Migrants on the edge of Europe

Perspectives from Malta, Cyprus and Slovenia

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Abstract

On 1 May 2004 ten new member states[1] joined the European Union, pushing the EU's external borders further east into parts of the former Communist bloc, and south along the Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas. The political and media focus in the run-up to the expansion of the EU, however, was primarily on the potential scale of East-West migration from Central and Eastern Europe, to some extent echoing fears generated in 1986 over an influx of migrants from the then new EU member-states of Spain and Portugal. Not only did this give the unfavourable impression that Polish, Latvian or Czech citizens, for example, would jump at the chance to emigrate (overlooking how feasible or even desirable such a decision would be for some), but the hyperbole surrounding EU enlargement did not readily lend itself to painting a more accurate picture of who or what made up the ten new member states. In the following account the focus is on three of these countries, Malta, Cyprus and Slovenia, which did not feature in discussions about the potential for mass emigration from the new accession states; the effect of this was to largely ignore the changing migration dynamics taking place along the EU's southern borders, in particular the growing, and in some cases established presence of migrants in those three new member states. Their location in Southern Europe serves as a reminder of key South-North – as opposed to East-West – migration routes into the EU.

[1] The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Cyprus and Malta.

Malta, Cyprus and Slovenia in the EU

Levels of prosperity in Malta, Cyprus and Slovenia are today approaching income and welfare levels

on the southern ‘front-line’ of the EU and the growing reliance in some economic sectors on migrant workers. Moreover the small size of these countries has made the relative scale of the immigratory phenomenon all the greater. It is also important to note how contemporary migration to Europe has become more diverse and less within the control of nation-states than it was forty to fifty years ago. In contrast to the postwar decades when much immigration to Europe could be explained by reference to state-run guest-worker programmes, countries’ colonial ties or Cold War dynamics, migrants today are arriving from an increasingly diverse number of countries, for a range of different reasons, and through a variety of migration channels and routes. Malta, Cyprus and Slovenia are, to varying degrees of success, coming to terms with this ‘new geography of migration’ (King 1993), along with the issues associated with being new destinations for migrants. Internal debates are occurring in all three countries over the economic need for migrant labour, about how they ought to receive and integrate migrants, and of course over the implementation of border controls. These debates inevitably display their own particular national characteristics, but need to be understood within the wider international context that affects contemporary patterns and features of migration: that of globalisation and European integration.

new member states to gather information and data on recent migration patterns there. Interviews were conducted with academics, government officials, and representatives of migrant NGOs and communities in each of the three countries. Research in Cyprus, divided as an island since 1974, mainly concentrated on the EU-member Greek sector as it was felt that the Turkish sector displayed very different migration dynamics relating to the transplanting of mainland Turks into the northern part of Cyprus. Whilst this remains a sensitive political issue, it is important to note the movement of migrants from the north across the partition or so-called 'green' line into southern parts of Cyprus.

Malta

Two separate but interlinked issues have framed recent debates about immigration in Malta: entry to the EU and irregular immigration. Both issues have drawn on fears that the country, as a small and densely populated island, would not be able

island ‘as the southern most gateway to the EU ... cannot be expected to carry the burden brought about by this human tragedy on its own’ (Government of Malta 2005: 13).

The depiction of the situation as a ‘human tragedy’ sits uncomfortably alongside the policy of detaining most irregular migrants, but refers to their perilous journey from Libya which has claimed many lives over the past few years. The question of where responsibility falls to deal with irregular migration lies at the heart of the issue, particularly as Malta rightly or wrongly does not associate the rise in migrant numbers on the island to its own economic development. There are assertions that Italy pre-empts migrants’ arrival on its own shores by directing Maltese search and rescue patrols to pick up boats which are not always in distress.[9] A bilateral agreement with Libya allowing Malta to send irregular migrants back has so far proved elusive, whilst Libya is often accused of being negligent in clamping down on irregular migrants resident there. Rumours circulate of more than a million migrants in Libya awaiting their chance to sail to Europe; the fear being that many could potentially claim asylum in Malta. As a condition of EU entry, Malta assumed responsibility for receiving, processing and determining asylum applications by adopting in 2000 its first Refugee Act (prior to this Malta simply implemented decisions made by the UNHCR in Rome). Carrying the ‘burden’ of processing claims, detaining applicants and eventually repatriating or assisting the integration of asylum-seekers is primarily financial, but the arrival of migrants also has wider societal implications. Malta remains a conservative and predominantly Christian country. Catholicism for many is the defining feature of Maltese identity (Baldacchino 2002). Whilst rescuing migrants stranded in the Mediterranean is often described as a Christian duty, Catholic values (and hence national identity) are seemingly threatened by the presence of irregular migrants on the island.

