States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode #21 'Inside Cyprus: How Migration and Geopolitics Collide on a Divided Island (with Nicos Nouris)'

Enhanced transcript

Established by Emmanuel Comte

Abstract: In this episode of States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast, Emmanuel Comte speaks with Nicos Nouris, former Minister of Interior of Cyprus, to examine the country's response to the ongoing migration crisis in Cyprus. Nouris provides a firsthand account of how Cyprus has managed irregular migration routes, addressed rising criminal networks, and confronted structural challenges posed by Schengen Area exclusion. The discussion explores the role of the Green Line in Cyprus—a de facto internal EU border—through which the majority of irregular arrivals occur, and considers the broader geopolitical implications of Turkey–EU relations, including alleged settlement strategies and cross-border trafficking. This revealing conversation offers rare insights into how migration, sovereignty, and European integration collide on a divided island at the crossroads of three continents.

Disclaimer: *This transcript has been produced for educational purposes to support the understanding and integration of information discussed in the related conversation. It is not intended for use in quoting the conversation verbatim. For accurate quotations, please refer to the original recording.*

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: In April 2024, Cyprus declared a state of crisis due to a surge in irregular sea arrivals—over 2,000 in just the first quarter of the year. The challenges echo those of the 2015–2016 migration crisis, but in a uniquely complex national context. How does a small and divided Mediterranean island—located at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa—manage migration pressures?

Today, I speak with Nicos Nouris, who served as Cyprus's Minister of the Interior from 2019 to 2023. During his tenure, he became a central figure in shaping the country's migration policy, facing increasing pressure from Brussels and contending with the complexities of the Green Line that divides the island.

Thank you very much, Mr. Nouris, for joining me today to discuss your experience. We will talk about Cyprus's strategies for navigating repeated migration crises, confronting black markets and criminal networks involving migrants, and implementing policies in the UN-patrolled zone. Mr. Nouris also offers a rare perspective on why Cyprus remains outside the Schengen Area—and what this reveals about Europe's border priorities.

So, how did you become involved in migration issues, and what led you to serve as Minister of the Interior?

Crisis Overview

Nicos Nouris: I've been involved in politics for over 30 years, beginning in local government. I started as a municipal councillor, then served as deputy mayor of Nicosia for several years. After that, I moved to the national level, spending nearly seven years as a Member of Parliament.

It was from Parliament that the President of the Republic asked me to serve as Minister of the Interior. At that time, the ministry had a broader range of responsibilities than it does today—it included migration, which now falls under the Deputy Ministry for Migration. Back then, the Ministry of the Interior was the largest in the Republic in terms of responsibilities.

I believe I was chosen because I had long experience dealing with administrative matters, both in local government and in Parliament. I also served on the Parliamentary Committee for Internal Affairs, where we dealt with the reform of local government, migration policy, and electoral issues.

As you rightly mentioned, the first major sign of a migration crisis came in 2015, when Europe experienced a huge influx of people—mainly Syrians—arriving through Turkey and trying to reach Europe via Greece. At that time, Europe was completely unprepared to receive such a large number of migrants. And I must acknowledge that Cyprus, too, despite having seen the early signals, was not prepared—especially in terms of infrastructure.

By 2020, when Cyprus experienced what I would call a second wave of migration pressure, we again faced significant challenges, particularly due to the lack of facilities to host incoming migrants. So, it was a very difficult situation.

Emmanuel Comte: So, would you say you were drawn to the role by the challenge?

Nicos Nouris: It was my duty. I was appointed as Minister of the Interior without any expectation that I would be handling a migration crisis. The crisis emerged just six months after I took office, and I had to face it. I did my best to respond to the situation.

Emmanuel Comte: So, this refers to the 2020 migration crisis, which began shortly after you took office?

Nicos Nouris: Yes, it began in late February 2020—right around the same time the COVID-19 pandemic was also unfolding.

Black Markets and Criminal Networks

Emmanuel Comte: We will zoom in on that specific crisis shortly, as I think it is extremely important. But first, I'd like to zoom out a bit, to better understand what is at stake when we talk about migration.

As you mentioned earlier, migration to Cyprus is heavily influenced by geopolitical developments in the Middle East and North Africa. But if we look inside Cyprus itself, how would you describe the internal dynamics? For example, are migrants in Cyprus significantly involved in the black market or informal economic activities?

Nicos Nouris: To tell you the truth, as soon as a migrant arrives in a country—whether legally or illegally—they become part of society. This is undeniable. In Cyprus, especially during my tenure

as Minister of the Interior, we discovered that the involvement of migrants in illegal activities, particularly in the black market, was quite significant.

