

Cyprus, Turkey, and the EU: The Need for A Gradual Approach

SEYMEN ATASOY

Assistant Professor of International Relations
Eastern Mediterranean University

THE LATEST PHASE OF UNITED Nations sponsored talks for a Cyprus settlement took place at the The Hague on 10-11 March 2003. The occasion was a summit meeting between the Greek Cypriot leader Tassos Papadopoulos and Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash arranged by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Visiting the divided island two weeks earlier, Mr. Annan surprised both Greek and Turkish leaders by suggesting that his partially completed settlement plan be submitted directly to the two communities in the form of simultaneous referenda.¹ But Annan's hope that the two leaders could be convinced to accept his suggestion failed to materialize. In his press statement following the summit, Annan indicated that the Greek Cypriot leader had reservations regarding the plan, while the Turkish Cypriot leader fundamentally objected to it.

257

The schedule for Greek Cyprus' accession into the European Union set the tone for both the timing of the summit and the referenda proposed there. Had everything proceeded according to the Secretary General's plans, a reunited Cyprus would have signed the Treaty of Accession to the EU on 16 April 2003 and achieved a membership status in May 2004. The failure of negotiations led to a number of new circumstances for the island and the region. The EU will now inherit a divided island riddled with conflict and home to a Turkish Cypriot population left in limbo. Additionally, Turkey's own prospects for European inclusion will be significantly complicated—a situation which will generate negative regional consequences. Taking the political dynamics in North Cyprus and in Turkey into account, this paper suggests that a realistic middle way out of the present bottleneck is as follows: the Turkish side should accept the Annan plan on the condition that its implementation is deferred until Turkey's EU

DR. SEYMAN ATASOY is Chair of the Department of International Relations and Assistant Professor at the Eastern Mediterranean University in Northern Cyprus.

membership is decided, or, alternatively until a common agreement is reached with all parties involved in the conflict. This additional time can be used to overcome the two main obstacles which the Annan plan is facing, namely the bypassed need to develop sufficient mutual trust between the two communities and the lack of any preparation for EU membership in North Cyprus.

As finally revised on 26 February 2003, the Annan plan envisages a Swiss-style state called United Cyprus Republic having a federal government with a rotating presidency and two constituent states. It calls for a single international legal personality and sovereignty, with partition and secession expressly prohibited. The deal requires the Turkish side to cede about 7 percent of the island or roughly 20 percent of North Cyprus to the Greek side and would allow Greek Cypriots to gradually either return to their abandoned homes in the Turkish constituent state or be compensated for them.

SOME HISTORICAL SNAPSHOTS

A complex—and hotly contested—political and legal history forms the background to the present situation. The United Kingdom, with its imperial power declining in the 1950s, decided to withdraw from the eastern Mediterranean island in the face of an armed Greek Cypriot struggle for independence. In 1960, The Republic of Cyprus (RoC) was created: the Greeks and the Turks shared power in the new state, and the balance of power was secured by guarantor powers Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. But the leaders of the Greek community voiced unhappiness with the arrangement, claiming that it gave too much political power to the much smaller Turkish community and rendered the island ungovernable. Citing these problems, in 1963 they sought to unilaterally change the constitution, and when the Turkish Cypriots resisted these modifications, intercommunal violence erupted. Such violence persisted periodically and by 1964 the Turkish Cypriots had retreated to enclaves. Upon finding minimal security in the North, the Turkish Cypriots initiated self-rule in the form of the Provisional Turkish Cypriot administration. This government gradually evolved into the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), and was named as such in 1983.

Currently, the southern part of the island is controlled by the Greek administration of the RoC which enjoys international recognition as the legitimate government of the whole island. The northern one third of the island is administered by the government of the TRNC, which only finds international recognition from Turkey. The TRNC and Turkey do not recognize the RoC, explaining that its Greek leadership illegally pushed out its Turkish partners when it usurped governmental authority in 1963. Accordingly, blame should also be placed on the international community for unfairly choosing to recognize the purely Greek government as the sole authority on the island.²

Turkey's support for the Turkish Cypriots is not only verbal—Turkey sent troops to Cyprus in response to the Athens-instigated coup d'état of 1974, which sought to unify Cyprus with Greece. Turkey's actions were based on its obligations as a guarantor power and has since maintained over 30,000 Turkish troops in North Cyprus.

