

An Eastern Mediterranean region like never before

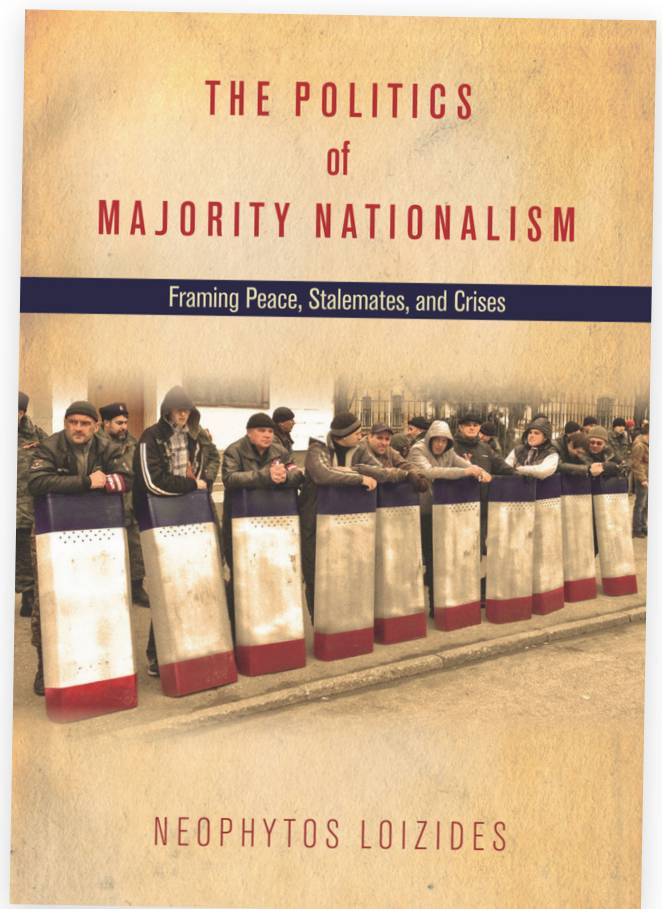
NEOPHYTOS LOIZIDES

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My research, supported by a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship in 2014-2015, focused on the Eastern Mediterranean region, or more specifically the contemporary politics of what I have referred to as the 'post-Ottoman neighbourhood'. My main aim has been to understand the interplay between destructive nationalism, majority radicalisation, and ethnic cleansing. With the support of the British Academy, I concentrated on the following two questions. What drives the politics of contemporary nationalism during crises and peace mediations? Can conflict-mitigating institutions be effective in bringing peace and reversing ethnic cleansing, despite the region's divisive history and seemingly prohibitive conditions?

Historically, the post-Ottoman region has faced a rich, explosive, and diverse pool of ethnopolitical contention and demographic engineering. The past 12 months have coincided with even more critical developments for peace. The refugee flows and spectacular rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) have caused many to fear new crises across the entire Mediterranean region – split between those countries in the south facing civil war, and those Eurozone members to the north, particularly Greece, confronted with the most severe financial crisis since the Second World War.

Turkey has been an interesting paradox of stability amidst those crises. According to some accounts, Turkish GDP tripled during the decade in which the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was in power, while the country now appears on the list of the 20 largest economies of the planet. At the same time, according to the UNCHR, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey in 2015 was expected to rise to nearly 1.9 million, including 1.7 million Syrian refugees. The refugee flows and other domestic issues, including Turkey's own Kurdish problem, have caused many to fear the destabilisation of the country and the concomitant reversal of its achievements since 2002.



Meanwhile in Cyprus, negotiations between the two communities were interrupted in October 2014 following the incursion of the Turkish seismic vessel *Barbaros* into the Cypriot exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The emerging financial and geopolitical challenges have added another source of apprehension in the volatile Eastern Mediterranean region. In 2011 a consortium of American and Israeli companies began explorations for oil and natural gas in the southern part of the island within the EEZ of the republic, contested by Turkey as well as Hezbollah in Lebanon. In September 2014, the Greek Cypriot side withdrew from the negotiations after



Figure 1
Dr Neophytos Loizides and George Papandreou (former Prime Minister of Greece) at the groundbreaking 'Turkey and Cyprus: Regional Peace & Stability Conference', held in Ankara on 28 February 2015.

the *Barbaros*' incursion, while in spring 2015 tensions between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean have reached a new peak.