This involvement occurred at various levels. It often started with minor infractions, but we observed a growing trend toward more serious criminal activity, including drug and human trafficking. In some cases—especially involving Syrians, and I highlight this with care—we found evidence linking individuals to extremely serious crimes.

Syrians were often coming from war zones, so there were connections to violent backgrounds. We had substantial evidence, including data retrieved from mobile phones—photos, videos, and more—showing participation in acts as serious as murder. While not involving hundreds of individuals, the few cases we documented were very serious.

Emmanuel Comte: You mean that some of these individuals had a violent background in Syria, correct?

Nicos Nouris: Correct. I am speaking about the facts we discovered at the Ministry and through police investigations. Some of these individuals—certainly not all—had strong links to violent groups. Others were fine, working legally, and integrating into society. They were granted international protection because they were considered at risk under the Assad regime.

However, we also had a number of fanatics, particularly from the northern region of Syria, from places like Idlib. These individuals had been involved with military groups and, upon arriving in Cyprus, applied their "expertise" in organized crime.

For instance, they became involved in nightlife operations, offering "protection" services. They engaged in extortion, providing so-called security to establishments like bars, clubs, and night shops, often involving coercion and threats.

Emmanuel Comte: You mean they were part of protection rackets?

Nicos Nouris: Yes, exactly—criminal networks. And their activities were not limited to nightlife. They were also involved in smuggling. This included smuggling through the occupied areas of Cyprus, but also from sea arrivals, especially from Lebanon.

The boats didn't carry Lebanese nationals; they carried Syrians who had crossed from Syria into Lebanon and then departed by sea toward Cyprus.

Emmanuel Comte: How long does it take to cross from Lebanon to Cyprus?

Nicos Nouris: It depends. These were small boats, overcrowded with desperate people, risking their lives. The journey could take anywhere from 12 to 18 hours, depending on conditions.

Emmanuel Comte: They arrived in the southern part of the island?

Nicos Nouris: Not exactly the south—let me clarify. They arrived in areas controlled by the Republic of Cyprus.

Emmanuel Comte: You mentioned drugs and organized crime. But are migrants also involved in non-criminal activities within the black market, such as undeclared work in construction or services?

Nicos Nouris: Yes, absolutely. When we talk about the black market, the issue ranges from minor infractions to much more serious crimes. For example, we had incidents involving members of smuggling networks who were issuing fraudulent travel documents. These individuals were caught at airports and ports. Even more concerning, some arrived by sea with fake documents—specifically, forged passports.

We discovered that these networks often had contacts within the areas controlled by the Republic of Cyprus. They exchanged messages and coordinated activities. However, the core of these networks was typically located outside our control—in the occupied part of Cyprus, in Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria.

As Minister of the Interior, I was in close contact with the police. We worked together to identify the source of the problem, and it consistently led back to smuggling and criminal networks operating from the occupied territories, Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria. These networks were involved in drug trafficking, human trafficking, and document fraud.

When we later discuss migration more broadly, keep in mind that about 95% of irregular migrants arriving in Cyprus enter through the Green Line. That is why we focus so much on these specific regions.

The Green Line and Schengen Barriers

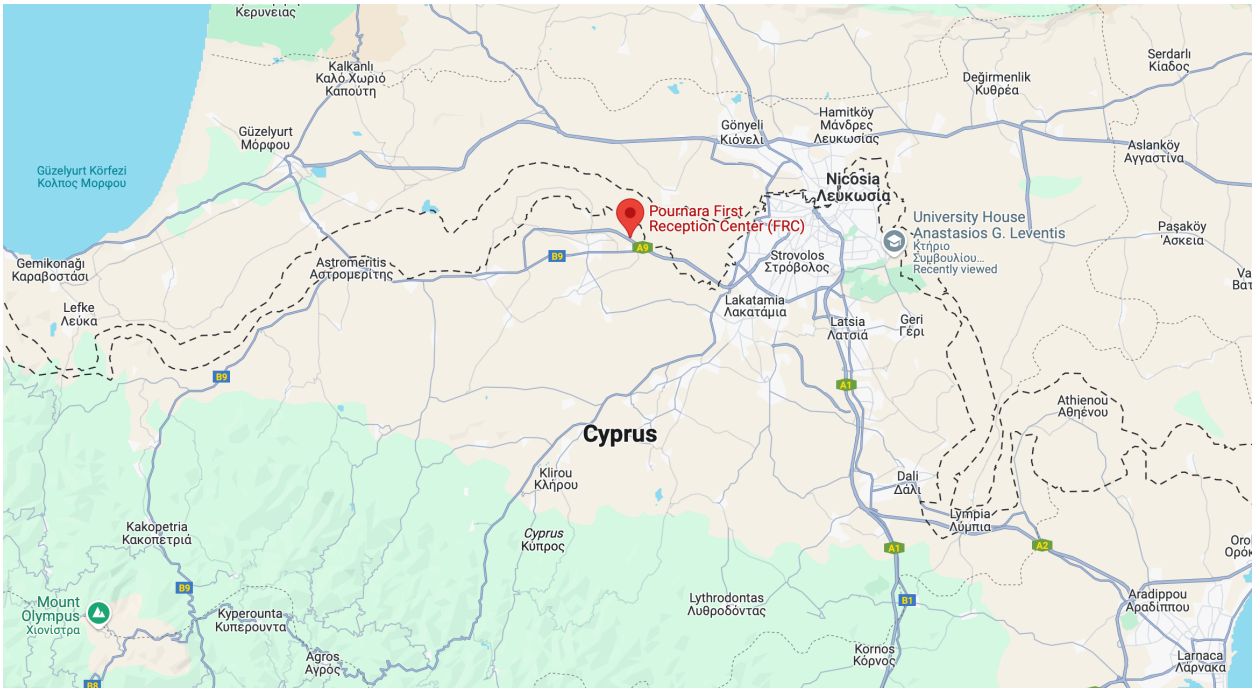
Emmanuel Comte: Just to provide some context: the Green Line is the demarcation that separates the island. So, you are suggesting that the smuggling networks bring migrants into the occupied part of Cyprus and then assist them in crossing the Green Line. Is their intention to remain in the Republic of Cyprus, or are they trying to reach other parts of the European Union?

