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Policy Measures for the Diaspora during the COVID-19 Crisis: The Case of Cyprus^{1, 2}

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes an unprecedented challenge for policy-makers worldwide. The coronavirus outbreak has rapidly put into question states' preparedness for crisis management, while also raising particular concerns on how national governments assist their citizens abroad in situation of distress. This Policy Brief tackles the issue of governmental responsiveness to the diaspora in a context of pandemic alert. In doing so, we focus on the case of Cyprus, one of the EU Member States with the largest share of citizens residing abroad. Drawing on official documents publicly released by different Cypriot authorities, we map the different initiatives adopted by the Cypriot Government in the attempt to assist its diaspora during the pandemic. Our analysis shows that, in line with its traditional approach towards non-residents citizens, Cyprus has adopted a rather pro-active stance vis-à-vis its population abroad. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, several initiatives have been put forward by ministerial actors, often via inter-institutional cooperation, aiming to mobilise resources that could meet diaspora' needs. However, the Government's engagement with the diaspora during this crisis has remained rather selective. Most policy measures primarily aimed to provide support to Cypriots in specific (mainly European) destination countries, while also targeting particularly vulnerable groups of individuals stuck abroad during the pandemic.

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has rapidly fuelled debates on states' preparedness to ensure the safety of their citizens and residents against unexpected health hazards. In addition to raising concerns on how to protect nationals and non-nationals living in their territory, states have also been progressively confronted with the need to assist their citizens abroad during the pandemic. This includes not only individuals stuck abroad as tourists or students, but also those temporarily or permanently living abroad who wished to return to their country of nationality or were facing particular vulnerable situations in their host countries. Across the EU, such unusual need for intervention triggered different institutional responses, with national policy-makers adopting varying emergency measures for their

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diaspora (repatriation, special consular assistance, diplomatic discussions to ensure the protection of those abroad, etc.).

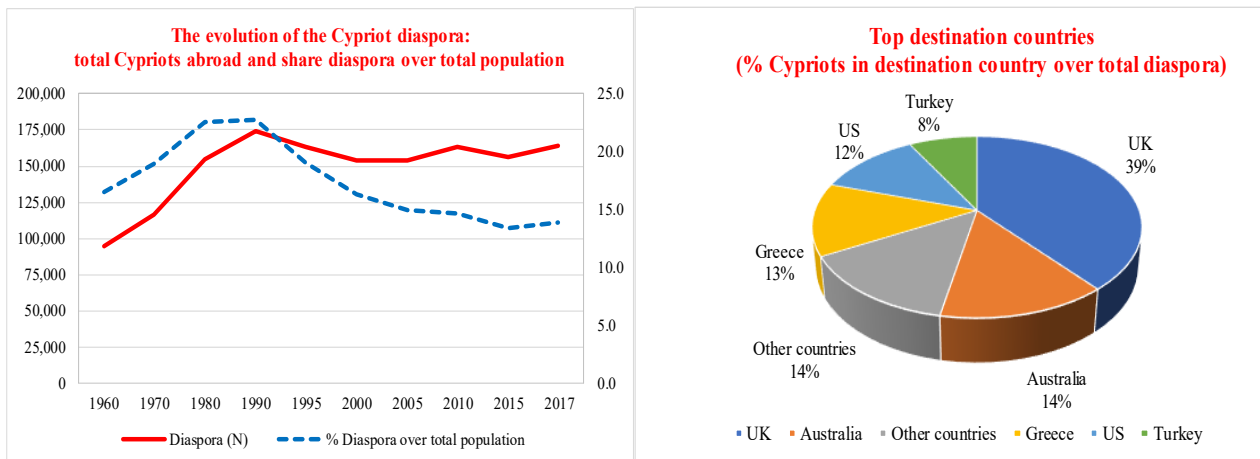
This Policy Brief focuses on the case of Cyprus, one of the EU Member States with the most sizeable diaspora in relative terms (compared to the country's total population). The paper aims to assess the responsiveness of Cypriot public authorities to the needs of non-resident Cypriots in the context of the pandemic. As we will show, Cyprus has adopted a quite pro-active position towards its population abroad, not only through constant information provision for non-residents, but also via the mobilisation of resources aiming to provide concrete help to Cypriots abroad in a situation of distress. Yet, such engagement was rather selective, as most policy initiatives aimed primarily at assisting Cypriots residing in specific (mainly European) destination countries.

