

Cyprus 'peace water' project: how it could affect Greek-Turkish relations on the island

A water pipeline between Turkey and northern Cyprus was recently completed, despite criticism from some Greek Cypriot politicians that the project would increase Turkey's influence over the north of the island. **Rebecca Bryant** writes that the project represents part of Turkey's long-term strategy to increase development in the north, preparing it for an agreement to end the division of the island, but also making it prepared to stand on its own. She argues that Greek Cypriots nevertheless carry some of the blame for Turkey's growing influence over northern Cyprus and that they should focus on developing new and urgent policies regarding the north rather than delaying engagement until after a solution is reached.



On 17 October, on a bluff overlooking the north Cyprus shore, supporters of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkish Cypriot nationalists, and the simply curious gathered to watch Turkish and Turkish Cypriot leaders inaugurate the 'project of the century.' As women who had waited too long for Erdoğan's arrival began to faint from the heat, leaders gave speeches and opened a pump, as they had done only a couple of hours earlier in the Turkish city of Anamur. This was ceremonial, however, since water was already gushing, making its way across 66.5 kilometres of sea and filling a dam in north Cyprus the size of a small city.

When Erdoğan first announced the plan more than four years ago, Turkish Cypriots looked on it sceptically. Since the 1950s, Cypriots have dreamed of bringing water from Turkey, whose Taurus Mountains in the south feed rivers that flow into the sea. Following the Greek-backed coup and subsequent Turkish military intervention that divided the island in 1974, Turkish Cypriots began again to discuss bringing water from the country that in those days they still considered their 'motherland'. But in a classic case of crying wolf, Turkish Cypriots had imagined the water for so long, and had been so often disappointed, that it took them some time to understand that when Erdoğan says a project will happen, apparently it has to happen.

This unprecedented project began in Turkey, where two villages were displaced to construct the dam that would be the source. Suspended pipes were strung over the course of more than two years, often against strong waves and currents. The countryside and many of the roads in north Cyprus have been torn apart to lay the total of 478 kilometres of pipes that will deliver the water throughout the island. It is expected that the pipes will deliver 75 million cubic metres of water every year for approximately the next fifty years. Half of this water will be for domestic and industrial use, half for agricultural use.



Cypriots quenching their thirst with the water brought in from Turkey via the newly constructed water pipeline. Credit: Rebecca Bryant

Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı declared during the inauguration that the water would make Cyprus the Green Island again, referring to its name in medieval literature. Other Turkish Cypriot politicians claimed that it would change the parameters of ongoing negotiations to reunify the island. Still others proclaimed this one-of-a-kind engineering feat

as a proof of the greatness of the Turkish nation.

All the leaders called it 'peace water', referring to Turkish claims that it may become a liquid inducement for Greek Cypriots to negotiate a settlement to reunify the divided island. In the island's south, however, right-wing Greek Cypriot politicians fumed, characterising the project as 'a third invasion', while the Republic of Cyprus foreign ministry [claimed](#) that it would 'augment Turkey's influence and control over Cyprus'.

This claim is certainly true, and it has been a source of disagreement between Turkey and Turkish Cypriots, the latter of whom have considerably mixed feelings about this generosity. On the one hand, water is a critical concern, as the [average rainfall](#) for the island as a whole is only 480 millimetres. In the north, misuse, especially as a result of tourism and a boom in holiday home construction for foreigners, has dried up certain aquifers and left parts of the central plain with trickling water supplies that have a distinctly salty taste.

There is no water conservation programme in the north, where water is normally supplied to homes only every few days but everyone has water tanks to collect it. Water delivery services drain wells in an unregulated way. Environmental groups charge that the key to solving the water problem is not flooding Cyprus with water from across the sea but rather with devising local solutions. There are also concerns about the project's potential effects on the sea as a whole – a question that has been insufficiently studied.