Nicos Nouris: That is essentially the core issue regarding migration in Cyprus. Let me illustrate with an example.

In 2020, during a surge in migrant arrivals, we identified—using intelligence from Europol, airport authorities, the local police, and also from EU tech systems—that the majority of migrants were following a very specific route. They would fly from various African countries, including Senegal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Nigeria, to Istanbul, using Turkish Airlines or another Turkish carrier called Pegasus.

From Istanbul, they would travel to Tymbou airport in the occupied part of Cyprus. From there, using local minivans coordinated by smugglers, they would be transported to preselected crossing points along the Green Line. These individuals would pay approximately €200 to €300 to be taken across.

Once they crossed the Green Line—which is not our external EU border, but the ceasefire line—we faced a serious challenge. We do not have full control over the 184 kilometers of the Green Line. The only thing we could do was to locate these individuals, pick them up, and transfer them to the Republic's sole functioning reception facility at the time: the Pournara First Reception Centre in Kokkinotrimithia.



Kokkinotrimithia was not a closed or detention center. It was an open reception center. Upon arrival, migrants were given medical and psychological examinations, vaccinated—particularly during the COVID-19 period—and checked for forged documents and other irregularities.

However, the numbers were overwhelming. The center's capacity was between 400 and 500 people, yet during the peak of the pandemic, we reached 3,000 occupants. It was an extremely difficult time. That is why I say we undertook significant efforts. Under severe pressure, we expanded the facility's capacity and restructured our entire migration policy. If we have time, I would be happy to speak more about those broader policy developments.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes.

Nicos Nouris: When we interview these people, we always ask: "Why did you come to Cyprus? What do you want?" And they all answer the same thing: "We don't want to stay in Cyprus." They say, "We were told we were coming to a European country, and from there, we would be forwarded to other countries. I want to go to Germany. I want to go to France." If I were to conduct a poll among migrants, the vast majority would say they want to go to Germany.

So, the answer is consistent. They're not coming here to stay. The smugglers told them that as soon as they arrive in a European country—Cyprus, in this case—they would then be able to go anywhere they want. But the smugglers never told them that Cyprus is not part of the Schengen Area, so they cannot move freely.

It's hard to believe, but some of these people did not know Cyprus was an island and genuinely thought that once they arrived in Cyprus, they could just walk or drive to Germany. We're talking about very poor people who were taken advantage of—paying fortunes and putting themselves in danger, especially through sea crossings. Most of them are young men, under 30, and the majority came through the Green Line.

Black Markets in Regular Sectors

Emmanuel Comte: We reached this point in the conversation because we were interested in black market activities, and we quickly focused on migrant smuggling networks from Africa to Europe.

Before we close this chapter, can I confirm: is migrant smuggling the main area of black market activity involving migrants? Or are they also involved in sectors like construction, delivery, or agriculture?

Nicos Nouris: Those other sectors involve minor infractions. A number of migrants are also involved in these sectors too. But if you ask someone to smuggle drugs, they know they're doing something illegal. In contrast, with sectors like agriculture, local employers—sometimes even knowingly—take advantage of these people.