HOW THE UN FAILED

After the 11 March collapse of the Annan initiative, Mr. Ergün Olgun, a leading member of the negotiating team of the TRNC, sat with me for an informal interview. He pointed to three main shortcomings of the UN effort: first, the failure to provide practical equality to each of the two sides; second, a mistaken belief in the ease of transition from conflict to federation in an atmosphere devoid of trust; and third, a failure to confront the real risks of ethnic violence when the two populations are mixed.³ Olgun also noted that the equal partnership structure of the RoC as originally designed in 1960 was a unique case: it was fundamentally different from former states like Czechoslovakia and the Yugoslav Federation, which, while home to many minority groups, had unitary power arrangements. Olgun continued to explain that the Greek side destroyed this partnership in 1963 when it usurped the government and sought to erase Turks from the island through ethnic cleansing, while the international community only rewarded the Greek leadership for these atrocities by recognizing them as the sole legitimate government on the island. Olgun stressed that in order to reach a sustainable settlement, the two equal peoples of the island have to feel safe and secure in their territories without one side claiming sovereignty over the other, and he concluded that the failure to address this need is the greatest problem with the current plan.⁴

An important difference between the Annan initiative and earlier UN efforts for settlement was the Annan plan's linkage to the time schedule for the accession of the RoC to the EU.⁵ During the early 1990s, the RoC applied for EU membership and its preparations proceeded smoothly during the decade. The 1999 Helsinki European Council adopted the view that a resolution of the Cyprus conflict was not required for the membership of the RoC. The TRNC authorities decried this decision, claiming that the Greek Cypriots, assured EU membership regardless, would become intransigent in settlement talks. Together with Turkey, the TRNC reminded the international community that the RoC's ascension into the EU in the absence of Turkey's consent would be a clear violation of international law because of the Cyprus Treaty of Guarantee.⁶ At the same time, some international lawyers offered a different—and softer—interpretation, and convinced Kofi Annan to adopt the view that the RoC's membership in the EU was inevitable and thus the Turkish Cypriots had somehow to be brought on board.

The possibility of the RoC quickly joining the EU and enjoying all the economic

benefits of this status distanced a significant percentage of Turkish Cypriots from their democratically elected President and government. Suffering from the long-standing embargoes imposed upon them by the RoC and the EU, and feeling additional negative effects from Turkey's financial crisis, Turkish Cypriots were experiencing economi-

It seems that the Greek Cypriot side is determined not to step outside the UN umbrella.

cally challenging times. Younger generations in particular, facing meager employment prospects and without a first-hand knowledge of ethnic violence, were attracted to the speedy implementation of the Annan plan which offered them the opportunity to become EU citizens in re-

turn for giving up on the TRNC's struggle for independent sovereignty. Beyond economic benefits, EU membership offered many other attractions including an end to the Turkish Cypriots' long-standing isolation.

Tapping into such popular desires, opposition parties organized mass demonstrations designed to pressure TRNC President Denktash to accept the conditions put in front of him and to clear the way towards EU membership. Gradually, the supporters of Denktash's position in North Cyprus also raised their voice through public demonstrations of their own, and Turkey formally reiterated its traditional support after some mixed signals during the settling of a new government in Ankara. Mutual accusations continue to be exchanged in the TRNC—the establishment accuses the opposition of harboring paid Greeks and European agents, while the opposition accuses the incumbent political elite of having vested interests in the continuation of the status quo.

NEW INITIATIVES AND THE UN

The outbreak of the war in Iraq has diverted Ankara's attention from Cyprus, yet new initiatives are already planned and are being introduced in early April 2003. Turkey's suggestion of a "Conference of Five," which would bring together the two Cypriot sides and the three guarantor powers, has already been rejected by the Greek Cypriot leadership as an unacceptable departure from the UN process. President Denktash's suggestion of territorial concessions to the Greek side in return for the removal of economic embargoes was rejected for the same reasons. It seems that the Greek Cypriot side is determined not to step outside the UN umbrella. Many Turkish observers argue that after having assured EU membership, the Greek Cypriot leaders will no longer have incentives to reach a settlement with Turks and will become intransigent. Greek Cypriot leaders, however, claim that they will be willing to negotiate in good faith on the basis of the Annan plan.

