Immigration in Cyprus:
New Phenomenon or Delayed Responsiveness?

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In 2005, according to the Cyprus Statistical Service, Cyprus had the highest population growth in the European Union: 2.6 per cent. This, however, is not due to an increase in the birth rate – the fertility index in Cyprus is not more than 1.4 – but to increased immigration into the country. Estimates of the numbers of current immigrants vary between 110,000 and 116,000 non-Cypriots, which corresponds to 13–14 per cent of the total population (854,300 in 2005) and to 14 per cent of the active population. Compare this to the figures for 1992, when immigration into Cyprus had barely begun: there were then 25,506 immigrants or 4 per cent of the population. Therefore whereas Cyprus was a country of emigration from the 1960s on, sending emigrants all over the world, these figures show that it has now become a country of immigration, receiving immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the former Soviet Union.

The rapid economic growth maintained in Cyprus during the years following the Turkish invasion in 1974 until the beginning of 1990, and its stabilization to a growth rate of 2–4 per cent, has caused the increased demand in human labour. The indigenous labour supply was no longer sufficient to satisfy the demand for unskilled, labour-intensive jobs in sectors crucial for development and economic progress. As a result, the state decided to change the migration policy, to abandon its previously restrictive labour policies, to grant entry to immigrants and to allow them to work for a restricted period (a maximum of six years) in specific sectors. Foreign workers with limited period residence permits therefore consist the first group of immigrants in Cyprus.

At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union has caused the massive influx of citizens and their families from countries of the former USSR, mainly from regions around the Black Sea, who were considered by the Greek government to have a Greek origin and therefore to have the right to a Greek
passport. These constitute the second category of immigrants, the Pontians, who come to Cyprus and enjoy the same rights of indefinite residence which are granted to Greek citizens.

Furthermore, international factors, such as the Gulf War and the successive crises in the region, as well as the continuing Israel–Palestine conflict, have caused economic migrants to come to Cyprus, as well as political refugees and asylum seekers.

There is one last and particular category of immigrants: large numbers of women, especially from the former Eastern bloc states, who work as dancers in nightclubs. At the same time, however, many of these women – ‘artists’ as they are called – are apparently related to the trafficking and even to prostitution for which Cyprus has been often internationally criticized.

Nowadays, immigrants are employed as domestic workers, in the service industry (especially restaurants, hotels and trade), in the construction industry (both in manufacturing and repair) and in agriculture. The overwhelming majority of East Europeans are concentrated in construction, services, agriculture and ‘artistic activities’. In these same areas (with the exception of ‘artistic activities’) there are also immigrants from Syria and Egypt, while workers from Sri Lanka and the Philippines mainly become domestic workers. Moreover, the labour market is largely defined by gender: women are mainly working as domestic workers and cleaners, while men are concentrated in construction industry.

In general, the state’s policy from 1990 until today treats the immigrant as a temporary participant in the economic life of the country who will return to their country of origin as soon as their residence permit expires. None the less, the number of immigrants continues to rise rapidly, reaching the levels mentioned above.

Because of the high demand for labour, illegal immigration has also increased. According to the estimates of the Cyprus authorities, most illegal immigrants come from the North of the island, particularly since 2003 when restrictions on the freedom of movement between the two parts of the island were lifted. According to data from the Cyprus police, 5,191 illegal immigrants came to Cyprus in 2005, out of which only sixteen came through the South. Meanwhile, Cyprus has proportionately the highest number of asylum applications in the EU: 9,675 in 2004 and 7,745 in 2005. This is due to the fact that after Cyprus joined the EU in May 2004, Cyprus tightened its visa policy. As a result, a large number of immigrants, mainly from Bangladesh and Pakistan, not necessarily in need of international protection, applied for asylum in order to be able to work, but also in order to be able to benefit from the allowances given by the social welfare services. The government has turned down most of these applications on the basis that they are bogus; it has also taken a hard line towards asylum applicants, forcing
them to work in agriculture – since the labour demand in this sector is high – while their cases are being examined. Asylum seekers whose applications are rejected receive no social benefits. Many of these people, who are literally homeless, reside in the Centre for Refugees in Kofinou, set up by the government, where however living conditions are hard.\footnote{This has driven many asylum seekers to acts of despair, such as hunger strikes, the threat of suicide, even marriages of convenience, which are given very wide publicity by the media.\footnote{This last phenomenon, widespread among immigrants, is of particular interest: there are male immigrants who pay Cypriot women to marry them so that they can obtain a work permit: the women typically receive between 1,500–2,000 Cyprus pounds (\$3,400–4,500) for marrying foreigners they do not even know.\footnote{There are also women immigrants married to Cypriot men, sometimes many years older than them, seeking to acquire both a legal means of staying in Cyprus and obviously also a home.}}

