

# The National Council of Cyprus

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## Abstract

*In 1975, in the aftermath of the 1974 Turkish invasion in Cyprus, President Makarios established the National Council (NC). This was a body intended to function in an advisory capacity to the President, with regard to negotiations on the Cyprus problem. Throughout most of its 40 years the Council has enjoyed the respect of the media as well as the Cypriot citizenry. However, in recent times the reason for the Council's continued existence has been questioned, with some claiming it has become redundant. Many argue that the Council has lost its legitimacy either directly – or indirectly through its constituent parts – insofar as it has failed to contribute to a solution to the Cyprus problem. This article aims to explain the NC's failure as a result of both internal politics and the overall declining public trust in political institutions in general and the NC in particular. It will examine the Council's interaction with other political institutions in the Republic of Cyprus and critically evaluate the changing context within which the Council operates. The analysis is based on a framework that integrates the recent changes that Cyprus has experienced, including EU accession.*

**Keywords:** Cyprus, National Council (NC), legitimacy, political parties, presidents

## Introduction

The study of Cyprus politics is usually related to the Cyprus problem – and not without good reason. The Cyprus problem has existed since before the *de facto* division of the island in 1974, influencing every aspect of the country's social and political life. There have been numerous strategies and measures aimed at solving the Cyprus problem, and the establishment of the National Council (NC) represents one such Greek Cypriot measure. The Council was founded in 1975 by President Makarios to advise the President in the negotiations related to the Cyprus problem after the Turkish invasion in 1974. It was also conceived as a tool to promote Greek Cypriot unity after the catastrophic effects of the 1971–1974 internecine disputes (Ker-Lindsay, 2008b).

There has been little research devoted to study of the NC, its purpose, and its status as an informal or *de facto* institution. With some notable exceptions (namely, Ker-Lindsay, 2008b) most scholarly works on the Cyprus problem usually focus on the personal (i.e. the Presidents) rather than the institutional aspects. Furthermore, most analyses concentrate on personalities, dramatic situations and controversial decisions as well as extraordinary events like the

London–Zurich agreements, the invasion, the Annan plan, etc. This article will place these types of events and information within the context of Cypriot political institutions and the interaction between the two; in such an analysis the legitimacy of political institutions is a crucial issue (e.g. Lipset, 1963). Political institutions as well as political actors can deliver as long as they enjoy the trust of their constituents. The NC derives most of its legitimacy indirectly from two sources: the political actors who represent its membership and the prominence (or not) of the theme that necessitated its foundation, that is to say, the Cyprus problem.

This article will examine the Council in terms of its mandate and whether it has been achieved. The hypothesis is that the NC has in fact failed to achieve its goals; the argument put forth is that this is largely the result of declining levels of public trust in political institutions in general and the NC in particular. The NC likely has a greater legitimacy than its constituent parts and especially political parties; moreover, it has never been linked to tangible effects directly related to the citizens, for instance, clientelistic benefits from governing, unlike the executive office and the parties. The Council's interactions with the Presidents and political parties will be scrutinised, and the changing context within which the Council functions will be evaluated critically. The framework for analysis will consider and integrate the changes that Cyprus has experienced in recent years. Intentionally the focus is on internal politics variables rather than external stakeholders' policies and influences such as Turkey's and Britain's policy.

The reason for the present analysis can be simply stated: the decisions of political institutions and executives affect our lives for good or ill (Rhodes, 2008, p. 339). In general terms, it is important to know what political actors do, why, how, and with what consequences; in this particular case study, it is critical: the NC is tasked with determining the (Greek Cypriot) strategy regarding solution of the Cyprus problem. And although the Council's status appears informal, it is the NC that brings together the two most powerful political actors in Cyprus: the President and the parties. Because of these key players, the NC – and in our hypothesis, its performance – reflects patterns of trust exhibited towards the political system. Over and above that, the Cyprus problem critically affects the lives of the citizens in many ways and a solution will certainly result in considerable changes in and for the island.

The article relies both on secondary and primary sources of information. Primary sources include interviews with the majority of the former Presidents of Cyprus and the party officials who participate in the Council. The interviews conducted were based on a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions targeting a wide range of issues involving the Council. The article comprises six sections. The first section introduces briefly the concept of legitimacy of political institutions and explains the analytical framework. The second section places the NC in a historical perspective, while section three discusses the structure and mandate of the Council and section four presents the findings of the interviews. Section five analyses the developments/variables that affect the legitimacy of the NC and section six deliberates the necessity of the Council in contemporary times.

## The Need for Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a theoretically rich concept and one that is widely invoked by political scientists. In his classic work, *Political Man*, Lipset (1963) emphasised the long-term, historical process by which regimes overcome crises and evolve into political systems whose legitimacy is broadly accepted and infrequently challenged, except by fringe groups or after protracted crises of performance. Lipset (*ibid.*) maintains that people in consolidated democracies have never questioned the right to rule. Yet in most of the western world in recent decades many indicators – surveys, rise of abstention, new forms of political participation, etc. – show that the legitimacy of representative (democratic) institutions has eroded markedly.

