

# **OZGUR PROJE**

## **NORTH CYPRUS**

**Defining the National and Cultural Identity of Turkish-Cypriots**

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## **Introduction to our Research Proposal**

Our research is based on exploring the extent to which Turkish descent defines the national and cultural identity of Cypriots in Northern Cyprus. Before we delved into our research, we formed a hypothesis that Turkish descent is important for the national and cultural identity of Cypriots in Northern Cyprus but the Northern Cypriots have also developed an independent hybrid sense of identity. Our independent variable was Turkish descent of Northern Cypriots and dependent variable was national and cultural identity of Northern Cypriots. Our measurement was based on using nominal questions to gain an insight into concepts such as national and cultural identity as understood by our survey respondents and made use of a small number of open ended questions to understand their individual background and descent from Turkey.

Our interest developed in this field as we were three international students (two from Pakistan and one from German--Turkish descent) that came to Turkey and realized the importance of culture. Especially when one's culture can have an important effect on one's identity, it becomes important to study the origins of culture formation and track its development. Having lived in Turkey for three years, the three of us observed and immersed ourselves in the Turkish culture and found it fascinating. This made us question whether Turks who live outside Turkey and are not brought up in Turkey experience a different national and cultural identity to that of Turks brought up in Turkey. This academic endeavour became more specific in the Turkish- Cypriot context where we decided we want to explore how a Turkish Cypriot defines his/her national and cultural identity in relation to their Turkish descent. Have they established their own culture, do they feel like they belong to Cyprus independent of Turkish values and norms or is their identity susceptible to a sense of confusion. This process of self inflection and identity of groups who have lived outside their country of descent is relevant in today's world of convenient and fast mobility and thus through this opportunity of Ozgur Proje, we decided to add to the existing scholarship

by academically exploring this phenomenon. Before we started the practical part of the research, we approached the subject matter from an academic perspective by reading journal articles and papers. We observed a common trend in most of them, which was that fluctuations in identity in the native Turkish-Cypriot community would occur because different generations have been socialized into and gone through different socio-political environments (Yücel Vural, 2007).

### **General findings and trends**

We had the opportunity of sitting down with Prof.Dr. Ahmet Sezon at Near East University regarding the issue of the divide in Cyprus since Turkish troops invaded 1974. Forty years on, Nicosia still remains to be the only divided capital in Europe. According to him, when it comes to self-identification, 60% of the people of Northern Cyprus refer to themselves as Turkish Cypriots. He described it as a small minority who identify themselves as Turks first and added further, that majority of the Turkish-Cypriots preferred to keep both affiliations at the same time together. Furthermore, he talked about the existence of not just a physical division, but also, the presence of a psychological divide in the minds of people which goes back to even before the conflict between the two communities. He went on to and explained the historical aspect of this of how during the years before, when there would be mixed villages, the conflict between the people still existed with one of the best examples of this being the intolerance of mixed marriages. There was no concept of inter-marriage between the two communities with their ethnicity and religion playing a huge role with more strictness coming from orthodox Christianity. Another problem, according to him that fostered this division further was with the withdrawal of the British, once the Republic of Cyprus was established, even the constitution did not allow for inter-marriage between a Moslem-Turk and Christian-Greek unless one converted to the religion of the other. Conclusively, there were these legal barriers that have also kept the divide amongst the two communities.

According to Prof.Dr.Ahmet Sezon, two prominent components that differentiated a Turkish-Cypriot from a Greek-Cypriot included language and religion while at the same time, they held common customs

as well so much so, they you would be unable to pin point and differentiate between a Turkish and Greek Cypriot. He further went on to tell us that the “Cypriotness” is something real, and something you feel that has led to people from two different ethnic communities to reach common ground which goes well beyond religion or ethnicity. He emphasizes on similar ways of living between the two communities such as when it comes to raising kids. Similarly, apart from pork, they have the same cuisine. Neither of them are European in terms of embracing European values but nonetheless they carry all the eastern cultural characteristics.

In accordance with surveys he recently conducted, if you look at Greek-Cypriots, 29% feel, to this day they are somewhat Greek and somewhat Cypriot but then again, 19% felt Greek-Cypriots only felt like Cypriots’ where as 9% said only a Turk, and not a Cypriot. The results indicate that majority of the people of the island both characteristics of the affinities.

When asked about the question of being secular, he told us that Turkish-Cypriots were amongst the most secular Moslems in the world. In fact, they do not mix politics with religion at the same time, and described them as less conservative as opposed to mainland Turks. According to him, in the North, religion does not play a big role to the extent it is very rarely discussed at home amongst families and lacks the structured governance of religion. In the South, however, religion is very important due to its historical roots, and up until today, the church plays a very significant role and still the biggest property owner of the island.