In his April 2003 report to the Security Council on the UN's Cyprus initiative,

Annan accuses President Denktash of being inflexible and failing to negotiate on a give and take basis. He notes that the successive Greek leaders Clerides and Papadopoulos also had reservations about the UN plan but were more flexible and cooperative. In an official visit to the TRNC in early April, Turkish foreign minister Gül expressed support for Denktash but also implied that the Annan plan was still on the table. In fact, just as the Greek Cypriot position is developed in consultation with Greece, the Turkish Cypriot policies are shaped with the influence of Turkey. Turkey may have more clout over the TRNC compared to that of Greece over the RoC, but Denktash probably has more influence in Ankara than a Greek Cypriot president has ever had in Athens.

POLITICAL STANCES ON A NEW CYPRUS

More recently, however, the increasingly important EU factor both in Cyprus and in Turkey has complicated TRNC-Turkey relations. In order to illustrate these changing dynamics, it seems necessary to briefly look at the main political positions in the two countries. In reality there is a spectrum of diverse intellectual and political positions on the Cyprus issue. At the risk of oversimplification, however, we can talk about two main clusters in each one of these countries: the official position and opposition in the TRNC, and the national position and the ultra-Europeanists in Turkey.

The general position held by the coalition government in power, the presidency, and the segments of the electorate supporting them in the TRNC can be roughly summarized by means of the following points:

- The constitution of the 1960 partnership state confirms Turkish Cyprus's natural right of self-determination, and the Turkish Cypriots cannot settle for anything less.
- Assuring physical security and the preservation of a separate national identity means working towards eventual international recognition.
- Turkey's security guarantees should not be eroded.
- Reasonable territorial concessions to the Greek side are possible.

Political parties, academics, media commentators and other critics that oppose the official position in the TRNC offer the following arguments:

- Joining the EU together with the Greeks in 2004 will end Northern Cyprus isolation and solve most of its economic problems.
- The Annan plan, which provides sufficient autonomy and acceptable safeguards

for prosperity under the EU umbrella, is the international community's best offer so far and should be accepted.

- While it is important to recognize the sacrifices Turkey has made for the Turkish Cypriot side, a higher degree of independence is necessary in order to reach towards Europe. Reducing the number of settlers by sending some of them back to Turkey—as required by the Greek Cypriot side and articulated in the Annan plan—is acceptable and desirable.

The main points of the national position in Turkey generally supported by the governing party, the opposition party in parliament, the civilian and military bureaucracy, and an overwhelming majority of the of the public are as follows:

- Turkey should continue to defend and support Northern Cyprus because to cease would be to abandon some of Turkey's hard-won historic and legal rights and vital national interests.
- Cyprus is strategically important for the national security of Turkey. It is increasingly important with regard to energy transport lines and water resources.
- If Cyprus came under the control of a rival force, Turkey would be encircled in Anatolia.
- Turkish soldiers have shed blood in Cyprus and the Turkish flag flies there. It would be a disgrace to bring down that flag in the face of unjust foreign pressure.
- Cyprus and Turkey's process of integration with the EU are unrelated issues. The sincerity of the EU regarding Turkish admission is highly doubtful anyway.
- Since the Turkish peace operation in 1974, violent ethnic conflict has ceased. The Greek-manipulated European efforts to reunite the island are likely to lead to ethnic violence and the gradual ethnic cleansing of the Turks through economic domination.
- The TRNC should be internationally recognized as an independent state.
- Reasonable territorial concessions can be granted to the Greek side.

Corporate interests, some influential academics and journalists of neo-liberal persuasion, and a tiny segment of the public opinion represent the ultra-Europeanist position on Cyprus in Turkey. This position is sometimes referred to as the ultra-liberal stance or the “give-Cyprus-away-and-be-free-of-the-problem” camp. Its positions can be sum-

marized as follows:

- Turkey is enduring meaningless sacrifices and costs in Cyprus while hindering the economic and social progress of Cypriot Turks.
- The EU is making a clear political linkage between Cyprus and Turkey's membership. As such, it seems that Turkey's policies in Cyprus are blocking its progress to join the EU.
- In this era of globalization, the geo-political importance of Cyprus is no longer convincing. Markets, capital, and business matter much more now than strategy.
- The TRNC is a hopeless case in terms of international recognition and economic development.

Clearly, there is a significant overlap between the TRNC official and Turkish national positions, and in fact there is a long enduring tradition of mutual understanding and support among them. During the last three decades, the national position on Cyprus has been institutionalized in Turkey as "state policy" and enjoys strong popular support as well as bureaucratic dedication. As citizens of a state established as a result of a hard-won liberation war primarily against a devastating Greek invasion, the overwhelming majority of the Turkish people highly respect and strongly support President Denktash's struggle to defend the national identity of his people through the TRNC. In fact, one of the main stabilizers of Turkish foreign policy towards Cyprus is the status of the as a matter of national honor.

