States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode #22 ‘Cyprus on the Edge: Migration, Conflict, and the EU’s Border Dilemma (with Eleni Mavrou)’

Enhanced transcript

By Emmanuel Comte

Abstract: In this episode, Emmanuel Comte speaks with Eleni Mavrou—former Interior Minister of Cyprus and the first female mayor of Nicosia—to examine how migration is governed in a divided EU member state. They discuss the realities of asylum seekers, undeclared labor, housing crises, and religious tensions in the buffer zone city of Nicosia. Mavrou shares unique insights into EU-Cyprus migration policy, the role of the Green Line, and how Cyprus’s exclusion from the Schengen Area complicates its position as a gateway to Europe. With rising pressure on the Eastern Mediterranean route, this testimony sheds light on a critical yet overlooked frontier in European migration governance.

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: How can migration be governed in a divided city, on a divided island, and within a fragmented region where history, politics, and culture draw sharp front lines? And what happens when such a region is gripped by demographic upheaval and simultaneous geopolitical turmoil?

Today, I am interviewing Eleni Mavrou, a major figure in Cypriot public life. She was the first woman to serve as mayor of Nicosia and later became Minister of Interior during a period of rising migration pressures and intense European debate. Together, we are exploring the complexities of immigration governance in Cyprus. We will discuss the daily realities of migration—from street-level community tensions to black market activities, and from managing criminality to negotiating with European and international actors.

Mrs. Mavrou, thank you very much for talking with me today.

Eleni Mavrou: It's a pleasure.

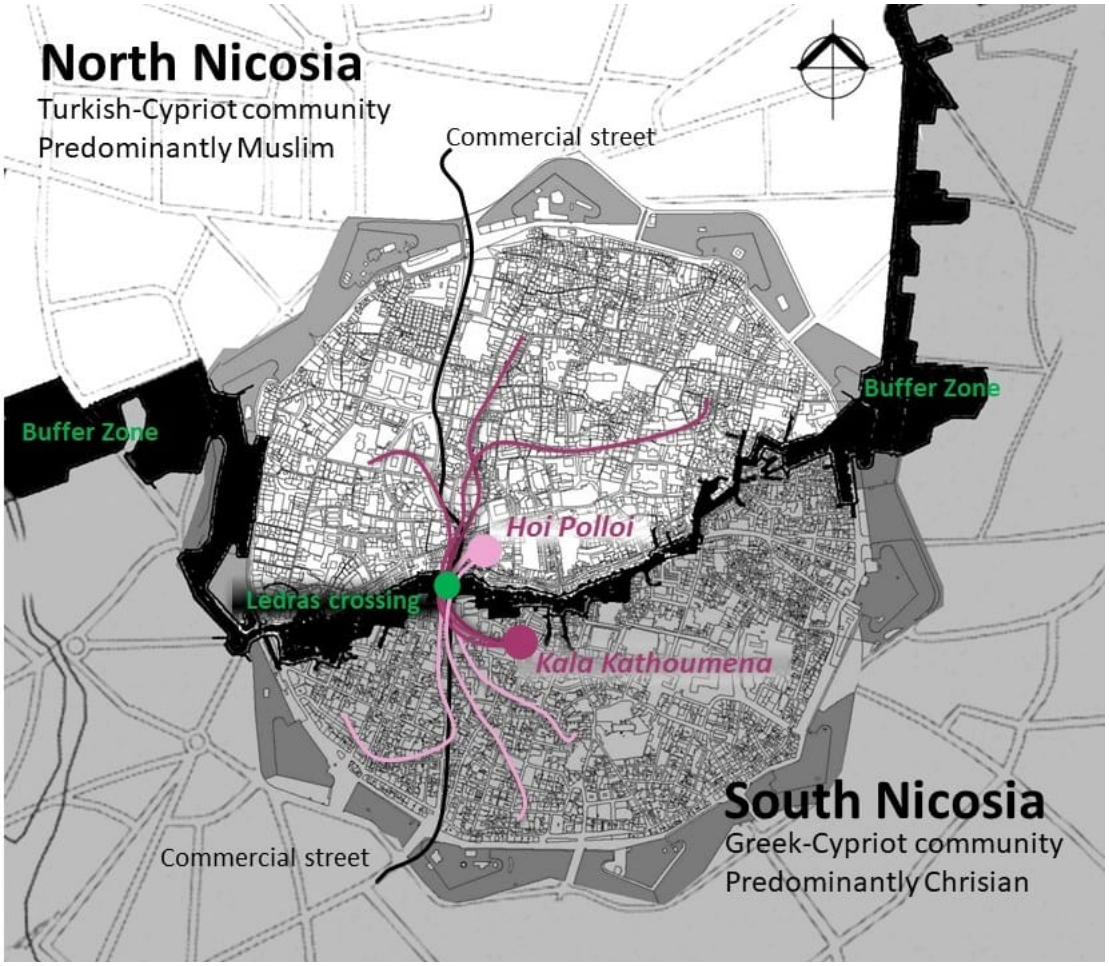
Getting Involved with Immigration at the City Level