We've had several incidents where illegal migrants, unable to obtain asylum and without any legal status, were simply walking around the island. We didn't have the infrastructure to host them, so they were left to look for work, ideally legal employment. But some people exploited them, saying, "If you want to work in the fields, you can. Here's your daily wage." And after the job was done, that was it—no contracts, no security.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the goal was to avoid social security payments. Do you have a minimum wage?

Nicos Nouris: Yes, we do. But they couldn't be employed legally because they didn't have asylum status.

Emmanuel Comte: So, legally speaking, employers couldn't hire them, but they still did—informally—to save on costs.

Nicos Nouris: Exactly. And it wasn't just about saving money. Employers had no obligations toward these workers—no healthcare, no permanent employment, no year-round commitment. For

example, in agriculture, the busy season lasts only four or five months. Once that period ends, they let them go. And yes, they often hid them as well.

Emmanuel Comte: So even though there's a minimum wage, they were paid below that?

Nicos Nouris: Yes. If someone is illegal in a country and goes to an employer to demand the minimum wage, the employer can just say no. These workers had no rights. This is undeclared work. We are actively combating it—with the police, with the Ministry of Labor—but it's a major challenge. At one point, 6% of Cyprus's population was migrants, the highest rate among the 27 EU countries. So, you can imagine how easy it was for this kind of exploitation to take place. Over 90% of them were in the country illegally.

Emmanuel Comte: In those 6%, you don't include British nationals, correct? Irregular migrants—6% of the population is made up of migrants who arrived irregularly?

Nicos Nouris: Yes, that's correct.

Emmanuel Comte: Alright. That is indeed a significant number. Are they involved in sectors such as agriculture—we mentioned that—tourism, retail, construction?

Nicos Nouris: Yes, they are. However, it's a bit difficult to employ them in hotels, for example, because they have to be visible, which is risky for both the employers and the migrants themselves. Perhaps in kitchen work, but they usually seek jobs that keep them out of sight.

Emmanuel Comte: So, potentially, they are involved across many parts of the Cypriot economy. But of course, from the Ministry of Interior's point of view, the most serious challenges involve drug and human trafficking.

Human Trafficking and Minors

Nicos Nouris: Yes, particularly human trafficking. I want to focus on that—especially concerning minors. In 2020, we saw an astonishing number of unaccompanied minors arriving daily on the island. These were children as young as ten, up to seventeen years old, arriving alone from Turkey. They were flying in on planes. Can you imagine? Turkish authorities were allowing unaccompanied minors to board flights. They would arrive at the airport, and from there they were transferred to the areas controlled by the Republic.

At that time, my colleague, the Deputy Minister of Welfare, was overwhelmed. They were scrambling to find small hotels in specific parts of the island to host these children. But hosting them wasn't enough. When you're dealing with children, it's not just about giving them a bed and a plate of food. Unlike adults, children need care and protection.

Unfortunately, the country didn't have the infrastructure or facilities to accommodate such large numbers of minors. That became one of my key battles in Brussels. I tried to explain that since we knew the point of origin for many of these migrants, Europe had to take action.

I requested the direct involvement of the President of the Republic, because I needed maximum political backing to manage the situation. What we asked of Europe was twofold: First,

we insisted that Turkey comply with the 2016 EU–Turkey agreement. You'll recall that after the migration crisis of March 2016, that agreement was signed for Turkey to host 3 million Syrians in exchange for EU funding.

But the agreement also required Turkey to prevent the onward movement of migrants to other European countries—including Cyprus. We had no diplomatic relations with Turkey, so we needed the EU to exert pressure.

Second, we asked for increased surveillance of Turkey's southern coast—especially the port of Antalya—because many of the boats headed for the occupied part of Cyprus were departing from there.

We requested that Frontex monitor these departures and also establish an office at Istanbul Airport to screen flights bound for Cyprus, particularly to prevent unaccompanied minors from boarding.

I'm pleased to say that the second part of our request was implemented. In 2022 and 2023, Frontex began monitoring those flights. This is the main reason arrivals have now decreased—not because of some miracle, but because there are now effective checks at the airports.

Immigrants and Irregular Trades

Emmanuel Comte: Very interesting. I understand that the smuggling aspect is crucial. But to conclude, regarding drugs, I understand that the human smuggling networks are targeting people aiming to go to Germany, as you mentioned. But what about the drug trade? Is it oriented toward the local market in Cyprus, or is it part of a broader European network?

Nicos Nouris: To address the second part of your question—honestly, I'm not sure. But I can certainly speak to the first part. Yes, across the Green Line, through the fields, we're not just dealing with irregular crossings; we're also seeing significant drug trafficking. The primary substances are hashish and cocaine.

Emmanuel Comte: And where are they coming from? The occupied part?