There is also a growing overlap among the TRNC opposition and the Turkish ultra-Europeanist positions. For example, the influential Association of Turkish Businessmen and Industrialists lobbies for a speedy solution of the Cyprus issue because such developments might ease tensions within Turkish-Western economic and political relations. However, this relationship is much weaker than the former for a number of reasons, including political orientation, social status, and practical considerations. Most of the people in the opposition camp of the TRNC and their political parties are strongly left-leaning socialists, while the ultra-Europeanists in Turkey are mostly free-market liberals. It is likely that many of the yuppies in the latter group look down on the Cypriot Turks as opportunist peasants. A key argument of mainstream Europeanists in Turkey is that the reforms demanded by the EU are made for the benefit of the Turkish people. Moreover, argue the mainstream Europeanists, acceding to these demands does not amount to a dishonorable acquiescence on the part of Turkey. They also hold that the Cyprus issue is unfairly linked to Turkey's own EU membership.

At the same time, the economic difficulties in Turkey and the TRNC are weakening the official/national alliance and strengthening the opposition/ultra-Europeanist coalition. In Turkey, the national position is likely strong enough to withstand the economic situation and prevent a significant deviation in Turkish foreign policy. The same cannot be said for the official position in the TRNC. In fact, the opposition

The economic difficulties in Turkey and the TRNC are weakening the official/national alliance.

parties may succeed in obtaining a parliamentary majority in the upcoming December 2003 elections and therefore be able to remove President Denktash from his post as chief negotiator. In the event of such hypothetical circumstances, however, any attempt

to shift TRNC positions away from Turkey's preferences would face major resistance from the Turkish Cypriots who do support the traditional official policies of the TRNC or Turkey. Tensions would likely rise very high and would be accompanied by unpredictable complications under such circumstances.

The Justice and Development Party (JDP), which recently formed a single party government in Turkey, gives high priority to Turkey's EU membership and tried to obtain a date for the beginning of EU-Turkey accession negotiations at the December 2002 European Council in Copenhagen. Instead, the EU announced it would not evaluate Turkey's fulfillment of the required criteria or discuss whether and when it could actually start accession negotiations until December 2004. In their haste to achieve concrete results in Turkish-European relations, various leaders of the JDP initially made foreign policy statements that deviated from Turkey's entrenched "state policy" on Cyprus. However, as their overall credibility on matters of foreign policy rapidly deteriorated, the strength of their new arguments and approach to the Cyprus issue also decreased, and slowly moved closer to the traditional Turkish Cyprus policy. This return was probably caused as much by the demands of the party's grassroots as by the voices of state elites who defended the established Turkish foreign policy. The Turkish government strongly desires a settlement that would accelerate its progression towards the EU, so long as that agreement would not violate Turkish rights in Cyprus and in doing so catalyze a negative popular reaction.

ACCOMODATING THE EU

In thinking about ways to bring about a just and sustainable settlement in Cyprus, two considerations deserve special mention. First, there is a need to create mutual trust and understanding through dialogue between the two communities. Turkish and Greek Cypriots have had almost no contact during the last thirty years, and initiating a settle-

ment in the absence of trust and a common identity could amount to revisiting the conflicts and violence that arose under the 1960s partnership state. Reviewing the relevant scholarly literature, Tozun Bahcheli notes that bicommunal states are prone to inter-ethnic conflicts and have a high potential for conflict, violence, and disintegration.⁷ He also cautions that EU membership provides no reliable guarantees against communal differences and conflicts and reminds us that membership in the EU has only marginally improved the relationship of the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland.⁸

The second consideration deserving special attention in discussions concerning possible resolutions in Cyprus is the need to preserve the desirable elements that late development and relative isolation have conferred upon the TRNC. Politically isolated without international recognition and economically cut off by embargoes from most of the rest of the world, the TRNC has been protected from many of the undesirable side effects of globalization. The absence of industrialization and mass tourism allowed the preservation of nature in its pristine form, most notably on the beaches and in the mountains of the country. Additionally, Northern Cyprus enjoys low levels of pollution, minimal traffic jams, low crime rates, and only a small military presence. The country has the potential to promote nature-friendly tourism, to improve and extend its English-speaking universities, which bring together international faculty and serve students from Turkey and several other countries; and to develop other service sectors.

