

Cyprus Peace Talks at a Stalemate: What Hope for Reconciliation?

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*The substantial progress made in the Cyprus peace negotiations over the past 20 months risks falling short of success, as politics and grievances resurface, writes **Fadil Ersözer**. He argues that true political leadership is required from both sides to achieve a lasting solution, and that the European Union as a framework can still be an incentive in facilitating a workable federated Cyprus.*

Cyprus is home to one of the longest-running unresolved conflicts in the world. The conflict has been 'frozen' by a ceasefire since the division of the island in 1974, but without resolution of the political and territorial contestations. The UN-supported peace talks aimed at establishing a two-state federation since late 1970s have repeatedly failed, as Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot sides have interpreted concepts such as 'federalism' and 'political equality' very differently.

With the efforts of consecutive Secretaries-General and countless diplomats down the drain, George Mikes once famously stated that 'The Cypriots know that they cannot become a World Power; but they have succeeded in becoming a World Problem, which is almost as good'.

A potential game-changer could be the European Union. The Greek Cypriot-run Republic of Cyprus applied for membership in 1990 and got the answer 'conflict resolution before membership'. However, after a decade, this approach changed from a condition of EU accession to mere rhetoric, principally over the risk that Greece might have vetoed the entire eastern enlargement.

Nevertheless, the Turkish Cypriot side, whose Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is not recognised by any country except Turkey, was attracted to the prospect of EU membership. The talks gained noteworthy momentum in early 2000s. However, the Greek Cypriot government's reassurances that it would do everything possible to support the UN-sponsored reunification plan before EU accession did not materialise.

Having secured EU membership without the need to cooperate with the Turkish Cypriots, Greek Cypriots were not inclined to share power. Instead they played for time, waiting for a future deal on more beneficial terms. As a result, while Greek Cypriots celebrated EU accession in the South a week after the overwhelming 'No' vote (76 per cent) in the 2004 Annan Plan referendum on a peace deal, Turkish Cypriots, who voted in favour of the plan (65 per cent) were plunged into disappointment and continuing uncertainty.

While the EU's influence in pushing for a resolution was severely limited after accession, the Union still has a useful role in play in achieving a united Cyprus. In particular, the EU's

supranational level adds a third level of governance to the two levels of a potential federation (federal and state). Such a multilayered architecture would offer institutional flexibilities in striking a balance between the competing needs for unity and autonomy.

For example, a federal Cyprus would be a sovereign state, but its component sub-states could represent themselves at the EU level on matters on which they have competence, such as regional issues. Additionally, the EU provides a promising environment to consolidate peace after reunification, where notions of sovereignty and power-sharing can be redefined.

Sociological institutionalism suggests that identity politics and interests are subject to change in the long run through social learning and norm diffusion. This might be the answer to an unexpected crisis in the current phase of the peace talks. The Greek Cypriot parliament recently passed a law that an unofficial Greek Cypriot plebiscite from 1950 seeking union with Greece (called *enosis*) will be commemorated in schools. Turkish Cypriots were extremely critical, as they see *enosis* idea as an 'existential threat' and as the 'root cause' of the conflict.

Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı, who has said that honouring such old ideals is entirely against the 'mentality of peace-making', has refused to negotiate until the decision is overturned. Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades, who initially said that Turkish Cypriots were 'exaggerating' a ten-minute commemoration, later admitted the decision was wrong but has not sought to repeal it.

Both insist that the talks should continue, but neither is willing to step back. The current climate is not ideal, but nobody sees the process as over, yet. Perhaps the UN can find a formula to resume dialogue, as it did in December 2016 during another crisis point during the talks.

I share Akıncı's criticisms on the commemoration law. The mentality behind the commemoration vote is against peace-making and the decision is entirely wrong. It has only fed Turkish Cypriots' insecurities. After all, the law was proposed by ELAM, a far-right neo-Nazi party, which got enough support to pass it. It is also discouraging that Anastasiades has not tried to make up for opening wounds with Turkish Cypriots.

However, Akıncı's response – refusal to negotiate – is also unacceptable. This matter is neither directly related to the talks, nor the chances of agreement in the short run. If the concern is on the longer-term peace, again, I share the concern, but things get more puzzling there. It was in fact Akıncı who earlier abandoned the peace-promoting mechanisms for preparing Cypriots to live together that he championed during his electoral campaign. Instead, he focused on quickly achieving a '(comprehensive) solution in months, not in years'. The contradiction is not too different from the 'mentality' that he criticises.

Perhaps Anastasiades and his party have changed tack, with an eye to the next Greek Cypriot presidential elections set for early 2018, by not objecting to the commemoration

vote. Similarly, Akıncı might be playing for time. A breakthrough on the Cyprus issue now is against the interests of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who wants to secure nationalist votes for Turkey's upcoming referendum on a new constitution.

It is saddening that what started as 'the best chance for reunification' (and is said to be the last) has nearly come to an end. It was only in January that UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that 'We are very close to an arrangement'. The leaders seemed not only willing to achieve a solution, but determined to do so. Progress over the 20 months of negotiations has been remarkable, and described as 'unprecedented' by the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Cyprus Espen Barth Eide.

In Geneva, the two sides presented their respective maps for territorial readjustment within a united Cyprus. The international dimension of the Cyprus problem, particularly security and guarantees, has also been under discussion between Cyprus' guarantor powers – the UK, Turkey, and Greece – and the two Cypriot sides. While these big advances have reached a new high, currently that optimism now bogged down by toxic blame-games.

Currently, we are not sleepwalking to collapse of the talks, but running towards it. There is still a chance that the leaders will resume and carry the talks the last mile. However, a 'business-as-usual' optimism will not be enough. Many contentious issues remain in the talks, among them Turkey's future military presence on the island, the possibility of a rotating presidency and final territorial readjustments.

Additionally, Greek Cypriots will conduct further hydrocarbon exploration studies this year. Turkey and Turkish Cypriots are expected to follow suit. In 2014, this issue brought peace talks to a standstill.

In view of these challenges, we need a big leap forward with truly responsible and willing leaders working for a united Cyprus. If they fail, we will need to wait for 'true leaders' who are able to make peace. Perhaps the peace talks will shift away from the 'undoable' objective of a two-state federation. However, success would not only mean resolution of a decades-old frozen conflict, but also that Cyprus would become a true example of peace-making and power-sharing in a problem-ridden part of the world.

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