The Cypriot Diaspora: An Overview

Cyprus has traditionally been considered an emigration country. The island witnessed several emigration waves, some of which even prior to the independence of 1960 (Demetriou, 2003). Migration outflows have become a constant feature in Cyprus' recent history, with the latest emigration wave being triggered by the 2008 financial recession (Konstantinidou, 2020).

Since the 1960s, the share of the diaspora has been consistently high (more than 10% of the total population- Figure 1), this making Cyprus one of the EU countries with the highest proportion of citizens residing abroad (Lafleur and Vintila, 2020). By 2017, more than 160,000 Cypriots were living in other countries, accounting for 14% of the Cypriot population. Most of those who left the country during the last decade are young people: around 66,000 individuals aged 20-39 years old left Cyprus during 2012-2017 (Eurostat, 2020), the main reasons for recent emigration being either studies or better work opportunities abroad. Currently, the Cypriot diaspora mainly concentrates in specific destination countries, due to cultural and historical affinities or geographical proximity. By 2017, more than a half of all Cypriots abroad were settled in the UK (63,160 individuals) and Australia (23,149). Greece and the US are also relevant destinations, with 21,215 Cypriots residing in Greece and 20,091 in the US in 2017.

Figure 1. The size of the Cypriot diaspora and main destination countries



Source: Own elaboration with World Bank (2011) and UN data (2017; 2019).

Traditionally, Cypriot authorities have maintained a rather “amicable” relation with the diaspora. They have usually tapped into non-residents’ resources, while also considering them as critical actors for raising awareness regarding the “Cypriot issue” abroad (Demetriou, 2003). To maintain and formalise close ties with the diaspora, authorities have set up a rather extensive institutional network for citizens abroad. This includes key institutions such as the Service for Overseas and Repatriated Cypriots (*Υπηρεσία Αποδήμων και Επαναπατρισθέντων*) or the World Federation of Overseas Cypriots (*Παγκόσμια Ομοσπονδία Απόδημων Κυπρίων*, POMAK) both founded in 1976; as well as more than 150 diplomatic missions and over 80 honorary consulates abroad (Konstantinidou, 2020).

Over the years, several policy initiatives were proposed for non-residents. Most of them emerged in the areas of education and culture (for instance, by establishing a network of Greek-speaking schools abroad, providing access to Greek language courses to non-residents or by offering scholarships to Cypriot students abroad to study in Cyprus) or citizenship (by allowing individuals of Cypriot descent to apply for the Cypriot nationality). Oftentimes, specific schemes aiming to encourage diaspora’s return have also been implemented. Yet, despite the general inclusiveness of the Government’s position towards nationals abroad, most of these initiatives primarily targeted Cypriots residing in specific destination countries, like the UK or Greece (Konstantinidou, 2020).

Given this relatively strong engagement of Cypriot authorities with the diaspora, one could reasonably expect that nationals abroad have also been the target of policies adopted during the COVID-19 crisis. Yet, given that the Government has historically paid more attention to Cypriots in specific (mainly European) host countries, it could also be assumed that such diaspora-oriented initiatives triggered by the pandemic have targeted particular diasporic communities, rather than all Cypriots abroad.

The following section will assess if this was indeed the case, by looking at the type, scope and limitations of the policy measures that Cyprus adopted for its diaspora since the beginning of the pandemic. Our analysis draws on official documents released by different Cypriot authorities (the President, the Ministry of Health (MoH), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Ministry of Transport, Communication and Works (MTCW) since late January until the beginning of June 2020⁵.

COVID-19 and Policy Measures for the Cypriot Diaspora

Unlike other countries around the world more severely affected by the pandemic, Cyprus registered less than 1,000 confirmed cases and less than 20 coronavirus-related deaths at the time of writing this paper. In relative terms, this means that around 0.1% of the population was infected, with a death rate of around 2% of all confirmed cases (John Hopkins University of Medicine-Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020). To prevent the spread of the virus, Cyprus has quickly reacted to the threat by following the directives of the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease and Prevention Control. Travel restrictions were implemented since February 2020⁶, strict travel regulations (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020d) were imposed shortly after, a total ban of commercial flights (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020e) was adopted on 21st of March⁷ and early lockdown measures (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020f) were announced on 23rd of March, when the country reported 116 cases. Regardless of the (lack of) severity of the pandemic in Cyprus, the Government implemented different initiatives to help Cypriots abroad.

