

Elections and the Cyprus Problem: change or continuity?

Alexandros Zachariades, a research student at LSE, gives us a briefing on the upcoming presidential elections in Cyprus...

The Republic of Cyprus (RoC) will hold its Presidential election in the coming weeks. The first round will take place on February 5, with a run-off between the two victors of the first round scheduled for February 12. The forthcoming elections will be among the most contested in the history of the RoC, with fourteen candidates vying for election.

Three candidates have emerged as frontrunners. The current leader of the polls is the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of President Anastasiades' second cabinet, Nicos Christodoulides. Christodoulides has been able to unite the three major parties of the political centre, DIKO, EDEK and DIPA, as well as parties and groupings that did not manage to enter the Cypriot Parliament. Critically, Christodoulides has also attracted a substantial amount of voters from the ruling DISY. After all, Christodoulides was a member of DISY until very recently. The other two major candidates are Averof Neofytou, the president of DISY and the former negotiator for the Cyprus Problem Ambassador Andreas Mavroyianis, who the left-wing AKEL supports.

Although the cost-of-living crisis and the state of the economy have trumped the Cyprus Problem as the most crucial issue in the minds of the public according to most polls, the Cyprus Problem remains a matter of paramount importance. A key question to be answered is whether the electoral result will signify a change from the tenure of President Nicos Anastasiades. This is a question of paramount importance, especially with regards to the Cyprus Problem. Christodoulides has been a close associate of Anastasiades since 2013. Averof headed the ruling party when Anastasiades left after assuming the presidency, while Anastasiades chose Mavroyiannis as his negotiator since 2013.

All three candidates support the bizonal and bicommunal federation as the framework for the eventual solution to the Cyprus Problem. This framework has been established as the basis of a future settlement since the 1977 and 1979 agreements between the

leaders of the two communities and has been accepted by the UN in numerous UN Security Council resolutions. However, the status of the Cyprus Problem is arguably at its worst since the establishment of the current status quo on the island following the 1974 invasion of Turkish forces in Cyprus. The forthcoming UN General Secretary's report on his good services regarding the Cyprus Problem and on the status of the UN peacekeeping force (UNFICYP) sketches a very bleak situation arguing that in neither of two sides of the Green Line there is strong willingness to pursue negotiations for a settlement.

On the one hand, the election of the hard-liner Ersin Tatar as the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community has meant that the official position of the Turkish Cypriots is that the basis of a settlement should be a two-state solution. On the other hand, President Nicos Anastasiades, despite officially never altering the official position of the Greek Cypriot side away from a bizonal bicomunal federation, has suggested other possible solutions, including a decentralised federation or a return to the constitution of 1960. These developments have led to the Cyprus Problem being farther away from a solution since the turn of the millennium.

The current situation is also in stark contrast to the summer of 2017 when the Cyprus Problem came close to a settlement during the negotiations held at Crans Montana. Since then, there was a wasted period between 2017 and 2020 when the pro-solution Mustafa Akinci was at the helm of the Turkish Cypriot community. Akinci had pressed his Greek Cypriot counterpart to sign a declaration making the Guterres framework, which the UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres proposed during the Crans Montana summit as part of the overall framework for the settlement of the dispute.^[1] There was, however, no response, and Akinci eventually lost the 2020 election against Tatar by a very narrow margin. Simultaneously, the tensions between the RoC and Turkey were further heightened by the deployment of the Turkish navy in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which essentially halted most of the hydrocarbon exploration program of the RoC. Furthermore, an informal five-party conference which included the UK, Greece and Turkey, and the two communities highlighted the stalemate in April 2021. Finally, the heightened tensions between Greece and Turkey have not aided the situation.

Solving the Cyprus Problem: The proposed action plans

Whoever emerges victorious from the presidential election will have to face an uphill

battle to get the Cyprus Problem back on track towards a negotiated settlement. Despite seemingly supporting the bizonal bicomunal federation as the basis of a future solution, Averof, Christodoulides, and Mavroyiannis have different approaches regarding the pathway towards a return to the negotiating table.

