

Freedom in the World 2023 - Cyprus

Note

The numerical scores and status listed here do not reflect conditions in Northern Cyprus, which is examined in a separate report. *Freedom in the World* reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Disputed or occupied territories are sometimes assessed separately if they meet certain criteria, including boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the report **methodology** and **FAQ**.

Overview

The Republic of Cyprus is a democracy with de jure sovereignty over the entire island. In practice, however, the government controls only the southern, largely Greek-speaking part of the island, as the northern area is ruled by the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), recognized only by Turkey. Political rights and civil liberties are generally respected in the Republic of Cyprus. Ongoing concerns include corruption, societal discrimination against minority groups, obstacles to integration for migrants, and weaknesses in the asylum system.

Key Developments in 2022

- Political affairs during the year were focused on the upcoming February 2023 presidential election, with different parties declaring support for their respective candidates and policy proposals.
- The country's capacity to process and host migrants and asylum seekers came under further strain, as new asylum applications increased by more than 60 percent compared with 2021.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

4 /
4

The president, who serves as both head of state and head of government, is elected by popular vote for up to two five-year terms. President Nicos Anastasiades of the center-right Democratic Rally (DISY) party won a second term with 56 percent of the vote in a 2018 runoff against Stavros Malas, who was backed by the left-wing Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL). The two had outpolled seven other candidates in the first round. International observers found that the overall election process adhered to democratic principles.

The next presidential election was set for February 2023, and Anastasiades said he would not seek a third term, quieting a debate on whether a 2019 constitutional amendment imposing the two-term limit should apply retroactively.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

4 /
4

The unicameral House of Representatives has 80 seats filled through proportional representation in six multimember electoral districts. Members serve five-year terms. In practice, only 56 seats are occupied, as the 24 seats reserved for the Turkish Cypriot community have been left unfilled since Turkish Cypriot representatives withdrew from the chamber in 1964.

In the 2021 legislative elections, which were held in accordance with international standards, DISY led the voting with 17 seats, down one from 2016, followed by AKEL with 15, also a one-seat decline. The centrist Democratic Party (DIKO) received nine seats, the far-right National Popular Front (ELAM) received four, the Movement for Social Democracy–Citizens' Alliance (EDEK-SYPOL) also took four seats, and the Green Party (KOSP) secured three seats. The liberal centrist Democratic Alignment (DIPA) won parliamentary representation for the first time, receiving four seats.

Also in 2021, the parliament voted to postpone that year's municipal elections until the 2024 implementation of structural reforms that would, among other changes, reduce the number of municipalities. The incumbent municipal councils would remain in place while the reforms were pending.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

4 /
4

Electoral laws are generally fair. Voters may only cast ballots at their locality of residence, not in other parts of Cyprus, and from abroad under certain conditions. In its report on the 2021 legislative elections, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) praised the electoral administration but recommended several improvements, including legal provisions for the presence of foreign and citizen observers, caps on parties' campaign spending, and earlier reporting requirements for such spending.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

4 /
4

A wide array of parties compete in the political system. Cyprus's two main parties, DISY on the right and AKEL on the left, usually split the largest share of the vote, but other parties are often able to play significant roles. In the most recent elections, the vote threshold for parties to win representation in the legislature was 3.6 percent.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

4 /
4

Cyprus has experienced regular democratic transfers of power between rival parties in recent decades. Multiple opposition parties are able to gain representation in the legislature.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

4 /
4

People are generally able to express their political choices without undue interference from outside actors.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

3 /
4

Three recognized Christian minority groups—the Armenians, the Latins (Catholic), and the Maronites—each have one nonvoting representative in the parliament. Members of these communities vote in special elections for their representatives, as well as in the general elections. The 24 seats reserved for the Turkish Cypriot population remain unfilled. However, in the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections, AKEL's Niyazi Kızılyürek became the first Turkish Cypriot to be elected to the EP or to win office in the Republic of Cyprus since 1964.

