompanied minors in the villages of Pelendri and Episkopi, in Limassol area, were created as part of the "Semi-Independent Housing Structures for Hosting Unaccompanied Children Over 16 Years" project, funded by the Social Welfare Services and implemented by IOM Cyprus. This effort aims on increasing the capacity of the shelters for UAMs over 16 years old, in order to provide a smooth transition of unaccompanied children to adulthood in Cyprus, both through the provision of semi-independent housing and by ensuring access to social services at local and national levels respectively.

### Integration

During 2021, it was evident that with the increasing numbers of migrants arriving in the country, integration policies should had been set as priority among the respective authorities

especially working with minors and vulnerable groups. Likewise, a number of funded and co-funded projects continued their implementation within several categories concerning the integration.

In detail, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, continued the implementation of the Action Plan 2019-2022 to empower the presence of migrant students in the education sector. Notably the Ministry focuses in actions such as the translation of documents that facilitate the communication between parents and schools, evaluation assessments for the Greek language course as a second language etc.

In addition, an increased number of hours provided for lessons of Greek as a Second Language in Primary Education. During the school year 2021-2022, major changes have been implemented on language training for students with migrant background in Primary Education. There has been a significant increase in the number of hours offered to all students who are attending language courses of Greek as Second Language for a period of two years. 92 primary education schools that participate in the DRASE+ programme, are offering a minimum of 10 hours per week to each group of students. Other schools are offering a minimum of 5 hours per week of Greek classes to each group of students.

Moreover, under the umbrella of the DRASE+ programme, 68 school units have been added to the 102 pre-existing ones (under the previous DRA.S.E. programme implemented since 2015). Currently, 52 schools at the pre-primary, 92 at primary and 24 at secondary and technical level of education participate in the project "School and Social Inclusion Action". The project aims to mitigate the negative impact of the economic crisis on education and to prevent social exclusion of vulnerable groups of pupils. Participating schools have access to the provision of morning and afternoon programmes for the reinforcement of learning and creativity among students and their families. Teacher assistants are also employed to work in the participating schools, offering support during regular/common core classes. Yet, students and their families have also access to psychosocial support succeeded through the operation of the Information and Social-emotional Support Centres.

## 6 INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION

### National Integration Strategy

Yet integration strategies were implemented also via other areas and other agencies. In June 2021, the project "Building structures for intercultural integration in Cyprus"<sup>2</sup>, started in five cities. The project contributes to the integration of migrants in a range of areas including participation, education, cultural and social life, urban planning, business, access to the labour market, anti-discrimination and multilingualism by bringing together all integration actors and stakeholders at a local level, including migrants.

Five regional integration networks, the cities of Famagusta (Paralimni), Larnaka, Limassol, Nicosia, and Paphos, based on the concept of Intercultural Cities of the Council of Europe, will be established and will include local authorities and officials, NGOs, public organisations and agencies (welfare, employment, education, culture, sport, safety, urbanism etc.), migrant groups and organisations, professionals and private organisations.

These networks will play a key role on the implementation of the project's activities including an overview and assessment of integration policies and community cohesion/social integration in each region. They will also develop an Intercultural Strategy outlining the vision, goals, and actions of each of the regional networks and the central authorities as well as a methodological tool for monitoring regional integration activities and a prototype tool (Social Trust Barometer) for monitoring cohesion/social integration in regional and national communities. All the above, shall contribute to the designing of a multi-level coordination mechanism on integration policies for the Republic of Cyprus.

Finally, other integration actions funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) that have been set in full operation in the previous years, continued their implementation during the reporting period. As the Programming Period 2014-2020 reaches to its end, new actions/projects shall be announced in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>2</sup> "Building structures for intercultural integration in Cyprus" is a 2 year project, implemented by the Council of Europe and co-funded by the European Union, via its Structural Reform Support Programme, (DG Structural Reform Support). Webpage: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/intercultural-integration-in-cyprus>

## 7 BORDERS, VISA AND SCHENGEN

### **Border Management at the external border**

During the reporting period and as it has already been mentioned, the need for the implementation and adoption of additional measures of support for controlling the augmenting migration flows in the island, has been stressed out by all competent authorities. The need for additional support has also been evident in the area of the external borders, their sufficient control and management.

