

Earthquake Politics: A Reflection on Aftershocks in Cyprus

The earthquake: From a natural disaster to a collective trauma

In the early hours of 6 February 2023, massive tremors awakened most of Cyprus. The cause was a powerful earthquake of 7.8 magnitude that hit southern Anatolia, causing immense destruction in both south-central Türkiye and northern Syria. Only a few hours later, another quake of 7.5 magnitude followed. The two earthquakes left behind a death toll of more than 50,000 people, with major cities becoming masses of rubble. It was one of the deadliest disasters faced by Türkiye and Syria in their modern histories.

Watching from Cyprus, the scenes of devastation were horrendous, with thousands of collapsed buildings and people trapped under the rubble. Communication and transportation were disrupted, meaning that while some people trapped under debris were able to use their phones to call for help, there were neither rescue teams nor equipment there to help them. Moreover, with media unable to reach the devastated region, it took around two days for the world to begin to grasp the scope and scale of the disaster. In Cyprus's north, many people struggled to reach family and friends who were in the region at the time. In the midst of panic and despair, the shocking news arrived that an entire co-ed volleyball team from a Famagusta secondary school, on a trip in Türkiye for a sports competition, was missing in Adıyaman. That city turned out to be one of the most hard-hit areas.¹

Brief Points:

- The 6 February 2023 earthquake that struck southern Turkey and Syria left more than 50,000 dead, 2.3 million homeless, and 3.3 million displaced. Its economic, political, and social impacts will likely continue for decades.
- The earthquake also affected the Turkish Cypriot community, which lost dozens of youth and their parents and teachers from Famagusta. This was a collective trauma for the community that many compared to the pain of the 1963-1974 intercommunal strife on the island, though this time they received the support of Greek Cypriot compatriots.
- Many Greek Cypriots expressed a strong desire to transcend the divide and share Turkish Cypriots' grief, the political potential of this empathy was immediately impeded by the Cyprus Problem.
- This moment offers an impetus for cooperation in the face of impending climate disaster, using the Technical Committees on Crisis Management and Environment and in line with the European Union's disaster resilience goals.

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The Cypriot group consisted of 39 people – 25 children aged between 11 and 14, along with 14 adults accompanying them, including their teachers, trainers and parents. When it became clear that search-and-rescue missions in those areas could not be immediately deployed, the Turkish Cypriot administration quickly mobilized its own fully equipped search-and-rescue team and sent them to Adıyaman, together with the families of those missing and volunteers from the north. Upon arrival, the team unfortunately found that the hotel where the Cypriot group was staying had been flattened by the quake, turning it into a pile of debris. Considering the time needed to assemble the team combined with the difficulty and time involved in reaching the hotel area, the search and rescue operation did not begin until 40 hours after the earthquake.² It continued working for five days, and throughout that period, time stopped in northern Cyprus, as that small society waited anxiously for any sign of hope from under the rubble.

According to UNDP's early estimates, the two earthquakes left behind up to 210 million tonnes of rubble, equivalent to 14,000 football fields covered in debris one metre high.³ Nearly 300,000 buildings were destroyed or severely damaged. This destruction left at least 50,000 dead, although most reports suggest that the number is far higher. Another 2.3 million became homeless, and 3.3 million people were displaced.⁴ These figures show the severity of the disaster yet fail to account for the human tragedy that occurred within seconds or the impact that will continue for decades. That impact is economic, political, and social, as many experts question whether or not certain cities will ever be fully rebuilt. It will also remain as a collective trauma in the lives of those who have been directly or indirectly affected.⁵

Aftershocks across the divide

During the five-day operation conducted by the Turkish Cypriot search-and-rescue team, hope waned minute by minute. Then, 132 hours after the earthquake, the crew on the ground in Adıyaman declared all 35 missing from the north dead.⁶ The whole island, but Famagusta in particular, descended into grief.

