

From the President's Office: A Journey towards Reconciliation in a Divided Cyprus

GEORGE VASSILIOU

I.B. Tauris (London and New York, 2010), x + 422 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-84885-411-6

From the President's Office is a remarkably candid and comprehensive exploration of George Vassiliou's attempts to reunify the island of Cyprus through a federal solution during his presidency from 1988 to 1993. Vassiliou primarily deals with his professional journey of reconciling a divided Cyprus, but in doing so he also sheds much needed light on the political machinations at both the EU and UN levels. As former President of the Republic of Cyprus – notably the first post-nationalist president – he is evidently well placed to provide the reader with a uniquely intimate insight into the complexities of reunification attempts. Moreover, the fact that his efforts are contextualised within the interplay of domestic and international forces makes this book a very valuable addition to the historiography of modern Cyprus. As such, it will be of immense value to a wide spectrum of students, not limited to those studying International Relations, Diplomatic History or Conflict Resolution. Given that it is written in a laudably accessible style, it will also appeal to the interested citizen.

The book is divided into five main sections, demarcated by what Vassiliou experienced as five distinct periods during his presidency. The first period deals with his initial time in office, from February to August 1988, in which he vigorously instigated an end to the international stagnation that had debilitated progress on the Cyprus issue since the signing of the Kyprianou-Denktaş agreement in May 1979. As Vassiliou elaborates, the lack of constructive developments at the UN level had been hampered by President Kyprianou's intransigent policy of 'preconditions'. The antagonistic climate was further compounded by his rejection of the 1986 proposals by the UN Secretary-General, Mr Pérez de Cuéllar. Vassiliou's attempts to mobilise the international community are marked by a sincere willingness to transcend narrow nationalist approaches as his rejection of the principle of preconditions clearly illustrates. Following meetings with the key international political figures of the day – Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Regan to name but two – enough momentum was harnessed to reactivate the international community's interest. Significantly, this period ends with the formal removal of the preconditions, an outcome of the Geneva meeting on 24 August 1988 between President Vassiliou and the Turkish-Cypriot leader Mr Raouf Denktaş, enabling intercommunal dialogue to begin.

The second period, from September 1988 to August 1989, opens with a resumption of negotiations between Vassiliou and Denktaş, only made feasible by the pressure placed on an

evidently stubborn Denktash by President Kenan Evren of Turkey and Prime Minister Turgut Özal. Equally unsupportive of the rapprochement were the EDEK and DIKO political parties. Indeed, Vassiliou persistently shows throughout how he had to temper DIKO-EDEK-EK and AKEL-DISY opinion. Testament to Vassiliou's conciliatory spirit was the unanimous adoption by the National Council, on 27 January 1989, of the proposals for a mutually beneficial solution to the Cyprus Question. The aftermath of Denktash's rejectionist tactic sets the context for the third period between August 1989 and December 1990 and the subsequent breakdown of the talks. Consequently, we see Vassiliou intensifying his efforts to internationalise the issue but also striving to locate it within the context of the Europeanisation of Turkey amidst the successful acceptance of the Cypriot application for membership to the EEC. A long term Europe enthusiast, Vassiliou's belief in the democratising potential of EEC membership is clear and its consequent potential to help resolve the Cyprus problem. Yet this cautioned optimism is more muted in the penultimate period, from March 1991 to May 1992, as any possible developments are stymied by Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot intransigence despite the increasing involvement of the US administration and its consideration by the newly inaugurated President George H.W. Bush as 'a matter of priority' for the USA (p. 123).

While Vassiliou did not shy away from accusing clerical leaders from frustrating reconciliatory efforts, it is judicious of him to commend others such as DISY leader, Glafcos Clerides, in his opposition to Archbishop Chrysostomos' misleading claims that Archbishop Makarios had not accepted the principle of a bi-zonal federation. An account of the unprecedented involvement of the Security Council in the Cyprus issue marks the fifth and final period between January 1992 and February 1993. While this chapter appears to open with cautious optimism with de Cuéllar's successor, Boutros Boutros-Gali securing the support of the Security Council, Vassiliou makes clear the tensions that were increasing within Cyprus with the 'constant rejection of every UN proposal by DIKO, EDEK, the Archbishop [Chrysostomos] and others' (p. 156). The culminative effect of these forces, compounded by Denktash's unwillingness to discuss issues of substance and the change of policy by DISY, left the reunification of the island vulnerable and Vassiliou's chance of re-election considerably reduced. Clerides' *volte face* evidently paid off with his election as president in March 1993. It was the reconciliation process which paid the highest price however with the resumption of the predictably adversarial politics.

The narrative is peppered with reportage from a multifarious selection of Turkish, Greek and Cypriot newspapers which not only help capture the wider public mood but allows the reader to gauge the interplay between political developments in divided societies and the mass media's perception, and at times distortion, of these events. These articles – the publication of some only made possible by Vassiliou's liberalisation of the mass media – are used sparingly but effectively to show the destructiveness of the nationalist shibboleths on both sides of the island. Indeed, the level of vitriol Vassiliou received from extreme nationalists in both communities, most effectively illustrated through this newspaper commentary, is perhaps the real litmus test of his ability and

willingness to operate outside the traditionally retrogressive and adversarial paradigm by his adoption of a 'peace and goodwill offensive' (p. 51). The extensive notes and appendices are to be congratulated, providing much important official commentary and documentation without stultifying the main text. Admittedly, there is the occasional grammatical and spelling error but in no way does either subtract from the value of this very important book.

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