GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Cyprus: A Path to Reconciliation

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January 24, 2024

Fifty years after the Turkish invasion and occupation, Cyprus is still divided and the prospects for a negotiated solution are slim: the island's two main communities remain separated by polarising narratives and unaddressed historical grievances. But even as the peace process stalls, younger generations and new initiatives are striving to develop a shared vision for the future that acknowledges mutual dependence. Interview with Maria Hadjipavlou, former associate professor at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Cyprus.

Xenia Samoultseva: What sets the Cyprus problem apart from other protracted conflicts?

Maria Hadjipavlou: One element is the deep-rootedness of the Cyprus conflict and the complexity of its causes. It is an interplay of domestic factors with century-old external interferences, compounded by Cold War politics in the 1970s. In addition, there is a question of identity: how each of the major communities on the island, the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots define themselves, and their connection and relationship to their ethnic origin, to their respective "motherlands", Greece and Turkey.

Cyprus had an anti-colonial movement, led by the Greek Cypriot organisation EOKA, (National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters) which excluded Turkish Cypriots and communists. The EOKA did not envision an independent island but "enosis", or unity, with "motherland" Greece – a goal that was not achieved. In response, the Turkish Cypriots, aided by Turkey, led their own organisation demanding "taksim", or the partition of the island. With the end of British colonialism and the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960, people had been fighting for two opposing visions that did not materialise. So while the agreement upon which the new republic was established entailed the creation of a bi-communal, power-sharing state with one international identity, in practice it did not work. The republic lasted for three years: in December 1963, inter-ethnic fighting broke out.

Another important aspect is the role of the guarantor powers. Greece, Turkey, and Great Britain were supposed to safeguard the independence and territorial integrity of the state. However, decolonisation was never really completed. Great Britain has two sovereign military bases that occupy 99 square miles; Every time there is trouble in the Middle East, for example, these bases are used by NATO members for whatever need arises, even though Cyprus is not a NATO member.

Finally, what has been unprecedented about Cyprus, especially when we compare it to the island of Ireland, is the failure of the referendums on the UN-proposed Annan Plan in 2004. While 65 per cent of the Turkish Cypriots voted in favour of reunification, 76 per cent of Greek Cypriots voted against, so the plan was defeated. That was a very important moment and a lost opportunity because at that time the international environment was very conducive to a solution, and to Cyprus joining the EU as a united island. What followed instead was further inter-communal polarisation, which took us backwards and rekindled mistrust and fears.

How has the involvement of the EU influenced the conflict and the search for its resolution until today?

On the pretext that the Cyprus issue and peace negotiations are under the UN auspices, the EU has not done much so far. It has supported talks, served as an observer, but that's it. The current President of the Republic of Cyprus, Nikos Christodoulides, is trying to deepen the role of the EU. But until now, there has not been any commitment on the part of the EU. There is also resistance to direct EU involvement, both from Turkey and the present leader of the Turkish Cypriots, Ersin Tatar, who promotes a two-state solution, which is unacceptable to the Greek Cypriots. Greek Cypriots expect more from the EU and so do many Turkish Cypriots.

What do you think could be the role of the EU in the future? Are there any steps it could take or projects it could initiate?

The failure of the Annan Plan showed society, especially the Greek Cypriot community, was not ready for a solution. We did not cultivate the culture for it. People were not well informed. They were carried away by party interests and political rhetoric often based on misinformation or half-truths. After the referendum, as part of a project, I visited, with a team, many refugee settlements of Greek Cypriots, and we explained to people what the Annan Plan would have provided on the contested property issue [concerning the property claims of displaced persons from the two communities]. There was a lack of information and understanding of what the benefits of the plan would be, like a return of two major cities and 110 villages to the Greek Cypriots. The divisive rhetoric from both the Church and the then newly elected President Tassos Papadopoulos clearly reinforced fear for the unknown. The EU and the UN were misled into thinking that accepting Cyprus in the EU would make Cypriots support reunification. They didn't read what was happening on the ground, and did not do enough to offer a vision of what a reunited Cyprus would mean. The majority of Greek Cypriots were carried away by the rhetoric of: "Wait until we get into the EU, and we will get a better solution".