As the funerals of the children and their teachers and parents were broadcast live on Turkish Cypriot media, many Turkish Cypriots described the grief, pain and devastation as unlike anything since the 1963-1974 intercommunal strife and war on the island.⁷ It turned out to be another collective trauma for the Turkish Cypriot community, although one that this time received support and sympathy from members of the Greek Cypriot community – their so-called 'other' across the divide.

The immediate reaction and response from the south, both at the political and the community levels, was one of empathy and solidarity. The Greek Cypriot leadership and some political actors expressed grief and offered support. Many Greek Cypriots, individually or through local and civil society institutions, mobilized to collect donations and aid for victims of the quake, and hoped to send these to Türkiye via the north.⁸ After it was announced that all missing members of the volleyball team were dead, many Greek Cypriots expressed their solidarity in modest gestures, such as turning their Facebook profile pictures dark and writing messages of condolences and support on social media. Some political parties and civil society organizations made calls to their leadership to declare an official mourning period, and some public and academic institutions lowered their flags.⁹ There seemed to be a strong desire to transcend the divide, support those in need, and commonly share grief.¹⁰ It created a humane space with political potential, much as the 1999 Turkish earthquake had done. Unfortunately, this social dynamic immediately fell prey to the politics of the Cyprus problem.

In the days following the earthquake, the Greek Cypriot government declared its readiness to send its search-and-rescue team to Türkiye.¹¹ Although Greek Cypriot officials initially announced the Turkish government had accepted their offer and that a team had been dispatched under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, the Turkish Cypriot foreign ministry later discredited this, even accusing the Greek Cypriot side of politically manipulating a humanitarian issue.¹² Moreover, the Turkish Cypriot authorities did not allow individuals who had collected donations to deliver those to the north for transport to Türkiye.¹³ This only became possible a few days later, when UNFICYP set up a mechanism to receive donations and deliver these to the Turkish Cypriot authorities.¹⁴

Trapped between recognition and sovereignty

In the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake, the 'motherlands' Greece and Türkiye managed to mend their strained relations through so-called seismic diplomacy, as had happened 24 years earlier. Nevertheless, the two sides in Cyprus were not able to capitalize on the social dynamic created at the community level and quickly fell back into the routine of exclusionary discourses. The Greek Cypriot side avoids any structured cooperation because of fear of lending any sort of 'recognition' to the north Cyprus and its institutions. The current Turkish Cypriot leadership, in turn, avoids it in pursuit of 'sovereign equality' based on two states of equal international status. In the absence of a political solution on the island, and without a prospect for common ground, these intransigent positions are making it more and

more difficult for the two sides to communicate and collaborate, even in the wake of such a humanitarian crisis.

Clearly, this offers little hope for any cooperative future of the island, which will soon have to deal with pressing crises of local, regional, and global scale, from energy to environment. The technical committees set up under the UN Good Offices Mission were intended to overcome this divide in the absence of a political settlement, but they, as well, have been negatively affected by the recent political climate on the island and the policies of the two sides.¹⁵ As the UN Secretary-General stated in his latest report on his mission of good offices, “The technical committees remain underutilized overall,” alas, to the detriment of the people living on both sides of the island.¹⁶

One significant technical committee that has not been functioning effectively is the Technical Committee on Crisis Management, which has a minimal mandate of “sharing information and discussing issues related to responses to man-made or natural disasters.”¹⁷ The UN Secretary-General lately reported again that efforts were underway, especially in the aftermath of a large forest fire in the north last summer, to set up “more efficient standing protocols to manage future crises” and to operationalize “crisis management coordination processes” in collaboration with the Technical Committee on Environment.¹⁸ Nevertheless, there has been no progress, and the UNSG report makes clear that the fears and exclusionary discourses of the two sides are the impediment to that progress.

An island at a crossroads: Transcending the divide?

The recent earthquake in Türkiye has brutally shown how human societies are vulnerable when they do not take the necessary measures and precautions for known potential risks. As an island sitting on a geological ticking bomb, Cyprus should have long been ready for a possible earthquake, as well as other natural disasters, such as fires and drought. However, the authorities on both sides of the island have been in a constant state of procrastination about crisis preparedness, with no serious response plan developed to date, either separately or jointly.

