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Establishing a federal Cyprus

What are the regional and domestic forces helping - and hindering - a federal solution to the Cyprus issue?

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A general view of Turkish controlled Cyprus from the roof of the former Ledra Palace Hotel inside the United Nations Buffer Zone between the Greek and Turkish controlled areas of the island. PAimages/Chris Ison. All rights reserved.

Following up from our previous article three months ago, we attempt to offer some analytic explanations concerning the process of negotiating Cyprus and to take a political position in it.

It is safe to say that the Cyprus peace process, with the aim of establishing a type of federal state, is moving towards its conclusion in the next months. There cannot be business as usual after this: either there will be an agreement or a collapse of the negotiations, with a theoretical starting point some years later and under probably different political circumstances and with different stakes and aims.

Still, there remains political and diplomatic play to unfold, of which the importance is vividly illustrated in the absence of public predictions by the key players as to the eventual result of the ongoing process. It is unclear whether a high level convergence among major powers will materialize and shape the way for a referendum. Even then, it is also unclear whether the public is likely to accept - by a convenient majority - even the most mutually favourable plan.

On imperialism and ‘mother lands’

It has become obvious recently that the broader relations between Turkey and Greece - especially with respect to the demarcation of the Exclusive Economic Zones between the two states - is a key parameter of the peace process in Cyprus. The balance of power between Greece and Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean in general and in Cyprus in particular has been a key factor of the problem since the 1950s.

After the partition of Cyprus in 1974, a quasi equilibrium was reached with Turkey having the upper hand in the military field and Greece in the diplomatic field. As the Republic of Cyprus in Greek Cypriot hands was reinforced, it began resembling a de facto second Greek state. In a similar manner, the Turkish Cypriot Republic of Northern Cyprus (established in 1983), remains financially and logistically dependent on the Turkish state.

It is evident that in the run up to the Geneva talks a few weeks ago, Greek-Turkish relations have become more autonomous from broader bi-lateral relations, regional institutions and global alliances. The negotiations demonstrate so far pretty much an image of Greece vs Turkey, without a clear position from the main powers involved (excepting the UN) toward pushing one or the other towards a more compromising stance.

In the effort of both sides to maintain a tough line, they also make loud statements aimed primarily for domestic consumption, but at the same time impacting negatively on the peace process and the climate in which it occurs. The quintessence of a hostile climate concerns the issue of trust by the people who will be called upon to vote for the agreement; the perception of the 'barbaric Turk' by the Greek Cypriots and of the 'arrogant and nationalist Greek' by the Turkish Cypriots has become consolidated as embodying concrete threats that may come to haunt them in a re-unified island.

In any case, the rivalry between Greece and Turkey is much bigger than Cyprus, and it is in this frame that the opposing statements from leading officials from the two governments need to be interpreted.

As the negotiations evolve it also becomes increasingly clear that in the north, Turkey has an even bigger role to play than Greece in the south. In the Greek Cypriot community, the newly emerging tough stance of Greece, is more an extra boost to the local rejectionist forces and status quo interests, in that it can delay and even derail the prospect of an agreement.

Withdrawal cannot be immediate and cannot be total. This is not a stance that can be legitimated in Turkey's political system; it is contrary to Erdogan's profile as a leader and to Turkish Cypriot anxieties, desires and expectations.

The Greek stance at the same time is subject to Greek Cypriot pro-reunification pressures. And if an agreement is eventually reached, there are enough resources amongst the Greek Cypriot rejectionist forces to fight against reunification, even in defiance of a Greek government.

In the Turkish Cypriot community, the situation is different, and in some respects opposite. The fragmentation of pro peace political forces and the decreasing pro reunification mobilization potential, the enhanced and deeper cultural and economic penetration of Turkey into north Cyprus since 2004 and the (largely structural) weakness of the Turkish Cypriot leader to transcend the commands of the Turkish government render Erdogan as effectively the key agent that can prevent an agreement from happening now, but who can also push it through a referendum if an agreement is made.