Legitimacy refers to the belief that the established political order is right. There are two basic meanings of the concept of legitimacy: the first tests actions against rules; the second questions whether the rules are accepted as binding by the participants of a social system (Morris and Walker, 1998, p. 322). In a similar vein Thomassen and Schmitt (1999, p. 9) note that there are two ways to assess the legitimacy of a political system: the first is the normative criterion, i.e. to what extent does it conform to certain normative criteria? The second is to determine the extent to which the political system is right in the eyes of the relevant beholders, the members of the particular political system. Accordingly, legitimacy can be judged on two criteria: whether the majority of the population accepts that the institution has the right to exist and broadly fulfils its functions (positive legitimacy); and whether they see viable alternatives to that specific institution (negative legitimacy) (Matveeva, 1999, p. 23). Linz (1990, p. 147) argues that most people support the democratic formula for legitimisation of authority. Elections and political participation illustrate this point.

In the context of Cyprus and especially in relation to the NC, the legitimacy of the Council has been gradually undermined by its inability: (a) to build a consensus among the Greek Cypriot political forces regarding the form of the desired solution and the method to achieve it; (b) to exercise effective pressures on Turkey and other powerful countries in the direction of promoting a solution to the Cyprus problem – the actual goal and *raison d'être* of the Council throughout its 38 years of existence. It has also been weakened, especially in recent years, by a negative spill-over effect from the two institutions that comprise the NC: the political parties and the presidency, both of which suffer low public esteem. This essay will use an analytical framework to scrutinise and assess various aspects that relate to the Council's legitimacy.

### *Analytical Framework*

The analytical framework of the current investigation considers both external parameters that influence the Council, and the internal workings of the Council as each impact on its legitimacy. The framework is built around the much-debated topic of the legitimisation crisis of political parties as carriers of democracy, representation and government (Daalder, 1992; Mair, 2005). Those who criticise current political practice call for greater and more authentic citizen

participation in the political process (Scaff, 1975, p. 447), while directing their strongest criticism at the political parties. Party crisis is not new, and is related to concrete social, economic and political changes occurring on national and international levels; at the same time, it is also reflected in changes to the institution of political parties *per se* (Daalder, 1992). The present analysis will look at changes in the party system, since the political parties are one of the two key components of the Council.

Europeanisation comprises the second factor in analysing the wider context within which the NC operates. This variable, which describes a process of transformation at the national as well as the EU level, will be examined because of the way in which it affects national political structures in EU member states – which is the focus of most of the literature on the subject (e.g. Radaelli, 2000). Considering the effect of Europeanisation reveals the political actors' adaptive responses to a changed or changing environment. This factor affects member countries differently, depending on the existing national cleavage structures, the political and administrative cultures and institutions, party organisational structures, size of the country and so on. The small size of Cyprus renders the country more vulnerable in this process. An inevitable consequence of Europeanisation is the reduced power of national governments in terms of creating policy, thus affecting both the President's and parties' impact.

A third important factor is the new media environment, especially the rise in social media. In combination with the traditionally powerful role of television, the new media has an even stronger impact on the political environment. The media have (and have always had) their own agenda on the Cyprus issue, which often conflicts with the NC or some of its members. This enlarged media has placed added pressure on the political parties and the NC to deliver efficiently and forces politicians to accept the notion of political accountability.

Developments regarding the solution of the Cyprus problem *per se* are a fourth factor that influences both the performance of, and the perceptions about, the NC. Given the primacy of the Cyprus problem in the public and party-political agenda for decades, as well as the fact that it is the sole mandate of the NC, it is tautological to say that the credibility and the viability of the Council depend on the state of negotiations. When negotiations are in an active phase the NC and its potential influence will come to the fore; the opposite will occur in periods of inaction. Moreover, if the people's expectations for a solution (or a good solution) are not met, this will reflect negatively on the NC's credibility and necessity.

The dynamics of party competition are also an important variable, given the parties' role in the Council and the fact that parties are the major power players in Cyprus. Party dynamics refer to the way party competition takes place, the electoral campaigns, public sentiment on various aspects of the Cyprus problem, changing political alliances; all these have the potential to affect the workings of the Council. Political parties also represent the most critical variable that can exercise some form of check and balance on the President's authority (Ker-Lindsay, 2008a).

Finally, in the Cypriot governmental system, there is enormous power vested in the presidential office, placing the elected President at the heart of the political system. Therefore, the

relationship between a President and the NC will critically affect the way in which the Council performs. The relationship between the presidential office and other institutions is equally important.

### **The Council in Historical Perspective**

Any analysis of a country's political institutions must include an examination of the country's national traditions (Von Beyme, 2008, p. 750). Finding a solution to the Cyprus question/problem/issue has been the most predominant preoccupation of Cypriot political actors since the 1878 British occupation of Cyprus – hence, it is quite a long-standing tradition. There have been many and varied outlooks on the Cyprus question throughout the twentieth century, with union with Greece (*enosis*) being dominant for the greater part of this time. The historical roots of the Council can be traced to certain Greek Cypriot organisations promoting *enosis* in the 1920s (Georghallides, 1979; Katsourides, 2013a). The hegemony of *enosis* was institutionally crystallised in the form of the various ethnic organisations within which the Church of Cyprus and a number of nationalist, lay politicians had a pivotal role.

