

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

**Opening Statement by**

**H.E. the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs**

 **Mr. Andreas Kakouris**

**at the 46th Session of the Universal Periodic Review**

**Geneva, Tuesday, 30 April 2024**

**- CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -**

Mr. Vice President,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished representatives of the Civil Society,

It is a distinct honour to address you today to present Cyprus’s UPR report for the 4th cycle.

Cyprus welcomes this opportunity to appear before this Working Group. Allow me to begin by reiterating the commitment of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus to the UPR process, a tangible and integral component of the supervision on the effectiveness of our human rights policies. We highly value the process, in which states and the civil society can engage in a mutually beneficial exchange and learn from each other.

I wish at the outset to express my Delegation’s appreciation to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for the support given in preparation of our National Report. I would also like to thank those Delegations which have sent questions in advance.

Cyprus’s standpoint on human rights is guided by the fundamental principles that all human beings are born equal in dignity and life, and that human rights are universal, indivisible and mutually reinforcing. We consider the protection of human rights as a continuous process and obligation to improve the functioning of our national human rights protection system; an enduring quest to consolidate progress achieved.

Yet, our major impediment in ensuring the effective protection and promotion of human rights in Cyprus remains the 50-year long de facto division of my country. People of Cyprus living on either side of the ceasefire line continue to suffer from the gross human rights violations caused by the 1974 military invasion and continuing military occupation of more than one third of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus.

As a result, the Government of the Republic of Cyprus is not in a position to apply and consequently ensure the implementation of human rights in the whole of its territory. Thus, the policies and data provided by the Government of the Republic of Cyprus under this process refer solely to the areas under where the Government exercises full and effective control.

Mr. Vice President,

Cyprus remains steadfast by its long-standing commitment to protecting and promoting human rights, both domestically and within the framework of the United Nations. Cyprus has acceded to the core United Nations Human Rights Treaties and European human rights-related Instruments and is committed to continuing the process of examining and acceding to pending remaining instruments.

We fully support the independence of the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. Its role is pivotal in directing international dialogue on human rights.

Since 2001, Cyprus has extended an **open invitation to all Special Procedures** mandate holders which we continue to uphold. In 2022, we received members of the Working Group on Enforced Disappearances. Their report touches upon one of the most tragic aspects of the Cyprus question; the determination of the fate of missing persons in Cyprus. We have taken good note of the recommendations of the Working Group, with the aim to accelerate the work in identifying the whereabouts of the missing persons, as the passage of time renders this an increasingly difficult task.

We are content to report that since our last review in 2019, we have continued the work on improving our human rights standards, by strengthening our institutional framework, reinforcing our legislative context and policy initiatives and enhancing implementation.

In 2021 we established the Deputy Ministry for Social Welfare, whose mandate among others is to reach out to more persons in vulnerable situations. In 2022, the Cyprus Commissioner for Administration and the Protection of Human Rights was re-accredited as Cyprus’s National Human Rights Institution with “A” status, signifying its full compliance with the Paris Principles.

Despite our commitment, protracted conflicts and crises in our region and beyond have placed our capacities and effectiveness to respect, protect and fulfill our human rights obligations under constant threat.

Cyprus continues to rank first among EU member States in proportion to its population in first time applicants for international protection. Notwithstanding the ongoing high numbers of irregular arrivals, Cyprus provides enhanced assistance to **asylum seekers**. Following the introduction of new legislation in 2020, applications are now examined expeditiously. The rights of asylum seekers to access healthcare facilities and labor market are guaranteed. They are also provided with financial assistance to cover basic needs and personal minor expenses. We are constantly upgrading our measures in order to enhance living conditions and ensure the accommodation on First Reception Centers for as many as possible.

Combatting all sorts of **discriminations** is key in our policy objectives. We have been vigorous over the last year, to safeguard equitable access to quality education and to healthcare services, regardless of nationality or legal status.

On combatting **gender-based violence**, and to more effectively implement the Istanbul Convention, we have, in 2021 enacted the Law on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. Among other elements, the Law recognizes femicide as a specific offence and as an aggravated factor in sentencing. On the basis of the same Law, we established a National Coordinating Body and launched our first National Strategy for 2023-2028. In 2020, we also passed a Law criminalizing sexual and gender online harassment. Moreover, since in 2020 there exists the House of Women, a crisis center to provide support to women who are victims of violence and their children. The House is accessible to all women and their children who are victims of violence, without discrimination; irrespective of their legal status.