The reshaping of the geopolitical order after the collapse of the Soviet Union did not alter the balance in Cyprus, despite the changes occurring as both the Republic of Cyprus and Turkey began their path towards the EU. The negotiations in the early 1990s failed and the strategy of tension that followed created political conditions that obstructed the negotiations from proceeding to the final stage until the early 2000s, at the conjuncture when the Republic of Cyprus was to enter the EU and Turkey to gain the status of an EU candidate country. The rejection of the Annan Plan by the Greek Cypriots and the entry of the Republic of Cyprus into the EU without its effective control of the northern part of the island has made the EU an important voice in the Cyprus problem as well.

This Greek Cypriot aim from the beginning becomes materialized only now, 13 years later in different circumstances and with EU and Turkey relations having taken a different form. The EU seeks to extend its control to north Cyprus through a solution of the Cyprus problem, ending not only an anomaly it has inherited, but also strengthening its geopolitical influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and its energy resources and routes.

Turkey seeks now to use Cyprus as a bargaining piece, not in order to pave its way into the EU as was the case 14 years ago, but in order to achieve recognition from the EU as a major power at its border with which the EU needs to have a special relationship. This new more direct EU-Turkey parameter in the Cyprus negotiation is not necessarily working in favor of reunification: it substantially enlarges the stakes and the issues under negotiation and may make an agreement more elusive at the present stage, and of a different sort in the medium term even by-passing the Greek Cypriot government of the Republic of Cyprus, if the current process collapses.

Although Turkey's final cards have not been played on account of domestic instability and a foreign policy with many open fronts, its desire to exchange its withdrawal from Cyprus with an understanding with the EU and Greece is clearly visible, primarily but not exclusively through the attitude of the Turkish Cypriot leadership.

But that withdrawal cannot be immediate and cannot be total. This is not a stance that can be legitimated in Turkey's political system; it is contrary to Erdogan's profile as a leader and to Turkish Cypriot anxieties, desires and expectations. The treaty of guarantees will have to be revised, but it cannot just evaporate into thin air – nor can half a century of political and military presence in the island.

The Turkish position on Cyprus goes far beyond the intransigence of the Erdogan regime and into the diachronic security concerns among the Turkish Cypriots as well as Turkey's geopolitical status in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this vein, a transitional period with a small and symbolic Turkish military presence and some role by Turkey in the security system currently being discussed is inevitable. Any absolute refusal as to this and more specifically the demands for an immediate and absolute withdrawal of Turkish troops, even before the enforcement of the agreement and the total exclusion of Turkey from the security system are simply out of touch with reality. And this without any serious prospects to maintain the current state of affairs in the political and economic fronts; that is, the continuing monopolization of the Republic in Greek Cypriot hands.

There are significant issues that have not yet been agreed but the balance is more or less known and this will not lead to any one of the two sides retreating fully. Both will have to retreat so that they find themselves somewhere in the middle – rotating presidency with cross voting, the town of Morphou under Greek Cypriot administration but with rights of remain to the current population, total withdrawal of the Turkish army but at a gradual pace, abolition of Turkey's right to unilateral intervention but maintaining Turkey in Cyprus' security system.

The UN refrains from pressurizing the two sides but it is clear that at some point it will have to call an end game in the current process. And in case of a collapse of the negotiations, it will most probably orient itself to an even more reduced role in the next period. The resumption of the talks at high level may have been

postponed for April after the referendum in Turkey about the constitutional reform, but it is doubtful whether any substantial change will occur then.

One may dismiss the Greek and Turkish governments' nationalistic cries, yet there are material issues and real state interests besides the public opinion in the two countries. Although a compromise agreement between Greece and Turkey on Cyprus is very possible, it may not happen as both states see Cyprus as one piece in their broader interests and relations. In order to agree they must also reach a sort of understanding concerning the framework through which they would continue to compete and resolve the rest of their matters and specifically the demarcation of their exclusive economic zones.

