

COMMENTARY

The Cyprus problem: Has time run out for reunification?



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For the past five decades, a solution to the Cyprus problem has remained elusive. With the different sides now having different visions for the island's future, it remains to be seen whether forthcoming talks in Geneva will bear fruit or bomb.

From 27 to 29 April, the leaders of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, Nicos Anastasiades and Ersin Tatar, and the three guarantor countries of Greece, Turkey and the UK will partake in informal talks convened by the UN Secretary-General in Geneva. The EU will also attend in an observer capacity. The goal is to gauge whether there is enough common ground to resume negotiations to finally resolve the Cyprus conflict. It will be the first such meeting since the collapse of talks in Crans-Montana in July 2017.

This website uses cookies. By continuing to use this website you are giving consent to cookies being used. Anastasiades continues to support a bizonal, bicomunal federation based on political equality, as provided for in the relevant UN Security Council resolutions. However, Tatar

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and Ankara hold that after decades of failed efforts, the federal solution has had its day. They advocate a two-state solution based on sovereign equality instead.

There is every possibility the meeting will end in deadlock or with one side walking away. This would be an awful outcome: it risks exacerbating tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and in EU–Turkey relations further, as progress on Cyprus is central to the EU's new positive agenda with Ankara.

Why has the federal model failed?

Negotiations for a bizonal, bicomunal federation have lasted five decades. A solution would be a win-win for both Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities as well as the broader region. Nevertheless, a deal has remained elusive.

While both sides have bridged many areas of disagreement, three topics remain particularly tricky: (i) governance, including the rotating presidency; (ii) territory and property; and (iii) security and guarantees. Still, as the progress made in the last round of negotiations between Anastasiades and former Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci on the first two areas show, compromise is feasible.

Security, particularly the withdrawal of the estimated 35,000 Turkish soldiers stationed in northern Cyprus, is another story. The bloody history continues to have a huge psychological impact on both communities and their approaches to security-related issues. While Turkish Cypriots continue to insist that only Turkey can guarantee its security, Greek Cypriots view the troops as an occupying force and a significant security threat. Compromise proposals for a phased withdrawal have been rejected by the Greek Cypriots repeatedly.

Cyprus joining the EU in 2004 also made finding a solution more difficult. While no third country should have a veto on EU enlargement, the error was that there were no safeguards in the run-up to membership. Thus, secure in the knowledge that Cyprus would join the EU with or without the solution, the then Greek Cypriot leader, Tassos Papadopoulos, called on his constituents to vote against the reunifying Annan Plan in 2004 in spite of having negotiated it himself. Consequently, Turkish Cypriots remained outside the EU, despite favouring reunification. Cyprus' accession was also the harbinger of EU–Turkey relations becoming more problematic.

Time is not our friend

It has become increasingly difficult to find a solution. The discovery and exploitation of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean should have served as an incentive for compromise. Unfortunately, it only complicated things further, leading to the confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean over gas reserves between Turkey and

Turkish Cypriots against Greece and Greek Cypriots.

Furthermore, with Turkish Cypriots financially dependent on Ankara, the latter's footprint and influence in the north has expanded significantly. Its ever-tightening grip is eroding the culture, identity, values and secular lifestyle of Turkish Cypriots. Ankara's pursuit of its religious agenda in northern Cyprus (e.g. extensive mosque building) is a major concern for Turkish Cypriots.

Over the years, tens of thousands of Turkish settlers arrived in the north, altering the Turkish Cypriot community's political profile and demographic makeup. Desecularisation combined with demographic change has made reconciliation harder. This was evident in the October 2020 leadership elections, which Akıncı narrowly lost to the Ankara-backed Tatar. Turkey sent bureaucrats to poor, rural areas of the north, promising assistance (<https://blogs.prio.org/2020/11/a-surprise-in-cyprus-recent-elections-and-the-return-of-the-populist-right/>) to people in economic straits. Meanwhile, anti-Akıncı social media campaigns went as far as to portray him as a traitor. Finally, three days before the elections, in cahoots with Ankara, Tatar reopened part of the fenced-off ghost town of Varosha for the first time since Cyprus was divided in 1974. Previously inhabited by Greek Cypriots, it was seen as an important bargaining chip in the peace talks.