The population of the Northern side can very easily be divided into two sides; the leftwing and the rightwing people. While the rightwing were against a federal solution, they did not support the Turkish Prime Minister and continued liking the army. However, in the last few years, the more authoritarian his role became, not only were the Turkish-Cypriots not happy with his regime, but neither were the mainland Turks.

Conclusively, the general feeling that exists amongst the Turkish-Cypriots is that of resent towards the Turkish government's intervention such as in their lifestyle and attempts to create more nationalistic feelings amongst the Turkish-Cypriots with more force rather than their own willingness.

When asked about the general the relationship held between Green and Turkish Cypriots, he told us that the two ethnic communities maintain a level of civility that was manifested since 2000. Since then, there have been no hatred attacks or any such incidents. Turkish and Greek Cypriots consist of nationalists and have potential for violence. However, not to the extent that we see in other places around the world today such as in Syria.

One of the few concluding questions that we asked Prof.Dr. Ahmet Sezon was regarding whether older generations tend to be more are more sensitive towards to the divide as opposed to the youth as well as the main components that would make an agreement possible. According to him, older generations most definitely identify the more with the "Cypriot problem" whereas younger generations are much more ignorant and open minded towards the conflict. In regard to an agreement being possible, he told us that the major issue that exists is whether the two communities are prepared to share power, ready to reject nation state paradigm and form a model based on power sharing. A second issue that may come up would be of property and if people believe it would be resolved in a fair manner. Overall, if the island can provide security to the people, they would feel happy.

Next, we had the chance to interview three faculty members from Eastern Mediterranean University with their descent being from North Cyprus. Generally, their responses to similar questions as the ones asked to Prof.Dr. Ahmet Sezon were had a similar pattern in terms of their overall opinion. There was a general agreement amongst them when it came to the question of how they identify themselves with the response being as "Cypriots." They hold on to the belief that they belong to both sides of the island in some ways when they are linked to their ancestors being from the other side.

On the question of the existence of the psychological green line existing, the three candidates were firm on their answers with an agreement of it existing very extensively with reasons being due to history that cannot be erased. The general consensus held was also that it exists more amongst older generations such as their grandparents who refuse to go on the other side.

In terms of major differences between the mainland Greeks and Turkish-Cypriots, emphasis was placed on differences being mainly in religion and language. While differences in upbringing, food, cuisine also exist, they were agreed upon being more similar than different. Furthermore, when asked about the differences with mainland Turks and the Turkish-Cypriots, similar responses were also obtained amongst the three as well as what we heard from Prof.Dr. Ahmet Sezon with the focus and main factor of difference being that the mainland Turks are far more conservative, especially in terms of gender issues. Determinately, the main difference that exists amongst the South and North according to them is mainly religion and the other differences, are being created politically.

A problem that was further highlighted, with majority of the interviewees holding a strong opinion on the mainland Turks who settle in Northern Cyprus expect not themselves to adjust to the their Turkish-Cypriot culture, but rather, vice versa. Additionally, a lot of the Turkish-Cypriots hold a strong prejudice with the current Turkish Government since they feel that the government is imposing the religious aspect more on them than they would like.

The debate of nationality can be divided into two sides of groups of people. There are those do not really care as opposed to those very nationalistic ones. However, the hostility on both the sides can be said to be more of a stereotype and varies from generation to generation. The key issues amongst the Greek and Turkish-Cypriots remain political. Many of the Turkish-Cypriots also voiced that in their opinion, they have to be recognized which would lead to the reduction of fear amongst the two sides.

We not only interviewed faculty members at the two universities, but went further ahead and handed out surveys to citizens of Northern Cyprus from three different parts, these being, Kyrenia, Famagusta and

Nicosia. Below, Figure 1 and 2 show a sample of a survey that was filled out by ten randomly selected people from Northern Cyprus.

