



An invitation to... enter the zone of co-operation ... by people with no common sense



by Marios Epaminondas

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A sign in the buffer zone, in front of a building, which has become contrary to certain impossibilities, an 'Educational Centre and Home for Co-operation' says: 'The Association for Historical Dialogue and Research invites YOU to enter the Zone of Co-operation'. Does this make any sense to YOU? Probably not! That's why we are providing a glossary!

Buffer zone

The term buffer zone refers to a ceasefire line, stretching from the east to the west coast of Cyprus with a width ranging from 3.3 metres to 7.4 km that de facto divides the island of Cyprus, and the capital city of Nicosia, in two. It is maintained 'between the Turkish and Turkish Cypriot forces in the north and the Greek Cypriot forces in the south'.¹ The buffer zone is currently under the control of a peacekeeping mission of the UN. The buffer zone is often referred to as the dead zone, not because there is no life in it (in fact it has been a safe haven for Cypriot wildlife for years), but because it was the theatre of violent conflicts in the past and it is for the most part inaccessible to civilians.

Crossing the buffer zone from one side to the other in Nicosia was unthinkable for decades. Even when restrictions of movement were partly removed in 2003 and civilians could cross from one sector of the city to the other, the buffer zone itself remained a 'dead zone', a 'no man's land' separating the city, the country and the minds of Cypriots. In popular thinking the 'dead zone' has become an almost perennial symbol of confrontation: confrontation of armies, arguments, interests, histories. It is in a sense the 'reification of confrontation'.



Certain impossibilities

The confrontation of the 'two sides' impedes understanding and praxis in at least two ways: it reinforces the idea that there must be two versions of everything and it mistakenly suggests that the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities are uniform 'within themselves', thus downplaying all other forms of intra-community differentiations and otherness.

When, in 2005, the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR) came up with the idea of establishing an inter-communal educational centre in the buffer zone, even some of the most passionate adherents of co-operation maintained that this idea was IMPOSSIBLE for at least three reasons:

- a) It was impossible to be granted permission by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) and all other relevant armies and authorities for construction projects in the buffer zone: no other civilian or group of civilians had ever done that in the past.
- b) It was impossible to secure adequate funding for renovation (estimated at no less than a million euros) bearing in mind that a buffer zone is by default the most insecure place for any sponsor to invest money.
- c) It was impossible to find a suitable establishment in the buffer zone available for sale. Only one half-ruined house had the prerequisites to become the Home for Co-operation. However the main owner clearly had stated in the past that he was not willing to sell it, in addition to the fact that he had 17 other co-owners spread all over the world!

All these arguments were easy to grasp. All one needed was common sense. However, the AHDR board members were not people of common sense ...

Association for Historical Dialogue and Research

Established in 2003 by a group of young Cypriots, the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research has enlisted members from various ethnic, linguistic and professional backgrounds working at various educational levels in Cyprus. Its board, comprising Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot educators and historians, is a brilliant example of how productive co-operation, creative ideas and respect can blossom across a divide.

The ADHR of Cyprus has as a mission to defend and promote productive dialogue and research in issues regarding history and history teaching and to strengthen peace, stability, democracy and critical thinking.

At the heart of every activity of the AHDR lies the concept and practice of multiperspectivity: the ability and willingness to seek out, assess critically and incorporate new perspectives in an attempt to reach a higher level of understanding.





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Educational Centre and Home for Co-operation (H4C)

Located in the buffer zone of Nicosia, Cyprus, the H4C is aiming to break the common perception of the buffer zone by contributing to turning it from a dead-zone symbol of separation to a zone of co-operation. It will function as a shared space for inter-communal co-operation and dialogue, hosting conferences and exhibition spaces, a library, an archive and offices.

More specifically it will:

- provide opportunities for NGOs and individuals to design and implement innovative projects, which will help the empowerment of civil society and the enhancement of intercultural dialogue;
- enable young people, educators, historians, researchers, activists and other agents of change to develop knowledge and critical thinking through programmes on education, training and research;
- encourage Cypriots to demonstrate the benefits of co-operation across the existing divide;
- enhance awareness of the complexity and diversity of history and support the conservation of the cultural heritage of Cyprus.

