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A curious case of Cyprus: is minority discourse eligible?

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This cursory academic sketch is not an attempt at establishing a strong thesis; instead, it is a modest selection of phenomena that would point to the fact that an alteration in national consciousness among the Greek Cypriots can be observed. On the one hand, probably no member of this community would see themselves as having a separate national identity from other Greeks; on the other, the balance of this relation – of Cypriot Greeks towards the rest of the Hellenic world – is undoubtedly under the process of revision.

There are several articles and longer surveys that tackle this issue, usually focusing on one chief aspect (Loizos 1974, Μαυράτσας 1988, Papadakis 1993 or Theophanous 2011 – from the point of view of anthropology or philosophy of political sciences). Nikos Peristianis (2006), who analyses the problem of Cypriot nationalism from various angles, rightly simplifies the question to loyalty: either national or civic. While the first one is Hellenocentric and corresponds to the idea of *enosis*, the second is Cyprocentrist and may differentiate Greek Cypriot from the Greek national whole. There is also the possibility of a dual identity (Peristianis 2006: 114ff).

My goal is different and less ambitious: to offer an overview of spaces within the Cypriot political and cultural world while adapting a minority perspective and signaling a paradigm shift that may lead to a landslide change, defined in Peristianis's terms as a move from the nation towards the state.

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How Balkan is Cyprus?

It may seem illogical that among texts in this volume devoted to various Balkan states and nations, a note on Cyprus is to be included: an island that indeed does not lie on the Balkan Peninsula, or even in Europe. And regardless how the Balkans are defined, whether geographically (i.e., areas south of Sava and Danube rivers) or historically (lands in Europe under the Ottoman rule or – in a modern sense – the after-war territories of Southern Europe where Communist regime was adopted, see Mazower 2000: xxv ff.) I would argue that Cyprus is Balkan not because of its geographic location. However, for numerous historical reasons – its fate was parallel to many Balkan regions and in order to understand its present condition, one should not neglect the processes that defined the shaping of contemporary Balkans.

Cyprus was under the Ottoman rule since the late 16th century, later than most Balkan countries, but experienced a similar fate. Turkish settlers came to Cyprus shortly after the conquest in 1570–1571 and have remained there until today. Their history is well described and analyzed, also from the point of view of contemporary shifts, changes and tensions (Navaro-Yashin 2006, Loizides 2007). The existence of Greek (Orthodox) and Turkish (Muslim) inhabitants might not have shared a body of customs (though there are hypotheses about a hybridity of these two social groups, see Constantinou 2007) and life in poverty. However, they formed a peaceful contiguosness – maybe without contact, but also without open hostilities, at least until the 1950s. The fact remains though that Cyprus, similarly to many Balkan nations, observed an influx of Islam. At the same time, the Orthodox church flourished because, under the *millet* type of social division, where inhabitants were looked upon as chiefly religious groups, with the responsibility placed upon the clergy, the church overtook a large part of administrative affairs. Cyprus, again not unlike some of the Balkan regions, mostly with a Greek majority, also experienced modern colonization by a Western power, in this case by the British Empire (much like the Ionian islands and not unlike the Dodecanese or even Crete). As a result, until the early 20th century Cyprus, even as far as similarities in architecture are concerned, lied in the heart of the Balkans. Later, its history diverged, and the island did not share the key events or processes common for the Balkans.

What minority?

When considering the minorities in Cyprus, probably the most popular concept would be that of the Turkish Cypriot minority, comprising

roughly 20% of the island's population. Another idea would be to look at the demographic situation in the region occupied since 1974, to the north of the so-called Green Line, where the long-standing Turkish Cypriot population has been recently challenged by the new, Turkish-based colonization wave and pushed into an "oppressed minority" position (Hatay 2007). I will, however, address a third minority option: looking for arguments as to whether the Greek Cypriots could be considered a minority within the idea of Greekness (for a discussion of this notion, see e.g. Calotychos 2003, Τσαούσης 2009), that is within the sum of members representing Modern Greek culture, spread throughout the world and concentrated mainly, but not only, in the Republic of Greece.