Emmanuel Comte: What first brought you into contact with the issue of immigration in your political life?

Eleni Mavrou: Life itself. Migration was not really an issue for Cyprus until the late 1980s or early 1990s. We used to be a country of emigrants; we were not used to having immigrants in

Cyprus. That started changing in the early 1990s, mostly to encourage employment in various sectors of the economy—tourism, agriculture, and so on.

But at a certain point, the number of migrants began to increase rapidly. Then, the number of refugees started rising as well. So, when I took office as Mayor of Nicosia, migrants already had a very strong presence in certain areas of the city—especially the walled city, but not only there.



Eleni Mavrou: The old city, let's say. And this created a number of challenges.

Emmanuel Comte: Where were these migrants from?

Eleni Mavrou: Mostly from Syria and Egypt—Arab countries in general. We also had many women from the Philippines and Sri Lanka at that time in the 2000s. So, primarily from Asia and the Arab world. Many of them were in Cyprus with work permits—quite a large number. But there were also asylum seekers, people who had crossed through the buffer zone and were in the country without any papers. So they were, in effect, invisible.

Emmanuel Comte: These asylum seekers, I suppose, were fleeing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Africa at that time?

Eleni Mavrou: Not much from Africa then. We had some from Iraq, a few from Somalia, but not even many from Afghanistan at that point. The number of asylum seekers was still low. We had Kurds from Iraq and Turkey, and people from Syria—mostly of Kurdish origin.

The number of asylum seekers started rising significantly after the outbreak of war in Syria in 2011. From that point onwards, we began receiving more asylum seekers from other regions as well.

Emmanuel Comte: So, at that time, Cyprus had mostly migrant workers on low wages, living in unsuitable housing, correct?

Eleni Mavrou: Exactly. Many of them lived in overcrowded conditions, in buildings that were not fit for habitation, and without formal rental contracts. So, as a municipality, one of the first things we focused on was improving their housing and employment conditions—especially housing.

At the same time, we had to address religious differences. After the 1974 Turkish invasion, the mosques in the areas controlled by the Republic were not operational. There were no imams, and the mosques had been essentially abandoned.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you had to restore functioning mosques?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, we had to accommodate that need as well. Regarding housing, we focused more on the landlords—the property owners—rather than directly on the migrants themselves.

Emmanuel Comte: What do you mean?

Eleni Mavrou: We worked with the landlords to improve the housing conditions.

Emmanuel Comte: These landlords were Greek Cypriots?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, exactly. In many cases, landlords were renting out old shops—places without proper facilities like bathrooms or toilets. So, we had to work with them to upgrade the living conditions and to stop them from overcrowding these spaces. You couldn't have 20 people living in a house meant for five or six. This created friction between the local residents and the migrants.

Emmanuel Comte: So, there were neighborhood conflicts?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. For example, you cannot have 20 people showering in a garden with a hose because the building has no facilities. So, we tried to improve living conditions and, at the same time, reduce the friction between migrants and local Cypriots.

Emmanuel Comte: What was your role in this? Was it more of a conciliatory, intermediary role? Or did you involve the police?

Eleni Mavrou: In Cyprus, municipalities have no jurisdiction over the police. But, the police were involved in some cases—particularly in operations targeting undocumented migrants, those without legal papers.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the police would come when there was a neighborhood conflict and remove migrants who were irregular?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, but usually that was part of broader political decisions.

Emmanuel Comte: Did these neighborhood conflicts ever escalate into violence between migrants and locals?