If Ankara's influence continues to grow, the north will increasingly morph into Turkey, with Turkish Cypriots eventually becoming a minority. Indeed, the north's isolation is leading young Turkish Cypriots to emigrate to Europe.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not helped. The closing of the crossing points in the early stages of the pandemic has been a travesty for relations between people in the two communities, who had been free to come and go for 18 years.

The short supply of political will

Despite the numerous creative and implementable solutions to the thorniest issues being proposed by experts from both communities, real political will – a readiness to compromise or take calculated risks – has been absent. Winning elections have proven to be more important than effectively selling the benefits of reunification to the population. The groundwork necessary to build trust has never been carried out adequately. Peace processes have been leader-driven and excluded society, with limited cooperation between the two communities. Hardliners on both sides (but particularly Greek Cypriot) spread disinformation and scaremonger. Nonetheless, there is one area where all parties excel: the blame game. ✕

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The current situation is unsustainable. Both Greek and Turkish Cypriots have plenty to

lose from the absence of a solution. Many Greek Cypriots remain sceptical about reunification, fearing it would inject a significant dose of Ankara into Cyprus. But failing to support a deal would actually probably mean a bigger and more unpredictable shot. While an internationally recognised two-state solution seems highly unlikely, northern Cyprus being totally swallowed up as a de facto Turkish province is likely. This would have serious security implications for Greek Cypriots as well as for the lives of Turkish Cypriots.

After months of UN shuttle diplomacy, there must be some hope of finding common ground in Geneva. Pressure is on Tatar and Turkey to show some flexibility. Otherwise, the talks risk being a total flop. But today's Turkey is not the Turkey of 2017. Ankara pursues a more nationalist, assertive foreign policy. While it is unclear whether Turkey is ready to be as flexible as it was in Crans-Montana, it may use the two-state solution as a bargaining chip.

Greek Cypriots must also step up. They should demonstrate a genuine commitment to reunification and not simply point fingers at Ankara. There is little point in revisiting a federal solution if it ends up being a process without an end once again. There should be a readiness to resume talks from where they left off and be constructive. While there could be a tweak here and there to what was on the table in Crans-Montana, there clearly will be no major changes. With Anastasiades in his second and final term, this gives him more space for manoeuvre.

There is a lot at stake for Greece. Despite the strained Greek-Turkish ties, Athens has strong incentives for both sides to make progress. Without a solution, the normalisation of EU-Turkey relations will remain extremely challenging and not only impact Greece vis-à-vis the Eastern Mediterranean but also other areas, such as migration. Host to some 3.5 million Syrian refugees, Turkey has already shown that it is ready to open its borders if and when things with Europe get rough.

The international community, particularly the EU and US, have an important role to play. In the run-up to the Geneva meeting, diplomatic efforts remain crucial. Since Greece and Cyprus are both EU members, Turkish Cypriots and Turkey do not view the European Union as neutral – hence its observer status. Nevertheless, this never stopped the EU from contributing creative ideas to bridge the tricky gaps between both sides in the past, and it should continue to do so. The EU would also be able to play a central role in implementing a peace deal.

Following his visit to Cyprus in March, EU High Representative Josep Borrell should double down further on diplomacy. He must reiterate to Ankara that for the EU's new ~~positive agenda~~ ~~with Turkey to bear fruit, particularly the giving of a green light to the use of the Customs Union, Ankara should be constructive.~~ A phone call from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whom Ankara takes seriously, could also be beneficial.

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But perhaps more importantly, EU leaders must ram home the message to Greek Cypriots that they need to act wisely and accept that the status quo is evaporating rapidly. While the implications of this would impact the broader region, Greek Cypriots would potentially pay the biggest price in terms of political, economic and especially security as Turkey continues to expand its influence.

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