There are many reasons to adopt a contrary perspective: that of Greek Cypriots being a seamless part of the Hellenic family just like Pontic, Cretan, Maniot, or Corfu Greeks. The long shared history, common language and culture are crucial in understanding the place they occupy within Greekness and the place of Cyprus within the framework of an irredentist Great Idea. The latter justified the urge to unite all the Greek-speaking people under one Greek rule and was the dominant discourse of Hellenic politics for the larger part of the 19th and early 20th century. The Great Idea catalyzed the eventual winning of Crete, Macedonia, or Thrace as territories, but it also has to be held responsible for the failure of Asia Minor campaign and the ensuing catastrophe. The Asia Minor Catastrophe did not mean losing the much-desired cities and lands on the Ionian coast, but mainly brought about the exchange of Orthodox and Muslim populations. This decisive move terminated – with few exceptions – the centuries-long coexistence of Orthodox and Muslim populations, both in Greece and Turkey. It was also the beginning of Greece as a homogeneous state that has indeed welcomed diaspora Greeks, but not necessarily non-Greeks.

The ties between the island and Greece were strong but intensified even further when Greece became an independent state in the aftermath of the Greek Revolution (which started in 1821). Envoys were sent to educate Greek Cypriots and make sure they do not fall off the Hellenic state's education grid. More than half a century from the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus, Greek Cypriots have stayed under that great influence of Greek culture: they learn from Greek textbooks, they have broad access to Greek mass-media (radio and television channels), and follow Greek news reports closely. They study at Greek or British universities (the only state Cypriot university is relatively small and its offer quite limited so far), and Cypriot artists seek musical or literary success in Greece as a gateway to real fame.

Birth of a Nation?

Several crucial factors sets the Cypriot history apart from the Greek common (or shared) history. First of all, much to the surprise of everyone involved (belligerent and negotiating parties alike), the fighting between Greek Cypriots and the British, or the so-called Cyprus Emergency – which started in April 1955 and continued for several years without much progress or change (Mallison 2005: 21–30). Through multi-lateral negotiations in 1960, it concluded with the creation of The Republic of Cyprus, an independent, non-involved state (e.g. Dodd 2010: 20–40). The latter was of a peculiar composition with one of the most complicated constitutions in the world that suddenly obliged the former belligerent parties of Greek and Turkish Cypriots to enter peaceful cooperation. Peace was, in fact, the code imprinted already into the symbolism of the flag (the latter depicted two olive branches under a silhouette outline of the island²) as well as the coat of arms (with a white dove at its center). It all proved to be wishful thinking as the project ended with an almost immediate failure, and as soon as in 1963, a new conflict erupted. The first years of the Republic also signified the last years of Greek-Turkish fragile coexistence. The two populations started to separate politically and geographically. The Scheming of the Greek junta in 1974 cumulated in the Turkish invasion of the northern part of Cyprus, which crippled the island's economy and accomplished a factual division of the island that has lasted until now (Mallison 2005: 80–86). The precarious existence of a Republic which at first could not support even the simplest of state symbols (there are no words for the anthem of the Republic, while the melody is that of the Greek national anthem), was culturally further endangered by the post-1974 situation. It received much-needed help from Greeks directed at their fellow Greek Cypriots. Only recently does independence from Greek cultural influence or dominance seem to be a more frequent subject among Greek Cypriots.

One sign of such budding independence is the gradual appreciation of the Greek Cypriot dialect. Once regarded a vulgar type of speech, not worthy of literary presence, it was, and still is, the actual insular mother tongue, the first variant of Modern Greek learnt by Greek Cypriots (Papapavlou 1998, Pavlou, Papapavlou 2004). The standard Modern Greek is therefore to some extent an “outsider” language, not entirely foreign, but indeed a troublesome variety, although taught in schools (Terkourafi 2001, Ayiomamitou, Yiakoumetti 2017, Michalska 2014). Naturally, a certain

² Its design makes is one of the most complex (in terms of shapes) national flags in the world – alongside the Brazilian, Bhutanese, or Iranian flags.

tension is produced between these two varieties as one is dominant while the other is generic³. However slowly, first through the work of folk poets⁴, the dialect has gained some appreciation (not unlike Greek demotic vernacular deemed unworthy of literary creation in the 19th century) in wider circles, but its grammar has still not been properly codified and few dictionaries are produced; the latter are created mostly by Greek Cypriot aficionados and not by professional linguists (Παπαγγέλου 2001, Χατζηιωάννου 2010; as opposed to the various contemporary web-based dictionaries, one of them maintained by the University of Cyprus⁵). It is only recently that the dialect has entered the world of literary prose – together with the problem of its unsure notation as several sounds that do not exist in the Standard Modern Greek, differ from author to author in a number of variants.