The term National Council initially emerged in 1921, at which time it referred to the most respected and influential organ of one of these ethnic organisations, the *Political Organisation of Cyprus* (*Eleftheria*, 1921, p. 4). The National Council was the heart of this organisation, which was chaired by the Archbishop and included *ex officio* the four higher Prelates and another 40 lay members appointed through indirect elections from the six districts of Cyprus. The NC was delegated comprehensive powers and was exclusively responsible for directing and coordinating the *enosis* struggle. The violent insurrection of October 1931 terminated all political activities in Cyprus for almost a decade. When political activity re-emerged in the 1940s, the game had changed: now there were strong left and right groups that were ideologically opposed (Christophorou, 2006). It was no longer possible to successfully coordinate a common stance against the British, and the EOKA armed struggle in 1955–1959 only further aggravated the tension between left and right.

With Cyprus' independence in 1960, the political system of the country was radically reconstructed. The Constitution as it was drawn up provided for a clear separation of powers: executive power is exercised by the President, who appoints the cabinet and is not held accountable to the Parliament, which plays a secondary role within the political system compared to the executive. The role of the President became even more empowered after the withdrawal of the Turkish Cypriots from the governing institutions in 1964. Cyprus entered an era of turbulence and violence between the two communities and between left and right – a friction that was encouraged and nourished by western countries and the two 'mother lands'. Ultimately this led to the Greek junta-led *coup d'état* and the subsequent Turkish invasion in July 1974.

The National Council re-emerged in 1975 in the aftermath of the Turkish invasion as a forum for bringing together Greek Cypriot political forces. President Makarios established the Council as

a presidential advisory body with the purpose of facilitating a common stance on the Cyprus problem within the Greek Cypriot community and as a means for Makarios to be aware of the parties' positions and their possible reactions in different situations (Lyssarides interview). The first meeting of the NC took place on 21 January 1975 and participants included all political parties represented in the Parliament at the time. It also served another function: it aimed to build national unity among the Greek Cypriots after years of fierce intra-ethnic fighting (Ker-Lindsay, 2008b, p. 125). The NC has no constitutional or legal foundation because it was intended that way (Christofias interview).

During the Makarios era the Council held joint meetings with the Cabinet on several occasions. According to the former president of EDEK, V. Lyssarides (interview), Makarios' intention was not to have more people supporting his views; he did not need that. Rather, he wanted to hear more opinions and ideas regarding the handling of the negotiations and also wanted to involve the cabinet in political affairs. Lyssarides believes that this was a correct decision by Makarios because the Cabinet is not a technocratic body and is inevitably involved in political affairs, especially when the ministers travel abroad and are obliged to present the Cyprus case to foreign officials. Regardless, this practice was abolished after Makarios death.

### **Structure and Mandate of the Council**

The NC is structured around political parties and RoC presidents, those serving in addition to former presidents. In terms of the political parties, their participation in the Council is dependent upon their representation in the House of Representatives. Unlike similar institutions that comprise a strong executive representation, for instance, the USA's National Security Council, the NC is more party political in nature. Because the Council is an informal institution, it has neither administrative personnel nor financial resources.

Prior to 1988 the NC operated under a set of unwritten, and as such, inconsistently applied, rules. When G. Vassiliou was elected President in 1988, he convened the body in an effort to revitalise it, as it had been practically non-functioning due to intense conflict between the former president, S. Kyprianou, and the political parties AKEL and DISY. Vassiliou aimed to instil an ethos of collectivity and consensus into the workings of the NC not least because he did not have the backing of a strong power base (only AKEL). The Council agreed to the following: the reactivation of the NC with the participation of the party leaders whose parties were represented in the House of Representatives; the participation of those parties that polled at least 5% in the most recent parliamentary or presidential elections (the threshold at the time was 8%); regular monthly meetings (Vassiliou interview).

These terms have remained in effect ever since with some minor adjustments. As an example, during Vassiliou's presidency even the parties without the minimum threshold were allowed to attend the meetings. Further, it was decided during the Clerides presidency that one person could accompany the leader of each party to the sessions. It was also agreed that several additional officers

would be allowed to sit in on meetings as observers in an effort to capitalise on collective wisdom; these included former Presidents of the Republic, the President of the House of Representatives, the General Attorney, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Government Spokesman and the Secretary to the President (Clerides, 2001).

At a 2001 meeting under Clerides, it was reaffirmed that the Council would convene monthly, although the President had the right to call more frequent meetings. While the agenda is set by the President, NC members may request inclusion of any issue which, if agreed by a majority, will be incorporated. The structure of discussions does not allow dialogue among the members of the body. Council meetings are held behind closed doors, shrouded in secrecy and confidentiality. The body has the authority to refer any issue to supporting committees for consideration and advice.

Council interaction with other major political institutions is largely a function of its powers, both formal and informal. It also depends on its scope of activities – which as we have stated, are strictly confined to the Cyprus problem. The NC has no formal authority over the President of the Republic; it functions solely in an advisory capacity. It is the President who has sole responsibility for negotiations and strategy related to the Cyprus problem; and it is the President who determines the workings of the NC and the weight attributed to its decisions.

After Kyprianou's assumption of the presidency, the NC underwent various phases including its *de facto* neutralisation in between 1985–1988 due to intense party struggle. Kyprianou handled the negotiations personally and dismissed the negotiator at the time (T. Papadopoulos), also making it clear that he would not be bound by the majority views in the Council (Ker-Lindsay, 2008b, p. 127). After Vassiliou's election in 1988, it was decided that the President would have to abide by any NC decisions that were agreed unanimously (Vassiliou interview). However, it was also established that the President could call a referendum if he strongly disagreed with the result. That said, the principle of unanimity allows the President considerable room for manoeuvre given that he is always supported by at least one party. When Clerides assumed office he further stipulated: 'since there is no constitutional provision for the existence of the NC, the commitment of the president to implement unanimous decisions is not legally binding, but bears with it significant moral and political weight' (Clerides, 2001).