We would therefore say that, Cyprus, until today, has regarded immigrants as temporary residents and it has not pursued policies of social integration. The Minister of the Interior, Neoklis Sylikiotis, has said, ‘The state’s priority was to satisfy the demand for labour in several productive sectors of the economy, to manage the different consequences of this influx, and to tighten controls against illegal immigration.’\footnote{Cyprus considered that it had no immigrants but instead only foreign workers: as a result, no systematic and integrated migration policy has been developed which aims either at integrating the immigrant into society or encouraging them to participate in it. The General Director of the Ministry of the Interior, Lazaros Savvides, has said, ‘The reason is that no one foresaw the situation we face today. As a result, all the measures taken were short term and all the medium and long-term estimates turned out to be wrong.’\footnote{It seems that having decided to take in foreign workers, the state not only had not predicted how many of them would come but also showed that it was not ready to accept, assimilate, or integrate them into society. This policy can only be described as short-sighted and opportunistic. It is also significant that immigration matters are handled by four different ministries and a number of other services with little coordination between them. The result is confusion and ineffectiveness in handling these questions. Furthermore, people in key positions, with no special knowledge and no appropriate training in issues related to human rights, take arbitrary decisions which may seem to be based on xenophobia. An example of this was the refusal by the Immigration Office of the Police to extend the resident permits of a group of Chinese students because they decided that their qualifications were not equivalent to their studies.\footnote{Furthermore, the obsolete legislation, which was bequeathed to the
Republic of Cyprus by the colonial regime, is also a factor which leads to much arbitrariness, since it is inadequate to respond to the new demands. The anachronistic legal framework does not allow the authorities to deal with special cases or to use humane criteria. In consequence, immigrants living for years in Cyprus are deported without taking into consideration the consequent separation of families, foreigners are detained in prison *sine die*, or are even arrested as suspects for terrorist attacks. One particularly egregious example was that of a Serbian mother of two children, aged 16 and 17, who applied for an extension to her residence permit so that her children could finish school. Her demand was rejected and she and her two children were deported.

We can say, therefore, that the absence of a carefully planned immigration policy, which would regulate the entry, stay and employment terms of immigrants and provide adequate reception structures and mechanisms for integration or assimilation, has resulted in the failure of immigrants to integrate and the failure of Cypriots to accept immigrants as members of society.

It is no accident, we believe, that these people, being literally marginalized by Cypriot society, know very little of the culture and – more significantly – of the language of the country in which they live. Even people who have lived in Cyprus for more than five years can hardly communicate in Greek, choosing instead to use English. The immigrants, for their part, say that they have not learned Greek because they did not consider it necessary. English is sufficient for them to live and survive. As far as communication and contact with the Greek Cypriots are concerned, these do not seem to go beyond the professional framework. Having thus created their own different framework within society, they do not seem to aspire to anything more than that. The state, for its part, does not oblige these people to learn Greek and nor does it provide them with systematic language lessons.

In view of this isolation and marginalization of immigrants, it is fair to conclude that neither citizens nor the state were prepared to accept such a large number of immigrants. In a society, which since 1974 and the violent division of the island by the Turkish Army, is relatively homogenous, foreign elements become obvious and frightening. Cypriots are sceptical that immigrants of a different culture can integrate, and they consider immigrants to be a threat to their own relatively homogenous society. They seem to prefer, I believe, to isolate immigrants or to show a certain indifference towards them, instead of trying to incorporate them into society.

We can therefore conclude that immigration in Cyprus is not considered a social fact which has to be faced, but instead a social problem, bringing many troubles into today’s society. Foreigners quickly become a scapegoat for contemporary phenomena such as unemployment, criminality, the increase in divorces and family breakdown, and even demographic changes.
The media have played an important role in this by publicizing figures without analysing them, in order to create a stir, and painting a picture of Cypriot society as generally xenophobic.

It can even be claimed that the state’s policies have sustained and even encouraged the xenophobia of Greek Cypriots. Its incapacity to realize in time this phenomenon and to develop a systematic integration policy has left free space for impulsive or even sometimes arbitrary deliberations from the several organs of the society. This becomes even more obvious by the way that the whole legal and administrative system works. There is a certain institutional racism reflected in the slogan, ‘We use immigrants as and when we need them.’

Hence, it goes without saying that Cyprus, as an EU member state and a modern and democratic country, as it would like to be considered, needs a more integrated and long-term immigration policy with a more humane approach. This must be based on an acceptance of the immigrant as an integral part of contemporary society. It is at least encouraging that there have been considerable debate on this recently, and the authorities seem to be starting to take the issue seriously. The EU’s Directives and international conventions, already signed by Cyprus (the Directive on long-term residence, the various conventions against racism, discrimination and human rights violations) are adopted and need to be implemented. The recent provision of language lessons for foreigners and the intensive language courses being introduced in schools for non-Cypriot students, are some of the signs that a new policy is being put into place. Let us hope that this leads to a change in the perception of immigration in Cyprus.

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NOTES

2 The figures refer to the residents of regions who are under the control of the Republic of Cyprus, with the estimated number of Turkish Cypriots.
4 The US government in a recent report has included Cyprus in the list of countries under monitoring, because it ‘has not provided enough evidence of its effort in solving the crucial questions of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.’ (Trafficking in Persons Report, June 2006 <http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/el/features/setimes/features/2006/06/07/feature-01>.
6 We use this term to refer to the sector where the last category of immigrants we described is mainly employed.
7 Jacqueline Theodoulou, ‘Illegal immigrants have their rights too’, Cyprus Mail, 28 February 2006.
10 Fwtini Panayi, ‘Βοηθούν πολιτικούς πρόσφυγες’ [They offer help to political refugees], ΣΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ [Simerini], 12 October 2005.
12 Costas Savva, ‘Γαμπροί και νυφές έναντι €4,000’ [Grooms and brides for the amount of 4000 CP], ΣΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ [Simerini], 16 April 2006.
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14 Marios Dimitriou, ‘Η ένταξη μεταναστών με μακροχρόνια διαμονή’ [The integration of long-stay immigrants], ΣΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ [Simerini], 3 December 2006.
16 Yiorgos Michailides, ‘Σοβαρές καταγγελίες από αιτητές πολιτικού ασύλου’ [Heavy accusations by asylum seekers], ΣΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ [Simerini], 12 November 2003.
17 Militsa Polemitou, ‘Ελευθερώστε τη Γιασμίν’ [Freedom to Jasmin], ΣΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ [Simerini], 24 March 2006.

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[Map of Cyprus showing Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israeli territories, and the Mediterranean Sea.]

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