Women in Cyprus have equal political rights, but sexism and patriarchal attitudes discourage them from playing a more active role in politics. No parliamentary party is led by a woman, and parties have failed to meet internal quotas mandating that 30 to 35 percent of their candidates be women. Only eight women were elected to the parliament in 2021, a decline from the 2016 results. Nevertheless, that year Annita Demetriou of DISY became the first woman to be elected as speaker of the Cypriot parliament.

The interests of the LGBT+ community, which still faces significant discrimination from some sectors of society, are not always well represented in the political system.

Immigrants have some access to naturalization procedures and the political rights associated with citizenship, generally requiring several years of legal residency to apply. Separately, many Cyprus-born residents with one Turkish and one Turkish Cypriot parent have faced lengthy delays in their citizenship applications, leaving them stateless in some cases.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

4 /
4

The freely elected government is able to make and implement policy without improper interference from unelected entities.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? | 3 / 4

Cyprus has strong anticorruption laws that are, for the most part, adequately enforced. However, there have been a number of high-profile corruption scandals in recent years, and the government has faced criticism for early releases and pardons of individuals convicted on corruption charges.

In 2022, the authorities continued to revoke passports that had been granted illegally under a flawed citizenship-by-investment program. The program was terminated in 2020 following revelations that passports had been improperly issued to individuals with criminal records or links to foreign governments.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? | 4 / 4

In general, the government operates with openness and transparency. A freedom of information law was enacted in 2017, though civil society activists argued that its exemptions were too broad.

Most candidates for the February 2023 presidential election agreed during 2022 to comply with an enhanced asset-declaration procedure proposed by independent experts who regarded the legally required declarations as inadequate.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? | 4 / 4

Freedom of speech is constitutionally guaranteed, and media freedom is generally respected. A vibrant independent press frequently holds the authorities to account. Numerous private outlets compete with public media. There are no restrictions on access to online news sources.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? | 4 / 4

Religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed and generally protected in practice. Nearly 90 percent of those living in government-controlled Cyprus are Orthodox Christians, and the Orthodox Church enjoys certain privileges, including religious instruction and some religious services in public schools. Non-Orthodox students may opt out of such activities. The government also constitutionally recognizes and subsidizes non-Orthodox Christian and Muslim religious institutions, and it facilitates crossings to and from Northern Cyprus for the purpose of worship at religious sites. Unrecognized religious groups can receive tax exemptions by registering as nonprofit organizations.

Muslim groups have occasionally faced obstacles in the operation of their religious sites or discrimination by the general public. Muslims have criticized the hours of access to Hala Sultan Tekke, an important holy site in Larnaca that is administered by the Department of Antiquities. The site's mosque is generally open for only two of Islam's five daily prayers for most of the year, though extended hours are granted during Ramadan and at other times upon request.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

3 /
4

Academic freedom is respected in Cyprus. However, state schools use textbooks containing negative language about Turkish Cypriots and Turkey, and there is pressure from elements of the political system regarding schools' treatment of sensitive historical and unification-related issues.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

4 /
4

People are generally free to engage in political and other sensitive discussions without fear of retribution or surveillance.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is constitutionally guaranteed and generally respected in practice.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

3 /
4

NGOs are generally free to operate without government interference. However, the government has used regulatory rules to harass specific organizations in recent years. A 2020 amendment to the law on associations empowered the Interior Ministry to swiftly deregister NGOs that it deems inactive or noncompliant with the law's filing requirements. The ministry then deregistered Action for Equality, Support, Antiracism (KISA), which was known for its advocacy on behalf of migrants and asylum seekers, on the grounds that it failed to file documents with the Registrar of Associations within the required deadline. The necessary information was submitted after the deadline, but in 2021 the ministry ordered banks to freeze the organization's assets, and the Administrative Court rejected KISA's appeal of the deregistration. An appeal to the Supreme Court was still pending at the end of 2022. Also during the year, several NGOs had their bank accounts temporarily frozen under indiscriminate policies related to addresses in Northern Cyprus or protections against money laundering.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

