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Cyprus -- Kypros or Kibris or both?

More than four years after the failure of the UN-sponsored Annan plan, the Greek Cypriot president, Dimitris Christofias, and Turkish Cypriot leader, Mehmet Ali Talat, are to re-open negotiations on 3 September. But in spite of their declared aim to agree a bi-zonal federation by spring 2009, the political crisis in Turkey may undermine their efforts to reunify their common homeland

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Visitors to Cyprus are bombarded all the way from the airport at Larnaca with leaflets and posters encouraging them to move to the island -- Welcome to Cyprus! -- and to buy a home in the sun, as if the only problem were to persuade foreigners to invest in property. But that isn't the only problem. When they reach Nicosia their mobile phones make it clear that Turkcell controls the airwaves here, giving a stronger signal: Welcome to Turkey!

The problem of Cyprus has been a problem for the world since the 1950s, and for Europe since 2004, when the Republic of Cyprus joined the European Union. The republic's writ doesn't run in the northern part of the island, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) established in 1974.

Turkey, which has 40,000 troops stationed in the TRNC, is the only country to recognise this international legal curiosity. The UN and Greek Cypriots regard it as occupied territory and it is outside EU jurisdiction. This does not prevent Turkish Cypriots from enjoying all the rights of EU citizens, including freedom of movement in the 27 states of the Union, provided they have Republic of Cyprus passports, which most do.

Cyprus is the most complex, extraordinary and intractable problem in the EU -- but there is hope. This spring, the border crossing on Ledra Street in the very heart of Nicosia was opened to pedestrians. They can now move directly between the Greek and Turkish parts of the old walled city and 110,000 did so in the first month. The formalities are minimal: a form to be filled on the Turkish side, and questions about meat imports on the Greek side.

This has advantages for both sides. Turkish shops now display their prices in euros, the Greek branch of Debenhams employs Turkish-speaking staff, and shoppers have a symbolic promise of good times in their pockets: the Republic of Cyprus joined the euro zone in January, European currency is accepted everywhere and new coins carry the country's name in both languages, "Kypros" and "Kibris", the first Turkish word to appear in the euro zone.

A green line

Ledra Street is where the division began 35 years ago, when a British officer drew a green line through the middle of Nicosia after clashes between Greek and Turkish Cypriots in 1963. The following year UN troops were called in, and the demarcation line was extended right across the island after the Turkish invasion in 1974. The problem has defeated five presidents of the Republic of Cyprus and five UN secretary generals.

Progress on Ledra Street is a direct result of the defeat of the former president of the Republic of Cyprus, Tassos Papadopoulos, in the elections in February. He was mostly responsible for the Greek Cypriots' rejection of the peace plan proposed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2004¹. He persuaded them that time was on their side and that they would be able to exert more pressure on Turkey once Cyprus joined the EU. The decisive reason for Papadopoulos's defeat was that most Greek Cypriots realised that he was wrong: time was working against reunification. So, this time, two-thirds of them voted in the first round for Ioannis Kasoulides and Demetris Christofias, who promised to reopen negotiations with the Turkish side. And in the second round they elected Christofias, a leftwinger and a patriotic Cypriot, not a covert Greek nationalist.

The left in Cyprus was always dominated by traditional communists, even under British colonial rule. But despite its impressive Marxist–Leninist rhetoric, the leading Progressive Party of the Working People (AKEL) was a Mediterranean variety of Labour Party, based on strong trade unions and farmers' cooperatives². The communists appealed to both sides and many Turkish Cypriots were party members. The Republican Turkish Party (CTP), to which the president and head of government in the north belong, was affiliated to AKEL for many years, the party leaders were good comrades, and AKEL is still trusted by many in the north.

Christofias represents another break with the past in that AKEL did not play an active part in the civil war started by the Greek Cypriots in 1963, whereas Papadopoulos had a bad reputation as a former leader in the campaign for unification with Greece (Enosis) and as an organiser of illegal Greek militias.

Papadopoulos and Christofias represent two opposing visions for the future of the Republic of Cyprus: Papadopoulos wants a sort of second Greek state with some rights for the Turkish Cypriot minority; Christofias has a Cypriot vision of a federation of two states with equal rights.