The 1988 agreement also provided that 'in the absence of unanimity the president will take seriously into consideration the opinion held by the majority of the parties' (Vassiliou interview). Clerides (2001) interpreted the term majority to refer to the vote share of the parties rather than their arithmetic aggregation. Therefore, he declared that he would earnestly consider the opinion of those parties in the Council whose vote share exceeded 50% on aggregate. The NC continued to operate under the same set of informal rules until very recently, when President Anastasiades proposed the following amendments, which were agreed: the appointment of a negotiator to handle the talks with the Turkish Cypriot side instead of the President, thus revitalising a Makarios practice of the 1970s; the President will be obliged to abide by those decisions taken by parties that represent 75% of the electorate, consequently striking the unanimity precondition (he

maintains the right to call a referendum); the establishment of a permanent secretariat of the Council staffed by an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Papadopoulos, 2013a; Haravgi, 2013). Previously, Christofias (interview) had created a number of working groups to facilitate the process of negotiation: government and sharing of power, European Union, finances, territorial settlement, properties, and safety.

The NC has only ever had indirect powers, and these invariably depend on the will and ability of the political parties to exercise pressure on the President. Unanimity and efficiency of the Council are both difficult considering its size and the varying viewpoints of its members. After all, the Cyprus problem is a political problem, which by definition renders consensus a testing mission. Besides, the dynamics underlying party competition, especially in campaign periods, further impede efforts to achieve consensus. Throughout the years the NC has been most productive in fulfilling its role when members accompanied the President abroad during negotiations (Lyssarides interview). Beyond these occasions the Council's track does not seem hopeful: the NC managed to reach almost unanimity only in the late 1970s when they concurred on the bi-communal, bi-zonal federation and in 1989 when they agreed to a framework for the solution of the Cyprus problem. Subsequent agreement was usually related to procedural issues, in abstract principles and in 'quiet periods' than on contentious and substantive issues and in turbulent times.

The following section presents the data from interviews with former Presidents of Cyprus and party leaders in an effort to identify their stances on the various issues that affect the performance of the Council as well as its future.

## Findings

The information submitted in this section is based on personal interviews conducted on the basis of a semi-structured questionnaire. The questions focus on how the two most eminent political actors in Cyprus (presidents and parties) view their participation in, and the workings of, the NC. The findings are offered without comments in this section. If a reference is not quoted, it indicates that all respondents gave the same answer.

### The presidents

- Party competition heavily influences NC functioning, usually in a negative way
- The NC is an important institution (except Vassiliou)
- The NC remains a necessary institution if working properly
- At present, the NC does not work effectively
- Most NC work must continue under cover of secrecy
- The President always works in cooperation with the governing party, and this is critical (except Vassiliou)
- The Council should have technical support in the form of *ad-hoc* committees and expert knowledge



- Each president considers his term as the most productive
- The NC must continue to deal exclusively with the Cyprus problem
- Leakage of documents and information inhibits the workings of the Council

#### The political parties

- Party competition heavily influences the workings of the NC, usually in a negative way – especially true during electoral campaigns
- Unanimity is difficult to achieve
- The NC is an important institution
- The NC remains a necessary institution if working properly
- At present, the NC does not work effectively. The way the meetings are held only allows monologues, which is counterproductive
- It is important that the Council has technical support in the form of *ad-hoc* committees and expert knowledge
- The NC needs permanent scientific, technocratic and administrative support (Garoyian, Syllouris and Perdikis)
- The NC needs to become a legalised institution with its own economic and human resources (Perdikis)
- Beyond unanimity, those decisions taken with enhanced majority (i.e. parties that represent more than 75% of the electorate) must be binding for the president (Garoyian, Neophytou)
- Intra-party preparations and coordination take place before NC sessions
- Parties are only bound by NC decisions with which they agree
- There were no important disagreements with their 'own' president
- Most NC work must continue to be governed by secrecy
- The NC must continue to deal exclusively with the Cyprus problem (except Perdikis)

#### **The Council in Context: Legitimacy Revisited**

The NC does not operate in a vacuum, and while in the past the Council enjoyed positive attention and deference this is no longer the case. In an increasingly volatile political setting, various signs suggest that change is afoot. These changes are considered below, based on the analytical framework described earlier and the interview findings. These suggest diminished levels of legitimacy for political institutions and personnel.

##### *Party Crisis*

In Cyprus the political parties are at the centre of the entire political structure, playing a crucial role in every aspect of political life (for a more detailed discussion on the role of parties in recruiting the political elite in Cyprus, see Katsourides, 2012). Their stranglehold in society has been

undisputed for years. Nevertheless, in recent times the Cypriot political system has experienced a crisis of legitimacy and, quite naturally, the party system is at the heart of this crisis. As the literature on political apathy has argued, in the last three decades, growing numbers of EU citizens feel negatively about the main institutions of their national democratic system (Betz 1993, p. 413). The same trends have been apparent in Cyprus too in the years following the country's accession to the EU. The current economic calamity has further aggravated the problem.