This line of thought has most recently been put forward by the Maltese pressure group

regularly been blamed in the media for rising crime rates and disrespecting local customs and traditions (Trimikliniotis 2003: 6).

This raises the question whether Cyprus' entry into the EU has benefited its resident migrant workers. On the basis of the above an instinctive answer would be 'no' given, firstly, the recent changes to national policy to continue to prevent TCNs from settling more permanently, and secondly, the freedom granted to all EU nationals to live and work in Cyprus. Yet the situation is more ambiguous and certainly more complex than policy rhetoric would suppose. To the extent that the role of specific migrant groups is structurally embedded in the Cypriot labour market, it is less certain that new EU nationals would be able, or in fact willing, to assume occupations held for several years by TCNs. Live-in domestic workers employed in private households, for example, are an established migrant workforce on the island. Mainly from countries in South-East Asia (Sri Lanka, Philippines), they are 'prized' for their diffidence and non-threatening presence in the household. Suggestions that Central and East European migrants could, or would be willing to, fulfil this job function are met by a degree of scepticism: CEE migrants are seen as more assertive of their employment rights, a factor which must be seen against the cases of employers who have exploited and abused their working relationship with domestic workers (see

The public reaction in Slovenia to migrants from outside Europe was mostly hostile at that time, fuelled by journalists writing articles about the supposed threat posed by their arrival (Erjavec 2003). The centres housing the migrants, particularly in the capital city Ljubljana, were the scenes of public campaigns vilifying asylum-seekers and irregular migrants, with only a few civil-society groups calling for a calmer, more rational response. The hostility outside the centres was seemingly translated into the poor conditions inside; rooms were described at the time as crowded, airless and dirty with little effort being made to separate vulnerable residents (Pajnik *et al.* 2001). The very presence of migrants from outside Europe on the streets of Slovenia's cities brought a change to the Asylum Law restricting the freedom of movement of asylum-seekers as a means to improve national security (Erjavec 2003: 86).[21]

It is evident that the responses in Slovenia to the

nationalities than are found in Slovenia. The impact of globalisation, and the resulting transnational connections between people across the world, is thus more apparent in Cyprus, although Slovenia hosts a small number of labour migrants from outside Europe; i.e. from China. The response to EU accession in Cyprus, to suggest that new EU nationals could replace resident TCNs, not only betrays a degree of insularity to globalisation, but also reveals a poor appreciation of how the global division of labour works there. Whilst employers prefer to hire

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Appendix 1

Table 1 Foreign workers in Cyprus by economic activity, 1999-2005

Economic activity	**Number employed by year***						
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004+	2005+
Agriculture, hunting and forestry	1,925	2,069	2,487	2,970	3,474	3,803	3,952
Construction	1,653	1,516	1,842	2,506	3,458	4,600	5,608

Table 4 Number of asylum-seekers in Slovenia by year, and by country of origin

Year	Asylum-seekers	Country of origin					
		Iran	Iraq	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Turkey	Serbia and Montegro
1997	72	23	3	-	1	2	5
1998	337	20	1	4	8	6	229
1999	774	90	58	4	16	58	320
2000	9,244	5,924	447	247	270	1,119	397
2001	1,511	272	214	66	26	379	205
2002	532	54	132	19	1	73	91