

PERCEPTIONS OF HOMELAND: THE CASE OF CYPRUS

Thanos Koulos

Vice President, Program Operations

University of Nicosia Global Semesters

Throughout history every group has associated itself one way or another with a particular territory, a homeland that functions as a reference point in the evolution and development of the group. Gradually, and with successive generations living, working and dying in the same territory, the territory is invested with emotional connotations in group culture and surfaces as an ancestral homeland. As such it turns to an element of the group identity and provides for a self-definition framework.

In the era of nationalism a twofold association of people with a specific territory has been developed. The first is an ethno-cultural association where a specific group claims a certain stretch of land to be its exclusive homeland; a nation claiming its place in a world of nations by reference to its specific ancestral homeland. The second is a civic association where a group exercises its civic rights in a specific territory – a state – that ideally is also its ancestral homeland.

In the past couple of centuries the international community has been developed along the dictates of the ideology of nationalism and the model of nation-states. The exercise of political power has been legitimated by reference to the 'national will' and the prevalence of nations as the sole legitimizing factor for the creation of the modern states. Ideally, every state is a nation-state drawing legitimacy from its nation, its 'people'. Despite the fact that most states include other ethno-cultural minorities, the claim to statehood is justifiable only when made by a national group. There are of course exemptions to this, where more than one ethnic groups have created a state – like the case of Switzerland – but in all cases the establishment of civic structures has been enhanced by the cultivation also of ethno-cultural affiliations and a sense of a distinctive national identity. Switzerland may be constituted by 3 cantons – Italian, French and German – however the Swiss believe that they form a separate nation; their civic allegiance lies with the Swiss state as well as their national consciousness as Swiss.

In this framework, the Republic of Cyprus has been a paradox from the beginning. Since the Cypriots never developed a single and distinctive national consciousness, but rather from the early national awakening they came to embrace Greek and Turkish national ideals, it was only logical to view Greece and Turkey as the respective 'motherlands' – Greece of the Greek-Cypriots and Turkey of the Turkish-Cypriots. Hence the struggle of the Greek-Cypriots for 'Enosis' and of the Turkish-Cypriots for 'Taksim' are understandable. The Republic of Cyprus created only a state in a world of nation-states that was not backed up by a nation. It established civic

structures and gradually won the civic allegiance – at least of the Greek-Cypriots – but it never came to form a distinctive national consciousness as the Greek-Cypriots see themselves as part of the broader Greek nation and the Turkish-Cypriots of the Turkish one. Another paradox is that since 1964, the Republic of Cyprus has been functioning as a de facto second Greek nation-state – since the administration of the state has been left to the hands of the Greek-Cypriots only. The breakaway Turkish-Cypriot entity in the occupied north again claims to be a separate Turkish-Cypriot nation-state.

The root of the Cyprus problem lies to the fact that the two major ethnic groups of the island have developed separate and conflicting national identities that impede the establishment of a unitary nation-state. Hence the solution of a bi-zonal, bi-communal federal state surfaces as the most appropriate. The leaders of the two communities may be working formulas on governance and administration, territorial adjustments and the property issue – all the logistics and technicalities of a solution – however, issues that touch upon the identity of the new federal entity and to an extent, of its constituent communities remain unaddressed. For example, will the new entity have claims to be a nation-state despite the fact that the two communities have developed separate ethno-cultural affiliations? If yes, how? Or does it aspire to transcend national identities and be a pioneer liberal state that will signal the end of nationalist ideology on the island? Will its civic structures be appealing enough for people to shift their allegiances from their deeply-rooted ethno-cultural affiliations towards it, or will ethnic lines become more solid? Will the new entity be able to rise above the emotional attachment of its peoples to the two outside 'motherlands' and provide the framework for a joint homeland to both Greek and Turkish-Cypriots?

On the one hand, there are plenty of examples from around the world of failed federations; systems and structures that appear logical, correct, representational and functional, that have in fact led from political deadlocks and stalemates to state collapse (i.e. Belgium, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia). On the other hand, there are examples where federal structures have succeeded (i.e. Switzerland, Germany, the US). What these examples demonstrate is that the issue of identity and the emotional attachment of people to what they perceive to be 'their' homeland need to be addressed in any federation plan in order for it to be viable and functional. Political allegiance is directly related to ethnic and territorial identity and a future federal Cyprus should be addressing both.