The last years reevaluated the strong bond which the Republic shares with the Greek “motherland” – an economic crisis that has been troubling Greece since 2008 has had its repercussions in Cyprus as well, mostly due to financial connections with the Greek economy (via the so-called toxic bonds). This undermined political trust and revised the fiscal strategy of the state for the years to come. The ever-changing geopolitical context is no less critical. While Greece is often entangled in disputes in the Balkans, the recent seemingly solved Macedonian question being one vivid example, Cyprus is, on the one hand, looking East, mostly to Israel; and on the other hand – due to the presence of two British military bases on the island – is not absent from the domain of these connections and Western allies. Cypriot –British contacts happen to be rather curious, driven partly by mutual distrust that drives back the aforementioned Emergency, and partly by a strong physical presence on the island of British expats, tourists, and soldiers, and of other important ties with the UK – be it cultural (elements of cuisine, the popularity of British literary, musical and TV production), linguistic (a significant influence of English on the Greek Cypriot vernacular, expressed in many widely used borrowings), material (left-hand side road traffic), educational (Cypriots are numerous to study at British universities) and relational (an important Greek Cypriot minority in the UK based chiefly in London).

³ Such a situation makes Cyprus a diglottal state within Charles Fergusson’s terminology (see Fergusson 1959: esp. 332ff).

⁴ One has to mention here the phenomenon of improvised poetry contests, *tsiattista*, held in pure dialect on various festive occasions such as weddings. *Tsiattista* were added, in 2011, to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list.

⁵ See <http://lexcy.library.ucy.ac.cy> (DOA 30/10/20).

While looking at this strengthening of Cypriotness⁶ Among the Greek Cypriot in recent years, we must also pay attention to the strengthening of state symbols, formerly neglected, such as the Cypriot flag (usually positioned next to the blue-and-white striped Greek flag) or state holidays – though commemorations of the 15th of August, the day of the creation of the Republic, were conveniently moved to take place in October. Certain circles also honor the controversial holiday of the 1st of April as the day of the beginning of the Cyprus Emergency – among Cypriots called simply Αγώνας – ‘the Fight’ (Dodd 2010: 20, Mallinson 2005: 21–24).

One dual literary comparative case

In 2010, a seminal study on Greek Cypriot literature was published, entitled *History of Modern Cypriot Literature* (Ιστορία της νεότερης Κυπριακής λογοτεχνίας, see Κεχαγιόγλου, Παπαλεοντίου 2010). This immediately brought about backlash on the part of the Cypriot academic society (Βουτουρή 2011), a part of which did not appreciate the establishing of Cypriot literary creation as an independent field (stated already in the title of the contested book) and instead pointed out that to them Greek Cypriot literature remains but a function of Greek literature, having a similar position within the vastness of the Hellenic literary world as Cretan, Ionian, or even Australian diaspora literature, as long as it is written in Greek (Borowska 2014: 44–45). Let us examine a more recent instance of two Cypriot prose writers, both prominent and both awarded the European Union Prize for Literature.

Emilios Solomou, the 2013 laureate, was granted the award for *The diary of infidelity* (*Το ημερολόγιο της απιστίας*, published by the Athenian publishing house Psychogios, see Σολωμού, 2012). The novel takes place on an Aegean island and draws heavily from mythological motifs. Is it, however, a “purely” Greek book, indistinguishable from books written by non-Cypriot Greeks, published and written in elegant standard Modern Greek. His next book, the bulky *Hatred is Half of the Revenge* (*Το μίσος είναι η μισή εκδίκηση*, published by Psychogios, see Σολωμού, 2015), a commentary on Greek history and realities, presents several plot lines set in different timespans. One of these is a historical reconstruction of the infamous Dilessi Murders of 1870, while other parts, set in the crisis-stricken present times, are a caustic political commentary putting today’s politicians in one line with 19th-century crooks and bandits. Again, any Cypriot

⁶ I have come across this exact word in the context of building a Cypriot identity through folk museum collections (see Stylianou-Lambert & Bounia 2016: esp. 93–114).

trace is almost non-existent, while the Greek context is thoroughly studied and exhibited.

