

## **Opinion Poll: Perceptions of Cypriots about Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Migrants**

### **Executive Summary**

**21 March 2023**

This study was undertaken by the University Centre for Field Studies (UCFS) of the University of Cyprus, for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Cyprus between September and December 2022. The purpose of the study was to identify perceptions and attitudes towards refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants, and discern trends or shifts in public opinion from the last comparable survey conducted for UNHCR in 2018. The present study analyzed the public opinion of the population residing in the areas controlled by the Government of the Republic of Cyprus. 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**

One of the shifts recorded since 2018 is the different perception about the countries of origin of refugees and asylum-seekers. Today, African countries are regarded as the main countries of origin, followed by Middle Eastern countries, while in 2018 the primary countries of origin were thought to be Middle Eastern countries. Estimations of the numbers of refugees currently thought to reside in Cyprus have also increased since the 2018 study. Refugees from Ukraine, who arrived in Cyprus since February 2022 are not perceived as asylum-seekers nor as refugees. In addition, overestimations about the monthly allowance that asylum-seekers are entitled to, or other governmental financial contributions for asylum-seekers, were also recorded.

The most notable change between 2018 and 2022 appears to be a significant negative shift in attitudes towards integration. The majority of respondents recognized that certain obstacles to refugee integration, such as xenophobia and racism, are posed by the local population. While this finding suggests an increasing awareness among the public of negative norms, a significant number of participants perceive refugees and asylum-seekers as themselves lacking the willingness to integrate. It appears that the idea that refugees and asylum-seekers do not want to integrate in Cypriot society is working as an ideological moral disengagement strategy, shifting the responsibility for integration to refugees and asylum-seekers themselves. The perception that refugees and asylum-seekers prefer to interact only with members of their own ethnic communities was prevalent among respondents, which further suggests that the public seems to shift the responsibility for integration to refugees and asylum-seekers themselves.

It could be argued, based on the findings, that there is an increasing trend favouring isolation rather than integration. Percentages favouring camps as a way of accommodating refugees and asylum-seekers have increased, while percentages favouring integration in society have decreased since 2018. This is probably attributable to the dominant political and public discourse where the refugee integration component is absent.

As regards the terms *refugees*, *asylum-seekers* and *migrants*, there is still confusion among the public about similarities and differences between these groups. The representation of these groups revolves around two main categories, namely *suffering/hardships* and *negative threats*. When comparing the three groups, the most negative representation is that of asylum-seekers while the least negative is that of refugees. This may be attributed to the fact that many Cypriots identify themselves as refugees following internal displacement in 1974. It is worth mentioning that references relating to hardships and suffering were made for all the aforementioned groups, which suggests an acknowledgement of the difficult conditions they are facing. It is to be further noted that refugees are considered to be the group suffering the most, while asylum-seekers are perceived to suffer the least. Moreover, among the three groups, refugees are perceived to be the least threatening while asylum-seekers are perceived to be the most threatening group. Migrants fall in the middle, both with regard to suffering and threat posed to society.

On a positive note, there is clear recognition by the vast majority of the participants of the difficult conditions refugees and asylum-seekers are facing in reception centers, which are considered unsafe and unsuitable for habitation. Additionally, the majority of the respondents expressed a positive response to calls for support and donations of food, clothes, money and other forms of support in daily life situations for refugees and asylum-seekers. What is also encouraging is the expression of intention to continue offering this kind of support in the future. These findings suggest that there is a charitable approach towards supporting refugees rather than a human rights-based approach that grants asylum to refugees and enables their integration in society. Additionally, respondents expressed reluctance towards eventually granting citizenship following naturalization procedures.

In terms of daily contact with refugees, it seems that over time the public comes into more frequent contact and communication with refugees compared to 2018, although today they state that the contact is not as pleasant compared to that reported in 2018. It should be noted, however, that most of those participants who do have contact report mostly pleasant feelings during contact; this finding underlines the beneficial effects of contact as predicted by the contact hypothesis.

The small size of Cyprus, the possible changes in the island's demographics and the fear of criminal/violent behaviour continue to constitute the main concerns the public has regarding refugees and asylum-seekers. Consistent with previous findings on fears, there is a preference

towards the idea of introducing a limit to the number of refugees and asylum-seekers that Cyprus can receive. The argumentation that Cyprus does not have the capacity to accept more asylum-seekers nor is it able to cope with increased arrivals is also reflected in the findings.

As to UNHCR, a positive element recorded is the increased visibility of UNHCR and increased visits to UNCHR’s website and social media pages since 2018. Yet more work needs to be done by UNHCR and other stakeholders, including the media, in addressing the negative perceptions that have been identified by this study. Working with media to enhance awareness and tell the human story should be an ongoing goal. The use of threat frames in media reporting has a negative impact on attitudes towards refugee integration. On the contrary, when humanitarian frames are used the impact has been found to be positive

Overall, UNHCR together with other stakeholders, can build on the positive attitudes depicted in the study. One of the major policy interventions shown to be effective is related to the contact hypothesis. Any programmes aiming to bring the local population in contact with refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants will certainly help in alleviating some of the fears (both realistic and symbolic) that lead to prejudice and opposition to policies that support refugees and asylum-seekers. Last but not least, there is a great need to include integration in the public and political debate as an important parameter in the comprehensive management of the asylum and migration issue.

### **Methodology**

The study consists of two parts. In the qualitative part, three focus groups were conducted in the Greek Cypriot 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. The total number of participants was 1,057 persons. The data collected via phone interviews between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2022 by the University Center for Field Studies of the University of Cyprus were analyzed using quantitative methods and were largely representative of the Greek Cypriot population of Cyprus.