Basic help via information provision

Since the outbreak, Cypriot authorities have established several channels of communication with nationals abroad. At the end of February 2020, the MFA posted a contact list (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020g) of Cypriot diplomatic missions abroad and the Ministry's

⁵ Phase II of the deconfinement (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020a) flatended on 08/06/2020 (Kathimerini Cyprus, 2020a). After that date, the full restriction of movement and curfew was lifted and airlines progressively resumed (Republic of Cyprus, 2020) their operations under new guidelines. However, MTCW announced that repatriations (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020b) will be continued until the 19th of June 2020.

⁶ The first travel restrictions were announced by the MoH and concerned everyone returning from North Italy, South Korea, Iran or Japan. Returnees were self-checked for COVID-19 symptoms and those presenting symptoms had to consult a doctor. Travel restrictions progressively increased to include other EU and non-EU countries (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office (2020c).

⁷ Announcement made by the Minister of Health after the meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Committee under the chairmanship of the President of the Republic, imposing a ban for 14 days. The ban was renewed several times until 09/06/2020.

emergency contacts. One month later, a special online platform for Cypriots abroad⁸ was created. Connected to MFA's National Crisis Management Centre, this platform aimed to manage non-residents' requests, allow communication with the homeland, and provide useful information about repatriation.

Active intervention for Cypriots stranded abroad: repatriation measures

Just like many of its European counterparts (European Parliament, 2020), Cyprus has pro-actively intervened in the repatriation of its citizens stranded abroad, this probably being the most important type of concrete help provided to the diaspora during the pandemic. According to a press release (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020h) of the Press and Information Office of the Republic of Cyprus, 7.500 individuals were repatriated to Cyprus until 25th of May 2020. Repatriation initiatives were implemented shortly after the outbreak as in mid-March 2020, the MTCW already announced (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020i) the organisation of charter flights for repatriation.

The first repatriations (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020j) targeted Cypriots who were abroad for medical reasons, business, short-term stays or official reasons; and they later started to include broader categories of the population abroad. The first flights were organised from the UK, with the Minister of Transportations encouraging Cypriots who transit in the UK to contact a special phone line (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020k). On the first day of the flight ban (21/03/2020), three charter flights (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020l) repatriated 439 individuals from the UK; and more flights were organised after this date [for instance, 96 Cypriots were repatriated from the UK on 09/04/2020 (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020m), some travelling from other countries; 116 were repatriated on 14/04/2020 (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020n) and 96 on 15/04/2020 (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020o)]. Yet, the MoH also specified that repatriation flights could only be organised according to the country's capacity to receive those from abroad (2,000 individuals every 15 days). Repatriations were also restrictively implemented: only those who showed a negative COVID-19 test (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020p) at the latest four days before the flight could be repatriated⁹; and repatriated citizens had the obligation to spend 14 days on preventative quarantine (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020p)

⁸ See: <http://www.connect2cy.gov.cy/> (Accessed: June 9, 2020).

⁹ To assist in this process, MoH published a catalogue with accredited organizations abroad providing this medical certificate (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020q).

in state designated facilities.

Repatriation flights were also directly organised from Greece (another major destination for the Cypriot diaspora), whereas others only used Greece as a transit country. By way of example, Athens was used as transit for a flight from Doha (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020r) carrying 26 Cypriots coming from Australia, Qatar, the Philippines, China, Japan and South Korea. Other flights originating from Hannover (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020s) and Frankfurt (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020t) in Germany transited Thessaloniki. At the time of writing this paper, no information was made available on specific repatriation flights from the US or Australia, the two most important non-EU destinations of Cypriots abroad. Furthermore, by the 4th of May 2020, only seven Cypriot citizens¹⁰ were repatriated from third countries under the Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

Additional support for all Cypriots abroad

Besides repatriation, additional measures initiated by different public officials, often involving collaboration between different ministerial actors and usually targeting specific groups of non-residents, were also adopted. Some measures aimed to keep Cypriots abroad in contact with homeland authorities: for instance, the Presidential Commissioner chairing the Service for Overseas and Repatriated Cypriots held discussions with diaspora representatives [Diaspora Leaders (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020u), Youth Diaspora Leaders (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020v)] and diplomatic officials (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020w) regarding the development of the pandemic in host countries and in Cyprus. Other measures aimed to provide more concrete aid. As an illustration, the MoH and the MFA helped Cypriots abroad to procure medicine (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020x) from Cyprus, when such medicine was no longer available in host countries. Via its diplomatic missions abroad, the MFA also set up a network of health professionals¹¹ (already residing in the host countries) to secure medical care service where the need arises. Mental health issues were also addressed: in collaboration with the Consortium of Rectors of Cypriot Universities, the MFA announced the initiative (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020y) to provide psychological support and counselling via a special phone line to all Cypriots students, including those abroad. Similarly, the Minister of Finance announced the provision of financial aid (Cyprus

¹⁰See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/summary_tables_of_repatriation_flights_4_may_2020.pdf (Accessed: June 9, 2020).

