

"AND BRING ALL CYPRUS COMFORT"

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Why is this small island-state in the Eastern Mediterranean still physically divided despite nearly four decades of persistent UN efforts to bring about a negotiated settlement? Is there anything new in this conflict which explains why Cyprus should be hitting the headlines – including enticing our former foreign minister Alexander Downer's foray into conflict mediation? Why the recent feeling of optimism, followed by the failure and anxiety, for an eventual solution, especially within the European context? What can Cyprus teach us about the nature of protracted conflicts and ways of resolving them?

When in 2001 Ibrahim Aziz filed against the Republic of Cyprus and its three guarantor powers, at the European Court of Human Rights, one could have been forgiven for imagining that EU-ization of the conflict would somehow empower the citizenry against the ubiquitous communal state. Five years earlier, Titina Loizidou, won a landmark lawsuit against Turkey for denying her access to her property in northern Cyprus.

Although both cases lend themselves to polemical exploitation, in different ways and for different reasons, they aspired to higher expectations from any settlement of the Cyprus problem. At a more fundamental level, such narratives underscored the ethical dilemma compounding each attempt to resolve the Cyprus conflict: how to construct a legal-constitutional order, dictated by a set of historical determinants, including the desire to rectify past injustices, which reconciles human rights and group security, with the expectation of upholding the fundamental precepts of liberal democracy, whilst fortifying the foundations for sequential integration/unification.

The importance of Cyprus and what this long conflict teaches us lies in the complex web of interacting factors—internal and external to Cyprus—that have shaped the overall negotiating process. In analyzing the relationships between the two sets of factors—internal and external—and their interconnected and often contradictory implications, it is possible to identify elements of continuity and change both within and between its various historical facets. In conceptualizing relevant trends and relationships, we develop an overall assessment of the psychological and political dynamic that has thus far obstructed a resolution of the Cyprus problem.

The intercommunal talks generally treated the Cyprus problem as an ethnic conflict, and sought its resolution on this basis. It must be noted that the two communities had been politically, economically, socially and psychologically separated over time, whilst the 1974 partition endowed this separation with a geographical, demographic and military dimension. This deeply entrenched separation constituted the main impediment to any effective rapprochement. The net effect of the physical division of the island has been to hamper communication, interaction and contact not only between the two communities

but even between those forces which were prepared to pursue, or at least explore, common interests and objectives. In addition, postponement of a solution led, at different times, to one or both parties resorting to unilateral actions outside the confines of the process, thereby exacerbating the conflict and further impeding negotiation and third party mediation.

One of the key conclusions to emerge from this discussion is that both communities had, for different reasons and in different ways, become supporters of the status quo which they viewed as, if not ideal, at least preferable to the uncertainties of any future regime that did not incorporate their maximum expectations. On one side, the Turkish Cypriots feared that reunification within a strong federation would see them revert to the pre-1974 situation as an isolated minority dominated by a larger and more powerful Greek Cypriot community. On the other side, the Greek Cypriots viewed any federal solution that did not encompass a strong central authority and the withdrawal of the Turkish troops, as no better than their existing predicament. They would be sacrificing their legitimacy as the sole recognized Cypriot state and would be risking the total occupation of the island. Though the motivation and the rationale may have differed, the position of both parties was similar in one important respect: they both considered the incentives for change to be weaker than the security of the status quo. Fear of worst case scenarios paralyzed their will and their capacity to pursue a riskier but ultimately more promising course.

Conflict resolution contains no certainties. It is often thwarted by many unknown variables and susceptible to internal and external fluctuations. Besides security, the conflict's nagging presence becomes a constant reminder of the impossibility of sealing off one epoch from the next with any confidence in evolutionary progress. Asymmetry, inequality, disparity, and inclusion/exclusion, continue to define and redefine inter- and intra-communal relations, often underscoring class, gender, generational and other social cleavages. The pervasive disposition of the status quo, sits uncomfortably with Cyprus's historical order. In the interim, new trends have pegged Cyprus's particularism to regional and global transformations. Europeanization is but one manifestation of Cyprus's modernization as it teases out the boundaries of Western expansion and the contradictory convulsions of its own search for self-definition.

The Cyprus conflict has many identities. The challenge confronting Cyprus ultimately lies in its capacity to transform itself into a postmodern society with a political arrangement that transcends its historical insecurities. Often a climate of uncertainty and ambivalence demands risk-taking. In this sense the EU offers itself as a surrogate for creative politics. As Cypriots need to overcome their past and create their own history, there is the danger that continual rejections will prolong stalemate, and stalemate will entrench partition.