For the effective support to the Cypriot Authorities as a medium of combatting irregular migration, additional expert staff from EU agencies such as Frontex, EASO/EUAA and Europol has been deployed in the country. A first-time operation of the Joint Operational Focal Points Air took place at Pafos International Airport with the deployment of one Frontex specialist to assist the local staff and support its efforts.

Moreover, in relation to the European harmonisation of external border controls, the Council of Ministers prioritised the implementation of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS), the actions required as well as the allocation of the adequate human resources and expertise. Following the EU Regulation 2018/1240 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 September 2018 establishing a European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) and amending Regulations (EU) No 1077/2011, (EU) No 515/2014, (EU) 2016/399, (EU) 2016/1624 and (EU) 2017/2226, all the preparatory work has been almost finalized during 2021.

The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Interior is responsible for the coordination of all actions, the Permanent Secretary of the Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy is responsible for the development of the information systems which would host and connect the national uniform interface to the central Unit, to enable the ETIAS Central System to connect to the national border infrastructures and to the central access points. For its effective implementation, working groups have been set up, to elaborate on the legal Bill, the administrative structures the ETIAS' procedures, and to the technical support needed.

### **Schengen governance**

Subsequent to Cyprus' application of joining the Schengen area, two separate Schengen evaluation missions took place in 2021 in order to evaluate the compliance of the country with the EU and Schengen acquis.

Following a mission in the field of returns in December 2020, an evaluation of Police Cooperation took place from 31.01.2021 to 05.02.2021. Furthermore, the evaluation in the field of External Borders Management took place from 14.02 to 20.02.2021.

In September 2021 the Working Party of Schengen Matters (SCHEVAL) of the Council of Europe, approved the Recommendations to the Republic of Cyprus related to the weaknesses identified during the Schengen evaluation in the field of management of the external borders, police cooperation and returns. As from that, the final Action Plans should be submitted to the European Commission for their evaluation.

## 8 IRREGULAR MIGRATION INCLUDING MIGRANT SMUGGLING

### **Fight against facilitation of irregular migration ('smuggling') and prevention of irregular stay.**

During 2021, the Frontex operation 'Focal Point Air' continued its mission at Larnaca International Airport, by deploying police experts of Georgian nationality who assist in the process of prevention of illegal migration from their country. The aim of this operation was to tackle the phenomenon of abuse of lawful stay by Georgian nationals an incident that became more evident since the visa liberalisation for Georgia. Yet, under the same umbrella, 25 Frontex experts were deployed at Larnaca International Airport and 1 at Paphos International Airport respectively, to assist the Cypriot authorities in the procedures of detection of false/falsified travel documents as well as the second line checks.

In addition, for the last three consecutive years, a Frontex operation is posted in Cyprus under the name "Cyprus" (former Focal Point Sea). The scope of this operation is the provision of operational and technical support to the authorities of the Republic of Cyprus, in relation to issues such as debriefing, screening, detection of false and falsified travel documents etc. For its successful implementation of the operation, 39 experts were additionally deployed to cover its needs on a local level during the year of report.

Besides, Europol continues to assist the competent authorities in intelligence related issues that concern smuggling in human beings and irregular migration, combatting human trafficking and networking. The number of officers deployed in this operation varies from 2- 4 on a permanent basis.

### **Preventing and tackling misuse of legal migration channels**

As already mentioned, Europol's presence and support to the competent authorities responsible for preventing and tackling misuse of legal migration channels continued during 2021. It is evident that with the increasing migration flows over the last years, the presence and expertise support by EU agencies to competent units in the island, has been proven vital on combatting illegal migration.

Since April 2019, the Aliens and Immigration Unit is coordinating an operational activity in Cyprus in which Europol Guest officers are deployed. The officers are proceeding with secondary security checks of migrants in order to gather information concerning modus operandi and routes followed by migrants travelling to Cyprus.

Furthermore, since August 2109, the Aliens and Immigration Unit, within the framework of the abovementioned operation, is hosting Frontex guest officers particularly screeners, debriefers, travel document experts, interpreters and Information manager officers, responsible to obtain as much information from migrants concerning irregular migration routes, modus operandi etc. The Unit then proceeds with the analysis of data collected in order to identify the routes followed by migrants and their facilitators as well as the hotspots where crossings between the check points of the Green Line occur. As a result, the Cyprus Police increased the patrolling of areas where, based on the aforementioned observations and risk assessments, illegal crossings of migrants are often taking place.



