

# HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE SEE THE CYPRUS ISSUE AND HOW A BETTER CYPRUS CAN BE ACHIEVED?

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## INTRODUCTION

Negotiations about the Cyprus Issue go on for decades and a lot of effort has been made in order to achieve a solution. Yet, the ones who will actually live the solution in the island, the young people, are never considered as stakeholders or being asked about their opinion. Such approach counteracts the recent UN Resolution on Youth, Peace and Security<sup>1</sup> which actually recognizes the significant role young people can play in achieving peace and security. This is why the Security Council urges Member States to consider ways of including youth in decision-making process at local, regional, national and international level. Furthermore, the resolution recognizes the “important and positive contribution of youth in efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security”, and it “affirms the important role youth can play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and as a key aspect of the sustainability, inclusiveness and success of peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts”.

In this framework, the non-governmental organization Youth for Exchange and Understanding (YEU) Cyprus developed the project “Better Cyprus: The Cyprus Issue and Youth” in order to shape recommendations based on young people’s opinions with regards to the Cyprus Issue and how they envision a better Cyprus. The age of the participants through the whole project ranged from 16 – 30 years old. The project used the methodology of Structured Dialogue, a means of mutual communication between young people and decision-makers in making the voice of young people being heard in the policy-shaping process within the EU and further. It aims to increase cooperation with civil society and to get input from young people.

The Structured Dialogue methodology gathers the opinion of grassroots, using a bottom-up approach and non-formal education methods and technics. The main purpose of the Structured Dialogue methodology is to produce policy papers with a set of recommendations which need to be adopted at a later stage by (official) stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution 2250 (2015) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7573rd meeting, on 9 December 2015

For the purposes of this project, the methodology included the following milestones:

- A focus group with Greek Cypriots: The focus group of Greek Cypriots gathered in Nicosia on the 15th February 2016.
- A focus group with Turkish Cypriots: The focus group of Turkish Cypriots gathered in Nicosia on the 18<sup>th</sup> February 2016.

The aim of the focus groups was to gather on a very first level the opinions of young people on the Cyprus Issue. The call for both groups was open to everyone.

- Online questionnaire: The online questionnaire aimed to gather the opinion of as many young people as possible from all over the island concerning the Cyprus Issue. It was published on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2016 and remained open until the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016. Overall, 271 responses were received. The questionnaire was developed on the recommendations gathered by the two focus groups, allowing the respondents to provide their own opinion too.
- Conference: The main action of the project was a three-day conference, which took place during 18 – 20 March 2016, at the Cyprus Community Media Center (CCMC) premises close to Ledra Palace, in the UN Buffer Zone in Nicosia. During the conference, the outcomes of the focus groups and the online questionnaire were presented and further discussed with the participants, aiming to gather a comprehensive opinion from young people as well as more concrete recommendations. The conference gathered more than 50 young people from different ethnic and religious groups and communities living in Cyprus (Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, Armenians and more).

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## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this policy paper is to advocate for incorporating the recommendations of young people from different groups and communities in Cyprus concerning the Cyprus Issue, taking into consideration the peacebuilding efforts that are currently taking place with the leaders of the two main communities of the island. It also seeks to provide practical suggestions for improvements which can be introduced to shape a peaceful future in Cyprus. Specifically, it will recommend actions to be taken on different levels: Government, Administration, Civil Society and Media in different fields.

The problem description and the recommendations were both identified by the participants during the various phases of the project (focus groups, questionnaire, conference).

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## PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

International law issues are part of the everyday life in Cyprus. The problems are already known: different minorities and ethnic groups who live in the island, incidents of violence that can lead to extreme behavior, fear of the unknown, racism and hate speech towards the others, a feeling of superiority. Apart from the above mentioned, Cyprus recently encountered economic problems and several environmental issues; and all these in a divided homeland of a 9,251 km<sup>2</sup>.

The five most prominent problems in Cyprus identified by the participants of the project during the consultations and the conference, are the following:

1. One-sided education and history teaching
2. Trade barriers and dependency from Turkey
3. Fanaticism and nationalism
4. Media and political misinformation
5. Mutual mistrust between both sides

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### 1. ONE-SIDED EDUCATION AND TEACHING OF HISTORY

It is a fact that each side is and has been teaching its own view of historical facts as each side has its own narrative for every significant event. At the same time, neither side appears to be willing to acknowledge the other's narrative. Such a subject is an issue of one-sided education and history teaching which simply employs ethnic nationalism and fanaticism. As young people are taught what divides Cyprus rather than what unites it, they cannot develop their own opinion over this issue. On the contrary, one-sided education promotes hate and fear of the opposite side, and often it has been observed that even teachers in schools are biased. There is no peace education in schools; and young people are not aware of their own culture and history. It is important to reconsider and reset the aims and teaching methodology of history education in Cyprus as it is linked to both social and political issues on the island.