Prior to EU accession Cypriot society was characterised by high politicisation and party loyalty, which were likely related to the unresolved national problem of Cyprus and obligatory voting (CIVICUS, 2005). But today, there are strong indications of party dealignment. Cyprus' accession to the EU has made obligatory voting essentially redundant and the voter has been free to change his/her traditional voting behaviour. The 2008 European Social Survey (ESS) revealed that 37% felt no party affiliation. Abstention rates reached a record 41% in the European elections of 2009, 21.3% in the latest national elections in May 2011 and 18.42% in the recent presidential elections of February 2013 – an extremely unusual phenomenon in Cyprus politics. The public's trust in political, social and representative institutions and politicians is at an historic low (table 1). The Eurobarometers also verify this trend. Moreover, political parties are seen as nests of corruption: in a recent survey of the Transparency International Cyprus branch, an astonishing 99% believe that the parties are corrupt (Orphanidou, 2013).

**Table 1: Levels of Trust in Political Institutions in Cyprus (scale 0-10)**

	2008	2010	2012
Trust in country's parliament	5.44	4.59	3.14
Trust in the legal system	6.24	5.63	4.04
Trust in the politicians	4.38	3.59	5.10
Trust in political parties	4.26	3.52	2.69

Source: ESS Surveys 2008, 2010 and 2012

These developments, compounded by a highly volatile and divisive political terrain, reflect on the NC's levels of trust. Indicatively, a survey conducted for the CyBC during the electoral campaign for the 2011 parliamentary elections revealed that from 1996 to 2011 (15 years) trust in the Council fell from 93% to 73%.<sup>1</sup> It is not only in public opinion surveys that the lack of respect for the Council is evident; the actors themselves state that within the NC itself there is a lack of respect for the Council and opposing party members. In the interviews undertaken for this

1 CyBC 1 Poll, 17 April 2011.

analysis, all political parties and Presidents identified the ill-mannered way that the members treat the workings of the Council as the most important deficit. Of course, each party blamed the other. This situation of disrespect is, in turn, communicated to the people and reflected in public opinion surveys. Thereupon, a vicious circle of disappointment in the political system is created, nourished by the politicians themselves and the media.

### *Europeanisation*

Cyprus, as a very small island, is extremely vulnerable to EU pressures. There are three major areas where the effects of Europeanisation impact on the NC: (a) the loss of state sovereignty, which undermines government and party authority, consequently compromising their legitimation; (b) EU promotion of civil society/citizen action, which is slowly transforming the island's political culture; (c) European involvement in negotiations around the Cyprus problem. Although the NC has no direct involvement with the EU, the sum of the above factors points to a new political culture in which the once distinguished and powerful institutions (i.e. political parties, executives) are losing power to new, less conventional political actors such as civil society organisations and the media, as well as EU-empowered mechanisms.

The Maastricht Treaty has accelerated a process whereby state sovereignty is constantly reduced – voluntarily or not – in the name of ‘more Europe’ (Ladrech, 2010, p. 133; Bale, 2008, p. 40). The scope and organisation of the public sector have been contested; in turn, this has reduced the potential for political parties and politicians to implement meaningful policies since it deprives them of their traditional tools. The strengthening of supranational organisations like the EU weakens political party influence as well as their power (Bosco and Verney, 2012, p. 132). Loss of state sovereignty directly affects the parties, especially as they are increasingly connected and dependent on the state (see the cartel thesis of Katz and Mair, 1995). As party and executive competencies are progressively more removed or reduced through EU legislation, these institutions become less viable and reliable – citizens lose trust in them because they no longer can fulfil their promises.

Thus far, politics and especially the unresolved Cyprus problem have dominated all aspects of the social and institutional life of Cyprus (CIVICUS, 2011, p. 28). Over-politicisation in a country with an unresolved ethnic problem is thought to lead to a relative atrophy of civil society and a prominence of political parties (Mavratsas, 2003, p. 121). Yet, this is changing (see for example Taki and Officer, 2008). The EU actively encourages citizen participation and engagement through civil society and other forms of interest group representation as an alternative to political parties; the result is the undermining of conventional partisan channels (Beyers and Kerremans, 2004). Parties are thus left with little opportunity to act authoritatively and their role diminishes compared to other actors.

In Cyprus, party crisis and Europeanisation have led to the transformation of the island's political culture from a system of institutionalised to individualised pluralism. Under institutionalised pluralism, ‘political elites, and for the most part only elites, matter’ (Kernell, 1997, p. 12). These elites include political parties, the Church, the trade and employers unions and other

powerful economic elites. Individualised pluralism, however, has led to the devolution of power and the weakening of parties, thus resulting to a growth in interest groups, which has greatly expanded the number of political actors. The new individualisation has brought with it a cultural shift in the way Cypriots place their demands. The earlier collective and organised mobilisation through the mediation of political parties and trade unions seems to have been replaced by distaste for collective forms of action and conventional politics (for the changed nature of Cypriot politics see Faustmann, 2008; Katsourides, 2013b).

The most significant political development attributed to the Europeanisation process is the bringing together of the two main ethnic communities of the island to work towards a common vision and purpose – that of EU membership. Indeed, the prospect of Cyprus' accession to the EU acted both as leverage towards promoting a solution but also a means to reunite the two communities. All political parties and presidents stress the EU's huge influence on finding a solution to the Cyprus problem. The EU has actively promoted bi-communal co-operation and exercised pressures for the solution of the problem: for instance through financial help pacts.

