

Interview With Neoklis Sylikiotis, Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Cyprus

People say there are between 80,000 and 100,000 non-Cypriots in Cyprus. What is your opinion about the number of the immigrants nowadays in Cyprus and what do they represent as a percentage of the population?

According to statistical data, in Cyprus there are at the moment about 60,000 legal immigrants, 40,000 European citizens, while it is estimated that there are about 50,000 illegal immigrants. This is equivalent to 20% of the total population, with legal immigrants representing 10% of the total population and 14% of the active population. Compared to those of other European countries, where immigrants generally represent some 6–7 per cent of their population, these figures are pretty high.

One could say that the state has suddenly found itself faced with a situation that it cannot control. Why have we not realized the significance of this question, at least not until today?

It is a fact that Cyprus has suddenly gone from being a country which sent emigrants all over the world to a country which now receives immigrants. The peculiarity of Cyprus in comparison to other Mediterranean countries is the fact that it is situated in a politically and economically unstable region. Furthermore, as a modern and peaceful country, despite the political problem, and a member of the EU, Cyprus is a transit point to other European countries.

However, what had caused the current problematic situation is basically the fact that we thought that the foreign workers who were coming to Cyprus to work would fill the gaps in the labour market and then leave. This reflects an immigration policy without systematic integration mechanisms and with a rather short-sighted approach.

This is why we have already started planning a new immigration policy, with united integration programs, a complete application of EU Directives, places for receiving immigrants and asylum seekers, and an improvement in the conditions of detention for illegal immigrants. This is of course for me, as Minister of the Interior, one of my main goals and priorities.

It is well known that on the European level there is a particular mobility towards this question. How and to what extent does this influence the measures that are taken in Cyprus?

At the European level there are different approaches, as there is also diversity of the needs and the possibilities of the several EU countries. That is why no united immigration policy has been yet planned. It is, however, generally accepted that we should look at the causes which oblige people to migrate in search of a better life: for example, the crucial problems of the poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and health care in the migrants' countries of origin. The EU should hence offer financial support to these countries, in order to help them improve their infrastructure. As for the EU Directives, which are aimed at creating a more uniform migration policy, Cyprus has the obligation to adopt them in its legislation and to implement them.

Several ministries and many departments and services are dealing with immigration. In effect this creates a general confusion and ineffectiveness. How should this situation be dealt with?

As a matter of fact, we intend to put in place better coordination, as well as a more humane approach, which would be less adherent to the legal aspect of the question than to the political. We should insist, as a democratic country, on respect for the human rights of immigrants, either they are legal or illegal. The question of the deportation of the illegal immigrants who have families in Cyprus, is also of a particular significance. As a country which has signed the International Conventions and the European Directives, we are obliged to respect them.

There is also a discussion concerning the incompetence of several officials, who, while being in crucial positions, do not have the appropriate knowledge and education. As a result, many arbitrary decisions are taken, such as the deportation of persons living for years in Cyprus, the segregation of families, and so on. What measures could be possibly taken in order to avoid this situation?

The lack of knowledge is evident more in the area of political asylum than in migration. When it has to do with asylum, we must investigate whether the asylum seeker is indeed in need of protection or if he is just using the asylum system to extend his stay in Cyprus. These are the cases where a special knowledge is needed. For this reason, seminars are organized either with UNHCR or the European Union.

As for the immigration issues, the problem lies mainly in how the legislation is interpreted. We often notice that officials use their discretion not in favour but to the disadvantage of the immigrant. An example is the EU's Directive on the status of third-country nationals who are long-term residents, which was implemented in Cyprus in January 2007 after a year's delay, into which the Directive on family reunification has been also incorporated. Apart from the main provisions, there are parts of these directive which leave room for different

interpretations. As a result, even though the decision had been taken to extend residence permits until the full implementation of the Directive, many officials decided otherwise. This reflects in reality a sterile legal approach.

The way someone uses their power, greater or smaller, indicates how progressive or conservative they are. That is why we say that a more humane approach is needed for the handling of these questions, which however can not be imposed by the law. Significant in this aspect is also the attitude of the politicians and the media, as the xenophobic trends sometimes have their influence in society.

If therefore we, the politicians, have a more humane attitude towards these questions, the officials could be also affected by this.

Another reason for the inefficient conduct of these questions is obsolete legislation, which was bequeathed to the Republic of Cyprus by the colonial regime. How do we deal with this?

The law for Foreigners and Immigration has been modernized with some modifications. The law for Political Refugees is about to be voted on, and a bill for trafficking will be sent to Parliament.

What are the measures taken in order to control illegal immigration?

Cyprus has dealt with illegal immigration and has almost solved the problem. We have repatriation agreements with a number of countries.

The problem, then, is within the 'internal borders' of the country. Illegal passage from the northern to the southern part of the island, especially since 2003, is a fact. How do we deal with this question? In your speech at the opening ceremony of the Daedalos Institute of Geopolitics conference on migration in December 2006, you mentioned that cooperation with the 'authorities' in the North is needed in order to deal with this problem. How could this happen?

I mentioned this not only at your conference, but also in the European Council of the Ministers of the Interior and Justice. In order to deal with this problem, it is necessary to cooperate with Turkey and to coordinate with the EU. This point was also made by the Italian Minister of the Interior, Giuliano Amato, in the Council of the Ministers of the Interior and Justice in Dresden, in Germany. The Turkish Minister of the Interior has reacted rather evasively, saying that we cannot talk about a political question in a technical discussion.

As for the occupied areas, something peculiar is happening. While on the one hand, the EU continuously encourages the opening of crossing-points between the North and the South, the de-mining of several parts of the Green Line, and so on, on the other hand, it also blames us for an insufficient surveillance of the Green Line.

