

## Following a litany of failures, few will miss Cyprus' outgoing president, Dimitris Christofias.

Blog Admin

*This weekend Cyprus will elect a new president. [James Ker-Lindsay](#) writes that history will not be kind to outgoing president, Dimitris Christofias – and rightly so. Over the course of the past five years he has presided over the failure of yet another round of UN peace talks aimed at reuniting the island, oversaw the collapse of the island's economy, and was blamed for a major disaster.*



Last Sunday, Greek Cypriots went to the polls to elect a new president. (And it is only meant to be Greek Cypriots under the 1960 constitution. The Turkish Cypriots should be voting for the vice-president, but this post has been in abeyance since the 1960s.) As expected, Nicos Anastasiades, the leader of the centre-right Democratic Rally (DISY), came first; gathering 45 per cent of votes cast. It was not enough, however, to avoid a second round. This Sunday, he will face Stavros Malas – a nominally independent candidate backed by the Cypriot communist party, AKEL – in a winner takes all run off. Barring a major upset, it seems extremely likely that Anastasiades will be the next president of Cyprus.

In the meantime, the current president, Dimitris Christofias is wiling away his last few days in office. Few will miss him. Even his own party will be pleased to see him go. His record over the past five years was so bad that it refused to let him stand again.

On the Cyprus issue, Christofias could well go down as the leader who squandered the last best chance to reunite the island. When he came to power in 2008, there seemed to be an ideal alignment of political forces across the dividing line. The fact that Christofias and Mehmet Ali Talat, the then Turkish Cypriot leader, both came from the political left, and were known to be pro-solution, was seen by many as a reason for some much-needed optimism following the failed referendum to reunite the island in 2004. Unfortunately, as has been so often the case over the decades, the talks quickly became bogged down as the two sides sparred over relatively insignificant constitutional issues. Nevertheless, UN officials insist that progress was being made. The problem was that Talat faced a tough re-election battle in 2010. With little to show in terms of his domestic record, his only hope against Dervis Eroglu, a veteran hard liner on the Cyprus issue, was to show something tangible from the talks; even if it was just a joint declaration stating where convergences had been reached. However, fearful of his own hard line coalition partners, Christofias refused to co-operate. Talat lost. And the talks ground to an inevitable halt. While it is impossible to know whether a solution could have been found had Talat won – going by past performance, it was unlikely that it would have – what can nevertheless be said for certain is that, by failing to help Talat, Christofias ensured that the process failed. As a result, the division of the island, now nearing its fortieth year, has become even more entrenched.



Dimitris Christofias Credit: Mario Link  
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Christofias's failings on the Cyprus reunification talks pale into insignificance against the damage he has done to the economy of the island. There was a time when 'the Cyprus Problem' referred to the division of the island. No longer. These days, European attention is firmly focused on the serious financial difficulties Cyprus faces. Of course, it would be wrong to blame Christofias for causing the economic

crisis on the island. The fault essentially lies in the reckless way in which Cypriot banks invested in Greece. Nevertheless, Christofias's response to the situation has undoubtedly ensured that the consequences are far graver than could have been had he taken prompt action. Knowing full well that Cyprus would need an international bailout, Christofias did everything he could to delay it until after the election; and thus avoid having to take responsibility for the swingeing cuts to public services that are being demanded by international lenders. This has served to undermine confidence in the island and strain relations with key European partners. To make matters worse, the reforms being proposed are badly needed. The public sector in Cyprus has to be cut back and modernised.

His third major failing centres on events that took place on 11 July 2011, when 98 containers of ammunition and high explosive, which had been confiscated on their way to Syria, and then left in an open field at a corner of the island's main naval base, exploded killing 13 people – including the commander of Cyprus' naval forces, the commander of the base and a number of conscripts. It also destroyed the island's main power station, located next to the base. In the wake of the blast, the most serious peacetime disaster to occur on the island, Christofias appointed a well-respected lawyer to carry out an independent investigation. The resulting report laid the blame firmly on the president. Many felt Christofias would have no choice but to resign. He refused – carrying on in office as though nothing had happened. Meanwhile, the defence and foreign ministers, who both resigned in the wake of the explosion, are now on trial for manslaughter. The hope is that, once out of office, Christofias will join them.

All things considered, this has been a truly terrible presidency. History will not be kind to Dimitris Christofias. If there is perhaps one small silver lining to all of this, it is that the past five years may just have set in motion a change in Cypriot politics. Uniquely in the European Union, Cyprus has a presidential system of government. This has given the president enormous political power and moral authority. However, the traditionally high level of societal deference towards the office has undoubtedly diminished. The Mari explosion led to unprecedented scenes as protesters gathered outside the presidential palace calling on Christofias resign. Even *Phileleftheros*, the island's main newspaper, which has traditionally avoided strong criticism of the president in office, has been openly scathing. This willingness to hold the government to account is certainly welcome. But whether this is the start of a more significant trend has yet to be seen.

For the meanwhile, whoever wins the election on Sunday will face the enormous task of rebuilding the economy and, hopefully, putting the settlement talks back on track.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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