First apology

So observers were surprised and leftwing Turkish Cypriots were shocked when they joined forces in the 2003 elections and Christofias helped Papadopoulos to win. When Christofias stood against Papadopoulos five years later, many saw it as a belated confession that he had made a mistake in 2003 that had sealed the fate of the Annan plan. On taking office, Christofias apologised, the first president of Cyprus to do so, for the crimes against Turkish Cypriots committed 35 years before.

Ferdi Sabit Soyer, prime minister of the TRNC and head of a government based on president Mehmet Ali Talat's Republican Turkish Party (CTP), has no doubt about the new president's good intentions, but he does not think he will be able to get the Greek Cypriots to accept a "realistic solution". As he says,

Christofias is still harbouring in his government representatives of the no camp, committed to the Papadopoulos line³.

Soyer is right. But it is ironic that he should point out that Christofias is saddled with enemies of compromise. The enormous desk in Soyer's office is flanked by the TRNC and Turkish flags and there is a portrait of Kemal Ataturk on the wall. The Turkish Cypriot government has a political partner that it cannot influence or defeat in elections: Turkey is a guarantor power of the Republic of Cyprus with internationally disputed rights of intervention, but the real power in the north is the Turkish army, which also controls the police, the fire brigade, and the intelligence service. The Turkish Cypriots are right to call the prime minister "pasha". The pasha was the sultan's representative under the Ottoman empire.

The Turkish army will be an unseen presence in the negotiations between Christofias and Talat scheduled to start in September. The general staff in Ankara regard the problem of Cyprus as a national issue on which they must have the last word. This was made very clear to the president of the TRNC when he tried to open the Ledra Street crossing in January 2007 without permission from the Turkish army. He was summoned to Ankara and lectured by the chief of the general staff, General Mehmet Yasar Büyükanit, on the limits of TRNC "sovereignty".

The good relations between the TRNC government and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government in Ankara are a source of concern to the military. The current power struggle between the Kemalist camp and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey also creates problems for Talat and Soyer. The army was behind the move of the Constitutional Court to have the AKP banned, and though the ban was averted, the power game in Ankara is far from over (see "Turkey's coup that never happened").

Army scepticism

The generals, unlike Erdogan, were always sceptical about the Annan plan because they knew it would mean withdrawing all their troops from northern Cyprus. The commanders of the navy, air force and police even planned a coup to stop the negotiations, but the chief of the general staff, General Hilmi Özkök, would not allow it because it would end Turkey's prospect of joining the EU⁴.

The military authorities in Ankara are still resolutely opposed to any solution to the problem of Cyprus because it would entail the withdrawal of Turkish troops. After Talat and Christofias announced new talks beginning 3 September, General Büyükanit declared his anxiety about the talks and warned the Turkish Cypriots on the need for caution. So Talat needs to be careful about what he says regarding the current conflict in Ankara⁵. Asked whether he might ask for some Turkish troops to be withdrawn, as a gesture of goodwill to the Greek Cypriots, he referred to an article in the constitution confirming that the Turkish army is responsible for security in the TRNC, omitting to mention that, before he took office, he and his party wanted the article repealed.

The question now is whether the Annan plan will be the basis for the forthcoming negotiations. And if not, what is to replace it? Christofias thinks the plan is dead. Talat thinks not. Officially, both have stated that they are prepared to negotiate on the basis of any "relevant" UN plan, including the

Annan plan but not precluding others.

Things have changed. Under the Annan plan, land belonging to Greek Cypriots in the north was to be returned or compensation had to be paid. But building permits have been issued since and most of the land has been snapped up by Turkish and British investors who have sold thousands of "homes in the sun" to foreign buyers. Talat admits this but says the Greeks knew what they were doing when they rejected the plan. This is not a good start.

For many Greek Cypriots, property is the key issue. They rejected the Annan plan and they are not about to accept an even less satisfactory solution. Some Turkish Cypriots feel betrayed. Ali Erel, chairman of the Cyprus EU Association in the north, is critical. He notes that Turkish companies funded by the Development Bank in Ankara are responsible for most of the investments in Greek land, "non-solution investments" as he calls them because the companies concerned do not want the problem of Cyprus to be solved.