The case of the British bases lying between the occupied areas and the South is also significant. They [are] in reality a hole for illegal immigration, despite our efforts to coordinate with the British bases.

The question of the asylum seekers is also of a great importance. There is a long-term delay between application for asylum and the final decision. This actually encourages illegal immigrants, especially those who cross from the occupied areas, to apply for asylum even if they do not really need political protection, as is true in the majority of cases. In order to facilitate the procedure and to deal with this problem, we have recently decided that officials of the Asylum Department should conduct interviews immediately and *in situ*, that is, at roadblocks.

Another crucial and important issue for Cyprus is human trafficking. The recent report of the US Congress into human trafficking, and particularly prostitution, puts Cyprus in the unflattering category of countries under surveillance. However, while the authorities are aware of the situation with cabarets and artistic visas, we perceive certain inertia of the state towards this question. Why is that happening?

I would not call it inertia. We acknowledge the gravity of the question and we are taking several measures in order to control the problem.

Within the framework of the Law on Human Trafficking, as well as the relevant EU Directives on the matter, we are currently examining the legal framework in order to establish stricter criteria. At the political level, measures are being taken to tighten up our policy on artistic visas. I would like to specify, as an answer also to the criticism we receive for issuing artistic visas for not solely artistic activities, that these visas are not only given to women coming to Cyprus to work in nightclubs. They are also given to music bands or other artistic groups who come to Cyprus for specific purposes and for a specific period of time. What we can do, however, is to control the place where a person with an artistic visa will work.

Furthermore, I have to underline that today we are putting particular emphasis on informing possible victims, through our embassies in certain countries.

In addition to giving the public a broad range of information on this question – through relevant material, the media and other sources – and the stricter and more systematic control of nightclubs by the police, the creation of a refuge centre with specially trained staff are some of the measures to be taken to deal with this problem.

It is worth mentioning also that we will be gradually applying the policy of communal priority, according to which the residents of EU countries are given a priority for these permits.

We believe that trafficking is another question that has to be dealt with globally, like immigration, not only from the point of view of the receiving countries but also from that of those who prepare and offer these persons for this kind of jobs.

It seems that not only the state, but also society was not prepared to accept such an large number of foreigners. It is also significant that, since 1974, Cypriot society has been in general terms relatively homogenous. Do you believe that the absence of a well-planned immigration policy has contributed to some extend to the phenomena of xenophobia and racism among Greek Cypriots?

We must admit that there is xenophobia in Cyprus and that we are not ready to accept the different and particularly, the immigrant. This xenophobia is unfortunately being reproduced in the speeches and attitude of some politicians, as well as some parts of the media. We should not, for example, exaggerate the facts and arbitrarily accuse foreigners every time there is a crime. It is of course easier to accuse the foreigner than the local.

We can ascertain that Cypriots, in general, do not easily accept the foreign or the different. This position is also reflected in education, where I particularly had the chance to work in the past. Our education still has a monocultural character. However, since we are now a country of receiving immigrants, which means that there is a large number of immigrants in our schools, we should give emphasis to a more multicultural approach and thus give the opportunity to those children to be integrated within the school community.

It is therefore important to stress the principles of equality, solidarity and cohesion through the integration mechanisms, as well as to emphasize the importance of the knowledge of the history and the culture of the others. At the same time, we should help them come closer to our culture. The Cypriots, as people who have lived abroad (at least most of us), should sense more the necessity of the social integration of immigrants.

That is why society needs to have more information about these people. Phenomena, such as, for example, blaming illegal immigrants for unemployment, are a result of insufficient information available to the citizen and should be confronted. Besides, while contacting foreign organizations and organizations for immigrants' support, I have many times insisted on the fact that this ministry is ready to support them and work towards their integration in the society.

There is a unique phenomenon in Cyprus: the vast majority of foreign workers does not speak Greek and, what's more, they do not seem to want to learn it. Why do you think this is happening? What are the state's or even society's responsibilities? What are the measures to take

in order to deal with this situation?

First, we should underline that there is no legal obligation to know the language in order to obtain a residence permit. For example, during the discussion for the implementation of the EU Directive on long-term residents, there was a suggestion that such a language requirement be introduced but it was not accepted. Thus, while the Directive aims to integrate immigrants, in Cyprus we did not consider it necessary to include a provision for the language, even if knowing the language is a strong element of integration. At this point, maybe we should take into account the fact that in Cyprus you can gain Cypriot citizenship without knowing either of the official languages of the state. It is also significant that in Cyprus there is a wide use of English. However, it is necessary to increase the number of programmes available for learning the Greek language and to make them systematic.

Sometimes people express fears of the danger of a demographic change of the island because of the large number of foreigners with respect to the small size of the island and its population. Are these fears legitimate?

We could say indeed that because Cyprus is a small island, it is possible to face such a problem. However, panic and the exaggerated attitudes do not help to deal with it. They generally take the form of a hysterical reaction towards a question that must be treated more globally and humanely.

Do you think that we could talk about having ghettos within the towns, such as, for example, in Nicosia within the walls, or old Limassol?

The low rents in the centre of towns are a very important factor in attracting immigrants. We could not however talk about having ghettos, at least not at the level of other cities as Berlin, London, Paris, and so on. We should, however, confront these phenomena while it is still early. The responsibility of course of the Ministry of the Interior towards this is really important. What we should do, for example within the walls of Nicosia, is to work towards the development of the region in order to give the motives to the locals to return back to the centres and a mixed population be thus created.

Hence, measures should be taken for the cooperation of the responsible authorities in order to deal with this phenomenon, which reinforce, among others, the xenophobic trends and, what's more, marginalize the foreigners.

Geopolitical Affairs interviewed Minister Sylikiotis on 14 March 2007.