

THE PERCEPTIONS OF CYPRIOT YOUTH MATTER

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The potential of youth has become the subject of a growing research agenda among scholars and practitioners, parallel to a global rise in youth mobilisation. However, there are a number of countries worldwide that have a tendency to underestimate the political, social and economic agency of youth. Among these countries is Cyprus, where the voices of youth are persistently ignored in their respective communities and across the island. The theatrical term *soliloquy*,¹ referring to the ‘act of talking to oneself’, best characterises the present situation for Cypriot youth.

It is an unusual and difficult situation to be young in a country that has been divided politically for more than 55 years, and physically for more than 45 years. Myriad factors, including an education based on nationalist narratives, hearing negative experiences from elders, witnessing nationalist discourse in media and politics, and living with the physical scars of the past on a daily basis, have contributed to youth marginalisation. Today’s Cypriot youth grapple with the past legacies and the present realities of a divided island.

Despite the failure of countless peace-building initiatives, and criticism of the elite-level, closed-door, ‘nothing is agreed until everything is agreed’ format of negotiations, there is a persistent hesitation to include the wider public — including youth and women — in the peace process (Lordos, 2009; Lordos, Kaymak and Tocci, 2009; Jarraud, Louise and Filippou, 2013; Pimond et al., 2019). As reflected in the first-ever Human Development Report (HDR) on Cyprus written more than 10 years ago, politicians have not given youth any opportunity to unleash their energy or optimism on the peace process — they neglect to even consider their perceptions and demands. Instead, Cypriot youth have been relegated to the role of passive bystanders (UNDP, 2009, pp.12 and 164). There has since been limited progress, and this relates both to the broader peace process and to each specific level of decision-making.

¹ The word ‘soliloquy’ stems from the late Latin ‘soliloquium’ meaning ‘talking to oneself’, from Latin *solus* — ‘alone’ — and *loqui* — ‘to speak’. It is also used in the translation of ‘Liber Soliloquiorum’, a Latin treatise by Augustine (Etymonline, 2020).

There remains a need to focus on certain specific groups, i.e., Greek Cypriot youth and older Turkish Cypriots as these are the groups most resistant to reconciliation, and on improving the quantity and quality of contact between communities (Lordos, Kaymak and Tocci, 2009). In order to understand youth demands, the periodic investigation of youth attitudes and trends is critical to observe any shifts in hopes for the future, perceptions of the other community, readiness for the peace process and/or willingness to co-exist.

This briefing draws on the main findings of the ‘Moving Beyond Soliloquy: Youth Perceptions on Politics, Peace and Inter-Communal Contacts’ policy report, which was jointly published by the PRIO Cyprus Centre and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Both the report and this briefing detail the findings of telephone surveys conducted simultaneously in Cyprus by Noverna Analytics in the south and by Lipa Consultancy in the north, in each community’s native language.² This policy brief comprises three parts: youth and politics, inter-communal contacts among youth, and peace in Cyprus. The details of the survey along with extensive policy recommendations and action points, which are in line with the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) on ‘Youth, Peace and Security’, can be seen in the detailed FES/PRIO policy report.

² The sample includes 250 Greek Cypriot youth and 250 Turkish Cypriot youth aged between 18 and 35 years old. The survey commenced on 30 November 2019 in the north, and on 3 December 2019 in the south, and concluded for both sides on 10 January 2020. Coventry University’s Ethical Board provided the ethical approval for the survey. The survey is a part of a research project entitled ‘The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: The Cyprus Case | YOUPEACEBUILDER’, which has received funding from the EU’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska -Curie grant agreement 796053.

YOUTH AND POLITICS

When asked about their interest in politics, 63.6 percent of Turkish Cypriot youth and 46 percent of Greek Cypriot youth responded that they are generally 'not interested' or 'a little bit' interested. However, the underlying reason for this does not pertain solely to the political apathy of youth; the survey findings confirm the youth's widespread lack of confidence in politicians and political parties. Also contributing to this disinterest are sentiments of inadequate youth political representation.

Only a small percentage of both Greek and Turkish Cypriot youth believe they have sufficient representation in politics. In contrast, 70 percent of Greek Cypriot youth and 58.8 percent of Turkish Cypriot youth feel inadequately represented in politics. A 21-year-old Turkish Cypriot, in an interview in the scope of the YOUPEACEBUILDER project, reflected this situation: 'Political parties are hesitant to encourage youth candidates in politics, and they don't have any intention to open the doors to youth, either.'

Politicians, among other political institutions and individuals, receive the lowest levels of confidence on both sides of the island, with 49.2 percent of Greek Cypriot youth and 47.6 percent of Turkish Cypriot youth expressing a lack of confidence. After politicians, both Greek and Turkish Cypriot youth expressed the lowest levels of trust in political parties and the government. Mustafa Akıncı and Nicos Anastasiades, the leaders of the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities, respectively, received the highest confidence marks on both sides of the island compared to political institutions and people, with 35.2 percent and 16.8 percent, respectively. Conversely, the responses for the three most trusted institutions are universities (70.4 percent), the military (33.6 percent) and justice (33.2 percent) in the south, and the military (60.8 percent), the police (40 percent) and the president (35.2 percent) in the north.

INTER-COMMUNAL CONTACTS AMONG CYPRIOT YOUTH

After decades of separation, opening checkpoints between the two sides of the island in 2003 marked a milestone achievement in inter-communal contact. Although Cypriot youth were born and raised in a divided country, most have no memories of the era when the checkpoints between north and south were closed and the two communities were unable to have any sort of interaction. The overwhelming majority of Cypriot youth today are able to visit the other side, with the exception of Turkish nationals living in the north.