Figure: Location of the water pipeline from Turkey to Cyprus



Source: Republic of Turkey Government Water Works [website](#)

Turkish Cypriots, however, have been especially vocal about the project's management. While Turkish Cypriots argue that the project was part of Turkey's aid package to north Cyprus and should be used both for their benefit and profit, Turkish leaders are reluctant to put a project on which they spent 1.6 billion Turkish lira (approximately £358 million) into the hands of the municipalities and local water authority, as Turkish Cypriots are asking. Turkish Cypriots not only want to reap the financial benefits of the water but also do not want to have their autonomy impinged upon by the potential threat of cutting it off.

And here we come to the crux of the matter. Although north Cyprus is often portrayed as a province or colony of Turkey, until the arrival of the AK Party Turkish Cypriots actually had considerably more autonomy than they do now. Former Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Raif Denktaş was highly respected in Turkey and close to the Turkish military, and he could normally manipulate the latter to get his way.

After the AK Party came to power in late 2002 with a platform of Europeanisation in Turkey and, as a consequence, a solution in Cyprus, Denktaş and his military cronies were all sidelined. The checkpoints dividing the island opened in 2003, allowing Cypriots to move around the island for the first time in almost three decades, and in 2004, Cypriots voted in a referendum on a United Nations plan that would have reunited the island. They went to the polls only one week before the Republic of Cyprus would accede as an EU member state.

Although Turkish Cypriots supported that plan, Greek Cypriots resoundingly rejected it. While negotiations have continued in fits and starts since then, the Republic of Cyprus has continued a policy of isolating the north, impeding the various kinds of 'openings' that Turkish Cypriots had expected as a result of the referendum. In Greek Cypriot discourse, cooperation with any institution in the north, including its academic institutions, constitutes 'recognition by implication', meaning that although doors opened in the island, these were not doors that connected Turkish Cypriots to the world.

Instead, middle-class Turkish Cypriots saw the lives of their Greek Cypriot counterparts and asked why they could not have the same. And not long after the U.N. plan's defeat, Turkish politicians began to formulate a Plan B regarding Cyprus: Making it as strong an entity as possible. Of course, having an economically strong north Cyprus is important for any eventual reunification, as one of the main reasons Greek Cypriots voted against it in 2004 was that the poorer north would be a financial burden to them.

However, the Republic of Cyprus also does everything it can to impede that development, leaving Turkish Cypriots stuck: If they cannot develop in advance of a solution, how can they keep from being either swallowed by the Greek Cypriot majority or a financial burden to them? And if the Greek Cypriot leadership blocks that development at every turn, what choice do they have but to develop via Turkey?

In the past ten years, Turkey is a growing regional economic giant that is leaving its imprint more and more on the island's north in the name of 'development'. Global chains have arrived in the island via Turkey, while large, five-star resorts with Turkish owners now fill its coasts. Turkish Airlines now flies to hundreds of locations, and the unrecognised Ercan airport connects Cypriots to them through a short commuter flight to Istanbul.

The water project, then, is only the culmination of a longer-term plan to 'develop' the north, preparing it for a solution but also making it prepared to stand on its own. This is the Plan B: Making north Cyprus into a stronger entity so that, in the event negotiations fail yet again, the Turkish side can argue for its recognition. All of this happens, however, in a 'Turkish' way, while the water project is interpreted by many Turkish Cypriots as tying them 'from the belly' to Turkey, like an umbilical cord ties a child to its mother.

The water project is now a fact, though an untested one. The rush to complete it casts some doubt on its construction. However, if Greek Cypriot politicians are to complain that this cements Turkish occupation, they should also understand their own complicity. The effect of the 'recognition by implication' rhetoric has been like squeezing a balloon: The air is going to gather somewhere else. If Greek Cypriot leaders are serious about stopping further Turkish intervention, there need to be new and urgent policies regarding the north that do not delay all engagement until after a solution that until now has proven elusive.

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