## 9 TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

### **Detection and identification of victims of human trafficking**

The detection and identification of victims of human trafficking, is a topic on which continued work is taking place in Cyprus over the last years. The increasing numbers of migrants reaching the island for the last consecutive years, have consequently led to the rise of cases of identification of potential victims of trafficking in human beings. The competent authorities for the identification and detection of potential victims, continued their work on training related topics that would help their expert teams on the identification of victims, as well as on their approach. Yet, other steps regarding the provision of information were implemented as a response to the need for reporting of cases as such.

During 2021 the training to frontline officers, i.e. Police, Asylum Officers, Immigration Officers and Social Welfare Officers continued as a medium of constant information and provision of expertise and knowledge for detection of potential victims of trafficking in human beings. The trainings aim to give the officers the necessary capacity to detect indicators of trafficking and also to assist victims in the referral procedure. They are also designed to equip officers with the competent skills to assist victims in the referral procedure.

In addition, Cyprus Police introduced the operation of a four-digit hotline (1497) that functions on a 24/7 basis for the voluntary provision of anonymous information for human trafficking. The hotline is free of charge, referring exclusively for human trafficking cases. Complaints or information direct immediately, to the Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.

Yet, within the Police unit, a specific place has been set-up designed for conducting interviews with victims / potential victims of trafficking. The area was planned in such a way so that, the victims would feel secure, comfortable and relaxed to express themselves freely and communicate their story in a supportive environment. The initiative has also contributed to the protection of the victims and the professionals during restriction measures of Covid-19.

Finally, a new comprehensive guidance to trafficking victims has begun to be drafted in 2021, which will aim to guide the victims through the identification procedure, the criminal justice procedure and their support and protection measures. The Guide is foreseen to be ready in the 4th quarter of 2022.

### **Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration for victims of trafficking**

Victims of trafficking are eligible for voluntary return and reintegration support under the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme implemented by IOM Cyprus. The co-funded AMIF project runs for a two years period since October 2020. The purpose of the project is to conduct risk assessment and reintegration needs' assessment to victims of trafficking before facilitating their voluntary return.

## 10 RETURN AND READMISSION

### Main national developments in the field of return

A major policy development occurred during 2021, was the completion of the Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) a vital guideline for the elimination of gaps in the return procedures as they have been observed through the implementation. The SOPs which have been completed in September 2021 shall assist during the several stages of the procedure, the categories of irregular migrants, execution time, the legislation regarding return as well as the competent authorities working on the topic. A dedicated Working Group on Returns, with the participation on Cyprus' authorities, EC and Frontex was established in March. The main scope of the Working Group team was to develop SOPs for all return related procedures and to provide a better coordinating mechanism between Cyprus, EC and Frontex.

A year earlier, in 2020, a Return Office was created under the umbrella of the CRMD. The latter coordinated all relevant authorities involved in the field of returns namely the Aliens and Immigration Unit of the Police, the Asylum Service and the Law Service. The operation of the Return Office successfully continued during 2021, providing sufficient support and fulfilling the gaps occurred in the return procedures.

The Return Office of the CRMD is equipped with officers who coordinate the procedure and work on the management of administrative tasks regarding the return of interested persons. Within this spectrum, Frontex deployed a Return Specialist to work within the departmental office. The deployment entered into force on March 2021 as a response to the increased number of returns of irregular migrants. Following the positioning of the Return Specialist at the CRMD, a number of Return Counsellors were also deployed to the CRMD and the Aliens and Immigration Unit of the Police since May 2021, in order to support the voluntary and forced returns of irregular migrant.

The outcome of this cooperation was the Voluntary Return Operation with the departure of a flight on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2021, for the repatriation of 47 Vietnamese nationals who were residing in Cyprus on an irregular basis. Moreover, on December 17, 2021 a second Voluntary Return Operation flight was completed with the repatriation of 215 Vietnamese nationals residing in Cyprus on an irregular basis, wishing to depart.

Yet, with the intention to promote and increase the number of effective assisted voluntary returns, the cash incentives offered to potential returned have been increased. This development was considered an efficient medium and pre-return measure, for the promotion of voluntary returns.