The two communities diverge substantially in their support for opening new checkpoints. While half of Turkish Cypriot youth (50.4 percent) 'support' or 'definitely support' the presence of more checkpoints, just over half of Greek Cypriot youth (53.6 percent) expressed the opposite opinion, and

'do not' or 'definitely do not' support such a policy. The same difference also emerges in the frequency of crossings and maintenance of inter-communal friendships. Only 7.2 percent of Greek Cypriot youth (compared to 41.4 of Turkish Cypriot youth) say that they cross the checkpoints every day, a few times each week or at least once a month. In contrast, 38 percent of Greek Cypriot youth and 24.9 percent of Turkish Cypriot youth say that they never cross to the other side.

Regarding inter-communal contacts, Turkish Cypriot youth are more disposed to the idea of friendship with Greek Cypriot youth than are their counterparts. While 48.8 percent of Turkish Cypriot youth respondents say that they have friends from the other community, the same can be said for only 16.8 percent of Greek Cypriot youth. Regardless of how friendship is defined, this finding is important, and indicates that most Turkish Cypriot youth, and an overwhelming majority of Greek Cypriot youth, are not friends with anyone from the other community. However, the survey also found evidence that the negative narratives targeting the other community — as the 'enemy' or 'untrustworthy' — do not dominate the mindsets of any Cypriot youth. It is, therefore, possible to argue that this issue primarily reflects the lack of common and safe spaces to foster these relationships between the two communities and that creation of such spaces may increase the willingness of youth to socialise with the other community.

These negative trends among Greek Cypriot youth clearly demonstrate the persistent need to focus on their attitudes in order to increase the inter-communal dialogue. However, we also note that the positive trend among Turkish Cypriot youth in terms of checkpoint crossings relates to a factor other than to co-existence— accessing opportunities in the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) that stem from the state's EU membership.³ The high percentage of Turkish Cypriots who reported not having crossed to the other side can be explained by the presence of Turkish nationals, who are not allowed to do so.

PEACE IN CYPRUS

Since the Cyprus problem is inevitably entwined with — and profoundly impacts on — the daily lives of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, the questionnaire also investigates youth perceptions of the never-ending negotiations in the peace process, possible solution scenarios and the likely outcomes of future referenda.

³ The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is only recognised by the Republic of Turkey. While for Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots, Mustafa Akıncı serves as President of the TRNC, the international community considers him the communal leader of the Turkish Cypriots. As the government of the Republic of Cyprus remains internationally recognised as the government of the whole of the island, the entire island is now considered to be a member of the European Union. However, the *acquis communautaire* is suspended in Northern Cyprus pending a political settlement to the Cyprus problem (see Protocol no. 10 of the Accession Treaty).

As survey data demonstrate, youth respondents on both sides of the island are pessimistic about the progression of negotiations between their leaders. As such, an overwhelming majority of Greek Cypriot youth (84.4 percent) and about half of Turkish Cypriot youth (51.2 percent) believe that negotiations in pursuit of a viable solution are futile. This scepticism is also evident in responses to the open-ended questions about expectations for when there might be a solution to the Cyprus problem: more than half of all Cypriot youth respondents reported that they believe it will never be solved.

Inquiring the support for various solution models is an inescapable component of any survey conducted in Cyprus, and the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities are at odds over their preferred solution model. There is limited variation in the overall trends among Cypriot youth regarding the most favoured scenario, although the responses given by Greek and Turkish Cypriot youth are quite polarised. While 54 percent of Greek Cypriot youth ‘support’ or ‘definitely support’ the concept of a unified state, 62.4 percent of Turkish Cypriot youth favour two separate and internationally recognised states. According to the survey results, each community’s most favoured solution model represents the least favoured solution of the other community. However, the second most acceptable solution model for all Cypriots is a bi-zonal and bi-communal federation, although the level of support for this solution idea is much lower among Greek Cypriot respondents (18 percent) than Turkish Cypriots (54 percent). It is also worth to mention that the support level toward bi-zonal and bi-communal federation solution is not significantly differed among Turkish Cypriot youth of mainland Turkish descent.

Another common survey question in Cyprus relates to voting behaviour in potential referenda on a solution to the enduring Cyprus problem. More than half of Turkish Cypriot respondents indicated that they would vote ‘yes’ in such a referendum, while 34 percent of Greek Cypriot youth said they would vote ‘yes’ in a potential referendum.

STEPS TO MOVE BEYOND THE SOLILOQUY

The findings of this survey/report aim to foster a debate among academics, policy experts, civil society organisations and international third parties actively working on the ground. The data present some explicit conclusions and highlight points of action that –if followed--could make Cyprus an example for other countries and reveal a rare instance of successful implementation of UNSC Resolution 2250. The resolution identified five pillars — participation, protection, prevention, partnership and disengagement and reintegration — to enable youth participation, especially in peace processes. Therefore, steps to move beyond the soliloquy include:

- Increasing political representation of youth in decision-making at all levels;
- Creating alternative dialogue platforms to understand the needs of youth;
- Creating safe spaces and activities to promote dialogue and collaboration;
- Supporting and encouraging individual and collective youth-led initiatives;
- Establishing a Bi-communal Technical Committee on Youth to represent all Cypriot youth in peacebuilding efforts.

The details of all these steps and recommendations to promote a culture of ‘peace, tolerance, intercultural and interreligious dialogue that involve youth’ can be found in the detailed policy report (FESCyprus.org /cyprus.prio.org)

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