ABSTRACT

Cyprus is home to a divided society. On the island, two communities lead separate existences as the result of violent conflict and partition. Peace has eluded the island thus far, although public opinion polls show an increasing number of both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots are amenable to reconciliation. Negotiations, too, have continued to fail, most recently at Crans-Montana in 2017. Why then has peace been so hard to achieve? What are the main deterrents today? Drawing from expert interviews with local practitioners, peacebuilders, journalists, and academics, this report explores the necessity of inclusive education in the aftermath of conflict. It highlights areas that present organizations and individuals with opportunities to help pave a pathway towards sustainable, bicomunal peace.
INTRODUCTION

If the partition of Cyprus began in 1963, it was completed by 1974. Today, the United Nations-enforced buffer zone known as the “Green Line” separates the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Turkey.\(^1\) Friction between Greek and Turkish communities can be traced back to the island’s colonial past, and finally resulted in UN Peacekeepers being deployed in 1964. Following a military coup d’état supported by Greece, Turkish forces invaded and occupied Northern Cyprus in 1974 citing their responsibility to protect the Turkish Cypriot population. When a brief but brutal conflict ebbed at last, the island had been split in two, but Cyprus retained its three guarantors: Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

Decades on, a protracted conflict has cemented two separate histories, deepening underlying schisms between two communities that have lived largely separated since the 1960s. Today, the island is divided not just by physical borders, but also, as Sevgul Uludağ writes, by “zones of silence.”\(^2\) With time, each side has developed identities in antithesis, derived to a large degree from essentializing the other. Pain, memory, and trauma have become exclusive entities to be archived, but not shared. These memories, in turn, have informed—and been informed by—formal and informal education, leading to a conflict frozen in time and space.

But as this report stresses, not all is lost. Drawing from expert interviews with practitioners, peacebuilders, journalists, and academics across the island, we set forth possible pathways for fostering sustainable, bicomunal peace.

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METHODOLOGY

This report has been produced by HasNa in collaboration with M.A. students of Conflict Resolution at Georgetown University. It is a continuation of an ongoing project studying the role of education within the larger framework of atrocity prevention and reconciliation after mass violence in India, Germany, and Rwanda.

A mix of primary and secondary sources informed the basis of this research. Data was collected through a series of key informant interviews, and triangulated through historical archives, media articles, and previous reports by HasNa. Interviewees consulted were peacebuilders, journalists, and academics whose expertise ranged from working in the field, to social psychology, negotiation, and second track diplomacy.

MEMORY

Violence is often a fight for the memory of the place. It can be seen as a desire to create a specific narrative by one or multiple groups which affects—or attempts to control, as Senechal de la Roche would argue—a specific group or idea. Cyprus is no exception. From Myanmar to Rwanda, we have also seen how the archiving of a formal history defines the core of national identity. As Foer puts it, “Memory changes the tense from past to present. In that regard, the past continually intrudes on the present, and unresolved issues from that past can become potent risk factors for the present.” Harding puts forth four categories through which to look at memory: memory as a strategy; memory as psychology; memory as survival; and memory as resolution.

One of the biggest barriers that Cyprus faces is the memory of its prolonged and embedded conflict. The debate is not just about remembering, but more about what is remembered (or forgotten), and by whom. Today, Cyprus has become a battleground for identity with “Turkish” and “Greek” on one side and “Cypriot” on the other. The two communities have been living in two separate worlds on one island since the mid 20th century and in the years that followed, peacebuilding initiatives, negotiations, and other attempts to “solve the problem” have had limited success.

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In Cyprus, memory is a strategy in service of the development of historical and cultural master narratives that center “Greek” or “Turkish” over “Cypriot.” On both sides, these narratives focus on solitary, nationalistic suffering to legitimize political goals. The formation, and indeed hardening, of such memory is aided by the lack of interaction between Turkish and Greek Cypriots. Over time, this strategy has led to the formation of two different communities basing knowledge, behavior, and experience on a particular simplified, mono-perspective and essentializing narrative.

The challenge for peacebuilders is to leverage memory for resolution. This project has to take into account what Zembylas and Karahasan call “dangerous memory”—a remembering that challenges the status quo. “Dangerous memories,” they write, “are potentially subversive to those identities and may create new narratives and identities that do not retain essentialism.” But how does one translate these ideas into practice?