The next Cypriot laureate of the Prize honoured in 2016, Antonis Georgiou, was distinguished for his novel entitled *Album with stories* (*Ενα άλμπουμ ιστορίες*, published in Athens by the Rodakio publishing house, see Γεωργίου 2014), a colorful collection, abounding in photographs, of interwoven stories of everyday Cypriot life, family stories and social problems exposed through individual cases, all these embedded in the more significant historical perspective of the Turkish invasion and its painful aftermath. The text experiments with points of view, parallel narration, or stream of consciousness techniques, but its most striking feature is the common usage of the Cypriot dialect. As the book was published in Greece, it includes an extensive Cypriot Greek to standard Modern Greek dictionary – its absence would render the text unreadable to most Greeks. Georgiou’s literary experience resembles that of many in late 19th century Greece when the official language of prose was *katharevousa* - the artificial variety that could be located, from a linguistic point of view (cf. Horrocks 1997: 445ff), somewhere between demotic vernacular and ancient Greek. Progressive writers at the time would decide to use demotic in dialogue parts while leaving the rest of the narrative in the “higher” variety. Georgiou’s writing may be regarded as an early sign that Cypriot literature is indeed striving for independence.

In place of conclusion

What truly sets the two populations apart are key events in their political and state histories, i.e. Greek and Cypriot history, respectively. Cypriots experienced neither the Catastrophe of 1923, nor occupation and an ensuing civil war in the 1940s. On the other hand, Greeks did not see the Emergency: a war that would be narrated as a combination of mutiny, anti-colonial struggle, civil war, and – as it is viewed from today’s point of view – a fight for independence. The bitterness of invasion and the painfully slow healing process that is still a dominant part of the island’s life remains unshared by Greeks.

In 2009, Alkinoos Ioannidis (born 1969), a prominent Cypriot musician and a strong voice in the Hellenic musical world, wrote and performed a protest-song entitled *Πατρίδα* (‘Homeland’). In this highly personal, almost intimate recited confession, he says:

Κάτω από ένα τραπέζι, το θυμάμαι σαν τώρα
με μια κούπα σταφύλι στον βομβαρδισμού την ώρα

είδα αλεξίπτωτα χιλια στον ουρανό σαν λεκέδες
 Μου μιλούσε ο πατέρας μου να μη φοβηθώ
 Κοίταξε τι ωραία που πέφτουν!

[Transl.: Under a table I remember it like it was now / with a handful of grapes in the hour of bombardment / I saw thousands of parachutes in the sky like spots / My father spoke to me so that I would not fear: / Look, how beautifully they fall!]

This memory from the Turkish invasion in the summer of 1974 is alien to a contemporary Greek while shared universally in Ioannidis' generation of Greek Cypriots. The remembrance of the war, and then the bleeding wound of the split island is something unique, reserved in the Western world only for this island – and Nicosia remains the only divided capital in our part of the world since the fall of the Berlin Wall. As negotiations aiming at ending the “Cyprus question” are permanently stalled and consecutive peace plans rejected at their various stages, what remains are modest grass-root movements, small deeds of ordinary people on both sides of the division line (the “cease-fire line”), carefully explored ethnographically by numerous researchers, such as Yannis Papadakis (2005), Rebecca Bryant (2012), and Yael Navaro-Rashin (2012). There lies the answer to the particularity of these Cypriot key events that do not necessarily have to be decisive historical developments. To embrace them and to understand them is a task for Cypriots, and Cypriots alone.

Nevertheless, it is language that offers the simplest and most blunt examples. In Cyprus, there are two words to denote a Greek – Hellen / Έλληνας which stands for ‘any Greek, living anywhere’, and Helladite / Ελλαδίτης, denoting only ‘Greeks living in the Republic of Greece’. Moreover, since the 19th century, Greeks coming from the “motherland” have been called *Καλαμαρίδες* behind their backs, the slightly derogatory word having its origin in *καλαμάρι* – ‘inkstand’ (see Terkourafi 2001: 65). These were conceited quill-drivers, the know-it-alls who arrived with a mission of teaching the unschooled and ignorant Cypriots how to be Greek. The word has remained in (surreptitious) use today, and these relations expressed in the very vocabulary, give evidence of the ambiguous, partly hidden connections between Greeks and the Greek-speaking inhabitants of the island of Cyprus.

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Summary

The article points to several examples from contemporary Cypriot politics and culture that would expose a change in how Greek Cypriots think about themselves. It is suggested that they now regard themselves no longer merely as part of a greater Hellenic world, but rather as a particular minority, not (yet) ethnically diverse, that stays within its boundaries.

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