Eleni Mavrou: In my experience, incidents of violence involving migrants were very rare—at least during my tenure as mayor. Most violent incidents involved rivalry between migrant groups themselves, often for religious or political reasons.

Emmanuel Comte: That's interesting. Before we move on to those tensions, let's stay for a moment on the housing issue. You mentioned that many migrants lived in the old city of Nicosia. How do you explain that?

Housing and Integration Challenges

Eleni Mavrou: After 1974, many buildings in the old city were abandoned. The same applied to some areas outside the old city, particularly along the Green Line. These areas were largely deserted after the war, so many buildings were simply left unused.

Emmanuel Comte: So were migrants squatting in those buildings?

Eleni Mavrou: No, they were renting them.

Emmanuel Comte: So, there were landlords, but the buildings had been abandoned?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. The buildings had been left unused, but there were still legal owners renting them out.

Emmanuel Comte: Who owned the property rights to the buildings?

Eleni Mavrou: They were mostly Greek Cypriot owners.

Emmanuel Comte: And these owners said, "Okay, my building isn't being used, so I'll let migrants rent it"?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: And these types of buildings were primarily in the old city because that's where Turkish Cypriots used to live?

Eleni Mavrou: No, we are mostly talking about buildings owned by Greek Cypriots. These properties became vacant because people didn't feel safe for a number of years, so they left.

Emmanuel Comte: Due to the invasion?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. Even after the summer of 1974, there weren't outright conflicts, but there were incidents that made people feel insecure.

Emmanuel Comte: Did they move abroad or just elsewhere on the island?

Eleni Mavrou: Some moved abroad, but mostly they relocated elsewhere on the island.

Emmanuel Comte: Was there a fear the properties would be taken over?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. Over time, some people decided to rent them out. Some may have returned temporarily, but they didn't feel secure enough to invest in maintaining the properties. So, as the houses became harder to live in, people moved out again. Often, the older generation stayed for a while, but eventually, they too had to leave.

Emmanuel Comte: So, there were many available buildings?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, and they were affordable for migrants. At the same time, they were highly profitable for landlords. The rent wasn't fixed per unit. Instead, if one tenant paid 100 and there

were nine more people each paying the same, 100 might seem like a low rent per person, but for the landlord, the total income was substantial—much more than they could get otherwise.

Emmanuel Comte: Were those rental contracts formal, or were they outside legal frameworks?

Eleni Mavrou: No, they were mostly part of the black market.

Emmanuel Comte: Were there rental contract regulations in Nicosia back then? Or was it unregulated? Were these contracts technically illegal, or did the municipality and the Republic simply not regulate them?

Eleni Mavrou: Rental contracts are not regulated—even now.

Emmanuel Comte: So, even if informal, it was still technically legal?

Eleni Mavrou: Well, no—it's not legal. From a tax perspective, landlords must declare a rental agreement to pay tax on the income.

Emmanuel Comte: So, taxes weren't being paid?

Eleni Mavrou: No, not at all. Most of these rental arrangements were verbal.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the main reason for not declaring the contract was to avoid paying taxes. In other countries, strict regulations often exist—you can't rent a place unless it meets a minimum number of square meters per person, proper ventilation, sanitation, and so on. But this kind of regulation didn't exist in Nicosia?

Eleni Mavrou: No, such regulations didn't exist. But we later began applying some related regulations concerning public health. At some point, the municipality began discussing and encouraging interventions, although not very successfully. We started closing down buildings that did not meet required standards.

Emmanuel Comte: Ah, so you intervened directly?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, in those cases, we acted for public health reasons, based on relevant regulations.

Emmanuel Comte: Did you fear any outbreaks of disease?

Eleni Mavrou: No, not really. But it was a very productive, practical, and immediate way to bring about change.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. So, you invoked public health as a justification to stop the situation?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, to a certain extent.

Emmanuel Comte: Understood. So, there was a combination of factors. On one hand, the geopolitical situation played a role. It reminds me of a quote from a German chancellor before World War I—his name was Bethmann Hollweg. He told his son not to plant trees in their estate in Eastern Germany because the Russians would eventually take the land. Similarly, the landlords in Nicosia didn't invest much in their buildings, fearing they might be taken over one day. On top of that, they had migrants who were willing to accept very poor housing conditions. So, there was no incentive to invest in the properties.