Even so, developments in the post-referendum era have questioned EU influence and reduced Greek Cypriot optimism for a possible solution. Discontent was intense because certain EU officials (namely the Commissioner for Enlargement at the time, Gunter Verheugen) supported the Annan plan, which they believed was compatible with the *acquis communautaire*. Greek Cypriots, on the other hand, perceived the Plan to be contrary to the EU's legal order. The Greek Cypriot public has been disappointed with the EU's contribution to a fair solution to the Cyprus problem and the punitive way Cyprus was treated in the aftermath of the referendum. Therefore, the negotiations slated for autumn 2013 and EU participation in these will be very critically assessed by a sceptic Cypriot public.

### *Party Competition*

All party leaders identified inter-party competition as crucial to party dealings with the Council. In fact, George Perdakis, MP and acting leader of the Greens, believes that the NC serves as little more than a forum for political parties to score points against each other, going so far as to compare the Council to a chicken coop. What is more, the general consensus among political actors is that the parties' use of the NC for their own purposes renders the Council practically illegitimate; certainly it commands no respect in the eyes of the public. Party politicking also undermines any chance of agreed strategies between the parties and the President. As a case in point, DISY withdrew from the NC in February 2006 (Pantelides interview) arguing that its function and usefulness should be reconsidered. Some of the interviewees, however, believe that DISY used the NC as a campaign strategy for the presidential elections of 2008 in its effort to delegitimise President Papadopoulos (Kyprianou, Christofias, Pantelides interviews). Christofias went even further, suggesting that during the second half of his tenure most parties (excluding AKEL) plotted against him during NC meetings in order to discredit his proposals, his party and himself. Recently, President Anastasiades and most political parties refused to allow G. Lillikas' newly formed Citizens Alliance

to participate in the NC on grounds that it had not taken part in elections (*Simerini, 2013*). The party itself argued that the real reason for its exclusion lies in the threat posed to other parties by its presence in the Council (*Papadopoulos, 2013b*). All those interviewed recognised that manipulation of the NC is strongest during electoral campaign periods.

Changing political alliances are also a factor influencing the Council's operations. Because not one party can command sufficient public support to elect a President, the political parties must forge alliances. All presidents since Makarios have been elected in some alliance and lost the support of the parties that contributed to their election at some point of their tenure – reflected in relation to all aspects of their administration, the Cyprus problem not excluded. Furthermore, the Cyprus problem was at times the primary reason for the break-up of their alliances. Usually coalition partners support the President to whose election they contributed, albeit in varying degrees (*Christofias, Kyprianou interviews*). As a result, the fact that in Cyprus governments are always coalition in nature, and because the Council's make-up is political, its functioning will always be subject to the drive for executive power. Consequently, it is anticipated that a significant degree of fluidity will be constantly present.

### *The Cyprus Problem*

Subsequent to the 2004 referendum on the Annan plan, the dynamics surrounding the Cyprus problem have radically altered; this has had repercussion on the NC in two ways that have lessened its credibility and increased the perception that it is redundant. First, the Annan plan served to divide Cypriot society in a way that has left a mark on political attitudes and behaviours, changing the way citizens view the political parties' and the President's authority on the issue. The referendum allowed the citizens, for the first time, to have a direct say on a solution to the Cyprus problem, which ultimately meant that they could dissociate themselves from their traditional attachment to a particular political party and/or President. Cypriots realised they could and should take a personal stance on the issue because it was far too consequential to let someone else decide. This concurs with the picture of individualism analysed above.

Second, in the aftermath of the failed referendum on the Annan plan, there is the widespread belief that the Cyprus problem cannot be solved and an increased pessimism over the situation. This residual pessimism questions the NC right to have sole authority to decide on the issue. Besides, the Council's inability to reach a solution only encourages disrespect and questions regarding its legitimacy. Moreover, the time distance from the 1974 events combined with the false expectations for a solution have reduced the importance of the Cyprus problem on the political agenda. A number of recent surveys have confirmed a shift in focus – for the first time in the electoral history of Cyprus – on the economy instead of the Cyprus problem. The marginalisation of the Cyprus problem is also linked to the ongoing economic crisis. The 2012 Spring Eurobarometer (EB 79) reveals that Cypriots consider the economic situation (75%) and unemployment (72%) as the two most crucial issues their country faces today. Given that the Cyprus problem has taken a backstage position it creates conditions for the NC's further marginalisation.

### *Media and Accountability*

The media is directly related to the accountability of political institutions and politicians. Mulgan (2003, p. 113) has documented that accountability is seriously compromised when the executive is over-dominant – as this can easily lead to a situation where the President is above public scrutiny. This is also a situation that many believe describes Cyprus. Popular demand for accountability of public officials has never been higher, and the media has as a result become increasingly significant. A recent survey investigating patterns of elite recruitment and career paths in Cyprus indicated that tenure rates are diminishing – a reflection of changing values *vis-à-vis* governing (Katsourides, 2012). On the one hand, public expectations are considerably higher now; on the other, politicians' personal and professional careers are scrutinised by a number of institutions that only recently came into being – the mass (and social) media in particular. Both factors render accountability an increasingly critical value. Politicians are today more easily expendable: mistakes and/or bad judgments are difficult to hide and may easily result in a politician's loss of position and/or reputation.

