

CIVIL VOLUNTEERISM SHAPING UP THE RECENT HISTORY OF CYPRUS

I will now speak about events that are described in a book a friend of mine and I have written back in 2007.

The book was published both in Greek and Turkish under title «IHANETE UGRANIS AYAKLANMA».

In this book we describe how the work of volunteers in civil society organisation has shaped the recent history of Cyprus.

In the winter of 2002, Greek Cypriot TV channels broadcasted events that were doomed to change the political atmosphere of the Greek Cypriot society in a dramatic way.

Something extraordinary was taking place in the t/c community, in absolute contrast to what up to that time g/cs might expect.

Massive demonstrations were in progress, massive demonstrations of t/cs demanding the reunification of the island.

Please, try to capture the scene, the emotions. This community which we were taught that it consider us as an enemy, took to the streets demanding the reunification with us, their enemies.

It was an earthquake.

Even those of the g/c press/mas media, that had always an especially negative approach towards the whole t/c community, were commending on the events in a positive way.

A totally new factor entered in the Cypriot history in a decisive way. A whole population was not any more the passive recipient of the policies and decisions concerning the national question, decisions taken by a small number of people. This population was now demanding to express its own view on the national question challenging all traditional ideas on the subject.

At this historical point, the t/c community did not consider the g/c community as an enemy. Instead, they extended their hand demanding an end to a more than fifty-year conflict that had caused a lot of blood and suffering.

By the end of February 2003 -after the biggest demonstration that had ever taken place in the whole history of Cyprus (80 thousand people out of a population of 160 thousand) - the g/c society was a different place. The feeling of distrust and hate that was prevalent in the g/cs was dissipating by the day.

When the barricades that divided the island for three decades opened, on April 23, 2003, we experienced incredible scenes. Take these adjective at face value. They were scenes that will not be forgotten, not only by us, but by tens of thousands of t/c and g/c.

You see, with the opening of the gates, this new magnificent mood of the t/c community started spreading into the g/c community.

Nationalism, this feeling of hate against people you don't know, had suffered a severe blow in the t/c community and was in retreat in the g/c.

People that were divided and lived separately in a nationalistic environment, which at times took to the sky, were now mingling, hacking in a festive-like atmosphere.

The way was wide open for historical changes. For the first time in our history, the solution to the national question could be sought not through national confrontation, conflict, or, in the best case, talks in a totally antagonistic climate, but through mutual respect, through recognition of mistakes and even crimes by the corresponding national groups, recognition of the greatest probably truth of our times, that the vast majority of the people in all nations are always the victims of wars, have never really gained anything in wars other than pain and suffering.

For first time talks could be carried out in a climate of common future sharing, recognition of the fact that the needs of the people to live and be happy are the same at every corner of this planet.

Cyprus was at a historical crossroad.

We were amazed. What had happened? It is possible that what we were living though had taken place by accident?

This feeling of the greatest curiosity to find out what had happened in this small community during the years that it was totally isolated from the rest of the world, pushed me and a comrade to search into the recent history of the t/c community, into the events that preceded the opening of the gates. It is through this search that we came up with a book on the events.

And we found out that: it was the voluntary work of thousands that made the miracle happen. It was the initiative of the people,

their decision to change a situation they did not like, that was the driving force of the events that had astonished us.

The following is a short summary of the events that had taken place in the t/c community the preceding years:

In 2000 a huge number of t/c associations and syndicates formed the platform ***This Country Is Ours***. The initial aim was to deal with problems of the everyday life, but soon the ***Platform*** demanded a say on the national question and the talks between the leaders of the two communities that were in progress at that period.

During a life of around two and a half years, 2000-2002, the ***Platform*** was able to gain the trust of the mass of the t/cs. During the same time, it organized countless activities demanding a solution to the national problem of Cyprus and permanent peace.

The ***Platform*** had succeeded in gaining the mass of the t/cs and the mass of the t/cs had succeeded in changing ideas and beliefs in both communities. It is very important to note here that this success had been built on the voluntary work and participation of thousands of people, without which nothing really would have changed.

The success in recruiting thousands of volunteers who in turn mobilized the people, provided the ground for a permanent solution to the national question in Cyprus. The solution did not prevail not because of the inadequacy of the volunteers but because a similar mass recruitment of volunteers in the South did not take place, an effort for a similar mass mobilization in the

South failed to materialize. Instead, the organizers of the 'yes' campaign relied solely on their attempt to convince political leaders by discussions behind closed doors and the organized party members to argue their case at the referendum

At the same time, the President of Cyprus did everything possible to revive nationalism and mistrust against the t/cs and led the campaign that ended with the rejection of Anan's Plan, the plan that the UN Secretary General had at the time proposed for a settlement.

There was a whole setback in the feelings and ideas of the g/cs, but also of the t/cs who considered the rejection of the proposed UN plan as a rejection by the g/cs of their will and readiness to live together.

For all those of us who saw in the actions of the t/c a possibility for a rebirth of Cyprus, one of the most important lessons we can draw is the significance of recruiting volunteers for the work, if mass mobilization is to succeed. Organized forces will always be far too few in such fast changing situations.

Based on these believes, we decided to act. Although the rejection of the proposed plan by the g/cs was an important set back, the biggest success of the t/c masses, the opening of the gates and the contact of the ordinary people, was still intact.

Firstly two gates had opened in 2003, **Ledra Palas** gate and **Pergamos** gate, as a result of the pressure exercised by the t/c massive mobilizations of 2002-2003.

A couple of more were opened later on, establishing a new reality in the divided Cyprus. The more gates we open, the better for a peacefully future in Cyprus.

Based on this, we took the initiative, a group of g/c and t/c volunteers, to form the Committee for the Opening of **Ledras** street in December 2005.

Ledras street was not just one more street that had been closed for decades. It is a long street that divides Nicosia, the Capital of Cyprus, into two parts. This street was first closed in 1958 as a result of bi- communal strife (the first ever street to be closed) and had since been the main symbol of division between the two communities.

In March 2006 we volunteered, g/cs and t/cs, to form the Committee for the Opening of **Pyrgos/ Limnitis** gate.

If the gate of **Ledras** symbolized the division more than anything else, the gate of **Pyrgos/Linitis** symbolized the irrationality, inhumanity and suffering produced by the division of the island, more than anything else.

Pyrgos is a g/c village and **Limnitis** a t/c one. Although they are separated by a distance of just eleven kilometers, even after the opening of the first gates, you needed half a day travel to go from one to the other. This reality condemned both villages in real tough isolation.

A remarkable series of mobilizations was made possible through the recruitment of volunteers, both g/cs and t/cs for the organization of demonstrations and other actions

As a result of these activities and mobilizations of the two committees, we finally succeeded the opening of both gates, in 2008 that of **Ledras** and in 2010 that of **Pyrgos/ Limnitis**.

An important step towards a common struggle of t/c and g/c for a solution and against nationalism is the formation of the **Bicommunal Peace Initiative United Cyprus**.

Almost all the t/c unions that built the **Platform This Country Is Ours** which led the events of 2002-2003 are members of this Initiative - the great difference being though that now the t/c masses are highly discouraged.

On the g/c part we succeeded in including in the common **Platform** some trade unions for first time.

Concluding, I would like to emphasize that according to my view, the events that had taken place in the t/c community were of historical dimensions.

If they had taken place in a bigger, not isolated country, they might have shaped events to the benefit of peace in a much wider geographical area.