Zone of co-operation

For the AHDR, peace does not simply mean the absence of armed conflict; it entails the shifting of the state of mind in a way that adopting the perspective of the 'other' becomes a way of life; it entails entering a zone of co-operation. Achieving this might mean breaking certain conventions of common sense. After all, now we have enough evidence to 'prove' that challenging what is considered common sense can be productive.

After months of laborious work, eventually UNFICYP and other authorities granted the needed relevant permissions and funding was secured. The establishment of the Home for Co-operation is supported by the EEA (European Economic Area) financial mechanisms; by the major donors Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein; by Sweden, Switzerland, Cyprus and the Netherlands and also by individuals, organisations, local authorities in Cyprus and abroad. The United Nations Development Programme – Action for Co-operation and Trust in Cyprus (UNDP-ACT) is providing support through the Multiperspectivity and Intercultural Dialogue in Education (MIDE) project, which is a two-year research and education initiative being implemented by the AHDR.

The main owner of the house in the buffer zone, and the rest of the owners, were talked into selling it. Learn more about the idea behind the H4C and meet the former owner of the house, Avo Mangoian, who tells the story of the house in the AHDR's video blog:

'New Faces, Old Places: A History of Home'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDhjYCxQjzM&feature=related>

Construction work on the H4C began in February 2010 and the occasion was marked by a traditional Cypriot-style street festival with grilled meat, music and games on 6 February 2010: Groundbreaking Fiesta! Watch coverage of this event and learn more information on the H4C: **'History on the Grill'**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEQu8WKZjM>



YOU

YOU are young people, youth workers, activists, educators, historians, and researchers based in Cyprus or anywhere else; you are people who find the effort to transform dead zones into co-operation zones worthwhile. You are the ones who will give life to 'that building in the buffer zone' and transform it from a set of premises to a home for co-operation. Some of YOU, based in Cyprus, are already becoming some of us. You are preparing to enter an era in which you will have the opportunity to interact in a space located in Cyprus, which is neither 'this side' nor the 'other side'; in an era during which differences will not be the sources of dead-end confrontations, but the basis for productive dialogue.

The rest of YOU are encouraged to send comments and ideas to ahdr.mide@gmail.com

The inauguration festivities took place in May 2011.

For more information look at:

http://www.ahdr.info/about_h4c.php

Rana Zincir Celal – Project Consultant:

'In my own world, taking my first steps in the buffer zone was a little like walking on the moon for me – totally alien terrain, a bit frightening but also exhilarating, life-changing even. What struck me was the contradiction I felt between the deep sadness evoked by being surrounded by remnants of a conflict on the one hand, and an overwhelming sense of possibility and hope on the other.

Co-operation across the divide is an idea, whereas conflict is a reality embedded in our everyday lives and encounters. Herein lies what makes the Home for Co-operation so special, that it will be a visible, tangible representation of co-operation. Beyond its immediate functional purpose (also very important), the H4C will provoke the imagination: what thoughts will people have when they walk through the Buffer Zone and see a dynamic, lively space where Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots are working, eating, thinking and creating together?'

Chara Makriyianni – AHDR President

'Why is H4C special?

Because giving children and young people the means to make sense of and weigh the multiplicity of pasts offered in various accounts, across the existing divide, is the most excellent gift we can offer the new generation – because knowledge is contested, is transient, and is subject to nonstop change. H4C, with its shared spaces for debate and dialogue, can contribute to this ongoing adventure of research and learning.

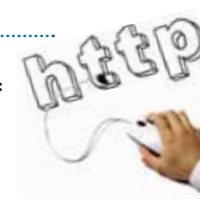
Because engaging in this paradigm shift – from a discourse of intolerance to one of co-operation, based on understanding and mutual respect – is the way forward.'

Some resources

Association for Historical Dialogue and Research:
www.ahdr.info

United Nations Peace Keeping Force in Cyprus
<http://www.unficyp.org>

European Economic Area and Norway Grants
<http://www.eeagrants.org/id/1560>



1. Retrieved from http://www.unficyp.org/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=778&tt=graphic&lang=1

The H4C was inaugurated on 6 May 2011