Free Press Under Fire: The Case of Northern Cyprus

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The fate of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl at the hands of Islamic militants in Pakistan last year made headlines, but journalists around the world suffer daily, in many cases invisibly, as is the case of the journalists of Cyprus. In the case of Cyprus, perhaps it is the size of the island or the duration of the “Cyprus problem” that has resulted in the neglect of the outside world. Unfortunately, journalists are threatened throughout the world, and Cyprus serves as a striking example of the high price members of the press continue to pay for their work and the inattention of the world.

In 1974 hostilities between Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots and Turkish forces resulted in the division of the island of Cyprus into two de facto, autonomous areas with 58 percent of the island’s land area governed by the Greek-Cypriot government called the Republic of Cyprus, and 36 percent of the island governed by the Turkish Cypriots called the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). The legitimacy of the latter is only recognized by the government of Turkey. A narrow U.N. buffer zone (Green Line) separates the entities comprising 3 percent of the island (with British sovereign bases completing the stakeholders of territory). In the intervening 28 years, freedom of expression and of the press has been undermined with severe restrictions placed on communicating across the Green Line.

The denial of opportunities for face-to-face interaction and limitations on telephones, postal service, and distribution of newspapers and magazines reflect a form of “strategic non-communication” imposed in an effort to insulate or influence perceptions and opinions.

Buffer zone: “no man’s land”

Volatile Times

Fall 2002/winter 2003 has been an unprecedented time in this protracted conflict. On November 11, 2002, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan conveyed to the two sides a detailed plan for a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem, a plan that was revised by December 10, 2002. This plan has been the subject of face-to-face talks in Cyprus between the leaders of the two communities under the auspices of the U.N. On December 13, 2002, the European Council at Copenhagen decided that Cyprus (i.e., The Republic of Cyprus) together with nine other candidate countries would accede to the European Union with or without a settlement of the Cyprus problem. As of this writing the U.N. had set February 28, 2003, as a deadline for agreement on the Annan plan. Cyprus (united or divided) along with the other new EU members will sign an accession agreement in Athens on April 16, 2003, and they will become full members on May 1, 2004. Pressure for a settlement has reached a new phase with public demonstrations in the north, some calling for the resignation of Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktas, reflecting the desire for a solution that would allow the entire island to reap the benefits of EU membership. Pressure for agreement mounts steadily, fueled by internal and external factors.

The Cyprus Republic’s constitution recognizes the right to freedom of speech and expression in any form and includes the right to receive and impart information and ideas without regard to frontiers. The 1989 Press Law safeguards the unhindered circulation of newspapers. Media laws in the south have recently been revised in the mandatory process of harmonization required as part of EU accession.

For more than 20 years the only exchange of newspapers took place at the Ledra Palace checkpoint in Nicosia. Those papers were generally destined for governmental offices and journalists, but were unavailable to the public at large on either side. Newspapers on both sides are generally financed and supported by political parties. In the south, there are 10 Greek-language dailies, one English-language morning newspaper, and several weeklies with a total average circulation of 65,000-70,000, to serve a population of approximately 790,000. The population in Northern Cyprus (less than 200,000) has a choice of no less than 10 daily papers, giving the tiny area one of the highest concentrations of newspapers per capita anywhere in the world, but the mainland Turkish papers sell best. Two conservative Turkish dailies, Sabah and Hurriyet, have a combined
Journalists as Targets

Journalists have consistently been the victims of division. Journalists on both sides are unable to move freely across the Green Line to gather news or to attend press conferences. They have been frequent targets in Northern Cyprus. In July 1996 Turkish Cypriot political columnist Kutlu Adali of the leftist daily newspaper Yeni Düzen, was shot and killed near his home in Lefkosia. Adali had been an outspoken critic of Turkish Cypriot administration policies and used his column to advocate peaceful cooperation between parties. In the north, a pattern of censorship, intimidation, detention, harassment and imprisonment of journalists persists. Threats continue to be made against Adali’s family. In September 2002 it was reported that his widow’s dogs had been killed as a symbolic threat to other journalists. Ilkay Adali, the journalist’s widow, has filed an application with the European Commission of Human Rights in Strasbourg charging that the Turkish government violated the right to life, prohibitions against degrading treatment, right to a family life, freedom of expression, freedom of association and other rights. A decision in the case of Adali v. Turkey is imminent.

