
Racist Violence in Cyprus

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With the support of KISA -
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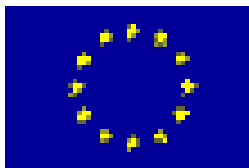
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An assessment of overall trends and patterns

Due to the historical background of the ethnic conflict in Cyprus and the ongoing segregation of the two local communities, it is not surprising that there has been very little said or done to tackle discrimination, racism and racist violence in Cyprus. Research on race and migrant related discriminatory practices and racism is still very rare as monitoring systems are either inadequate or non-existent. The prominent position of the 'Cyprus problem' in every political debate has resulted in a weak tradition of anti-discrimination laws and policies. Racism has never really been a priority issue for any government, nor for the civil society, with the exception of a few independent NGOs such as KISA, which usually lack funding and support. Under such circumstances, NGOs in Cyprus are restrained when challenging unjust policies and discriminatory practices.

In addition, crimes related to racist violence are not properly documented by the Cyprus police, either because of institutional racism that exists or because of the authorities' tendency to ignore issues related to migrants and racism altogether. The intention of this report is to produce an overview and a brief analysis of data available from sources such as national daily newspapers and NGO reports. The latter constitute a vital source of information on cases of racist violence. Furthermore, they include cases that victims never intended to report to the police, which is often the case when the victims concerned have insecure residence status or, perhaps, little confidence in the police.

Evidently, there is no comprehensive monitoring system regarding racial discrimination and violence, just as there has been relatively little interest in racial victimisation (or even other kinds of criminal victimisation) of migrants or other ethnic communities in Cyprus. Since no accurate official data on racist violence in Cyprus has ever been published, it is impossible to cite statistics on the number of racist crimes in the country. Nonetheless, according to NGO reports and newspaper articles, there have been a large number of racist incidents since early 2000.

Furthermore, due to the fact that Cyprus only became a host country of migrants since the 1990's and of asylum seekers since 2000, the tensions and the ongoing bi-communal conflicts between the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot communities perpetuate xenophobic perceptions towards groups of different religious or ethnic origins, other than the dominant groups. This pattern of intolerance is becoming more and more evident and as a result it has evolved into racist crime and violence against the increasing number of migrants from various countries. At the same time, Cypriot media irresponsibly and continually exploit this trend, fuelling the xenophobic character of the society.

In recent years there is a noticeable rise in anti racial behaviour and race related mob attacks. Very recently in July 2010, in the centre of the capital Nicosia, during a demonstration by the ultra-nationalist youth group ELAM (Greek popular front), some Asian students were chased and a Nigerian passer-by was badly beaten and forced into the path of a moving car just because of his colour and race¹.

¹ Cyprus Mail, 'Our View: A very peculiar type of free speech', , <http://www.cyprus-mail.com/opinions/our-view-very-peculiar-type-free-speech/20100725> accessed June 2010

Last year on 29 December 2009, the same ultra-nationalist group, organized the first ever fascist and nationalistic march in the centre of Nicosia with an estimated 80 - 150 people participating. They were carrying a banner saying 'every foreign worker equals an unemployed Greek'².

In April 2010, the Palestinian cultural centre of Larnaca was burned down by unknown persons. However, taking into account previous attacks on the centre and various racist slogans frequently written on its walls, it is assumed that the motive was racist and nationalistic³.

Another problem is racism in sports; some football fans openly display their racist behaviour, for example spraying graffiti swastikas or using provocative banners with nationalist slogans. In 2009 APOEL a local club was charged by UFEA due to the racist behaviour by its supporters. Furthermore, on 19th February 2009 a group of Turkish Cypriots were attacked by Appollon Football Club hooligans. After the game, football fanatics attacked Turkish Cypriot cars while they were waiting at traffic light junction.

Moreover, according to the media, there are often reported incidents of racist attacks against Turkish Cypriots since the partial lifting of the restrictions to freedom of movement on the island in 2003. However, the penalties given were not very effective.

