

The ‘silent revolution’ of Cyprus

Neophytos Loizides | University of Kent

doi:10.18866/biaa2015.113

In 2014, few experts would have cited positive developments on the Cyprus problem; since the collapse of the peace process a decade earlier, the Cypriot stalemate had been deepening each day. Yet, at the grassroots level, bicomunal activity has been emerging as a critical actor.

Active citizenship is the foundation of a democratic and plural society. Cyprus provides an insightful story of how civil society can play a critical role for peace. When, in September 2014, bicomunal negotiations ended after a Turkish frigate started seismic surveys in the Cypriot exclusive economic zone, peace activists continued their efforts. Unlike most cases across divided societies, where civil society institutions frequently side with nationalism, Cypriot peace activists identified promising opportunities in the crisis and sought alternatives in an attempt to reframe the Cypriot peace process.

Public diplomacy can be critical in identifying such opportunities. In February 2015, the British Institute at Ankara along with partners from Turkey (Uluslararası Stratejik Araştırmalar Kurumu, USAK) and the two communities of the island (the ‘Cyprus Academic Dialogue’) co-organised a flagship conference in Ankara, the first bicomunal event to take place in the Turkish capital after decades of Cypriot conflict. As the University of Kent, my home institution, also partnered this event, I witnessed first hand the multiple strengths of Cyprus-based academic and civil society practitioners and how they could prove catalytic for a settlement in the promising 2015 peace talks.

First, civil society can take risks that governments are commonly reluctant to entertain due to political risks. Organising a bicomunal conference in Ankara was, understandably, not an easy undertaking. But taking risks also pays; the event attracted 17 academics and NGO leaders from both communities on Cyprus. Even more impressively, from the Ankara end it attracted ten ambassadors, 33 officers from

24 different embassies (including the embassies of the US and 15 EU member states as well as the EU Delegation in Ankara), six officers from Turkish state institutions (including three from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 11 researchers from nine think-tanks, 29 academics from nine different universities and ten reporters from five different media agents (including Reuters, France 24 and the Anadolu News Agency). It also included participants from the Turkish industrialists’ association and the country’s largest conglomerate, Koç Holding. This conference is just one example of what has been happening on a smaller scale across the island, in what the newspaper *Politis* has labelled the ‘silent revolution of the Cypriots’. Such civil society and public diplomacy events are critical in rallying political support for change at the government level.

Following months of preparations, the event in Ankara, hosted at USAK House, secured two high-profile speakers: the former Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou and the former Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Hikmet Çetin. Papandreou, who engineered a transformation in the symbolic landscape of Greek-Turkish relations in 1999 (with his Turkish counterpart, the late İsmail Cem), made an impressive and decisive intervention in favour of peace. Moreover, Cypriot academics and NGO leaders spoke a shared language, hence signalling a convincing new direction in the peace talks. Thinking outside the box is easier for civil society leaders than governments. Participants at the Ankara conference did not speak in Greek or Turkish terms, but, rather, they framed issues in humanitarian and scholarly terms, and, in so doing, reached out to different audiences. Speaking on the same wavelength (despite disagreements) reflected a highly convincing case for reunification. The scholarly work presented at the Ankara conference provided tangible examples of what could work in a future settlement, not only for Cyprus but also in other comparable cases in the Middle East and the Balkans.

Civil society was a critical factor in the election of moderate peacemaker Mustafa Akıncı as leader of the Turkish-Cypriot community. Akıncı has supported peace initiatives on the island since the 1970s and through bicomunal networks gained the respect and trust of the Greek-Cypriot community. Likewise, Greek-Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades stabilised the Cypriot economy following near bankruptcy in 2013 and has made decisive gestures of reconciliation since Akıncı’s election.

At the symbolic level, a peace settlement for Cyprus could be as equally transformative for the eastern Mediterranean as the fall of the Berlin Wall was for Europe. A federal Cyprus would be the first example of an ethnically-partitioned society to reunify, after four decades, and, importantly, with the mutual consent of majorities in referendums in both communities. A Cypriot unification would be, undoubtedly, an inspiring model for those opposing destructive nationalism, ethnic cleansing and conflict in the eastern Mediterranean region.



The two keynote speakers: Hikmet Çetin (left) and George Papandreou (right)