A frequent target of the regime in the north has been Avrupa, a daily newspaper known for its criticism of Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash. The government has claimed that the mission of Avrupa has always been to extinguish the Denktash regime and foster a split between Turkish Cypriots, Turkey and the Turkish military. Avrupa has faced numerous legal problems over the years in response to its reporting. Editors and reporters have been arrested, imprisoned and put on trial, and editorial offices have been shut down. In 2000 six reporters were tried by a military court for defaming Mr. Dentash. In an effort to silence the voice of opposition, the reporters were fined $260,000. On May 24, 2001, a bomb blast ripped through Avrupa’s printing office, destroying the paper production machines. On November 9, 2001, the newspaper’s computers were seized by orders of the Turkish Cypriot judicial authorities due to “unpaid taxes.” Pressure on Avrupa intensified in early December 2001 as the two leaders, Clerides and Dentash, prepared to meet, spurred by the possibility of Cypriot accession to the European Union. Turkish Cypriot police ransacked Avrupa’s editorial offices after an article appeared reporting that a Turkish Cypriot teacher was dismissed for describing Turkey as an “occupying force in Cyprus.” Avrupa’s printing machines and revenues were confiscated by the government, but it continued operations by using the premises of another paper. Finally, on December 15, 2001, Avrupa closed itself down, throttled by a succession of further prison sentences and fines. Sener Levent, the editor, announced that it would be reborn as Afrika, ironically explaining that Cyprus “no longer faces Europe, but instead is turning back towards prehistory, towards Africa.” He noted that the “law of the jungle” operated in northern Cyprus. The journalists of Afrika soon reported plans to challenge the continued use of military courts in northern Cyprus. Other cases of harassment and intimidation were reported as well. The Committee for the Protection of Journalists, a New York-based nongovernmental organization that monitors abuses against the press, was told by Sevgul Uludag, a journalist that monitors abuses against the press, was told by Sevgul Uludag, a journalist that monitors abuses against the press, was told by Sevgul Uludag, a journalist that monitors abuses against the press, was told by Sevgul Uludag, a journalist that monitors abuses against the press, was told by Sevgul Uludag, a journalist that monitors abuses against the press, was told by Sevgul Uludag, a journalist that monitors abuses against the press.

By the summer of 2002 Sener Levant and reporter Memduh Ener were convicted of insulting the Turkish Cypriot leader in an article published on July 29, 1999. The article was about Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktas, who was said to have sent his wife and children to Turkey with the help of Greek Cypriot leader Glafkos Clerides during an outbreak of violence between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots in 1964, which resulted in an early phase of division on the island. The journalists were charged with the offense of the “possibility to harm the president.” The six-month prison sentence was the highest ever given to a journalist in Cyprus. Ultimately, Levant and Ener were released from prison on October 2, 2002, after an appeals court reduced the prison term to six weeks. Subsequently new charges were filed against Sener Levent...
and three journalists. In an interview with the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, Levent indicated that his staff and their families continue to receive threats, and that new lawsuits are being filed against the newspaper. He also said that he is unable to travel abroad because his passport and identity papers have been confiscated.

Fall 2002 brought Cyprus closer toward EU accession. Along with this progress for the Republic of Cyprus came increased pressure on journalists in the north. In September a threatening letter and e-mail were sent to some Turkish and Turkish Cypriot journalists. The letter read as follows: “ONLY SEVEN DAYS REMAINED FOR OUR DANCE.” The threats appear aimed at journalists who support movement toward the EU. On October 14, 2002, 14 Spanish journalists and two academicians, who visited northern Cyprus to participate in the seminar “Spain and Cyprus: Facing the Challenge of an Enlarged EU,” were forced to leave the TRNC after being told that they participated in a meeting “without permission.” Sener Levent is currently awaiting the outcome of no less than 75 legal cases brought against him by the authorities, including one in a “martial court” in January 2003.

The press in northern Cyprus, the case of Avrupa/Afrika in particular, offers a timely glimpse into the perils of the dissident press and the effect an unlettered press or, more significantly, a muzzled press may have on historic developments on both a national and international stage. Beyond the shores of Cyprus, the war on terrorism and other wars declared and undeclared loom large, and the rights of the press and the public they serve are once again potential casualties.

Selected References
Afrika homepage, http://www.avrupagazetesi.co.uk/

Susan Drucker earned a B.A. summa cum laude from Queens College with a joint major in communication arts and political science and a separate major in history. She earned a J.D. from St. John’s University School of Law and subsequently earned an M.A. summa cum laude in media studies from Queens College, The City University of New York. Her diverse educational background has proven to be invaluable in her research and professional endeavors.

Professor Drucker is a practicing attorney who specializes in communication and law, cross-cultural communication, and the relationship between communication technologies and public space. She has published widely on the emerging laws of cyberspace, communication and conflict resolution in international disputes, wired cities, cameras in the courtroom, technology and legal communication, and the rhetorical functions of Holocaust memorials.

Her most recent books include The Huddled Masses: Immigration and Communication (Hampton Press, 1998), Real Law @ Virtual Space: The Regulation of Cyberspace (Hampton Press, 1999, 2nd edition in process), Take Me Out to the Ballgame: Communicating Baseball (Hampton Press, 2002), and The Communication Landscape of a Divided Island of Cyprus (Hampton Press, 2002), all co-edited with Gary Gumpert. She is currently completing International Cyberlaw (with Gary Gumpert) to be published by Hampton Press.

Professor Drucker teaches courses in communication law, communication theory and interpersonal communication. In addition, she serves as faculty adviser to Lambda Pi Eta Honor Society and Chairperson of the Departmental Personnel Committee in the Journalism and Mass Media Studies Department, among other positions held at the University.

She is the recipient of several awards, including the Eastern Communication Association’s Distinguished Research Fellows Award (2002) and the Franklyn Haiman Award for Distinguished Scholarship in Freedom of Speech from the National Communication Association (1996). -SK