In November 2006, 15 to 20 Greek Cypriot teenagers, believed to be members of an ultranationalist group, entered the grounds of the English School and attacked a group of the school's Turkish Cypriot students, causing minor injuries. In February 2009 a Turkish Cypriot cemetery in Limassol was attacked by unknown persons, destroying headstones and causing other material damage. In addition, there is an increase in the number of extreme nationalist web-sites and blogs which include hatred and racist verbal attacks against migrants and the Turkish Cypriots.

The European Network of Legal Experts which reviews the latest developments in EU anti-discrimination laws and policies in Member States makes no reference to race or migrant-related issues regarding anti-discrimination laws and practices of Cyprus, which may account for the government's disregard of racism and discrimination⁴.

Although Cyprus has officially developed a relatively good system on collecting data for various statistical purposes, there are no data collection mechanisms in place with regard to racist violence. Therefore, the full extent of racist crime in Cyprus is overshadowed by the lack of adequate official data. Although the police keep annual records on all crimes committed, it appears that only two racist crimes were

² Cyprus Mail, 'We'll come at night and find you, traitor', <http://www.cyprus-mail.com/cyprus/we-ll-come-night-and-find-you-traitor/20091229> accessed June 2010,

³ Cyprus Mail, Attack on Palestinian centre condemned, <http://www.cyprus-mail.com/cyprus/attack-palestinian-centre-condemned/20100501> accessed 11 August 2010.

⁴ The Migration Policy Group (July 2010), European Anti-discrimination Law Review No.10-2010, p 48-51, <http://www.migpolgroup.com/public/docs/178.EuropeanAnti-discriminationLawReview1030.07.2010.EN.pdf> accessed 11 August 2010.

committed in 2005, eighteen in 2006⁵, three in 2007, six in 2008 and eight in 2009. However, according to relevant data collected by NGOs these numbers are not accurate and thus fail to reflect the actual dimension of racist violence and crime in Cyprus.

This is due mainly to two factors: 1) racist crimes are often not reported to the police out of fear, especially when irregular-migrants are involved and 2) those racist crimes that are reported to the police are rarely classified as such, but are treated as common penal law offences. Furthermore, there is no information available as to whether recorded racist crimes have been prosecuted as such or as common penal law offences. Even when some cases were recorded as racist crimes and prosecuted as such, there is no evidence to suggest that Cypriot courts considered racial motivation to be of any significance when imposing penalties due to the lack of legislative provisions to that effect. What's more, the above statistics do not seem to include incidents of racist behaviour or racist violence committed by police officers, a phenomenon that is not so rare according to NGOs. It is worth mentioning that racist violence committed by police officers does not form part of the statistical information available on the official website of the Cyprus police,⁶ even though relevant records are kept in file.

In 2007 the lack of national data on hate crimes in Cyprus was highlighted in the annual report of the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) when FRA reported that Cyprus claimed not a single case of racist violence. The Chairman of the House of Parliament Human Rights Committee stated 'we didn't hand in a report, because we believe there is no racism in Cyprus'⁷. In 2009 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance noted in its report that 'the situation continues to be worrying' in Europe and an increase in racist violence and crime is reported in Bulgaria and Cyprus⁸.

In some instances, ministry officials have also been accused of covering up incidents of racist violence. More precisely, officials of the Ministry of Education and Culture were accused by the Ombudsman for ignoring a racist attack against a 15 year old African Cypriot which is mentioned below.

It is also repeatedly demonstrated that the police make wide use of violence on a regular basis. The use of violence against migrants and the mass violation of their rights by the police is an area of grave concern to human rights organizations and other NGOs and agencies. This is also mentioned in international reports⁹. In 2009 the Ombudsman which also functions as the Authority against Racism and Discrimination, criticised the police for 'stubbornly refusing to acknowledge racist incidents and to confront them with the necessary decisiveness'¹⁰. The report

⁵ The increase of the number of racist crimes in 2006 is assigned to serial offences committed by the same person

⁶ Cyprus Police, Statistical Data, Serious Crime per district for the first half of the year 2010 , , [http://www.police.gov.cy/police/police.nsf/All/388ED23973D6472CC2257774003BFF88/\\$file/serious.pdf](http://www.police.gov.cy/police/police.nsf/All/388ED23973D6472CC2257774003BFF88/$file/serious.pdf) accessed 25 July 2010

⁷ Cyprus Mail, 'We didn't produce a report because there's no racism in Cyprus', , <http://www.cyprus-mail.com/cyprus/we-didn-t-produce-report-because-there-s-no-racism-cyprus> accessed June 2010

⁸ ECRI <http://www.socialwatch.eu/wcm/discrimination.html> (ECRI, 2009), p.7.