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, you've summarized it very well.

Conflicts Among Immigrants

Emmanuel Comte: You also mentioned that public health concerns were used to justify municipal intervention. But earlier, you also referred to conflicts between migrants—sometimes based on religion or politics. Could you elaborate?

Eleni Mavrou: I may not be fully versed in the details, but for example, we witnessed conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Emmanuel Comte: In what context—during the 2000s or earlier?

Eleni Mavrou: At that time, during the 2000s.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you know why these conflicts occurred?

Eleni Mavrou: Not exactly. For example, some mosques had Shia imams, others had Sunni imams. I can't say more with certainty.

Emmanuel Comte: So, was there an effort to dedicate particular mosques to specific confessions?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. But I'm just saying that most incidents of violence occurred between migrants, and the reasons were usually religious—mostly between different branches of Islam. But not exclusively. Sometimes they were political.

Emmanuel Comte: What kind of political reasons?

Eleni Mavrou: Among Syrians, for example.

Emmanuel Comte: Was this before or after the outbreak of the Syrian war?

Eleni Mavrou: Even before the war. There were also conflicts among Kurds—for example, between those supporting the PKK and others who opposed it. Some were from Syria, others from Turkey.

Emmanuel Comte: Were there instances of physical violence between these groups in the streets?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes.

Emmanuel Comte: At night or in broad daylight?

Eleni Mavrou: Usually at night, but sometimes during the day as well.

Emmanuel Comte: And how did you respond to that?

Eleni Mavrou: The municipality was not involved in those cases. The police took over. To be honest, we were not prepared. We were not in a position to deal with such phenomena. These were new experiences for Cyprus.

Immigrants' Employment

Emmanuel Comte: And how did these people earn a living in Cyprus?

Eleni Mavrou: Most of them worked in the construction sector.

Emmanuel Comte: With work permits?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, with legal work permits. Some also worked in agriculture, but mostly in construction—especially people from Syria and Egypt.

Emmanuel Comte: So, they were employed legally, paying social security contributions?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. As I mentioned earlier, the number of asylum seekers was just starting to rise. Up to that point, the number of refugees we had was small.

Emmanuel Comte: Did you have a minimum wage back then in Cyprus?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes.

Emmanuel Comte: Then why were these people unable to pay normal rent if they had regular employment contracts? Was the minimum wage binding?

Eleni Mavrou: No, it wasn't binding at that time.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the wages were very low?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, and most of them were employed by small businesses—small contractors—so they weren't covered by collective agreements. For instance, they didn't get overtime, and they worked weekends without extra pay.

Emmanuel Comte: So, they found work mostly with small companies, in construction or perhaps in agriculture, and they lived in abandoned buildings in the old town?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. Most of them were men. Also, at the time—and still today—a large number of women were working as domestic helpers in private homes.

Emmanuel Comte: So, these men were not alone on the island? Were their wives working as well?

Eleni Mavrou: No, not necessarily. The women were mostly working as live-in domestic workers. They stayed in the homes of the families who employed them.

Emmanuel Comte: So, in the city, you had very few migrant women living independently?

Eleni Mavrou: Very few. And also, very few families.

Emmanuel Comte: Were these young men and women forming relationships or families?

Eleni Mavrou: Not really. They weren't forming families or relationships. There were significant cultural differences. The women were mostly from Asia—countries like the Philippines and Sri Lanka—while the men were mainly from Arab countries such as Iraq.

Emmanuel Comte: So, these women worked as domestic helpers in various households?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. I'm not saying there was no contact at all—some relationships were formed, and in a few cases, families were created—but it was rare. Most of the social interaction happened during Sunday activities, since that was typically their only day off. They would gather in parks to spend the day with friends from their own countries.

Emmanuel Comte: Did these people intend to stay in Cyprus permanently, or were they mostly in transit?

Eleni Mavrou: Most of them were planning to return to their home countries—especially the women. But in some cases, especially among Syrians, that became impossible, so they stayed longer and eventually brought their families over.

Emmanuel Comte: You mentioned earlier that after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, there was a significant increase in asylum seekers. These people didn't initially have regular status. Did that change the situation regarding undeclared work?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, undeclared work already existed, even among those with work permits. Some worked legally while also doing undeclared jobs on the side.