EDUCATION

Education remains the primary tool to “create national subjects.” In Cyprus it serves as a conduit to form a national identity tied to Greek and Turkish heritage, as opposed to a standalone Cypriot identity. These dichotomous identities have been amplified, and indeed reinforced, by mediums of formal and informal education. As the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR) puts it:

Historically, segregated schools are the norm in divided societies. Although the establishment of integrated schools does not constitute a magic panacea in the route to challenge divisive perspectives, we believe that integrated schools are essential in contributing to the healing of the wounds that afflict Cyprus and easing the path towards a multicultural, multilingual and multi-faith society.\(^7\)

Between 2004 and 2009, education briefly became a tool for fostering cooperation across the island. Textbooks were intentionally reframed to focus on commonalities rather than differences, highlighting the shared Cypriot identity between two divided communities. However, Dervis Eroglu’s election in 2009 sparked the return of a nationalist, Turkish-centered curricula.

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Therefore, the current education system, too, fails to foster bicommmunal cooperation across the two identities. Because of that, it seems that the younger generation of Cyprus today still subscribes to stringent categories of identity—either Greek or Turkish Cypriot. Trauma remains siloed, but not always for want of trying. Well researched and crafted material exists, but is not a functional part of the curriculum. Sevgul Uludağ, a Cypriot journalist, writes:

For many years teachers from the two main communities of the island, Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot, have been coming together to create new teaching materials for schools. They have produced wonderful books for teachers about, for instance, how to teach the humanitarian issue of ‘missing persons’ in their classroom. Neither the Turkish Cypriot, nor the Greek Cypriot authorities have ever allowed these teaching materials officially into the schools.\(^8\)

The media helps sustain the status quo. When the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) analyzed media content from 2002 to 2008 from Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, findings revealed stark disparities and bias in coverage on both sides.\(^9\) When Avraamidou and Psaltis looked at media coverage of two publications during the Crans-Montana peace negotiations of 2017, one publication harped on threats of Turkish expansionism, state dissolution, and a more general threat to the Greek Cypriot community while the other constructed a rigid opposition and deep mistrust for Turkish motives at the negotiations.\(^10\) These constructions create barriers to the acceptance of propositions and set the expectations of an “all or nothing” outcome.

Through education, memory is deployed as a strategy to delineate who the island is. The sustained narratives keep Cypriots unprepared for peace when the negotiators and leaders undergo peace talks. Working with teachers and education institutions to implement a curriculum that disavows the competitive victimhood between the two communities is a crucial factor in building an infrastructure for peace in Cyprus.

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7 Ibid.

FATIGUE

Cyprus has been called the graveyard of diplomacy, and for good reason. Major peace talks fell apart in 2004 in the form of the Annan Plan, and again in 2011, 2014, and, most recently, in Crans-Montana in 2017. With time, continued failure at the negotiating table has contributed to fatigue across the island. This shared apathy, in turn, has led to a poverty of imagination, where the creative solutions toward peace building have been stifled.

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One of the issues that has proved insurmountable is the essential question of security. A sentiment expressed by members of both communities is that in order for the conflict to be resolved, guaranteeing security for one community cannot come at the cost of the other. The 2004 Annan Plan was rejected by the people in part on these grounds. Greek Cypriots were not satisfied that their security could be ensured as long as Turkish troops remained stationed on the island. The recurring disagreements over such important issues have no doubt contributed to the stalemate experienced by negotiators on both sides.

Further complicating the Cyprus Problem is the diverse nature of stakeholders. What on the surface may appear to be a local conflict has, owing to the strong influence of the Hellenic, Turkish, and British guarantors, taken on a geopolitical dimension. Everything across Cyprus—the bureaucracy, the educational systems, the media—all are products of conflict. As a resolution continues to elude Cyprus, each failed negotiation further ossifies the situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS: PATHWAYS TO PEACE

The following recommendations are guidelines for those pursuing peacebuilding activities in Cyprus—at all levels. For many years, efforts toward “resolution” have fallen short and as time progresses, the nature of the problem, its complexity and intractability will continue to evolve. Hence, the role of peacebuilders is crucial especially at this moment.

**Identify leverage points for positive peace.** Reconciliation relies on the alignment of priorities, and Cyprus is no different. Identifying and acting on potential windows of opportunity is paramount for peacebuilding efforts on the island. A window of opportunity according to Levinger is “a moment when conditions are favorable for de-escalation of conflict”\(^{34}\) An example of this is COVID-19.

With the backdrop of nationalistic narratives prompting the dominant discourse, COVID-19 could have been an opportunity to push for and create more inclusive, productive, cooperative memory between the two communities. In April 2020, there were reports of cooperation between the two communities in delivering medicines and protective equipment to the north.\(^{35}\) Subsequently, the border crossings closed for the first time since 2003 due to the pandemic and cooperation between the two communities was short lived. If the politics of the crisis create a new memory, the identity of the two groups—from Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots—can change “as a political choice.”\(^{36}\) A leverage point such as COVID-19 can illuminate the political and material benefits of a cooperative Cyprus. As one of our interviewees remarked: “The sky’s the limit when it comes to cooperation, but it all comes down to political will.”