Until quite recently, the media in Cyprus was restricted to a few television networks and the newspapers; now there is a highly competitive and diffuse media environment that includes the progressively popular social media. The contemporary media has made it more difficult for the Council to keep their workings secret and for the President and parties to rally the public behind a chosen cause. Additionally, the various media each has their own agenda, especially with regard to the Cyprus problem. Most newspapers and television stations are clearly right or left in their stance, for or against the governing party and their politics. This means that the media has the potential to create/promote an environment that is unfavourable to the President's positions (Christofias interview). But the opposite is also true: a supportive media can bias listeners in favour of the President's position. At the same time, the President and party representatives can use the media to their advantage, purposively leaking documents or Council dialogues in order to serve specific goals, for example, discredit opponents. Tassos Papadopoulos was very critical of the National Council complaining that any confidential document was immediately leaked (Pantelides interview). The new setting in the media after the outbreak of the private/commercial media in the post-1990 era and the new social media in the post-2000 period has increased the volume of information made public. In turn, this has resulted in the need for politicians to find ways to link with the media in order to attract visibility. Leaking documents and decisions from the Council is a convenient way to do this. At the same time this practice creates a paradox which puts into question the usefulness of the body: the talks about the Cyprus problem require confidentiality which the Council seems impossible to provide, thus the body becomes an obstacle to the goal it was created for.

Although Council meetings are supposed to be confidential and closed to the press and the public, for many years now the debates have been out in the open, which reduces the use of meetings (Ker-Lindsay, 2008b, p. 132). The growing power of the media has encouraged and facilitated this situation, with politicians offering journalists information in a mutually beneficial relationship. All the same, leaking confidential information only serves to further weaken the NC's

influence over the public and makes NC members more cautious – especially with regard to written statements (Kyprianou, Neophytou interviews). However, neither the parties nor the Presidents interviewed believe that Council meetings should be totally transparent: the issues discussed are extremely sensitive and if strategies were made public then Turkey could easily gain the upper hand in negotiations. Despite the conviction of all interviewees that NC members must be informed in detail of everything that is related to the Cyprus problem, this is not always the case. In April 2013, President Anastasiades admitted that he had kept a document secret from the NC because he feared that it would be made public.

As the changing context in which the NC operates is determined by the rise of the various media and the increased demand for accountability, it means that decisions regarding the Cyprus problem are no longer veiled in secrecy or sacredness. On the contrary, they are under constant scrutiny and open to discussion.

### *Presidential Authority and the NC*

The Cyprus constitution gives the President of the Republic enormous power: the President serves as head of both the state and the government, and has been likened to an ‘elected absolute monarch’ (Ker-Lindsay, 2008a, p. 107). Presidential authority has been almost impossible to challenge despite certain signs of change in recent years. The fact that the President also has sole responsibility (since the death of Makarios) for negotiating the solution to the Cyprus problem adds substantial moral weight to the office. For this reason, NC operations will be dependent on the specific President and his attitude to the Council. Ker-Lindsay (2008b, pp. 128–132) argues that Vassiliou and Clerides treated the NC with greater respect than Kyprianou and Papadopoulos, albeit for different reasons, but not all interviewees agreed with this assessment (Pantelides, Christofias, Garoyian interviews). When the Presidents and the parties were asked to rate the presidencies they all ranked their own candidates/parties highest. Lyssarides (interview) believes that the Council operated more effectively under Makarios because he was the only president who had no insecurities and he enjoyed almost total public support.

Deference towards the serving President has been changing in recent times, although this has been a feature of Greek Cypriot political culture for decades (at its apex in the Makarios era). Today, the presidency is treated with less respect by the political parties as well as the public. The Mari incident<sup>2</sup> and the public response are highly illustrative of this changed mentality. In that period and since, issues of transparency and accountable government came to the fore – unrelated to the Cyprus problem *per se*. Come what may, because the authority of political institutions and personnel has been called into question, public trust in the President’s ability to handle the Cyprus problem as well will be affected.

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2 The incident concerned the explosion of a confiscated cargo of (Russian) ammunition destined for Syria, which caused many deaths as well as the destruction of the island’s main electric power station.

In another vein, the President is under no obligation to accept NC recommendations, even if he stands alone in his position (Ker-Lindsay, 2008b, p. 133). A prime example is former President S. Kyprianou's unrelenting stance in 1985 on the Cyprus problem. A President who is too authoritarian, who is seen as stubborn and unreceptive to criticism and ideas different from his own, risks losing the public's trust and respect. But, a certain degree of pressure can be exercised on the President as was evident during Christofias administration. Christofias' proposals during the negotiations – that is to say, the provision for a system of a rotating presidency between the two communities and a mixed voting system between Greeks and Turks – were severely criticised by all parties apart from AKEL. The majority of political parties demanded that these proposals be withdrawn.

Traditional means to effectively exert pressure on the President include the mobilisation of public opinion and parliamentary voting on issues not necessarily linked to the Cyprus problem. The political parties claimed more power in the post-1974 era, and in recent years they have been able to utilise both mechanisms effectively to pressure the President. During Christofias' term for the first time ever the Parliament intervened in the President's exercise of power. This could represent the beginning of a change in the relationship between the two institutions (executive and legislature). The Cyprus constitution stipulates that the President and the Parliament derive their authority independently of one another and that the President is the highest authority. In such a system, both branches of government have incentives to bargain in order to produce legislation and to govern (Shugart, 2008, p. 346). It remains to be seen whether the balance of power will continue to shift or be restored to the President. This will be inextricably linked with political alliances.