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and each side's responsibility in creating the conflict.

Today, the EU should learn from this mistake and start funding programs that are geared towards preparing the people for a solution, for reconciliation and coexistence, which are the ingredients for a united island. Because whether we like it or not, we are here to live together and are interdependent in all aspects. Cyprus is the common homeland for Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Maronites, Latins, and others.

Many protracted conflicts involve discussions about reparations, justice, and reconciliation. How are these issues being addressed in Cyprus?

Reconciliation has not been addressed in a serious fashion compared to other issues like power sharing, governance, property, economy, and so on. Reconciliation should have started long ago, because, as South African bishop and theologian Desmond Tutu said, it is a long-term process that lasts for generations. In deeply rooted conflicts, where there are a lot of unaddressed historical grievances, mutual fears, perceived injustices, painful memories, and exclusions, it takes generations to reconcile. The humanitarian issue of the missing persons, instrumentalised by both sides to demonise each other and argue against reunification, does not help towards reconciliation. Addressing it, as well as acknowledging the shared pain and suffering, is crucial for the reconciliation process.

There is an ongoing debate on setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. According to over 50 Greek and Turkish Cypriot academics, journalists, and writers I interviewed a few years ago, this is not something Cyprus needs, because the conditions are very different from South Africa or Rwanda, for example. These intellectuals mostly proposed mechanisms for reconciliation at the macro level, which would entail acknowledgment and apology for what each side did to the other, as well as building a trustful, honest relationship at the negotiating table. And they also spoke about putting different processes in place to address our past and its interpretations. The past is still present, and it dictates the future. Dealing with that past entails coming to terms with loss and each side's responsibility in creating the conflict, thus getting away from the adversarial, confrontational official narratives.

The EU can help a lot with reconciliation and the issues of violence, hate speech, and misperception. A few years back, people had not met each other for two generations. How do you perceive the Other you have never met, but are only exposed to through the narratives pushed of the media, politicians, or the education system?

As an academic who conducted research amongst youth, I think that one of the main issues has always been education. The 1969 constitution, before the partition of the island in 1974, assigned education and culture to the communal chambers of the two communities. So there was separation from the outset; there has never been an integrative mechanism for the two communities to work and plan together, and have a shared curriculum or educational philosophy. Each education system was connected to its "motherland" and not to developing a civic Cypriot identity.

How do you perceive the Other you have never met, but are only exposed to through the narratives pushed of the media, politicians, or the education system?

I gave a workshop at a village in Troodos, in the mountains of Cyprus. When we were discussing topics like gender stereotypes and the recent history of Cyprus, young women in their 20s and early 30s said that they hadn't learnt anything at school about these issues. You only learn about global history, and about Greece and Turkey. This needs to change. There is an omission on how we can develop a local attachment to the land that both communities share. Education can play a very big role as a conflict resolution mechanism and should not be used to reproduce the conflict.

One of the great initiatives that addressed these issues is the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, where educators from both sides work together on producing a more inclusive social and cultural history of Cyprus. Gender issues are accounted for and attention is brought to the impact of the conflict on women, but also to women's contribution to the peace process. The Cyprus conflict is gendered, and we need to analyse it through that lens too.

Could you tell us more about the gender dimension of the Cyprus conflict and the peace process?

Women from all communities have been impacted very differently from men. In the patriarchal and nationalist environment of the conflict, men who were wounded or killed in war were hailed as heroes, while women who were sexually abused were stigmatised. The issue of sexual violence in both communities was silenced; society was not ready to empathise. In many cases, husbands divorced their wives who had been victims of sexual violence. The Church of Cyprus even allowed abortion for women

who had been raped by the enemy. The mentality was: “How could the enemy touch my property, my woman, my wife?” This trauma is still lurking.

Another gendered impact of the conflict is the plight of the missing persons. For years, wives, sisters, and mothers have been standing along the UN’s Green Line with photographs of their loved ones, waiting for an answer. The state instrumentalised and feminised the issue, as if pain and suffering belonged only to women. Of course, it is not the case. Half a century later, Greek Cypriots who were taken prisoners in 1974 finally dare to talk about their trauma and humiliation, and the lack of social services to support them. We need a new understanding of war as something that has hit women and children differently than the men who fought it. This is one aspect.

