

Cyprus as an EU and Commonwealth Member State: Its Hopes and Ambitions

Euripides L. Evriviades

High Commissioner for the Republic of Cyprus to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

For good or ill, our planet continues to shrink. Our common and inescapable destiny as citizens of the world is to live in a global village in which everything is or seems to be connected to everything else. Not even an island is an island any more.

International and regional organisations like the European Union (EU) and the Commonwealth (CW) face similar issues, shared threats and common challenges. Hence, they must work in synergy to resolve overlapping regional and international problems.

Cyprus is a member state of both the EU and the Commonwealth. This is a huge asset. It is what enables us, amongst others, to exercise a multi-dimensional and a multi-layered foreign policy. This sort of enabling capability is what we would like to galvanise and streamline for the years to come, building on our long standing membership of: (a) the Commonwealth (since 1960); (b) our relatively recent membership of the EU (since 2004); and (c) our strategic location at the crossroads of three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa.

For Cyprus, the process of joining the EU was very transformative. The journey to the path of accession was as important as the destination. Our EU membership remains the single most important strategic development since our independence. What was even more transformative for Cyprus came after joining the EU. Our membership is enabling us to change structures and mindsets, and to learn from new experiences of co-operation, power sharing, collective decision-making, decision-shaping and security in its wider definition. Naturally, this remains a work in progress. We are not there yet, but the direction of travel is clear.

More importantly, Cyprus's EU and CW memberships complement each other. They provide us with additional platforms to deepen our bilateral, regional and multilateral ties with the EU27 countries, including the UK with which we share close affinities, but also with the CW53.

The UK, Malta and Cyprus are currently the three CW member states that are EU members as well. We are common law countries and with numerous other commonalities. These qualities are promoted in different ways in the EU. But with Brexit, Cyprus and Malta will be losing a Commonwealth partner. Everything else to the contrary notwithstanding, the EU remains for Cyprus the single most important and successful socio-economic and strategic construction in world history. Our perspective on the EU has not changed. It will not

change. We are sitting on the other side of the table from the UK in the Brexit negotiations, together with our other EU27 partners.

It is ironic and an oxymoron that Brexit is one of the reasons that the Commonwealth is currently being galvanised. Brexit or no Brexit, the Commonwealth must keep on reinventing itself in order to meet the ever increasing challenges faced by its member states and maintain its relevance on the world stage.

The CW continues to offer a niche capability: its unique membership status comprises countries from all continents and geographical groupings; a common language; shared business practices; common parliamentary traditions; and familiar legal regimes. Lord Howell characterises the Commonwealth as the "Mother of All Networks". Indeed, the CW could be the prime network for co-operation and co-ordination in multilateral fora (such as the United Nations or the International Maritime Organisation) and for fostering closer bilateral co-operation amongst its member states.

Regarding the latter, here is an obvious example. The majority of CW53 do not have resident High Commissions established in the 53 capitals. All CW53 are however present in London, facilitating bilateral and multilateral co-operation. Ten Commonwealth countries have non-resident accreditation to Cyprus from London. That is why, taking Lord Howell's argument a bit further, we would like to see the Commonwealth becoming a continuous network for enabling co-operation and capabilities to all of its member states. Only a few days ago, The Gambia rejoined the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth's appeal and "soft power" are still a reality. The question is, of course, how we move from theory to practice. All member states, when they join or participate in an international organisation, expect benefits and concrete deliverables.

So what does the Commonwealth have to offer, apart from a network?

There is huge untapped potential. This year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) is important to achieve this. We need to focus on concrete areas of co-operation, such as capacity building, development of infrastructures, access to international finance, diversification of economies and many other areas. In short, it should have more direct relevance to the Commonwealth citizen. This should be the heart of its activities.

The initiative for a Commonwealth Blue Charter is brilliant. Managed correctly, it can give a massive impetus for the advancement of the blue economy and blue growth. This is an area that is vital for the majority of the CW53 that are island states. They may be small, but they are big ocean states.

The Commonwealth should also consider seriously establishing a bespoke Commonwealth Development Bank with an exclusively social mandate, in which all the CW members are stakeholders. The Council of Europe (CEB) has one; it is a success story. More recently, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank was established. Both are good models to study. Imagine how a CW Development Bank could help address financial challenges for some of our most vulnerable member states, especially in the aftermath of horrific natural disasters.

How does Cyprus view possible EU-CW cross-fertilisation and co-operation?

Former Foreign Minister Kasoulides, who also chaired the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, floated the idea that was presented within the EU, advocating the need for a closer, structured and institutionalised EU-CW co-operation. We firmly believe that both organisations should work in a complementary manner, exploit synergies, avoid duplication and create niches. On a more practical level, we argue that, taking into account existing partnership co-operation arrangements of the EU with other international/multilateral

organisations and best practices that are already in place, there is scope to consider ideas for fostering a structured co-operation and dialogue between the two organisations and of their respective secretariats.

Let me suggest a couple of examples on EU–CW co-operation. The first is addressing disaster relief, humanitarian assistance and development co-operation. There should be a mechanism for co-operation and avoidance of duplication while allowing the CW access to the EU's vast resources.

Secondly, in the area of trade, a number of CW countries belong to the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) partnership with which the EU has a formal relationship. Currently the EU is discussing the post 2020 Cotonou arrangements that will govern trade between ACP countries and the EU. The CW, as an organisation, could be in a position to advocate and promote closer and freer trade links with Europe.

The highlight for the Commonwealth this year will undoubtedly be April's CHOGM. Cyprus shares the priorities that have been set out by the Commonwealth Secretary-General and the host country; notably the four priority areas for a fairer, prosperous, sustainable and a secure future.

We anticipate that CHOGM 2018 will be a watershed one that will produce actionable deliverables on all the above four areas and lay the ground for new areas of co-operation such as intra-Commonwealth trade and investment, cyber-security and the blue economy.

Only thus can the Commonwealth ensure its visibility, relevance and appeal for its citizens and member states, and have a role on the international stage.