On the bigger plane, an agreement on the Cyprus problem can only be based on the acceptance by the US and the UK that Russia cannot be ignored in the Eastern Mediterranean. There are signs that this is feasible as Russia's endurance in the global plane and more specifically in the Middle East, has made it clear that an agreement in Cyprus can only take place if Russia supports, or at least tolerates it. This would be reflected in the role of the Security Council, the transitional periods and the security system to be instituted.



A border crossing on Ledra Street, which separates the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot parts of Nicosia. PAimages/Jens Kalaene. All rights reserved.

Politics on the ground: the two intra-communal camps

The main development in the last three months is the further strengthening of the two camps in favour and against the reunification process. In parallel, the cleavage separating them at both the social and political levels has been reinforced in discursive, organizational as well as political terms.

Fascist and other right wing street protests against the peace process and the prospect of a federal solution are becoming a standard. Protests come along with a series of other public events, such as panel discussions, petitions, open letters etc, by the “five centre parties”, ELAM and Church leaders as well as other nationalist and far-right wing groups, intellectuals and opinion leaders.

In Cyprus, violence is not seen as an immediate concern, but rather a divisive mark from the past.

The clearest statements in favor of a solution and most willing to support the process from the trade unionists and from the peace activists, as does pro-solution mobilisation. Business representatives are more divided with statements both for and against. The fact that the two main parties AKEL and DISY, fully support Anastasiades' negotiation effort at this juncture is highly significant. Since the mid-1980s when they united against then President's Spyros Kyprianou's intransigence in the negotiations, each of the two parties (and especially AKEL) has been very careful to draw clear boundaries from the other's position on the Cyprus problem.

Yet, in line of successive developments, with Anastasiades building on and carrying forward joint decisions made by Christofias without changing much, the political gap between AKEL and DISY on this issue has shrunk. To be sure, both sides retreated on previous stances throughout time. DISY has backtracked on its position in favor of NATO's involvement in the process and of a "loose" federation, while AKEL has retreated from an overt emphasis on procedural matters and has refused to succumb to rejectionist internal and external pressures.

Partly because this division between AKEL and DISY is not simply a political matter, the two parties' ideological incompatibility is likely to play a role in determining internal opposition. Specifically AKEL and DISY dissenters are both openly and covertly intervening against the negotiations and against the prospect of an agreement in the current circumstances. These include both high profile personalities, who tend to be more careful, but also lower rank and local cadres.

Left-wing rejectionists evoke various things such as patriotism, internationalism, anti-imperialism, nationalism and even anti-capitalism. The argument of the most coherent rejectionist line inside AKEL itself more or less argues that too much is being conceded to foreign imperialism, of which Turkish expansionism is a manifestation. Inside DISY, opposition is essentially more traditionally nationalist, not in civic terms but on more ethnocentric lines.

In the Turkish Cypriot community there is both continuity and change with respect to the political system and the various pro and anti reunification forces. The

traditional right currently governing remains staunchly oppositional and undermines Mustafa Akinci's efforts while occasionally clashing frontally with him using nationalist arguments and rhetoric. Old and new fascist and far right groups have also made their customary appearance, threatening the "traitors" and including in them not only trade unionists and leftists but also Akinci himself.

The traditional left, although weaker and more fragmented today, firmly supports the reunification process, albeit without a mass movement shaping the political climate this time. The pro EU business groups and many civil society organizations and NGOs are also in favor of reunification and so is that segment of Turkish Cypriot society that feels alarmed with the developments in Turkey and the drift towards authoritarianism there.

However, what seems to be holding the balance is the new centre-right party led by Kudret Özersay, who maintains close links with Turkey and who is ambivalent with respect to the reunification process. Although Özersay as a technocrat had supported reunification, as a politician today with polls showing his People's Party as the most popular one in the north, he seems more interested in establishing himself in a pivot position in the political system.