The second aspect of gender is political participation. The number of women of both communities in decision-making bodies is the lowest in the EU. Politics is still a men’s affair. In the peace process and negotiations, no women are visible. Women’s representation and participation are very important, especially in situations where we need everybody’s talents and voices. Women have offered a lot, but their story has not been officially written. In Cyprus, we do not yet have a feminist history, a herstory.

The way states treat women is also an indicator of social and political development.

The third aspect concerns the peace process. In 1968, when the first round of negotiations began, one woman was legal advisor to the president, but since then, no woman sat at the negotiating table on an equal status with men. Yet peace, security, and property are issues that concern women as well. In 2009, I co-founded the Gender Advisory Team alongside other academics and activists from both sides. We developed recommendations on how to integrate the UN’s 1325 resolution on women, peace and security into the Cyprus peace negotiations, and outlined what good governance would look like from a gender perspective. We also delved into the issues related to property, economy, and citizenship. These proposals were received with interest by the negotiators, but to this day, they haven’t been translated into action. The same happened more recently with the recommendations of the Technical Committee on Gender Equality.

All this tells us that women’s issues and rights are not taken seriously in the negotiations. The way states treat women is also an indicator of social and political development.

Conflict fatigue is growing among Cypriots, who are tired of the current deadlock. Some begin to forget what has happened and treat it merely as a fact, with no aspirations for change. What are your thoughts on this?

This is a characteristic of protracted conflicts. I hear this especially from more privileged social groups, such as the new economic elite that arose after 1974. Many of them would probably not want a solution. So it’s not only the young people who had no part in this conflict and who grew up with the promises and failures of the negotiations who are feeling fatigued. I too sometimes wonder why I have been doing this for over 40 years; but then I ask myself, what is the alternative? To sit back, to watch the deepening of a status quo that is not stable, and to have Turkey permanently dictating the lives of the Turkish Cypriots and the security of the whole island?

Plus, this view of the younger generations being tired is not completely accurate. There are many young creative minds expressing their critique of the recent history of Cyprus. There are music, theatre, and

dance groups with members from both sides of the island, as well as joint environmental projects between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots who gather to clean the seaside together, and so on. This develops a human infrastructure that opens up spaces of contact, which leads to new friendships and a vision for the future made of coexistence and reconciliation. It also challenges mainstream confrontational narratives.

We should give credit to these political, educational, and social activities that are being carried out by the youth. The fatigue is there, but we have to deal with it, because, on the macro level, the elites and the political parties have not really delivered a new vision, nor have they acknowledged the contributions civil society can make from below.

Environmental issues and climate change affect both Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. Can collaborative environmental initiatives serve as confidence-building and reconciliation mechanisms?

The Project and Research Center AKTI and other NGOs give a platform for the two communities to work together on projects tackling water scarcity, as well as sea and air pollution. Many of these projects have been funded by European aid programmes. They also involve young people going to the other part of the island and getting to know the environmental problems it faces. They get to learn what happens in the occupied Pentadaktylos mountain range, where unsustainable mining causes the flooding of streets and villages when it rains.

We need to understand that we are not an island unto ourselves, but we live in an environment which is very susceptible to climate change and harmful practices and conflicts. Joint environmental projects are a crucial aspect of forming relationships and building confidence among new generations, who realise they have a shared future in a common homeland. It's not "them or us". It's together.

What would a positive solution for the Cyprus conflict look like?

A solution that also has a feminist agenda; one that is holistic and inclusive of all social diversity, be it class, ethnicity, language, sexuality, and so on. Everyone should be part of creating a new Cyprus and feel that their voice matters, that their needs are accounted for. Such a solution could make Cyprus a model of coexistence of different cultures, religions, and languages. It should bring out the richness that the island has because of its history, culture, and geopolitical and geographic positioning. My vision is a radically inclusive, democratic, pluralistic society that is less violent. Peace is not a one-time achievement. It's a process. It's a way of life. It always needs nurturing, because it is always in danger.

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Published January 24, 2024
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/cyprus-a-path-to-reconciliation/