⁹ Re STEPS Consulting Social Study for European Parliament, op. cit.

¹⁰ Cyprus Mail, Police stubbornly ignore racist attacks says Ombudswoman, <http://www.cyprus-mail.com/cyprus/police-stubbornly-ignore-racist-attacks-says-ombudswoman> accessed June 2010,

mentioned an incident where a gang of 30 Greek Cypriot youths rampaged through a village (Ypsonas), verbally and physically abusing migrants living in the area and vandalizing their properties. The youths used sticks, iron pipes and stones in their attacks, leaving four victims – two individuals from Great Britain, one from Romania and another one from Bulgaria - with injuries requiring hospital treatment. When the perpetrators were arrested, they admitted that they aimed to 'hit any foreigner they came across and teach them not to make trouble', while also shouting 'foreigners out of Ypsonas' and 'we're going to bury you all'. However, the police decided not to charge them on racist violence but on other, lesser, charges, such as causing actual bodily harm, public aggression, and malicious damage to property, etc. Other international human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, have also highlighted this kind of abuse of power by the police. Moreover, the Country Report on Human Rights Practices in Cyprus – 2009 states that 'there were reports of police abuse and degrading treatment of persons in custody and asylum seekers'¹¹.

Acts of racist violence are usually silenced and not treated with due consideration in Cyprus. Even in the most blatant cases of racist violence are reduced to isolated incidents and do not acknowledge the extent of the problem of racist violence and crime in Cyprus. By having such an approach there is no need to give it proper consideration. It is against this background that NGOs in Cyprus make every effort to record, review and assess racist violence.

Typical case study

On 18 December 2008, forty teenagers attacked a 14-year-old Cypriot girl, whose family had repatriated from Sudan, after her team won a volleyball match. The youths reportedly shouted racist comments while punching and kicking her repeatedly, thus resulting in the girl's hospitalisation with serious injuries¹². The incident was reported by the father of the victim, but despite several attempts his complaint was never documented.

In fact, when the police were informed of the incident, soon after it occurred, their only measure to protect the girl was locking her in the school until her father arrived to take her to the hospital. According to the Executive Director of KISA, no one was arrested, no statements were taken and no one was charged for that violent crime¹³. KISA brought the matter to the attention of the media, submitted a formal complaint to the Ombudsman and reported the father's failed attempts to give a statement to the police.

According to a press release made by KISA, 'this is one of the most serious crimes concerning racist violence in Cyprus, since the sole reason of the attack was the young girl's skin colour'¹⁴. KISA also criticised the police for failing to demonstrate any sense of sympathy towards incidents of racist violence, as well as for their failure

¹¹ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, Country Report on Human Rights Practices in Cyprus –2009, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/eur/136026.htm> accessed June 2010,

¹² Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2009 Cyprus, <http://report2009.amnesty.org/en/regions/europe-central-asia/cyprus>, accessed 12 July 2010

¹³ Cyprus Mail, 'Sudanese girl beaten in vicious racist attack', <http://www.cyprus-mail.com/cyprus/sudanese-girl-beaten-vicious-racist-attack>, accessed 25 July 2010

¹⁴ KISA (NGO), The Movement for Equality, Support and Anti-Racism, <http://www.kisa.org.cy>

to record such incidents. It is noteworthy that KISA held a protest demonstration in an effort to raise awareness about racist violence.

A few months later, the Ombudsman¹⁵ compiled a report that accused officials from the Ministry of Education and Culture for attempting to cover up the racist attack against the 14-year-old Cypriot pupil of African descent¹⁶. The report also noted the apparent reluctance of police officers to file a formal report, but stressed that one report was eventually filed after the Ombudsman office interfered. The report stated that 'the relevant authorities are silent on the real parameters of the incident. We get an image of an education system that is obviously confused and refuses to accept the nature of this racist incident'.