**Survey**

- 1) As an individual, which category would you most associate yourself within?
  - A) Turkish
  - B) Cypriot
  - C) European
  - D) Muslim
  
- 2) Which of the following options are you in most support of?
  - A) Two independent states
  - B) Federated bi-zonal state
  - C) Integration with Turkey (reintegration of Greek- Turkish Cypriot communities)
  
- 3) Does being a Cypriot take precedence over the Turkishness?
  - A) Yes
  - B) No
  - C) To some extent, yes
  
- 4) Personally, do you regard religious identity and ethno-national identity as separate?
  - A) Yes
  - B) No
  - C) To some extent, yes
  
- 5) Is anxiety about the question of national identity still felt amongst the Turkish Cypriots, to this day?
  - A) Yes
  - B) No
  - C) To some extent, yes

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**FIGURE 1**

- 7) Can you tell apart from a Turkish speaker to a Turkish Cypriot?
- A) Yes
  - B) No
  - C) Most of the times
- 8) Keeping in mind events and practices in the history of the two communities, do age-related alterations make a difference to people's perceptions of collective identity? (different generations)
- A) Yes
  - B) No
  - C) To some extent, yes
- 9) Could you list down some of the main cultural differences with mainland Turks.
- 10) In the current situation that exists, which of these do you consider most relevant to your identity?
- A) Territory and birth place
  - B) Ethnic origin, religion and language

**FIGURE 2**

Results from our surveys showed very similar patterns that were spoken of by our interviewees as well. For the first question, regarding which category they would most likely associate themselves with, 60% people said they would classify themselves as Cypriots. On the issue regarding whether the Cypriotness takes precedence over the Turkishness, we had 80% for the answer choice of "Yes."



Similarly, 90% people also agreed that age-related alterations made a difference to people's perceptions of collective identity. Lastly, we asked the randomly selected people if they were in support of two independent states, a federated bi-zonal state or integration with Turkey. We had 60% people for the option of a federated bi-zonal state, 20% for integration with Turkey and 20% for two independent states.

### **How our general findings are in line with our hypothesis**

As we began our research, we conceptualized and predicted a hybrid sense of cultural and national identity of Turkish Cypriots. After we conducted our surveys and interviewed, the general sense could indeed correctly be characterized by such hybridity and sense of variations amongst our population under study. It was variance and several divisions that were observed rather than a generalisable and shared sense of common identity amongst North Cypriots.

The divisions were not just seen between South and North Cypriots, in terms of national borders, but rather between Turks and Turkish Cypriots too, first generation immigrants from Turkey and second third generation North Cypriots (the older generation vs the youth) who had varying definitions of their identity and association with Cyprus. These variances were rooted in age group, social class, religious affinity, political awareness and so on but indeed divisions and variance was more common than a clear-cut identity. Indeed it was a hybrid as we had stated and had set out before our research trip, but a point of learning for us was the extent of the hybridity and divisions within defining identity. This in itself is one of the fruits of our research and shows the impact and relevance of our research as indeed identity and its understanding is subjective from person to person and must be studied further. Language, religion and history are potent decisive forces which actively shape one's identity and also lead to divisions amongst groups sharing similar characteristics. Politics and history when put together, specifically in the case of Cyprus, ensure that these divisions amongst society are renewed and further instilled.

Thus, we were on the right side of the research when we proposed that Turkish Cypriot identity is characterized by a sense of hybridity, however, the variance and divisions within this research area were only uncovered after we conducted our surveys and interviews, where after having evaluated and tabulated the general trends, we were able to conclude that the identity of a Turkish Cypriot is carved through several dimensions, measured along several thresholds and indeed the divide is not resolved and remains to be a potent force of further division and conflict amongst Cypriot and with its neighbors in the region.

As our findings clearly show, the question of identity is a major issue in the Cypriot society. This is due to the existence of not only a physical, but also a psychological green line, which hinders people from understanding and defining their identity. The reason why this so-called psychological green line still exists and shapes the island is due to the fact that is that the Cyprus War happened less than 50 years ago and that Cypriots pass on their experiences of the war and this way create biases.

Furthermore, the different religion and language of the Northern and the Southern part of Cyprus represent other factors, which make the creation of a common identity of Cypriots nearly impossible. These differences create an atmosphere between the two sides, which is characterized by a sense of non-belonging and intolerance. As participants of our interviews have also outlined, a major problem which leads to confusion in terms of identity is not only the difference between Northern and Southern Cyprus, but also the differences between Turkish Cypriots and Turks from mainland Turkey. The Northern Cypriot population is convinced that Turkish immigrants are not willing to accept the culture and way of life of Turkish Cypriots, but rather try to impose their culture and religious views on the Cypriot society. This leads to a further division and sense of intolerance amongst the Turkish Cypriots.

This shows us that there is not only the discrepancy between Northern and Southern Cypriots, but also within the society of Northern Cyprus in itself. This circumstance makes the question of identity much more difficult for the population, as compared to other parts of the world.

It seems like there is not going to be an end to this issue until there is an agreement between both sides of Cyprus and an era of interaction and exchange between Northern and Southern Cypriots. We believe that only like this people will be able to form a sense of common identity.

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