February 2015 conference

Yet, as I have argued in my book being published in October 2015,¹ crises can offer opportunities to take gradual steps and test innovative ideas. Civil society and academic practitioners can take risks governments cannot afford politically during such difficult times. As part of my British Academy Fellowship, and with the support of various think-tanks, civil society organisations, and governments, I co-organised the first bi-communal conference to take place in Ankara in the 50-year conflict in Cyprus. A bi-communal conference in the Turkish capital was not an easy undertaking. A year's long preparation between Nicosia and Ankara – mediated by the Australian High Commission in Nicosia, the British Institute at Ankara (BIAA)² and the University of Kent – could have led to nowhere, if any of the sides withdrew. Last minute problems are not unusual after decades of conflict escalating tensions in the region.

But taking risks also pays. The 'Turkey and Cyprus: Regional Peace & Stability Conference' was held on 28 February 2015 at USAK House – one of Turkey's leading think tanks – and was warmly welcomed. It attracted 17 academics and NGO leaders from both communities in Cyprus. Even more impressively, on the Ankara end it included 10 ambassadors, 33 officers from 24 different embassies (representing the US Embassy and 15 EU member states as well as the EU Delegation in Ankara), six officers from Turkish state institutions (including three from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 11 researchers from nine think-tanks, 29 academics from nine different universities, and 10 reporters from five different media

1. Neophytos Loizides, *The Politics of Majority Nationalism: Framing Peace, Stalemates, and Crises* (Stanford University Press, October 2015). www.sup.org/books/title/?id=21483

2. The British Institute at Ankara is one of six institutes with premises overseas that is supported by the British Academy. More information on the British Academy-sponsored institutes can be found via www.britishecademy.ac.uk/basis

agents (including Reuters, France 24, Anadolu News Agency). It also included participants from the Turkish industrialist association and the country's largest conglomerate, Koç Holding, and was cited in the national and international media including the *Guardian*.

Moreover, the event brought together two high-profile speakers: former Prime Minister of Greece and President of Socialist International, George Papandreou (Figure 1); and former Turkish minister of Foreign Affairs and spokesman of the Turkish Parliament, Hikmet Çetin. Papandreou's prestige and leverage in Turkey has been impressive, turning the tide in Greek-Turkish relations. In 1999, through a series of careful steps and calculated risks, Papandreou and his counterpart, the late Ismail Cem, transformed the perpetual cycles of crises between the two countries into opportunities for peace. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the two ministers at the time stabilised for the first time in recent history one of the most conflictual and war-prone pairings in international politics.³

Elections in Greece and Cyprus

The Ankara event has been only just one example of how peacemakers can transform the language of ethnic nationalism and war in their communities. A week earlier, Alexis Tsipras became the first Greek PM to meet with bi-communal NGOs in his inaugural visit to Cyprus. The completion of my own book in the first half of 2015 coincided with unprecedented developments for Greece. Most notably, on 25 January 2015, Syriza capitalised on the financial crisis to secure a landslide victory, winning 149 out of the 300 seats in the Greek parliament.

The phenomenon of the anti-establishment Greek radical Left and its revolutionary 40-year-old leader Alexis Tsipras quickly captured the hearts and minds of intellectuals and policy-makers in Europe and globally. But the charismatic Greek PM soon had to compromise his agenda, forging an unholy alliance with a small nationalist party, the Independent Greeks, and signing a third bailout agreement on 13 July 2015, despite a mandate referendum a week earlier to reject older proposals and to renegotiate better terms with international creditors. The meltdown of the Greek economy and society since 2008 has come to threaten not only the country's position in the EU, but also the continuity of Greek democratic institutions. A potential Grexit and collapse of the Greek economy could produce another humanitarian emergency in the region.

The post-2008 financial crisis highlights the importance of durable peace and stability in the region. Surprisingly, new opportunities have emerged to resolve Greek-Turkish disputes, especially the decades-long Cyprus problem. On 26 April 2015, Mustafa Akıncı, a veteran peacemaker with an earlier contribution to bi-communal co-operation in Nicosia, won a landslide victory with 60.3 per cent in the second round of the Turkish Cypriot elections. For the first time in its long

3. A video recording of the keynote presentations at the conference can be found via www.kent.ac.uk/politics/carc/events/

history of stalemates, the Cyprus problem has quietly moved towards resolution, a potentially inspiring example for the entire region at troubled times.

