

THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS AND THE CASE OF CYPRUS

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Think tanks constitute an important part of public life in all advanced countries. They study major issues, submit policy recommendations and also encourage public debates and exchange of ideas. They may also contribute to the formulation of policies and national narratives. In some cases, they also participate in second-track diplomacy and informal consultations at different levels.

Cyprus faces major strategic political, economic and social challenges. Nevertheless, there is no comprehensive framework for supporting independent institutions which undertake such activities. Any public and private assistance provided remains limited and random. This has to change as it constitutes a strategic failure. Unfortunately, the role and importance of think tanks are still not adequately understood by the government, the political system and the business community in this island-state.

Unfortunately, the presence of Cyprus in the international marketplace for the exchange and promotion of ideas is limited. This entails a considerable cost for the country. Other states understand the importance of such activities and support these institutions accordingly.

This is particularly serious in relation to the Cyprus problem. Turkey continues to occupy 37% of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus, which it does not recognize. At the same time, the Turkish side systematically promotes narratives intended to shift responsibility for the current situation onto the Greek Cypriot side.

Turkey recognizes the importance of think tanks, academic networks and international conferences in advancing its interests. Turkish diplomats and academics participate actively in international policy forums, including conferences dealing with the Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara has also supported publications

promoting its narrative on the Cyprus problem. A recent example is the 2024 book *Who Is to Blame? The Present Cannot Be Separated from the Past*, which includes a foreword by President Erdoğan. These actions demonstrate that Ankara considers the promotion of its narrative an important part of its broader strategy. Cyprus has not acted with comparable consistency.

Turkey has a comparable advantage in hard power. Yet it does not ignore the importance of soft power. Cyprus has a comparative advantage in soft power. Yet, it has not utilized it. There is no excuse for this.

States involved in major international disputes and conflict understand the importance of influencing international public opinion and promoting ideas. Parties in conflict substantially invest on public diplomacy and other instruments of soft power.

Cyprus has no comparable coordinated approach. There is no coherent national strategy for promoting its interests through knowledge, research, international networks and public diplomacy, nor a sufficiently developed national narrative that can be communicated consistently to international audiences.

Cyprus has a comparative advantage in utilizing soft power. It is a member of the EU, has longstanding academic and cultural links with Europe and the broader region, it has an important position in the Eastern Mediterranean, and has a substantial pool of academics, professionals and other experts who can contribute to international discussions. These advantages are not being utilized.

The current situation in relation to the Cyprus problem is not only the result of the imbalance of power. It is also related to the absence of a convincing narrative and the failure to understand the importance of a targeted international presence. It is regrettable that, so many years after the invasion, Cyprus continues to have such a limited presence in the international market for exchange of ideas.

Beyond the Cyprus problem, there are several other issues which concern the state, the business community, society and citizens. These include the economy, energy, housing, migration, demographic developments, education, health, energy and climate change. New technologies and artificial intelligence have created additional challenges.

No government or ministry can possess all the necessary knowledge. Political leaders cannot be expected to know everything. They must, however, be able to raise the right questions and know where to seek answers and alternative proposals.

The Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs illustrates both the contribution that independent think tanks can make and the difficulties they face in Cyprus. Established in 1993, the Center has undertaken research, published books and policy papers, submitted recommendations and organized conferences and discussions on issues of national, European and international importance. It has also played an active role in Track II diplomacy, facilitating informal dialogue and exchanges on sensitive political issues. The Center has contributed to public debate, policy development and Cyprus's engagement with international networks. Yet the scale of its activities may give the impression that it operates with a substantial professional team and vast resources. The reality is very different: it works with very limited resources and volunteers. It is remarkable that the Center has continued its work for more than three decades under these conditions.

The continuity of think tanks in Cyprus should not only depend on extraordinary personal efforts and volunteer work. For a small country facing significant geopolitical, economic and social challenges, supporting independent think tanks constitutes a necessity, not a luxury.