In January 2024, all Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Commissioners signed a declaration to apply a zero-tolerance approach to any incident relating to sexist behavior and sexual harassment in the workplace, thus providing the political impetus to eliminate any form of **gender discrimination.**

Cyprus has placed **women’s rights and gender equality** high amongst its priorities**.** More women now occupy senior political posts, whilst the integration of gender issues remains prominent into public policy planning. In this context, a new 2024-2026 Strategy on Equality between Women and Men is now in effect.

Closing the **gender pay gap** is an indispensable element towards achieving gender equality. The gender pay gap in Cyprus continues to follow a downward trend.

To further ensure the rights **of the child**, Cyprus is working towards establishing a second Children’s House. The first Children’s House was established in 2017 with the mandate to provide support services to children victims of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.

Moreover, the Holistic Sexual Education Law, enacted in 2022, aims at equipping students with comprehensive knowledge on sexuality and healthy relationships, empowering them to make better-informed choices on **sexual and reproductive health**.

Addressing **juvenile delinquency** while protecting the rights of the child, is a policy area where Cyprus has focused on targeted efforts during the reporting period. More specifically, the 2021 legislation on “Children in-Conflict with the Law”, provides for the establishment of a criminal justice system friendly to children in conflict with the law. In this vein, we are in the process of establishing a special juvenile detention center, outside of prisons, with a reformative, educational, therapeutic and welfare mandate.

Regarding **trafficking** **in human beings**, in 2019 we amended the relevant legislation in order to provide for stricter penalties for perpetrators, sex trafficking and labour trafficking. In June 2023, the first conviction of a person for receiving sexual services from a trafficked victim took place; a milestone conviction towards combatting trafficking. All human trafficking victims receive immediate support and assistance, including accommodation, financial, psychological and social support. Training of all involved stakeholders and raising awareness is also high amongst our priorities.

To further protect the rights of **LGBTQI** persons, the Government is preparing its first ever dedicated National Strategy, due to be adopted within 2024.

On legal **gender recognition**, a bill is currently before Parliament. On conversion therapies, we passed in 2023 a Law banning any form of conversion ‘therapy’ aiming at changing or suppressing a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

Safeguarding the right to **adequate working and living conditions** is key to our policies. In this context, the National Minimum Wage was introduced in 2023 which was subsequently increased in 2024. This development has significantly benefited a considerable number of low-income workers.

With regards to the **rights of persons deprived of their liberties**, Cyprus’s primary goal has been to apply a human-centered approach. To this end, and beyond the ongoing measures to address prison overcrowding, Cyprus puts particular emphasis on ensuring the access for all detainees and prisoners to the most basic guarantees, such as access to a lawyer and healthcare services.

On civil society, I wish to underline that Cyprus is firmly committed to support **human rights defenders,** protect an **open civic space** and promote the participation of civil society in a meaningful and inclusive manner. We are engaged in cooperating with civil society in a number of human rights policy areas, including on human trafficking.

In an effort to redouble our efforts, Strategies and Action Plans for a number of human rights policy areas are in effect, including for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on “Women, Peace and Security”, persons with disabilities, employment of foreign workforce, safety and health at work, integration of migrants, antisemitism and anti-corruption, to name but a few.

Mr. Vice-President,

Progress has undoubtedly been achieved, although we do recognize that more needs to be done. Building on our commitments, Cyprus presented its first ever **candidature to become a member of the Human Rights Council for the period 2025-2027**. Our candidature serves as an explicit advocacy towards defending and promoting human rights. Despite its size, the Republic of Cyprus aims to be actively engaged with all UN Member States, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Council’s Procedures and Mechanisms and the civil society. As a Human Rights Council candidate member, Cyprus has set priorities covering an array of policies including:

* gender equality,
* combatting violence and discrimination against women and young girls,
* enhancing unhindered access to quality education for all, including children with disabilities and children with migrant background
* promoting economic, social and cultural rights.

Furthermore, Cyprus continues to actively participate and lead international initiatives to promote the right to access, participate in and contribute to cultural life. Within the realm of the Human Rights Council, our efforts are focused towards solidifying a human rights-based approach to cultural heritage protection.

Mr. Vice-President,

Cyprus‘s long-standing engagement in international relations has always been guided by cooperation, dialogue, respect and good faith. In this regard, we are looking forward to the comments and recommendations by the participants which, as in all previous occasions, we take seriously in … and addressing the comments and recommendations.

I thank you.