The earthquake in Türkiye and Syria showed the importance of risk-based planning in disaster-prone regions. In that case, poor construction practices and lax enforcement of existing regulations, or even amnesties for breaches of those regulations, turned a natural event into a man-made catastrophe.¹⁹ While in Türkiye earthquake building codes existed but were violated,²⁰ in Cyprus both sides need to upgrade their codes. They also need to conduct a comprehensive review of the extant buildings, many of which are

old and deteriorating, including public schools and hospitals. Moreover, there is a need for the development of both separate and joint response plans in the event of a future earthquake or other natural disasters so that both administrations can take the required action.

It is also high time for the political leaderships on both sides of the divide to wake up and prepare for crises that will recognize no checkpoints and respect no sovereignty. Empathy with the other’s pain and efforts to provide help during the recent earthquake show that the ground is ready for such a collaboration. During that period, for instance, some political parties from both sides jointly called on the two leaders to establish a bicomunal rescue mission to be immediately sent to Türkiye.²¹ Although this did not materialize, the statement reflected the will of important political actors on both sides to join forces in the face of such a humanitarian tragedy. Moreover, the Turkish Cypriot leader made public his proposal to the newly elected Greek Cypriot leader on utilizing technical committees to prepare for and respond to earthquakes.²²

There are many humanitarian models for coping with disasters that we can draw from. For instance, only two days after the earthquake in Turkey the European Commission adopted a Recommendation and a Communication to establish common goals to boost disaster resilience in the areas of civil protection. This includes “ways to better prepare European countries for natural hazards, including earthquakes, floods and forest fires to name a few. In view of the rapidly changing risk landscape, the European disaster resilience goals aim to improve the capacity of the EU, its Member States and Participating States to the EU Civil Protection Mechanism to anticipate and withstand the effects of future major disasters and emergencies.” In this recommendation, the European Commission identified five goals to pursue collectively:

- **Anticipate – To improve risk assessment, anticipation, and disaster risk management planning.**
- **Prepare – To increase risk awareness and preparedness of the population.**
- **Alert – To enhance early warning.**
- **Respond – To enhance the EU Civil Protection Mechanism response capacity.**
- **Secure – To ensure a robust civil protection system.**²³

If the EU is committed to the recommendations and goals that they have adopted, it should not be difficult to incorporate Turkish Cypriots, who are EU citizens, in mechanisms such as both prepEU and rescEU. PrepEU is a

pan-European awareness-raising programme for disaster resilience targeting European citizens. On the other hand, the European Commission upgraded the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and created rescEU to protect citizens from disasters and manage emerging risks. It includes a fleet of firefighting helicopters and planes, medical evacuation planes, and a stockpile of necessary medical items and field emergency. Apparently, the EU is also developing a reserve to respond to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear incidents.

As the commissioner Janez Lenarčič emphasized on 8 February 2023, “Natural and man-made disasters are becoming more frequent, intense and complex, with an increasingly cross-sectorial and transboundary impact.”²⁴

This statement acknowledges what the earthquake has already shown us: that geological fault lines do not intersect with the politically imagined fault lines, just as raging fires, floods, or droughts cannot be divided by borders. The divide should be transcended when it is human life that is at stake.

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THE PROJECT

Building Peace in Cyprus through Linkages:

This long-term framework project seeks to identify opportunities for collaboration and cooperation as recognized elements of effective peacebuilding. It aims at putting forward suggestions to help to establish linkages, relationships of interdependency that go beyond simple or formal interaction. Such interdependency, economic, professional, political, and other builds on the recognized need and ability to rely on others develops relationships of trust that often radiate beyond the initial cooperation and create chains and networks of collaborations. It capitalizes on various tools that have been developed in international peacebuilding to aid in the development of such linkages. Sectors considered in this respect have included, among others, the environment, education, the arts and culture, gender, and business.

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