Nicos Nouris: Yes, from the occupied part of Cyprus. It's not that they're producing the drugs there necessarily, but the area is essentially lawless and loosely controlled. So, once human trafficking is facilitated there, it becomes relatively easy to conduct drug trafficking as well.

To support this claim further, I suggest you speak with someone from the Customs Service. It would be a very insightful interview. We are losing considerable revenue in taxes because drugs aren't the only contraband. Cigarettes and alcohol also cross the Green Line illegally on a daily basis—night after night, transported in cars through the fields.

I could even tell you specific brand names, though it may not be appropriate. But I'll mention one—Absolut Vodka. It's outrageous. I don't know where it's produced, but it arrives with counterfeit labeling. If you ask the legal importer of Absolut Vodka—I can give you his name and number—he'll confirm that it's a massive issue. Consumption keeps increasing over the years, while official imports are dropping. Why? Because the supply is entering the Republic illegally from the occupied part of the island..

All of these developments are the reason we've had to implement surveillance measures along the Green Line.

Cyprus, Turkey, and Demographic Strategy

Emmanuel Comte: So, we're getting to the core of the issue. From your perspective, the authorities in the north—if I may use that term—are at best passively allowing, if not actively facilitating, this circumvention of the Republic's taxation and migration controls.

Let's turn to that now. Are they simply passive, or are they acting deliberately? For instance, if I take a flight to Ercan airport, I notice there is no serious control. Is this a deliberate policy of turning a blind eye?

Nicos Nouris: I believe it's a combination of both. First, many Turkish Cypriots—who are considered citizens of the Republic of Cyprus—possess travel documents issued by the Republic. As EU citizens, they are allowed to travel freely using those documents. There are around 100,000 of them.

But today, the population in the occupied part of Cyprus is estimated to be close to half a million. The majority of people living there are not Turkish Cypriots; they are Turkish nationals with no historical or legal connection to Cyprus. These individuals are settlers. They were sent over and have settled there, taking advantage of our land and our assets.

I myself am a refugee—both my parents lost their properties because of the invasion. Their property is now inhabited by people from Anatolia. These settlers have no connection to Cyprus. They're simply exploiting the situation. This is why I say the illegal authorities in the occupied part are not just passive—they are deliberately altering the demographics of the island.

By importing around 400,000 Turkish nationals, they are actively trying to change the population balance. Back in 1960, when the Republic of Cyprus was established, Turkish Cypriots were a clear minority. Now, there's a concerted effort to make them the majority through mass importation from Turkey.

Simultaneously, they are pushing irregular migrants into the areas controlled by the Republic. This causes financial strain, security risks, and demographic shifts. The European Union considers a 1% migrant population to be an acceptable benchmark. In Cyprus, this figure is now over 6%.

Emmanuel Comte: You're referring to irregular migrants?

Nicos Nouris: Yes. Irregular migrants.

Emmanuel Comte: That's quite a significant difference.

Nicos Nouris: Indeed. And that's just the beginning. The first issue is demographics—altering the population composition. But I must also mention religion. The overwhelming majority of these irregular migrants are Muslims, and many are even radical or fundamentalist.

Emmanuel Comte: You mean the Turkish migrants?

Nicos Nouris: No, I'm referring to the irregular migrants from other countries, not Turkish nationals. This is a different group entirely.

Emmanuel Comte: Migrants, yes.

Nicos Nouris: People arriving here represent about 6% of the population. Many of them are Muslims—some, I must say, are fanatic Muslims. So, when you integrate into a society a group with such a profile in proportions larger than what is manageable, you inevitably create security issues.

As I mentioned earlier, we're now facing problems we never had before: murders, black market activity. Historically, Cyprus was always considered safer than many other European countries. That still holds true to some extent, but we've definitely seen a rise in criminal incidents—incidents we never used to have. Quite a number of them involve migrants. I don't want to generalize, but the trend is there.

Emmanuel Comte: Can you give some examples of these crimes involving migrants?

Nicos Nouris: We've had cases of assassinations carried out by contract killers who turned out to be foreigners—migrants.

Emmanuel Comte: Who are the targets in these assassinations? Businesspeople?

Nicos Nouris: Yes, mostly individuals involved in nightlife operations—control of nightclubs, prostitution rings. These are disputes over money, territory, and influence.

Emmanuel Comte: Let's look more closely at that. What exactly triggers assassinations in nightlife circles? Is it prostitution?

Nicos Nouris: Prostitution, drugs, illegal gambling—everything. It's the same everywhere. Turn on your TV and watch any American crime film—you'll see exactly what's happening here, of course, on a lower scale. Mafia is mafia.

Emmanuel Comte: Black market?