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### 2. TRADE BARRIERS AND DEPENDENCY FROM TURKEY

This issue was also identified as a significant one. Since the Turkish-Cypriot community is isolated from the rest of the island and the northern part of the island is only recognized by Turkey as the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)", there is an evident dependency from Turkey. At the same time, trade barriers exist and prohibit importing and exporting in and out of the northern part of the island. In this way, the consumers are forced to consume locally manufactured products sold at high prices, as there is a lack of product variety. Therefore, people in the southern and northern part of Cyprus are not able to consume, buy or sell the same goods, something that leads to economic inequality and creates division and difficulties in their cooperation. It is also important that both communities are watched over and "guaranteed" by an external stakeholder: Greece for the Greek Cypriots and Turkey for the Turkish Cypriots.

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### 3. FANATICISM AND NATIONALISM

The sources of Fanaticism and Nationalism identified are associated and/or derive from several sources such as: culture, education, family, misinformation, history, hate, language barriers, and religion. The effects and/or results of Fanaticism and Nationalism identified are: discrimination, unfair judgment, lack of freedom, national self-interest, narrow-mindedness, ignorance, violence among fanatic groups, bullying and lack of communication between Turkish speaking and Greek speaking Cypriots.

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### 4. MEDIA AND POLITICAL MISINFORMATION

We sometimes become witnesses of media and political misinformation in Cyprus. The reasons behind this issue are often associated (but not exclusively) with: corruption of the media, biased reporters, lack of common announcements on behalf of the two leaders, and misrepresentation from political leaders.

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### 5. MUTUAL MISTRUST BETWEEN BOTH SIDES

Mutual mistrust was identified as a separate issue in shaping the problem and according to the participants it is derived from:

- The increased hatred and stereotypes towards the other part
- Prejudice towards any type of solution
- The current status quo
- The biased media
- The demand for guarantors
- Communication difficulties with each other

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Cyprus still has a long way to go in order to establish a framework under which all groups and minorities are treated equally, while all the communities will be able to understand and cooperate with each other peacefully.

Thus, Youth for Exchange and Understanding (YEU) Cyprus, through the Erasmus+ project “Better Cyprus: The Cyprus Issue and Youth” which aims to advocate for incorporating the views of young people from different groups and communities in Cyprus concerning the Cyprus Issue, taking into consideration the peacebuilding efforts that are currently taking place with the leaders of the two main communities, proposes the following recommendations:

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### PEACE EDUCATION - PARTICIPATION

- *Involve young people in decision making processes* and promote transparency in interpreting the political discussions by **creating an online platform** for collecting public opinions on issues that are currently on the political agenda.
- Both communities to cooperate for **organizing student exchanges** in collaboration with schools. During these exchanges students from community A will be hosted by community B and vice-versa. Student exchanges will boost mutual learning in order to *build stable communication, common understanding*; and prove that co-existence is possible.
- **Introduce compulsory Greek and Turkish lessons in schools** (primary, secondary and high school), in order to *overcome the fear of the unknown and establish communication*.
- **Introduce/develop and empower critical thinking, active citizenship, increase self-confidence and include non-formal education for teamwork, human rights, innovation and creativity, in the educational system** to *promote understanding and communication*.
- **Promote the institution of foster families** by sending Greek Cypriot children to live for a specific period of time (i.e. one month) with a Turkish Cypriot family and vice versa, in order to *understand the similarities and boost understanding*. This can be done with cooperation between the Government/Administration and NGOs.
- **Publish one common history book** which *promotes shared history, reconciliation, common understanding and focuses on peace*. It should be written by an objective multicultural committee consisting of academics and historians; but also collaborators from local NGOs and private stakeholders.
- **Introduce teacher training** in history studying and teaching.

- Introduce different forms of **Non-Formal Education** in order to *promote reconciliation, peace education, conflict resolution, culture and human rights learning*. It can be achieved by professional trainers, volunteers, NGOs and schools all over the island.

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## BI-COMMUNAL COOPERATION

- Both communities to work, separately and together, in *improving the conditions of discriminated groups* within the society, such as ethnic minorities. The government/administration should listen to their voices more **through meeting them and their representatives in person**.
- **Establish a bi-communal environment protection office** in order to *realize that we live in the same island and share the same nature*.
- **Promote and strengthen cooperation** on municipality level to *confront common problems*: fields of water, electricity and agriculture.
- **Develop and integrate a transportation system** in order to *connect the whole island*.
- Organize and develop **common festivals and bi-communal activities** (i.e. wine festivals, strawberry festivals, traditional food, hiking, basketry, sports etc.) aiming to *share and empower common cultural values* with participants from both communities. They can be organized by associations, NGOs, councils and groups of people.
- Create an **Eco Village**, for people from both communities to live there for a specific amount of time *aiming to prove that coexistence and cooperation is possible*. The idea is for people to cultivate the earth without chemicals and use the money to support their families. This village may be established in Varoshia and can be created by NGOs.

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## MEDIA

- **Create TV channels, newspapers and social media pages** that share the news, events and entertainment programmes from both communities as objectively as possible, in order to *know the news from the whole island*.