**Bring people together.** Evidence shows that since border crossings became accessible to ordinary Cypriots, attitudes towards the other community have slowly been changing.\(^{17}\) While this inspires hope, large sections of society remain uninterested in travelling to the other side or engaging with members of the other community. This reluctance stems from a number of reasons. For some the thought of returning to certain sites is overbearing and entails retraumatization. Others view crossing to the other side as legitimizing it, and showing support for a larger cause they do not agree with. Yet others simply refuse “to be tourists on their own island”. Work to destigmatize crossing the “Green Line” and cooperating with the other community needs to continue to be done so that bicommunal relations can be built on the solid foundations of trust.

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People have to be prepared for peace, especially since the current situation is a result of decades of competing crystallized narratives. This priming is the key for sustainable peace and can only be achieved through long term commitments that consistently frame issues in a manner that focuses on positive peace, creative solutions, and effective dialogue. With the recent closing of the crossing points, social interactions between the two communities decreased drastically. However, as Sevgul Uludağ told HasNa recently, social media is being used as a tool to keep the conversation alive.

**Keep it on the radar.** To cut the Gordian Knot in Cyprus and ensure long term peace will require the cooperation of actors outside of Cyprus. Turkey, Greece, and the UK wield immense influence over any agreement made regarding Cyprus’ future owing to the commitment they made in signing the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee. The European Union, of which the Republic of Cyprus is a part, is bound to be party to any peace negotiation as well.

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17 Cyprus Score.”Support for a more inclusive peace process of Greek Cypriots.” Score For Peace. https://www.scoreforpeace.org/en/cyprus/2017-Gender-0.

The recent discovery of natural gas in Cypriot waters further complicates matters. Recently, the Republic of Cyprus signed a deal with Greece and Israel to build a 1,900 km (1,180 mile) subsea pipeline to carry natural gas from the eastern Mediterranean’s rapidly developing gas fields to Europe. The move was opposed by both Turkey and Northern Cyprus.¹⁹

This outside interest has both the potential to be a strength or a weakness. Maintaining international attention could prove instrumental if outside powers see it in their interest to facilitate an outcome in Cyprus. But as the conflict drags out, Cyprus runs the risk of falling further down the list of priorities of those would-be facilitators. Meanwhile, an eye must be kept on those that could benefit from the perpetuation of the conflict. While Track 1 diplomacy is essential to the peace and future of Cyprus, it can only be successful with simultaneous, coordinated efforts that aim to include rather than exclude the larger Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities.

**Promote widespread peacebuilding.** Peacebuilding initiatives need to occur at all levels and they have to be more inclusive, consistent, and sustainable. Deep-rooted identity conflict is not a dispute to be “resolved”, it is something to be reconciled. This cannot be done solely through an isolated, top-down approach which has been the case with the high-level negotiations led by the United Nations.

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A combination of theory and practice is needed to move forward. However, there are asymmetrical patterns of recognition in the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities that present themselves as challenges or barriers to further engagement. These asymmetrical patterns exist because of how education and socialization take place on both sides. Representation is a major part of the socialization process that helps in acquiring values and behaviors which are slowly constructed.²⁰ The actors responsible for socialization are mainly parents, teachers, and the media. Deconstructing this structure also takes time. Defences against negative media and other spoilers should be built and fortified.

Currently, history textbooks foster an environment of competitive victimhood and other negative trends. Representations and interpretations of the past influence the future. To change ingroup norms, schools, with the help of educators (authorities), can lay out the conditions for prejudice reduction by giving equal status, highlighting common goals, facilitating intergroup cooperation, and establishing support of the authorities.²¹

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**CONCLUSION**

How then can the deadlock be broken? Conversations with key stakeholders—including negotiators, practitioners, academics, journalists, and grassroots activists on the ground—make it clear that positive peace will need a political scaffolding able and willing to sustain it. Peace, when it comes, will be brokered through high-level negotiations, but it must be supported—in parallel—by programs that foster intercommunal trust and cooperation at all levels of Cypriot society. Internally, these pre-conditions for peace need to be nurtured across the island.

Creating a space for negotiations to succeed is an important step for Cypriots—both Greek and Turkish—to imagine a community together. Additionally, cementing memory takes time and consistency. A project in peacebuilding to bring forth a Cypriot identity would be a long-term commitment which can only be realized through consistent and widespread effort towards the reconciliation of deep-rooted conflict.

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HasNa’s mission is to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between communities divided along ethnic, religious, racial, gender, and national lines, and to reduce barriers to effective integration and positive peace.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

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