Emmanuel Comte: When you say "on the side," do you mean they worked extra jobs beyond their official ones?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. They had main jobs but also did additional undeclared work on top.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. And then, with the arrival of more refugees—particularly asylum seekers—who were not allowed to work until their applications were processed, did undeclared work increase?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, significantly. Since asylum seekers were not allowed to work until their legal status was determined, many turned to undeclared work.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the key factor was a change in status—the fact that, normally, asylum seekers do not have the right to work. As a result, undeclared labor increased in sectors like construction and agriculture.

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, mostly in those sectors.

Emmanuel Comte: I understand there was a turning point around 2011 with the outbreak of the so-called Arab revolutions. Before that, undeclared work existed but was something additional for regular workers with valid work permits. After that, it became more widespread, and for many, it became their only activity, since their legal status didn't allow them to work formally. This shift led to losses in tax revenue and social security contributions. Has there been a minimum wage introduced?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, there is one now.

Emmanuel Comte: When was it implemented?

Eleni Mavrou: Perhaps two or three years ago.

Emmanuel Comte: Oh, so it's quite recent.

Eleni Mavrou: There was a minimum wage earlier as well, but only in specific sectors and through collective agreements.

Emmanuel Comte: So now it's general?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. However, even before, we had serious issues with undeclared work—not only from asylum seekers but also from so-called students and individuals involved in false marriages.

Emmanuel Comte: Could you elaborate on that? Let's start with the students.

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. A market emerged to meet the growing labor needs in various sectors like agriculture, construction, and eventually tourism. Certain colleges started offering courses linked to practical training, and we began receiving students from various countries who never actually attended classes.

Emmanuel Comte: So these educational institutions pretended to provide vocational training, for example in agriculture or tourism, but in reality, they were a front?

Eleni Mavrou: Exactly. They pretended to offer courses in tourism, for instance, but the individuals who came as "students" didn't necessarily work in tourism—they worked wherever there were jobs available. And no, they did not complete degrees. These colleges often didn't even have functioning classes. They existed primarily to issue student visas so people could enter Cyprus and work.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. So, this student visa system was exploited to bypass the official immigration restrictions. Migrants used these institutions, which posed as educational providers, to enter the country and work irregularly in sectors like agriculture and tourism. Was this practice widespread and long-lasting?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, it lasted for quite some time. But in recent years, I haven't heard of any new cases. The practice seems to have stopped. However, it took a long time to fully understand the problem and then to introduce and enforce proper regulations.

Emmanuel Comte: Were you already in a position of authority when these changes began? Were you mayor or minister at the time?

Eleni Mavrou: It started even when I was mayor. The most significant developments took place after Cyprus joined the EU in 2004.

Emmanuel Comte: There were immigration quotas. Were they created after you took office, or did they already exist?

Eleni Mavrou: No, it existed before I joined.

Emmanuel Comte: Was it a system of quotas per country?

Eleni Mavrou: Not exactly. It was per sector.

Emmanuel Comte: Per sector. I see.

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, and this was a characteristic of our migration policy from as early as the 1990s. Migrants were not allowed to enter sectors where there were Cypriots interested in working. If there was local employment available in a specific sector, then no permits were issued to bring in foreign workers.

Emmanuel Comte: And yet, employers were still willing to hire migrants, even in those sectors.

Eleni Mavrou: Yes.

Emmanuel Comte: Was this sector-based quota system a demand from trade unions, perhaps?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. Trade unions wanted the quotas in order to ensure that Cypriot workers were given priority.

Migration through the Green Line

Emmanuel Comte: I see. But you mentioned things changed when Cyprus joined the EU. If the quotas already existed before, why did EU accession make the issue of fake students more widespread?

Eleni Mavrou: Because, in many cases, individuals had difficulty obtaining a visa for the European Union. Cyprus, although not part of the Schengen Zone, became a more attractive entry point once it joined the EU. Many people saw Cyprus as a stepping stone to move elsewhere in Europe. In practice, however, this was not so easy.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the fact that Cyprus became an EU country made it more attractive to migrants, which increased pressure and encouraged irregular channels of entry.

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: What measures did you take to crack down on those private colleges facilitating irregular migration?