Nicos Nouris: Black market, it's trafficking, drugs, money laundering. It's all connected. If someone wants to enter a country illegally, they'll find someone to provide fraudulent travel documents. That's how these networks operate.

The only difference between countries is scale. In a small country like Cyprus, the criminal operations are smaller, but in larger countries, they're obviously on a different scale.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you see Cyprus becoming a hub for money laundering, or is it limited to local operations?

Nicos Nouris: No, there's no evidence of Cyprus being used for large-scale international money laundering. It's limited to smaller, local operations. There's no indication of broader involvement in major laundering schemes.

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you. Let's move back to Turkish policies. You believe they are deliberate?

Nicos Nouris: Yes, I do.

Emmanuel Comte: And the end goal?

Nicos Nouris: The Republic of Cyprus is a recognised state and a member of the European Union. The EU considers the entire island as part of its territory, but EU law—the *acquis communautaire*—is not implemented in the area not controlled by the Republic. The living standards in the occupied part are significantly lower.

I've always said it's a mix of deliberate policy and circumstance. For instance, there are over 40,000 Turkish troops stationed in the occupied part. Are we seriously expected to believe they cannot control who crosses the Green Line?

If a Greek Cypriot attempts to cross into the occupied areas, they are apprehended almost immediately. The occupied side has surveillance systems, monitoring cameras, and military patrols. So why don't they prevent the crossings from their side?

Let me say something sensitive, which I couldn't talk about when I was Minister for obvious reasons: the United Nations.

What is the role of the UN in Cyprus? The UN controls the buffer zone—not the occupied area, but a neutral area maintained by the Republic of Cyprus to separate the two armies: the Turkish forces and the Republic's National Guard. The UN is supposed to ensure no one crosses this zone.

Yet they have never helped prevent migrants from crossing from the occupied part to the Republic-controlled areas. Why? I honestly don't know, and I won't speculate. But in my discussions with them, they said, "That is not part of our mandate."

And my question is: then what is your mandate? You're supposed to prevent crossings. You cannot tell who someone is just by looking—whether they are Greek Cypriot, Turkish Cypriot, or a migrant. For security reasons alone, they should be stopping these crossings. But they've done absolutely nothing.

Emmanuel Comte: So, do you think the end goal is that they're trying to "Turkify"—if that's the right term—the entire island? Maybe I meant "Turkify" in the sense of bringing it under their control and reuniting it under their own terms?

Nicos Nouris: If you ask me, the answer is yes. Turkey has always pursued a long-term strategy. They're not thinking in the short term; they're planning decades ahead. So yes, I believe they are capable of anything.

Cyprus and the Schengen Zone

Nicos Nouris: That's also another reason why, coming back to our subject, we had to take surveillance measures along the Green Line. Politically, we needed to be extremely careful with our actions because voices were claiming, "You're dividing Cyprus." Which is ridiculous.

By implementing deterrent measures along the Green Line, people accused us of putting up barriers. But we have obligations—as a sovereign state and as a member of the European Union. First of all, we must comply with the 2004 Green Line Regulation, which was signed when the Republic of Cyprus became a full EU member. What does this regulation say? It stipulates that anyone wishing to cross from the occupied areas to the areas controlled by the Republic must do so only through legal crossing points.

And secondly, they must hold valid travel documents and must have arrived on the island through a legal port or airport. So, if a migrant enters Cyprus illegally, they are not allowed to cross the Green Line. As a country, we are obliged to prevent these crossings.

The next step is our political objective: joining the Schengen Area. But Europe keeps questioning Cyprus. One of the main reasons is migration and the situation on the Green Line.

We're told we lack sufficient control. Yes, but the problem is our lack of control over the entire territory. Migrants can cross the Green Line in uncontrolled ways, and if we want to join Schengen, we must ensure who is entering the country legally.

A major issue preventing our entry into Schengen is the risk of illegal migration. As you rightly mentioned, geographically, Cyprus lies at the crossroads of three continents. We are near regions plagued by war—Palestine, Syria, and others. So, we face continuous migration flows. The EU is concerned that if Cyprus joins the Schengen Area and gains open borders within Europe, these flows will increase even more. That's a real fear.

But from our side, joining Schengen remains a top priority. We're convinced it will significantly boost our tourism industry. It will also benefit the construction sector, particularly housing. Many Europeans are eager to move here, buy homes, and live without facing border checks.

Emmanuel Comte: Indeed.

Nicos Nouris: In the last few years alone, the EU has provided significant financial support to Cyprus for handling migration and strengthening our border security. In fact, the EU has allocated approximately €292 million so far toward efforts that align with our goal of joining Schengen.

Emmanuel Comte: What exactly is this money used for?