Under these circumstances, it seems that Northern Cyprus' entry into the EU should be a gradual process, which would lend Northern Cyprus more time to reflect and prepare. Turkish Cypriots have not participated in the EU accession negotiations conducted by the RoC, and they haven't done anything to harmonize with EU criteria or to adopt the *acquis communautaire*. Most of the politicians, bureaucrats, and people in the TRNC do not even have a clear idea of what the specific implications of such membership would be simply because the issue has not yet been seriously studied.

To satisfy the preferences of the Greek Cypriots and those of the international community, the Turkish side has to accept the Annan plan as the basis for future negotiations. To satisfy the preferences of Turkey and the current TRNC leadership, the Greek Cypriots and the international community have to accept the need for delaying the extension of the EU system to Northern Cyprus either until Turkey becomes a member as well, or until an agreement among the two sides on the island and the three guarantor powers is reached. All parties need to negotiate in good faith and in the spirit of give and take. Also, rather than the news black-outs employed in earlier settlement talks, transparency during future negotiations seems to offer better prospects.

Many would most likely disagree with the idea of slowing the process of North Cyprus' EU accession for very understandable reasons. Most notably these objectors

would include Greek Cypriots who do not want to wait any longer to return to what is left of their property, Turkish Cypriot youth who want immediately the better economic prospects that accompany EU citizenship, and EU authorities who would like to complete the smooth accession of a united Cyprus. Yet, it is most likely that the desires of these parties will be frustrated anyway if the international community's current approach of rushing Northern Cyprus into the EU is attempted. Intercommunity violence is likely to frustrate the first desire, while intracommunal clashes among already polarized Turks in the North will doom the second. Ultimately, the EU's well-deserved image as a peace project may be tarnished as well.

However, this proposition to delay the extension of the EU to Northern Cyprus should not be seen as an opportunity to maintain the existing status quo within the TRNC or in Cyprus as a whole. Instead, the people of Northern Cyprus should intensify constructive debates aimed at progressive political, economic, and social changes. Additionally, they should reach out to the Greeks in the South in order to begin an open-minded dialogue between the two sides and to develop the trust and friendship that must form the basis for any sustainable partnership. Parallel to these efforts, Northern Cyprus should study the EU *acquis communautaire* and work to develop the internal legal and administrative framework needed to adopt it.

These processes must be transparent and be supported by the international community, especially by Turkey. Academics from universities in each of the two sides must try their best to help. Specifically, historians must come together and set the historical record straight.⁹ Political parties, civil society organizations, as well as government officials and bureaucrats from both sides should strive to create the social infrastructure for a just and sustainable settlement. Certainly it is true that such ideas have been little more than empty rhetoric in the past, but we now seem to have a historic opportunity. With prudence, thoughtfulness, and some luck, within the next five to ten years we can have a peaceful united Cyprus as a member of the EU, and inside it a Northern constituent state which can boast its model nature conservation as well as its sustainable service economy. 

NOTES

1. The full text of the final version of the Annan plan in English is available at: <http://www.pio.gov.cy>.
2. Michael Moran, *Resolution 186, Its Genesis and Significance: Manoeuvres at the UN in 1964* (CYREP, Nicosia, 1999).
3. Interview conducted on 14 March 2003, Nicosia, TRNC.
4. Ibid.
5. In his report prepared for the 9 April 2003 meeting of the UN Security Council meeting, Mr. Annan explicitly notes that he assumed that "The European Union factor in particular offered a framework of

Cyprus, Turkey, and the EU: The Need for A Gradual Approach

incentives to reach a settlement as well as deadlines within which to reach it.” The original English text of his report has been published by the Northern Cypriot daily *Halkın Sesi* on 7 April 2003.

6. Professor Maurice H. Mendelson, Q.C., *Why Cyprus Entry into the European Union would be Illegal: Legal Opinion* (Meto Print, London, 2001).

7. Tozun Bahcheli, “Searching for a Cyprus Settlement: Considering Options for a Federation, a Confederation, or Two Independent States,” in *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 30:1-2 (Winter/Spring 2000): 213.

8. *Ibid.*: 211.

9. A dynamic example is available on a creative web site on the internet entitled “The Cyprus Conflict: Historiography & Nationalism,” <http://www.cyprus-conflict.net/Nationalism.htm>.