Akinci is widely known for serving as the mayor of the Turkish Cypriot sector of divided Nicosia. In the early 1980s, he and Lellos Demetriades resorted to an *ad hoc* set of arrangements to address the city's impending environmental disaster in the absence of a sewer system. Leaving formalities aside (even refraining from signing any contract), the two mayors agreed to call themselves representatives rather than mayors of the city and managed to upgrade the city's sewer system, making the first step to Nicosia's reunification. A couple of years back, few would expect that a retired politician associated with a small leftist party would make a resounding comeback to politics. But the Cypriot public has questioned partition again and again by electing prominent pro-unification figures. What is most fascinating about Akinci is how he has been elected having campaigned openly in favour of returning the deserted suburb of Varosha to its Greek Cypriot inhabitants.

April 2015 conference

But will Greek Cypriots return home to their pre-1974 homes after four decades of displacement? A major aim of my British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship has been the study of durable solutions to forced displacement, focusing in particular on intentions and outcomes of voluntary return. My earlier and current studies with collaborators focused on four countries in the region – Iraq, Bosnia, Cyprus, and Turkey (Kurds). In particular, our survey with Dr Djordje Stefanovic, conducted with 1,000 participants two decades after the imposition of the Dayton Accords in Bosnia, suggests that the introduction of innovative electoral mechanisms such as distant community voting could empower refugee communities in the process of return. To broaden the understanding of this issue, during my Fellowship I also co-organised another three-day conference on peace processes and durable solutions to forced displacement, hosted by the BIAA on 17-19 April 2015.⁴ The event, which coincided with major refugee boat tragedies in the Mediterranean, aimed at raising awareness of the challenges facing refugees across the world and the region in particular. It included presentations from participants representing key international organisations in the area, including the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International Displacement Monitoring Centre, and the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, as well as academics from around the world including the Balkans and the Middle East.

Election in Turkey

Two months later, Turkey faced an unprecedented electoral outcome on 7 June 2015 when the People's Democratic Party (HDP) entered parliament. While predominantly supported by ethnic Kurds, HDP won significant support (and acclaim) across Turkish society

after a decade of attempted yet unfulfilled reforms by the ruling AKP. Following public fatigue with the dominance of PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP lost its majority of seats in parliament for the first time since 2002. The post-June electoral situation has created alternative possibilities – for either new elections, or a coalition government including the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) opposing Kurdish rights and the presence of Syrian refugees in the country. Since the 1990s, about a million ethnic Kurds have been forcedly displaced from their villages in the Kurdish regions of Southeast Turkey as part of Turkey's war against the PKK. They now live mostly in the major urban centres of western Turkey and often their mobilisations for political and human rights lead to confrontations with MHP supporters.

HDP's breakthrough last June could be attributed not only to the shifting political opportunity structures of the 'democratic opening in Turkey' in the past decade, but also the capacity of the party itself to align its peace frame with the broader human rights agenda – introducing a 10 per cent quota for the LGBT community and another 50 per cent quota for women candidates. Equally, the party capitalised on the public outcry against Turkish leader Erdoğan's crackdown of the 2013 Gezi park demonstrations and his attempt to transform Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one. Ironically, HDP will have to compete with the nationalist MHP as the kingmakers in future government coalitions. If it neutralises the latter's influence, a predominantly Kurdish party could become the catalyst for human rights and a consensus style democracy in Turkey and the broader region.

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The contemporary post-Ottoman neighbourhood has been at a crossroads despite painful bailouts, elections and referendums. Clearly new challenges and actors are emerging with competing nationalist and peace agendas. Depending on the outcome of current financial and political developments, the region could face renewed tensions with catastrophic effects for the global economy, forced migration and security. On 20 July 2015, in a bloody warning by ISIS, at least 31 university students died during a terrorist attack in the border town of Suruç in Southern Turkey. Most of the dead were university students with the Federation of Socialist Youths, assisting the rebuilding of Syrian Kobane for its Kurdish inhabitants after last year's war against ISIS. But as the mobilisation of students itself suggests, there is hope for the region as people with vision and courage risks their lives for a better future. New norms for co-operation could emerge in the neighbourhood, initiating an ambitious process of conflict transformation. With unresolved challenges emerging from concurrent crises and peace mediations, the contemporary post-Ottoman neighbourhood will continue to be crucially important for world politics in the next decades.

4. The programme for the conference on 'Peace Processes and Durable Solutions to Displacement' can be found at http://biaa.ac.uk/ckeditor/filemanager/userfiles/Workshop_Program_-_April_17-19.pdf