Christodoulides advocates the most hard-line approach. According to his critics, there are doubts about whether he truly supports a bizonal bicomunal federation. Out of the three parliamentary parties supporting him EDEK does not accept the bizonal bicomunal federation as the basis of the solution. Along with EDEK, other supporters of Christodoulides share EDEK's conviction, including Eleni Theocharous, a veteran right-wing politician leading *Solidarity*, a nationalist party which failed to enter the Parliament in 2021. Furthermore, DIKO, the largest party supporting Christodoulides, accepts the bizonal bicomunal federation framework but does not accept the Guterres framework as part of the solution. In short, his supporters have diverging views regarding the basis of a solution.

Christodoulides himself has also argued that the Guterres framework needs to be altered on the issue of property. He has also hinted that there are other areas where he disagrees with the framework but did not specify which. Furthermore, Christodoulides has argued that the EU needs to be mobilised through the appointment of a special envoy responsible for the Cyprus Problem by the European Council. The argument is that this will enhance the RoC's negotiating status through the EU's representative by pressuring Turkey to alter its stance on the negotiating table, given Turkey's vested interest in maintaining a close relationship with the EU. This would change the stagnant and hostile international environment in the Eastern Mediterranean, which in Christodoulides' view, is the outcome of Turkish intransigence.

Averof Neofytou, on the other side, accepts both the bizonal bicomunal federation as the basis of the solution and also accepts the Guterres framework. His stance is that the negotiations should continue from where they left off at Crans Montana. Neofytou has argued that the thorny issue related to security which is linked to the presence of Turkish troops and the security guarantees that granted rights of intervention to the three guarantor powers – the UK, Turkey and Greece – when the RoC gained its independence in 1960 can be solved by making the RoC a NATO member state. The thinking behind Neofytou's proposal is that since both Greece and Turkey are NATO members, by making the RoC a NATO member, a contingent of Turkish troops could

remain in Cyprus as part of a multi-ethnic NATO force. This would alleviate the insecurity of Turkish Cypriots, while the force having to operate within NATO's structure would restrict the capacity of Turkish troops to act unilaterally, thus, catering to Greek Cypriot insecurities.

Mavroyiannis, in some respects, takes a similar stance to Neofytou in that he also accepts the bizonal bicomunal federation and the Guterres framework. He also believes the negotiations should continue from the point they left at Crans Montana. Mavroyiannis argues that the DISY government, of which Christodoulides was a Foreign Minister and Neofytou was the head of the ruling party, lacks international respectability to deal with the Cyprus Problem. The reason, according to AKEL and Mavroyiannis lies in the fact that at the time, President Anastasiades proposed other frameworks for a solution to the problem apart from the bizonal and bicomunal federation while also entertaining the ideal of a two-state solution unofficially. Mavroyiannis argues that his career representing the RoC at the UN and the EU will allow him to begin rebuilding trust within the international community. This would be the first step.

The next step would be the operationalisation of the RoC natural gas reserves. Mavroyiannis argues that natural gas can act as a negotiating asset in two respects. Firstly, by taking the necessary steps to utilise the gas reserves at Block 12 of the RoC's EEZ for the state's internal consumption, the RoC will be able to tackle the cost of living crisis. Critically, Mavroyiannis argues that the RoC should sell Cypriot natural gas at a cost price to the Turkish Cypriot community. This would invalidate the Turkish argument that its military presence in the RoC's EEZ is there to ensure that the Turkish Cypriot stake in the island's natural gas reserves is not usurped. Secondly, Mavroyiannis argues that the RoC should alter its calculations and seek to make Turkey the primary destination for its natural gas in an effort to alter Ankara's stance on the Cyprus Problem. After all, the EastMed pipeline announced by Greece, the RoC and Israel and intended to supply the EU with Eastern Mediterranean gas has not gained any traction even though prices have been at extremely high levels due to the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, Turkey is and will be heavily reliant on natural gas in the coming decades.