### Assisted voluntary return

Along with the abovementioned operations, IOM Cyprus also continued the implementation of the national Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program. The project "AVRR Centre", is co-funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and the Republic of Cyprus. Its scope is to support as many migrants as possible with the AVRR procedures yet to provide its expertise and support to the Cypriot authorities in regards to the migration management.

The competent authorities recognise the value of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) as an essential component of an effective and humane migration framework, in line with the EU policy framework and commitments made in the framework of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM).

Throughout 2021, IOM was implementing the AVRR programme, through the project "AVRR Centre", co-funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and the Republic of Cyprus.

The project started in October 2020 and will be completed in June 2022. As a result of a sharp increase in the number of migrants interested in the AVRR programme, the project documents have been revised and adjusted in order to support as many migrants as possible with return assistance. In 2021, in particular, a total of 274 beneficiaries returned to their home countries in 2021, including two (2) unaccompanied children, migrants with health needs and families. The key countries of origin were Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Philippines and Cameroon

## **Reintegration**

IOM AVRR programmes advocate for a strong reintegration component and IOM strives to support sustainable reintegration of migrants returning to a variety of contexts, recognising that the factors affecting the reintegration process and subsequently its sustainability are not dissimilar from those that resulted in the decision to migrate in the first place. IOM therefore asserts that reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity.

Through the current AVRR programme the following types of reintegration assistance are available: support to establish an income generating activity (such as support start-up/business or job placement), health support, vocational training/education, and accommodation or housing equipment. The factors considered for reintegration assistance include, inter alia, the migrant's vulnerability and family situation.

Moreover, in 2021, IOM developed a new policy on the full spectrum of return, readmission and reintegration which intends to foster partnerships and cooperation between a variety of governmental and non-governmental actors at the international, regional national and subnational levels. At the national level, IOM presented this strategy at the CRMD in October 2021 as an effort of supporting the Republic of Cyprus in the migration management.

Finally, in June 2021, IOM Cyprus presented to the CRMD the EU-IOM Actions/Joint Initiatives for Migrant Protection and Reintegration and shared information material. The scope of this initiative has been focusing on facilitating the access of returning migrants from EU Member States, Norway and Switzerland to assistance upon arrival and reintegration support in their countries of origin and to securely transfer essential information from EU Member States, Norway and Switzerland on migrants whose return is not facilitated by IOM.

## **Forced return and detention**

Two major developments occurred during 2021 in the field of forced return and alternatives to detention. As Cyprus is facing an increased number of migrants residing irregularly in the country, it has been clear that certain measures were vital for the improvement of the return processes. A court decision that clarifies the necessity of the non-refoulement principle, as well as the cooperation of the CRMD with the local NGO CyRC regarding the alternatives to detention, have contributed on the improvement of the return processes in Cyprus.

On a legal basis, on 04.02.2021 an amendment of the Law on the Establishment and Operation of the Administrative Court (131(I)/2015) was introduced, in order for Cyprus to conform with the decision of ECtHR in *M.A. v Cyprus* (41872/10). An appeal against a return decision or a deportation order has since then a suspensive effect, if it is based on the non-refoulement principle.

In addition, the local NGO, Cyprus Refugee Council, implements a co-funded project of Case-management as an alternative to detention. During 2021, several cases were referred from Civil Registry and Migration Department, the national authority to the project, as part of suggested measures alternative to detention. The implementation of this project aims on the

improvement of the alternative to detention framework through the proposition of more options other than the obligatory reporting to a police station on behalf of a person of concern. Likewise, the process ameliorates the organisation of the "hard to remove" cases, through case management and improves the detention capacity by enforcing these alternatives to even more persons.

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**EMN ANNUAL REPORT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM**

**NATIONAL REPORT PART 2: ANNEXES**

**ANNEX A: METHODOLOGY**

**Methodology**

The collection of information consisted primarily of desk research (use of data already available or published, including national statistics, legal texts, reports etc.), complemented, when necessary, by interviews conducted with different stakeholders in the field of migration, asylum and integration, depending on the topical issues aroused of the respective publications.

Public servants from the Ministry of Interior, as well as the other Ministries, contributed as experts in their field, to all of the CY EMN NCP outcomes, tasks and developments' provision of information, when needed.

