

Executive Summary

“Perceptions of Cypriots regarding Refugees and Migrants”

This study was undertaken by the University of Cyprus Centre for Field Studies (UCFS), for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Cyprus between September and December 2018, in order to study perceptions of and attitudes towards refugees and migrants across the divide in Cyprus. This was done through an analysis of public opinion in the two communities of Cyprus around relevant issues. A similar study was commissioned by UNHCR in 2015; one purpose of the present study was therefore to observe and analyze any changes in attitudes during the three-year period, and highlight any changes observed. UNHCR will use the findings to develop specific and informed strategies in their ongoing protection and advocacy work on the island.

Main findings and recommendations

A significant finding derived from the qualitative study was the confusion in use and understanding of the terms “refugee” and “migrant”. Specifically, the analysis of the focus group discussions revealed that in both communities, but mostly in the GCC, the terms “refugee” and “migrant” are confused by many people. In the GCC a social class division within the group identified as migrants was also visible; migrants coming mainly from Russia and China were often not referred to as migrants as they were understood to be wealthy, and this perception did not fit with the dominant representation of the migrant as a poor person who came to Cyprus in search of a better life.

In the TCC the two terms were better differentiated: the term migrants was mostly used to refer to people who came from Turkey after 1974; refugees were mostly “invisible” and remotely related to the image of Syrian refugees who are often seen in Turkish newspapers and TV as homeless living under very poor conditions. On the other hand, some participants consider that with the arrival of refugees and migrants, there is not any security and peace left in the TCC. These people expressed the opinion that crime rates have increased and the state must take measures to address this issue, and that the numbers of refugees and migrants must be lowered.

The main findings of the quantitative study suggest that in both communities the levels of meaningful contacts between the local population and refugees and/or migrants have increased, compared to the 2015 survey and results. Even though the wider public's general feelings towards refugees, migrants and the phenomenon of migration in general, are today neutral to negative, compared to 2015, there is a significant improvement of attitudes in both communities. Furthermore, there are certain concerns expressed and threats perceived in both communities regarding migration. These fears are mainly focused around issues of damaging the economic growth and rise in criminality rates.

There is also a concern that due to its size, Cyprus is unable to host "so many" refugees and/or migrants. Overall, in the GCC people tend to slightly overestimate the number of refugees and slightly underestimate the number of migrants currently living in Cyprus. The majority of the TCC estimates that there are less than 10,000 refugees living in their society while they estimate that they are more than 50,000 migrants.

Both communities acknowledge that refugees need support and that providing support to refugees is a responsibility of the state. The GCC, on the one hand, thinks that the government is already providing enough support to refugees in Cyprus while the TCC, on the other hand, does not believe the same for the Turkish Cypriot authorities.

As far as integration, despite the concerns expressed by the two communities, the majority of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots support the idea that refugees should be living integrated in the local society, and not be isolated in camps. This idea was supported also in the 2015 study, thus making it a viewpoint that is supported consistently in time by both communities. However, the GCC's and the TCC's support of the idea of integration was limited by majority support for other policies, such as one that could introduce an upper limit to the number of refugees the island accepts. There was also disapproval of the idea of giving to refugees residing in Cyprus for more than five years the ability to obtain Cypriot citizenship. However, compared to the 2015 results, this disapproval rate is decreasing in the GCC, while for the TCC it remains unchanged.

Furthermore, when it comes to volunteering, a large percentage from both communities – a percentage that has further increased since 2015 – has reported that they donated/volunteered in the past or that they are currently donating/volunteering to organisations assisting refugees. Notably, out of those participants who reported that they neither did not or do not offer any kind of donation or assistance to refugees, a large number of them is willing to donate or volunteer in the future.

Based on the findings of the study, it is suggested that efforts are made for the development of TV and social media campaigns (the predominant media sources for the GCC and the TCC) that will expose locals to other cultures and that will be highlighting contact between locals and refugees and migrants.

Last, but not least, in terms of the treatment by the media of the term refugees and migrants there is a clear need for differentiation of the two terms; More importantly journalists need to be informed of the great negative impact the use of threat frames in their reporting has on attitudes towards the integration of refugees and migrants. On the contrary, when humanitarian frames are used the impact has been found to be positive.

With respect towards people's concerns and fears, UNHCR could further try to understand those fears in order to be able to adequately address them. Positive attitudes, such as the support of the idea of refugees living integrated in the society, or the expression of readiness to accept almost all kinds of social relations with refugees and/or migrants, could be used as entry points for further advocacy work to address other areas where Cypriots show less positive attitudes.

Methodology

The study consists of two phases. In the qualitative phase focus groups were conducted both in the Greek Cypriot community (hereinafter GCC) and the Turkish Cypriot community (hereinafter TCC). In total six focus groups were conducted, three for each community. The focus groups were heterogeneous in composition and included participants from various backgrounds in terms of age, city of residence and profession. Findings from the focus groups, as well as from the existing literature in the field of migration studies, were used as guidance to develop the questionnaire used in the quantitative phase of the study.

The quantitative phase included a large-scale telephone survey for the GCC, while a large-scale face-to-face survey was conducted in the TCC. The total number of participants was 1,408 persons, 701 of whom were from the GCC and 707 from the TCC. The data collected via phone and face-to-face interviews were analyzed using quantitative methods.