A final remark on the President's authority in relation to the Council: President Anastasiades has declared that he will be bound by any NC decision that is backed by political parties representing at least 75% of the electorate. While Anastasiades will benefit from the safety net that DISY always polls more than 25%, subsequent Presidents whose backing parties are smaller may have trouble. Moreover, the appointment of a negotiator to handle the negotiations could further compromise presidential authority. These actions leave many grey areas and, some journalists have wondered who would be the ultimate decision-maker, whose voice would carry the final authority (Dionysiou, 2013, p. 4).

### **Is the National Council a Redundant Institution?**

The preceding examination of the National Council brings to the fore the issue of the NC's usefulness in the current political environment in Cyprus. Although an academic analysis cannot provide all the answers, it can review the situation and make recommendations. It is ultimately the politicians who will decide the future of the NC.

As stated at the outset, the Council was established primarily to formulate state policy regarding the Cyprus problem and to inform the Presidents on the various party stances. As long as the Cyprus problem remains unsolved and continues to enjoy priority in the political agenda,



the preconditions exist for the NC to play an active and respected role. But for all that, the economic crisis that has spread throughout the European Union and more recently and very dramatically in Cyprus, has taken centre stage, side-lining the Cyprus problem. On top of that, for reasons explained earlier, the public has become less trusting in the authority and role of the Council, the President and the political parties. In view of these developments, the public views the NC as almost redundant.

In stark contrast, the political actors involved believe that the NC is a very significant institution and that there is still a place for the Council. This could be seen as a self-serving argument since the body gives the party leaders additional significance and media exposure. However, for the Council to exist in any meaningful way, legitimacy is crucial: the Council must have a fair degree of either direct or indirect legitimacy. Therefore, the NC must successfully address issues of accountability, commitment to promises, and show an ability to reach a minimum consensus among political forces. The political parties and the President must guide the NC in its bid for greater legitimacy, especially in view of the forthcoming negotiations in autumn 2013. This means that the Council must adapt to the changing environment, especially in the way it performs. By way of illustration it must become more efficient in terms of arriving at a consensus on the Greek Cypriot stance in relation to the Cyprus problem; a very hard to achieve task. This was identified by all actors as the one factor that will make the Council more responsible, more accountable and more trusted by the public.

The majority of those interviewed complained that NC meetings produce little more than a repetition of standard party positions, and all concurred that a substantive dialogue was imperative. Because political authority in the Cyprus system is fragmented among political actors, compromise is key to NC effectiveness. For the NC to operate more efficiently, those involved must reverse the rationale underpinning its current operation: turn the Council from an end in itself to a means to an end. Here, the end is the policy mandate on a Cyprus solution; the Council is in fact the means to achieve the end.

All actors were of the same opinion that Council meetings required better coordination and preparation, as well as expert technical knowledge. Where they did not agree is whether this support should be formal and permanent (Perdikis, Garoyian, Syllouris, Lyssarides) or more *ad-hoc* in nature (Christofias, Kyprianou, Pantelides). Many suggested that certain issues should be subcontracted to scientific/scholarly institutions either created precisely for the NC or hired for specific purposes. However, the political nature of the Cyprus problem must be considered, since ultimately the Cyprus problem is a political issue, which suggests that technocrats alone cannot substitute political decisions. Yet, how will consensus occur when Cyprus holds elections at least every two years and the Cyprus problem is always high on all party platforms? All those involved in negotiating a solution are competing for political power; and uniting them behind a common stance is no easy task. Efficiency implies the dissociation of political motives from the workings of the Council; this is easier said than done.

## Conclusions

The National Council of Cyprus, like the majority of political institutions today, suffers from a loss of legitimacy and public trust. Also, the once prominent Cyprus problem – the Council's focus and *raison d'être* – has recently taken a back seat to the economic crisis sweeping through Europe. The Council must regain a substantial measure of legitimacy if it is to continue to operate effectively and with the public's support and trust. The recent shift in the political focus away from the Cyprus problem might actually serve to help the NC redesign the way it operates – which is crucial in light of the forthcoming (re)start of the negotiations (for a Cyprus solution) in autumn 2013. In fact, the Council has begun to make efforts in this direction, although it is the legitimacy of the political actors that is the most critical variable in terms of the Council's authority and legitimacy.

Historical institutionalism has demonstrated that institutional traditions are not easy to change (Von Beyme, 2008, p. 752). They can adopt new purposes and methods of work and continue to exist. The reorganisation does not necessarily mean that the NC will or must completely break with the practices and methods of the past; it is more likely that the Council will enact adaptive measures that suit the needs of a changing environment. There is a clear need for scientific and technocratic support, collectivity in decision making and increased accountability of its constituent parts. All internal changes must be grounded in institutional changes, and must also reflect a change in the Council's relationship with other institutions within the political system. Council members themselves proposed several ideas for better functioning of the body: organisation that is innovative; setting up supportive mechanisms, and; ensuring the Council's greater accountability to the public. Nonetheless, should all these processes be implemented, the most vital measure relates to the political actors' willingness to find a solution to the Cyprus problem – and to stop using the NC as a tool to perpetuate it.

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