Nicos Nouris: It's used for two main purposes: managing migration and reinforcing border control. This includes improving infrastructure at ports and airports, implementing the Schengen Information System (SIS), and enhancing document verification processes. All of this requires substantial investment—in technology, personnel, and facilities.

Emmanuel Comte: Over what period?

Nicos Nouris: Roughly over the past four to five years. I'm not entirely sure about the exact timeframe, but I know the amount of money—it is €292 million up to today, allocated specifically for this issue. Personally, I participated in several discussions regarding Cyprus's entry into the Schengen Area. We were very eager for this to happen, for both political and economic reasons, as I mentioned earlier.

However, I felt there were clear restrictions on their side. The way they handled Cyprus's participation in the Schengen Zone has been a slow and protracted process. Cyprus is only the

second country among the European Union member states that has had to undergo such an intensive procedure.

The Risks for Cyprus

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, it's a very interesting and complex situation here on the island of Cyprus. So, do you think that Turkey has a deliberate policy of settlement—of Turkish settlements on the island—combined with a policy of channeling or turning a blind eye to inflows of migrants from Africa, the Middle East, or Muslim-majority countries, in order to change the demographic composition of the island? Is that your suspicion?

Nicos Nouris: I don't merely suspect it—we have sufficient evidence to show that this is part of a broader strategy Turkey is pursuing. Just a few days ago, for example, you might have seen that President Erdogan visited Cyprus and suggested to the Turkish Cypriots that they must introduce the hijab in schools. This is something entirely inappropriate—not just for a small island but for any European country.

To enforce such religious mandates goes against the more secular and European character of the Turkish Cypriots. The Turkish Cypriots have traditionally been more liberal in their religious outlook. Yet, this attempt to transplant policies from Turkey into Cyprus reflects a clear intention: to transform the island into a Turkish province. That's just one example.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. So, you are suggesting a parallel between the issue of Cyprus for Greece and the issue of Crimea for Ukraine. I understand the geopolitical threat is serious and absolutely central. And this threat is linked to migration.

Nicos Nouris: Indeed. And let me respond indirectly by pointing out that this is also why Turkey has never become, and likely will never become, a member of the European Union. The differences are simply too vast. Cyprus, on the other hand, is part of Europe. That means the challenges we face are European challenges, just like in Greece, Italy, or France. However, the situation is complicated by the continued occupation.

Emmanuel Comte: I wonder if the settlement policy has involved incentives, possibly offering seized properties for free in the north. For example, the people currently living in your family home—did they receive it from the state?

Nicos Nouris: I don't know all the specific details, but I do know that in the years following the invasion, both Turkish Cypriots and settlers were allocated plots of land. Gradually, people from Anatolia, particularly eastern Turkey, were brought to settle in Cyprus.

The motivation behind this is more than obvious since over the years their numbers increased, especially after the intercommunal negotiation talks in Crans-Montana, Switzerland.

At that time, the situation in the occupied areas was relatively stable. There weren't major investments or demographic changes being made, as there was hope for a negotiated solution, possibly including land exchanges.

Since then, however, things have deteriorated. I don't want to sound pessimistic, but I'm not optimistic that a solution is within reach. Now that it seems there will be no land exchange or

return of occupied territories, Turkey is rapidly proceeding with building mosques and shifting the island's demographic balance. Their goal is to make the occupied part of Cyprus indistinguishable from a province of Turkey.

Possible Solutions

Emmanuel Comte: Yes. So, the properties in the north were distributed firstly to Turkish Cypriots, but as you suggest, perhaps there was another pool of seized properties that allowed the authorities to distribute them also to people from mainland Turkey.

Were these properties sold or simply given out? Do you know what the allocation mechanism was?

Nicos Nouris: I'm not aware of the details, no. But definitely nowadays properties are given both to Turkish Cypriots and settlers.

Emmanuel Comte: Alright. So, this is a complex situation. But it seems to me that if there were no division and a unified authority controlled the island, many of these problems could disappear. Restoring property rights, for instance, would remove incentives for people from the mainland to settle.

If those properties weren't used as inducements for settlement and instead there were a normal housing market, you wouldn't see these new settlements forming. But at the moment, the Republic of Cyprus has no control over that part of the island. I'm thinking broadly here in terms of what a potential solution might look like.

Nicos Nouris: The solution must be to resolve the Cyprus issue. As long as we don't have a solution, and the Republic of Cyprus cannot intervene in the occupied part, we are powerless. Everything there is done by force. Turkey holds the power. It's Turkey versus a small island.

Even though we enjoy a very strong and equal political position among European countries, at the end of the day, Turkey is Turkey.

So, unless we achieve a stable and lasting solution that guarantees long-term stability on the island, unfortunately, we can't do much in that part of Cyprus.