However, these proposals have important issues that will determine whether they are truly feasible. In the case of Christodoulides, the proposal regarding the appointment of a special envoy appointed by the European Council is highly problematic in institutional

and political terms. Institutionally, there is no precedent in the EU's history of appointing a high-level stateswoman to mediate in a specific conflict. Additionally, there are important questions to be asked as to how this envoy would play a role in a process that, for the last 49 years, has been held under the auspices of the UN.

In political terms, it is improbable that Turkey would recognise or accept any authority by such a figure given that the RoC and Greece are EU member states and Turkey is not, thus, raising questions regarding the impartiality of the envoy. It is also highly unlikely that all of the 27 EU governments would agree to such an appointment the economic and political interests that states like Germany, Poland and France have with Turkey on a range of issues, including bilateral trade, migration and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. This became evident during the reign of Christodoulides in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when his policy of introducing EU sanctions against Turkey had minimal results.

In the case of Neofytou, there are serious complications regarding his proposed solution for the security chapters of the Cyprus Problem negotiations. First, it is implausible that Turkey will allow the RoC's accession to the alliance. It should be noted that in the past, the Anasasiades government has shied away from applying to join the Partnership for Peace, a NATO program involving non-NATO members, precisely because Turkey would veto its application. Furthermore, even if Turkey would be open to the RoC's accession in the event of a solution to the Cyprus Problem, it is also questionable whether the rest of the allies would also consent to the RoC's accession. Especially if there is no breakthrough in the Greco-Turkish dispute, bringing the RoC in could bring another source of tension within the alliance.

For Mavroyiannis, the main problem is that under the current conditions both in Turkey as well as in the TRNC it will be very difficult to restart negotiations from where they were left off at Crans Montana. On the one hand, until at least 2025, the leadership of the Turkish Cypriot community is in the hands of Ersin Tatar, who is a staunch supporter of a two-state solution. On the other hand, Turkey has taken a more assertive stance in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea since the collapse of the negotiations at Crans Montana. In this context, Turkish warships have blocked most gas exploration in the RoC's EEZ. Finally, it will take some time for infrastructure to be developed that would allow the RoC to utilise the natural gas resources in Block 12, thus, operationalising the "natural gas" card in the negotiations in the way Mavroyiannis envisages.

Conclusion

As this blog is being written, Nicos Christodoulides seems to be on the verge of electoral victory as he is expected to pass the first round and then be able to either lure the left-wing voters against Neofytou or the right-wing voters against Mavroyiannis. For either Neofytou or Mavroyiannis to stand a chance, it would take an unprecedented move by either AKEL or DISY choosing to support the candidate that will stand against Christodoulides officially. Nonetheless, even if such a scenario materialises it is doubtful whether the voters of AKEL and DISY will follow their party's orders. It would also require that the voters supporting Achilleas Demetriades and Constantinos Christofides, the two independent candidates in favour of the bizonal bicomunal federation framework, support whoever is against Christodoulides in the second round.

Finally, the electoral result is but one piece of the puzzle in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Cyprus Problem, despite its importance, is only one of several regional issues. Even if the new President is ready and willing to take bold and decisive steps towards solving the dispute, much will also depend on the outcomes of the Turkish elections and, to a lesser extent, the Greek elections. The new Parliament and President in Turkey must envisage to halt the democratic backsliding and turn Turkey towards a pro-Western direction which will elevate the importance of the Cyprus Problem in the calculus of Ankara. In the case of Greece, the government that establishes itself after the dual elections in May should be ready if the opportunity arises to work constructively towards a solution to the Cyprus Problem.

[1] The Guterres framework revolves around an oral exchange conducted between the UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres at the Crans Montana and the involved parties convention between the 30th of June and 6th of July 2017. The framework concerned the issues of territory, political equality, equivalent treatment, security and guarantees. The substance of the framework is sketched out in the UN General Secretary's report his mission of good offices in Cyprus dated 28 September 2017 available at https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2017_814.pdf See pp. 5-7.

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