The school's board of teachers investigated the incident and decided to expel one student and suspended five others for a few days. However, the punishment that was delivered was not intended to reprimand the pupils' racist conduct, but to redress the insults that the said pupils directed at the deputy headmistress of the school. Likewise, while the Secretary of the Cyprus Secondary Teachers Union (OELMEK)¹⁷ condemned the incident, he refused to acknowledge its racist nature saying that 'we will not accept under any circumstances that there is racism in our schools'.

Recommendations

- The Penal Code should be amended to provide for aggravated offences when these are committed in a racist context and provide for higher penalties when the crime or violence is racially motivated.
- The police should adopt an efficient and objective way for collecting data concerning racist crime. Local authorities should make good use of the expertise of related agencies in other EU member states.
- Police officers should receive special training for identifying, recording and combating racist crime and racist violence effectively. The current situation should be improved so that victims can report racist crimes and perpetrators are being prosecuted as such.
- Communication between NGOs and the police should improve for the purpose of reporting and tackling racist crime and violence.
- Efficient integration measures have to be taken promptly by the government, which has also the responsibility to promote non-discrimination, cultural diversity and multiculturalism across all sectors of society, particularly in education.

¹⁵ The Office of Commissioner for Administration (Ombudsman), http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/Ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/index_en/index_en?OpenDocument

¹⁶ Cyprus Mail, Ombudswoman report reveals racist cover-up, <http://www.cyprus-mail.com/cyprus/ombudswoman-report-reveals-racist-cover>, accessed 25 July 2010

¹⁷ OELMEK, <http://www.oelmek.org/dnn/english/tabid/65/Default.aspx>

- The Independent Authority for the Investigation of Allegations and Complaints against the Police should fully and effectively assume its role as an investigator on complaints against police officers, especially when complaints concern racist violence.
- An action plan against racism and particularly racist violence crime must be adopted so as to effectively address this issue.

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Recording incidents of racist violence

Although all Cyprus-based NGOs committed directly or indirectly to anti-discrimination and antiracism were contacted for the purpose of this report, only KISA (Action for Equality, Support and Antiracism) provided relevant information. This is mainly due to the fact that the majority of other similar organisations are not exclusively concerned with racial discrimination as such, but cover a broader agenda that only partly addresses discrimination and racism.

NGOs typically work with scarce resources therefore; data collection tends to be limited. Evidently, local NGOs collect data regarding incidents that are either reported directly to them or publicized through media reports. The data collection mechanism of KISA regarding racist violence is mostly based on complaints made directly by victims or third parties on behalf of the victim through the Migrant and Refugee Centres of KISA. Once a complaint has been filed, KISA documents all relevant details not only for the purpose of reporting the incident to the pertinent authorities or media, but also for following up the case. Each case is dealt with on an individual basis, yet the relevant procedure is not recorded in a way that would allow room for statistical analysis. Nevertheless, each record includes a detailed description of the incident and the type concerned, such as whether physical violence, verbal abuse, threats, or damage to property was involved. Records also include a detailed description of the victim and any other information that the victim makes available, such as residence status, age, gender, ethnic identity, national origins and language. Similar information is also available regarding the perpetrators, including their likely affiliation with an extreme group or movement. Needless to say, every record provides a detailed analysis of the circumstances and persons involved, the location, date and time of the incident. However, no surveys on racist violence are carried out by KISA, due to a lack of funds. Interestingly, no records have ever been requested by national or international bodies to monitor racist violence in Cyprus.

Reviewing incidents of racist violence

KISA systematically reviews all its records so as to keep track of every individual case, the severity of the incident, the personal circumstances of the victim and the extent of the involvement of the relevant authorities. The reviews are carried out based on the information KISA receives by both the victim and the authorities involved in the case. Additional reports are then produced for each individual case and kept on file. KISA also maintains frequent contact with those victims who report incidents of racist violence and mediates with the relevant authorities and/or organisations to both protect the victim and to officially report the incident, of course, with the consent of the victim. The responses of KISA to racist violence on an individual basis as well as for the purpose of advocacy are based on the records and reviews of the incidents.