Unlike the left which sees the future of the Turkish Cypriot community as passing through a federal Cyprus and unlike the right which sees value in the status quo, Özersay attempts to express a third position that prioritizes modernizing reform and Turkish Cypriot autonomy and refusing, for the moment, the dilemma of partition or federation.

Projections towards a pending definitive conclusion

The immediate purpose of agreements for ethno-nationalist conflict within countries is usually to freeze the military or paramilitary confrontations, and prevent violence from re-occurring. Both the Good Friday Agreement for Ireland and the Dayton Agreement for Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, can be seen as 'constructions of necessity'.

This is not the case in Cyprus where violence is not (and is not seen as potentially) an immediate concern, but rather a divisive mark from the past, which is becoming

all the more distant in the minds of the local populations and is further diluted by the increasingly multi-cultural demographic composition of the island.

This very fact makes an eventual agreement very uncertain in form and nature. Both actually resolving the conflict and freezing it through de facto or formal partition are still possible options for all the players involved as the need for a solution may not be seen as urgent either in the domestic or international sphere. Yet, for progressive Cypriots, north and south, reunification is a matter of urgency as well as necessity, in terms of both substance and in terms of the potential to be unleashed in the process.

If there is an agreement, a very polarized political conflict will unfold both north and south. But more so in the south where the outcome will be more uncertain and probably close. In the north since the agreement, if there is one, will have to be inevitably endorsed by the Turkish government, the nationalist rejectionist forces will be in a disadvantageous position.

In the Greek Cypriot community, the Greek government does not have this sort of leverage and will not be able to control the rejectionist forces. If there is no agreement, we expect changes to take place in the short and medium term. A deadlock will most probably be announced, a more blunt report should be expected from the UN and any future discussions will only take place after the passage of a couple years.

By then, the agency of different players could shape developments in different ways, most probably towards more partitionist directions.

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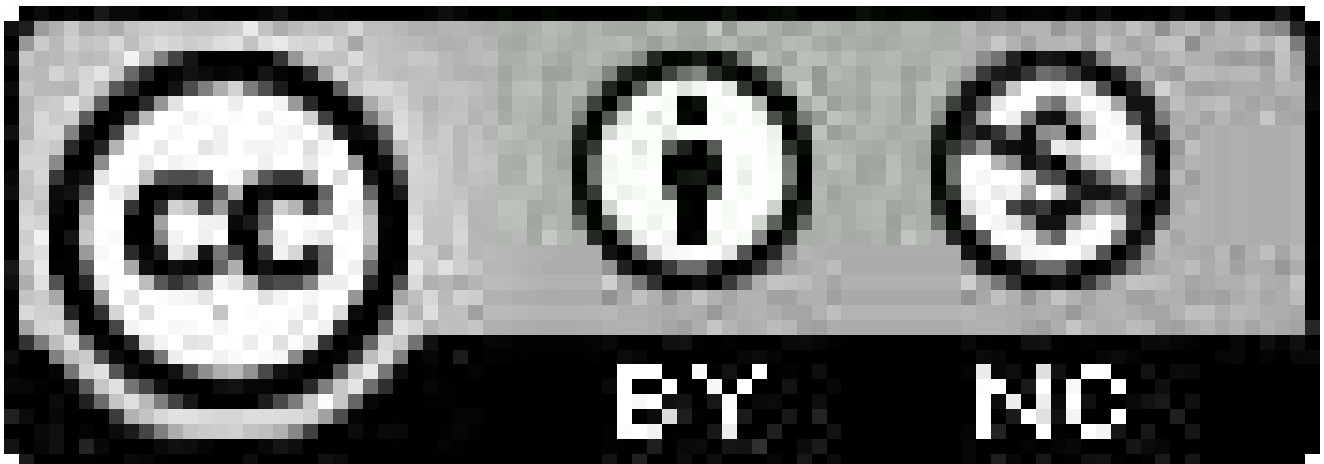
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