Eleni Mavrou: It wasn't easy. Several governments tried to implement measures, but eventually two key actions were taken. First, we started conducting more thorough checks on applicants in their countries of origin. We deployed immigration officers in various countries from which most of these students were coming.

Emmanuel Comte: You created new offices in those countries?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, but this effort lasted for only a short period, just to get things back under control. The second measure was conducting real inspections of the colleges themselves.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. It sounds like Cyprus came under increasing migration pressure through multiple channels. You mentioned occasional violence among migrants, but it remained limited. So far, we've mainly discussed irregular workers in sectors like agriculture, construction, and tourism. But did you ever feel that there was a broader problem with criminality among migrants?

Eleni Mavrou: According to police statistics, there was no evidence to support that reasoning.

Emmanuel Comte: So, no significant involvement in serious crimes?

Eleni Mavrou: Migrants were mostly involved in petty crimes—minor thefts, for example—not in serious criminal activity.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. And you're referring to your time as Minister or also as Mayor?

Eleni Mavrou: Primarily as Minister, and even up until a few years ago. The police statistics were clear: they did not show a significant number of immigrants involved in crime, especially serious crime.

Emmanuel Comte: So serious crimes such as armed robbery, assaults, or even murder?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, exactly. Migrants were primarily involved in petty theft, not in cases involving physical violence or serious offenses.

Emmanuel Comte: And these were what type of migrants? Mostly men?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, mostly men.

Emmanuel Comte: Men with undeclared work?

Eleni Mavrou: I don't know. Possibly, even young men, but I don't have specific information.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you didn't have the impression that migrants were involved in serious violence or drug-related activities?

Eleni Mavrou: No.

Emmanuel Comte: Alright. We've mentioned various pressures and channels of immigration into the country, including student arrangements. What about the Green Line? Was it a major factor in irregular immigration to Cyprus, or would migration have occurred anyway?

Eleni Mavrou: No, the Green Line plays a major role.

Emmanuel Comte: So, migrants would first arrive in the north?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes.

Emmanuel Comte: And then cross irregularly?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, the Green Line facilitates this. Being an island makes irregular immigration more difficult in general. However, we do have a significant number of people who enter as tourists and overstay their visas to work.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. But the vast majority of irregular migrants enter through the Green Line?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes.

Emmanuel Comte: Especially after the student arrangement was closed down?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes.

Emmanuel Comte: When did irregular migration through the Green Line begin to rise significantly?

Eleni Mavrou: Generally, irregular migration began increasing after our accession to the European Union. The number of asylum seekers also rose, especially after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. That was when we started seeing much higher numbers.

Emmanuel Comte: And that's also when the number of Green Line crossings increased?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes.

Emmanuel Comte: Were people also arriving by boat?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, some boats arrived directly in the south, but the majority came through the Green Line.

Emmanuel Comte: In the north, did they arrive by boat or by plane?

Eleni Mavrou: Both.

Emmanuel Comte: What do you think about the responsibility of the authorities in the north in this situation? Do they turn a blind eye, encourage it, or are they simply unable to control it?

Eleni Mavrou: I don't know the exact answer. There are people who support each of those three scenarios here in Cyprus. For example, Turkey hosted a vast number of Syrian refugees, and some say that Turkey couldn't cope and so encouraged people to leave through the north using flights.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you think the authorities paid for the plane tickets?

Eleni Mavrou: No, not as far as I know. The migrants had to pay for the tickets themselves. But perhaps some people in the authorities suggested, "If you go there, you will be able to cross into Europe through the Green Line."

Emmanuel Comte: And some say Turkey deliberately sends extreme Muslim young men to the south to create problems?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, that's one of the narratives. Some believe they selected the most dangerous individuals.

Emmanuel Comte: But this perspective relates to developments after your time in office, correct?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, these claims concern more recent years.

Emmanuel Comte: But irregular migration had already started when you were in office?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, it had already begun. I was Minister for only one year, but during that time we cooperated with the European Asylum Support Office because we were not equipped to handle such a large number of asylum seekers.

Emmanuel Comte: So, officers came from the European Asylum Support Office to assist?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, they helped examine asylum applications. They were stationed here for a while, then left, and later returned. We were trying to deal with something that was still quite new at the time.