4 / 4

Workers have the right to strike, form independent trade unions, and engage in collective bargaining. The law provides remedies for antiunion discrimination, though enforcement is uneven.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? | 4 / 4

The judiciary is independent. Supreme Court judges are appointed by the president on the recommendation of the court's existing members, and lower court judges are appointed by Supreme Court judges in their capacity as the Supreme Council of Judicature.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? | 4 / 4

The justice system generally upholds due process standards. Law enforcement agencies largely observe safeguards against arbitrary arrest and detention, and criminal defendants have access to counsel and fair trial procedures.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? | 4 / 4

Residents are free from major threats to physical security, though human rights monitors have noted cases of police brutality. Overcrowding and other problematic conditions have been reported at prisons and migrant detention centers.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? | 3 / 4

Despite government efforts to combat prejudice and inequality, members of non-Greek Cypriot minority groups, including migrants and asylum seekers, face discrimination and occasional violence.

A total of 21,565 new asylum applications were filed in Cyprus during 2022, a 63 percent increase from the 2021 total. Partly as a result of this rise, there were some 30,000 asylum applications pending at the end of 2022, up from nearly 19,000 at the end of 2021. A specialized administrative court began operating in 2019 to handle appeals. In 2021, the government simplified procedures for hiring asylum seekers, though they were permitted to work only in certain sectors and categories of employment. Most asylum seekers arrive by land through the TRNC, prompting allegations from the Cypriot government that Ankara is encouraging irregular migration. Cypriot authorities have engaged in controversial maritime pushbacks to Lebanon to prevent arrivals by sea.

Overcrowding and other poor conditions at the Pournara reception center have been exacerbated by the rise in new arrivals, prompting periodic protests by the residents. The center, built in 2014 as an emergency reception facility for up to 400 people, was later expanded to accommodate 1,000. By 2022 it reportedly hosted more than 2,000 people, with authorities struggling to properly house unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups.

Gender discrimination in the workplace remains a problem, including with respect to hiring practices, salaries, and sexual harassment; laws against such discrimination have not been adequately enforced.

Antidiscrimination laws generally prohibit bias based on sexual orientation, and there are legal protections for transgender people on some issues. However, the LGBT+ community continues to face societal discrimination in practice.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

3 /
4

There are few impediments to freedom of movement within the government-controlled area. The UN buffer zone dividing the island remains in place, but the number of border crossings between north and south has increased over the last decade.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

3 /
4

Property rights are generally respected in Cyprus.

A 1991 law stipulates that property left by Turkish Cypriots after 1974, when a Turkish invasion divided the island, is administered by the Interior Ministry. Under the law in the north, Greek Cypriots can appeal to the Immovable Property Commission (IPC), which has been recognized by the European Court of Human Rights as a responsible authority for the resolution of property disputes. However, its work has been seriously impaired in recent years by a lack of funding from the TRNC and Ankara.

In September 2022, the government confirmed that many Turkish Cypriot properties had been illegally sublet by Greek Cypriots who exploited the low rents charged by the Interior Ministry's management agency. Meanwhile, Turkish Cypriot owners continued to be denied access and restitution.

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 because Turkish Cypriot property managed by the Interior Ministry has been regularly subjected to illegal subletting by Greek Cypriot residents.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

4 /
4

Personal social freedoms are largely unrestricted. Same-sex civil unions are allowed under a 2015 law. However, there are no adoption rights for same-sex couples. No progress was reported during 2022 on legislation proposed in 2017 to allow corrections of one's legal gender. Domestic violence remains a problem despite official efforts to prevent and punish it. Government-funded shelters are open to survivors of domestic abuse.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

3 /
4

The legal framework generally protects workers against exploitative conditions of employment, and the government has made genuine progress in combating human trafficking. However, persistent problems include insufficient resources for labor inspectors and illegally low pay for undocumented migrant workers. Migrant workers and asylum seekers remain vulnerable to sexual exploitation and forced labor.