¹¹See: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/ανακοινωθέντα-άρθρο.html?id=12987#flat> (Accessed: June 9, 2020).

Government Press and Information Office (2020z) (750 Euros) for Cypriot students in higher education institutions abroad who are not able to return to Cyprus.

Authorities' special interest in Cypriot students abroad can be explained by their high numbers¹² and the pandemic's timeline, which included the Easter period. Students who would traditionally return to Cyprus for Easter holidays were unable to do so, this increasing their dependency on families back in Cyprus. Additionally, travel restrictions imposed even before Easter which impeded students to return also led to a legal suit (Kathimerini Cyprus, 2020b) against the Republic of Cyprus, although the case was rejected by the Administrative Court. However, early in the pandemic, the MFA discussed a support plan (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020aa) for Cypriot students abroad with the President of the Pancyprian Federation of Student Associations and the Heads of the National Student Associations of Cyprus in Greece, the UK, Bulgaria, Russia and the Czech Republic. The President of the Republic (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020ab) also justified authorities' special attention to students: "*Our concern for (their) protection...is a given and it is proven by the decisions of the Government... to support them financially... provide them with medical... and other assistance*".

Additional support for targeted destinations

Whereas the above-mentioned measures targeted all Cypriots abroad regardless of their place of residence, specific initiatives were adopted for those residing in Greece and the UK. For instance, the MFA collaborated with the National Federation of Cypriots in the UK to send free boxes with Cypriot food to Cypriot students in the UK (almost 4,500 boxes¹³ were prepared by May 2020) and to provide medical assistance, accommodation and legal advice¹⁴ to Cypriots in the UK. Specific healthcare arrangements were also made for Greece (Cyprus Government Press and Information Office, 2020ac), by providing direct contact information of doctors. After the lifting of the strict measures between Greece and Cyprus, the Cypriot Ministries of Transportations and Education also collaborated to arrange for flights aiming to assist Cypriot students to safely return to Greece and resume their studies in Greek universities¹⁵. Finally, while some Cypriots in the US and Australia benefitted from the

¹²See: <http://www.highereducation.ac.cy/gr/statistika-stoicheia.html> (Accessed: June 11, 2020).

¹³See: <http://www.presidentialcommissioner.gov.cy/anthropos/anthropos.nsf/All/7BDD4B15F4756230C225855E002A4FD1?OpenDocument> (Accessed: June 9, 2020).

¹⁴See: <https://cypriotfederation.org.uk/2020/03/covid19support/> (Accessed: June 9, 2020).

¹⁵ Three flights on 24/05/2020, (See: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/ανακοινωθέντα-άρθρο.html?id=13864#flat;>) three on 03/06/2020 and three more on 06/06/2020 (See: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/ανακοινωθέντα-άρθρο.html?id=14031#flat>) Those flights were organised as a response to the requests (See: <https://www.philenews.com/koinonia/eidiseis/article/941705/sos-apo-kyprioys-foitites-stin-ellada>) of repatriated students in Cyprus studying in Greece who flagged their need to return in Greece (Accessed 09/06/2020).

global assistance schemes implemented by Cypriot authorities (i.e. 17 Cypriots repatriated from Australia and 32 from the US, medicine sent to the US), they do not seem to have represented the target group of any specific initiatives adopted by homeland authorities during the pandemic.

Concluding remarks

Summing up, although the Cypriot Government seems to have adopted a pro-active stance to protect its citizens abroad during the pandemic, most efforts (including repatriation and other initiatives of concrete support) targeted specific diasporic communities (mainly those residing in Greece and the UK) and particularly vulnerable groups (students). In some cases, the effectiveness of such measures was also questioned¹⁶. Overall, very few initiatives were oriented towards Cypriots residing outside of the EU, this indicating a rather selective engagement of the Cypriot Government with its nationals abroad in times of crisis.

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¹⁶ Cypriots working in Qatar (See: <https://www.philenews.com/koinonia/eidiseis/article/939676/sos-apo-kyprioys-sto-katar>), and Cypriots trapped in South Africa (See: <https://www.philenews.com/f-me-apopsi/arthra-apof/article/941298/kravg-apogosis-50-egglobismenon-kyprion-stin-n-afriki>) criticised the Cypriot Government for its inactivity to their demands for repatriation and assistance (Accessed June, 2, 2020).

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