

Cyprus is a member of the European Union yet is a short hop from the coasts of Africa and the Middle East, and incumbent operator Cyta gains valuable business acting as a connecting point for all, says wholesale chief Yiannis Koulias

Cyta's cables link rival states where Europe meets Asia and Africa



Yiannis Koulias: We sometimes seem to act like a ministry of foreign affairs rather than a telecoms operator

Cyta, the national telecoms company of Cyprus, makes the best use of the country's position in the eastern Mediterranean, the furthest south-east member of the European Union.

The island, with only 700,000 people, is close to the coasts of the Middle East and north Africa. And that's the opportunity used by the head of Cyta's national and international wholesale operation, Yiannis Koulias. Cyta runs cables to and between its neighbours, such as Egypt, Israel, Lebanon and Syria, and to landing stations further off, in Italy and France, to connect western Europe.

"Some of these countries don't talk to each other," says Koulias with masterly understatement. "We act like a buffer." Cyprus has maintained good relations with most of the countries bordering on the eastern Mediterranean, and Cyta revels in its role of an island telecoms interchange between them.

"Syria links through Cyprus to Israel," says Koulias. There are a lot of transmissions — not voice, but data bandwidth. "We act as a gateway between Syria and Lebanon and Israel too." It's not easy to regulate communications between three countries which have such challenging political relationships, "but it depends a lot on personal relations rather than anything else", he says. "We sometimes seem to act like a ministry of foreign affairs rather than a telecoms operator."

The wholesale market division of Cyta covers both national requirements — so Cyta, as the incumbent, can supply services to other operators in the country — and international services. It includes Cytaglobal, a semi-autonomous strategic business unit specialising in international communications, with special emphasis on submarine cable systems.

"Cyta has invested many millions in submarine cables. It owns all the cable systems terminating in Cyprus." Some are bilateral — owned 50-50 with the operator at the other end — but the others are wholly owned. "We have nine cable systems landing in Cyprus. That's a lot for the size of the country."

Most connect other Mediterranean destinations — Marseille in France, Catania in Italy, Athens in Greece or Abu Talat in Egypt, for example. But the island is also connected to Sea-Me-We 3, which runs from northern Europe through the Mediterranean to Japan, Australia and other destinations on the western edge of the Pacific.

Now Cyta is investing in two new projects, called Alasia and Europa, with neighbouring telecoms companies, aimed at improving connections and reliability. Alasia — "an old name for Cyprus", says Koulias — will be a repeaterless cable to Syria and will connect with Cyta's existing Alexandros cable, a subsystem of Telecom Egypt's TEE that connects to Egypt and France. It will also complement the existing Ugarit cable to Syria.

Europa — originally a Phoenician princess who was abducted by the Greek god Zeus and who then gave her name to the whole continent — will run from Lebanon to Cyprus, where it will also connect to Alexandros. It will also duplicate the existing Cadmos cable from Lebanon to Cyprus. Alexandros is of course Alexander the Great. Cadmos was a hero of Greek mythology: Cyta loves classical names for its cables.

Satellite links

In case cables are not enough, Cyprus boasts another useful feature: it is one of the few places in the EU that is in view of satellites over both the Atlantic and Indian oceans. "That means we can relay all the way from Australia to the US," he says. Geostationary satellites are not much used for telephony or data these days, because of the long latency, but they are perfect for TV and other content.

"As a result many satellite operators, including Inmarsat, Eutelsat and Intelsat, have facilities here. We have a huge teleport."

That teleport will have extra uses in the coming years, he says, because natural gas has been discovered off the coast of Cyprus. US companies are drilling and they are developing a huge appetite for sending data back to their head offices for analysis. "But we might build a cable system to the platforms," says Koulias.

But he's looking at other long-term opportunities for Cytaglobal. Almost all Europe-Asia cables run via Egypt across to the Red Sea to get to the Indian Ocean, with — so far — the only competition going across Russia. "There is a dependency on Egypt," says Koulias, who calls the Russian alternative "adventurous". So he is exploring another choice — reaching the Red Sea round the back, via Cyta's cable to Syria.

"Israel also has a small strip of land on the Red Sea at Eilat," he points out. He's clearly exploring the possibilities that Cyprus has from its enviable position at the far east of Europe, where it meets the Middle East, Asia and Africa. ■



Nine cable systems land in Cyprus, and Cyta has announced two more

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