Emmanuel Comte: But that was more about processing those who had already arrived, not about proactive policies to prevent irregular migration?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, our efforts were primarily focused on managing and processing the arrivals, not on prevention. At that time, Europe was still, let's say, adhering to its asylum principles. Now, that's no longer the case. Refugees are not only discouraged but actively prevented from seeking asylum. It's not easy to expel people once they've arrived. That's why the effort is to prevent them from arriving in the first place. For example, we had a number of pushbacks involving boats.

Emmanuel Comte: By the police?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes. There was a recent, tragic case, involving people who came from Libya.

Emmanuel Comte: But the Green Line is very difficult to control. Did the United Nations play any role while you were Minister of the Interior in preventing these crossings?

Eleni Mavrou: No.

Emmanuel Comte: Why not?

Eleni Mavrou: First of all, the UN doesn't patrol the entire buffer zone. It only monitors certain points. We're talking about a very long buffer line. In some cases, asylum seekers managed to get into the buffer zone, and the UN was left with the responsibility of looking after them.

Migrants reached the buffer zone but were not allowed to continue to the Republic of Cyprus checkpoint to apply for asylum. Nor could they return to where they came from—they were effectively stuck between the two sides. So, the UN was left responsible for these people—something they do not welcome.

Emmanuel Comte: Because they lack the capacity?

Eleni Mavrou: Exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: So, in these rare cases, the migrants actually tried to cross via regular checkpoints, indicating they were law-abiding. But they ended up in no man's land, and the UN

had to care for them. Yet, many others cross outside official checkpoints, and the UN does nothing in those cases.

Listening to you, it seems there's a structural issue. On the one hand, Cyprus is an EU member, which makes it attractive to migrants. On the other hand, it's outside the Schengen Area and serves as an external EU border. This puts Cyprus in a sort of holding position for many migrants—especially given its proximity to conflict zones.

So, people may think they're reaching the EU, but ultimately, they get stuck here. Was this situation already present when you were Minister, or is it more recent?

Eleni Mavrou: No, it was already present back then. But in recent years, the EU has signed several agreements with countries of origin or transit for refugees. One such country is Turkey, with which the EU has an agreement that Turkey will take back asylum seekers.

Emmanuel Comte: But this doesn't apply to Cyprus?

Eleni Mavrou: No, because Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus. For instance, if asylum seekers cross into Greece from Turkey, and Greece sends them back under the agreement, Turkey accepts them. But that process doesn't apply to Cyprus.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you think there is a problem with Cyprus' EU membership in relation to migration? What would be your solution to the fact that, as an EU country, Cyprus is attractive to migrants, yet it remains outside the Schengen Area and thus beyond the common border? What has been the official Cypriot policy regarding joining Schengen, for instance?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, we would very much like to join Schengen.

Emmanuel Comte: This desire already existed during your time as Minister?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, and it still does. Even now, there is ongoing communication between the European Union and the Republic of Cyprus concerning Schengen accession. However, as I understand it, the EU does not currently consider Cyprus a secure point of entry because of the Green Line. I don't know what the future holds regarding Schengen membership.

That said, Cyprus has consistently supported the idea that refugees should be distributed among EU member states. This would ensure that countries of first arrival do not bear the entire burden alone.

And of course, as far as I'm concerned, it is essential for the European Union to contribute to improving conditions in countries of origin—either by addressing conflicts and wars or by improving living standards.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you receive Palestinian refugees?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, for a long time Palestinians and Kurds were the only recognized refugee groups in Cyprus.

Emmanuel Comte: And they continue to arrive, especially with recent events in Gaza? I imagine you may not have the exact numbers.

Eleni Mavrou: No, I don't have current figures, but yes, they do continue to arrive.

Conclusion

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you. This was a very interesting discussion—I've learned a great deal. Are you still working on migration-related issues today? What are your current projects?

Eleni Mavrou: Not directly, no. But I remain involved in various projects related to the city, and in that context, migrants are certainly included. For example, I work on initiatives related to public spaces and the role they play in social cohesion and community values.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you're still engaged in municipal life?

Eleni Mavrou: Yes, exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you very much, Mrs. Mavrou, for your time and for sharing your extensive experience and insights on migrant integration in Cyprus over the past 15 or even 20 years. Thank you.

Eleni Mavrou: Thank you.