Emmanuel Comte: You mentioned there are 40,000 Turkish troops on the island. So clearly, Turkey and Ankara have a decisive role in any possible solution.

What, in your view, could persuade them to accept a reunified island with a joint authority—something that might eliminate many of the problems you've described? What would lead Turkey to make such a concession?

Nicos Nouris: In politics, everything is about give and take. Cyprus, by itself, cannot offer Turkey anything. But Europe can. That's why the Cypriot government has never opposed the development of EU–Turkey relations. We've always been willing to find a solution, even through give and take within the broader European context.

If Turkey were offered something like partial EU accession, that might be the key incentive. On the other hand side, if the United States— one of Turkey's stronger allies—insisted, for political reasons, that Turkey should withdraw from Cyprus, this can happen.

Think of what's happening in Ukraine. President Trump is pressuring the Ukrainians to make concessions, not because he supports them per se, but for his own political reasons. It's still politics. It's all give and take.

Unfortunately, at present, there is nothing on the horizon here in Cyprus that gives us grounds for optimism. I don't see anything changing in the near future.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you think Turkey is using the Cyprus issue as a bargaining chip with the EU? Essentially as a form of blackmail to secure some kind of EU membership or other concessions? That would be quite unprecedented—no country has secured EU membership through geopolitical blackmail, even though economic negotiations are common.

Nicos Nouris: Indeed. I've participated in several ministerial councils in Europe. Whenever Turkey was invited as an observer—especially during the implementation of the 2016 migration agreement—Turkey always pointed out that although it had an agreement with the EU, it was not implemented with regard to Cyprus, a member state.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. Do you think, at the most basic level, the Europeans can trust the Turkish government on this issue? If, for instance, there was an agreement on membership.

Nicos Nouris: I don't think I'm the appropriate person to give you an honest answer. I'm very straightforward: I do not trust Turkey.

Emmanuel Comte: Okay. That's a clear position.

Nicos Nouris: Yes. And it's not because of something abstract—I'm basing it on their political behavior. One day they say one thing, and the next day they say something completely different. Just look at their policies over the past few years: toward Greece, toward Israel. They shift positions according to the geopolitical situation. Take Syria, for example. They've invaded Northern Syria and now claim, "We're going to stay here because our rights are here." How can I trust such a country?

Emmanuel Comte: And there are 40,000 Turkish troops on the island. How many troops do you have here?

Nicos Nouris: Around 6,000.

Emmanuel Comte: I understand. And Cyprus is not part of NATO.

Nicos Nouris: No, we're not. Despite the fact that at certain times, some of our governments considered it. But becoming a member of NATO requires unanimous approval from all current member states. And one of those countries is Turkey. Turkey would never vote in favor of Cyprus joining NATO.

Emmanuel Comte: Realistically, I think we need to think beyond NATO nowadays. If, in the future, there is a new European security organization that replaces NATO, Cyprus could be part of

it. That might help restore a balance of power on the island, which is essential for any potential settlement of this issue.

Concluding Notes

Emmanuel Comte: This was a really insightful conversation—thank you very much. What are your projects now?

Nicos Nouris: Nowadays, I chair the board of The Limassol Island's School Charitable Foundation, and I also serve as a consultant in the health sector. It's very interesting to return to the private sector.

Emmanuel Comte: That sounds like an exciting transition.

Nicos Nouris: Yes it is. It was a great experience being a member of Parliament, serving in government, and working with local authorities. But the private sector is always more dynamic. You can challenge yourself, explore new areas, and do completely different things. I'm happy to be healthy and to be starting this new phase in my career.

Emmanuel Comte: Perfect. Thank you very much, Mr. Nouris. It was a pleasure to exchange views with you.

Nicos Nouris: Migration will never end. I always say: as long as there are people on this planet, migration will exist. We must view migration as a social issue, not simply an economic one.

That's why I strongly disagreed when, in June 2024, the government of Cyprus signed the so-called Common European Asylum Agreement. It does not address the key concern of our island. Our concern—shared with the other four Mediterranean countries, Greece, Malta, Italy, and Spain, with whom we formed the MED5 coalition—is that solidarity in Europe should mean the horizontal redistribution of migrants across all 27 member states. That would mean reducing Cyprus's share from 6% to around 1%.

Instead of that kind of solidarity, the new EU migration policy allows member states to opt out of relocating migrants by paying €20,000 per migrant to the receiving country. This is completely unacceptable—and not even humanitarian.

This is not solidarity. If we say that migration is a humanitarian issue, we must treat it as such. Paying countries to keep migrants is not a humanitarian approach—it turns the issue into a financial transaction. That's not solidarity. That's economics. Let's hope that in the near future this policy will be amended to serve equally the interest of all EU member states.