Businessman Serdar Atai notes that "the so-called economic miracle and the sudden rise in per capita income in the north which the politicians are very proud of is merely the outcome of multiple exploitation of Greek Cypriot property". On the Soyer government's promise to pay compensation for Greek property out of the state budget in the event of unification, he said: "They steal the undeserved wealth and everybody in the community will be obliged to pay"⁶.

Greek land is not the only point on which the Turkish side rejects the Annan plan. It is claimed in Nicosia that the Turkish side has no intention of accepting the proposal that it give up Morphou, where there has been massive investment since 2004.

What form of state?

The main issue is what form the "united republic of Cyprus" should take. Ankara, in accordance with the Turkish National Security Council (MGK) decision of 24 April, confirmed by the Turkish prime minister during a visit to northern Cyprus on 20 July, is calling for a solution "based on the realities of life on the island and the de facto existence of two separate peoples and two republics": a confederation of two states with separate rights of self-determination. The Annan plan proposes a federal republic of Cyprus: a common federal state with two equal components.

For the Greek Cypriots, the EU and the UN, there is a big difference. A confederation is a structure which any member state can dissolve at any time, whereas a federation is a state like the Republic of Cyprus established in 1960, in which the component parts have certain powers but the state itself has permanent and unitary sovereignty. The communiqué signed by Christofias and Talat on 1 July said the presidents had "discussed unitary sovereignty and citizenship and had agreed in principle". The nationalist parties in the north immediately called on Talat to resign and the newspaper *Volkan*, which is controlled by the Turkish intelligence service, accused him of abuse of power and treason.

Another issue is continuity with the Republic of Cyprus, which is still a recognised entity under international law despite the 1974 partition. The Greek Cypriots insist that it should continue to exist, so that the proposed federation would be in a sense the second Republic of Cyprus, an idea that the foreign

minister, Markos Kyprianou, finds acceptable⁷. But Ankara insists that Turkey must continue to be the guarantor of the united republic of Cyprus. This would be unthinkable for the Greek Cypriots and would put the EU in an absurd position: the guarantors of an EU member state would be a state which is barred from EU membership for the foreseeable future because of a democratic deficit and an army which is a law unto itself.

The Turkish Cypriots' room for manoeuvre with Ankara is crucial to the success of the forthcoming negotiations. The important issues can be settled only if Talat takes a firm line against the excessive demands of the military and Kemalist extremists. Christofias can subscribe to the painful concessions that a settlement would entail for the Greek Cypriots only if the concessions benefit Turkish Cypriots, not the Turkish army.

Even if a solution were reached, who could guarantee that the Turkish generals really would withdraw their troops from a reunified Cyprus? Certainly not the AKP government in Ankara. Mehmet Ali Talat said: "It would be impossible. It would be the first time ever that an army refused to implement a political agreement." It sounds plausible. But so does the rejoinder: if there is any military anywhere in the world who might dare to, it is the Kemalist generals.

So the solution to the problem depends more than ever on the situation in Turkey. If the Kemalist camp continues its fight with the AKP, Ankara could be heading for a crisis that might end all hope of Turkish accession. Membership of the EU is the main incentive for Turkish politicians to accept a solution in Cyprus. And if there were no longer any possibility of Turkey joining the EU, there would be no hope for Cyprus, at the moment when for the first time in years all the conditions for achieving a solution are about to be met.

A solution would help solve many other problems in the island, on both sides. The future of all Cypriots depends on tourism, which has been in crisis for years in the north and south. Water is already in very short supply and if this worsens because of climate change, it will be impossible to sell those homes in the sun. Since June, southern Cyprus has depended on water delivered by tanker from Greece, which costs much more than it would if it came from Turkey. There are plans to run a pipeline from Anatolia, where there is plenty of water, but work can start only when the problem of Cyprus has been solved and the new federation has established normal relations with Turkey.

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¹ The UN Secretary General proposed a federation of the two states in Cyprus, which would join the EU together. See Niels Kadritzke, "Cyprus: saying no to the future", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, May 2004.

² Talat's leftwing CTP used to be regarded as AKEL's alter ego in the north.

³ Christofias had to promise ministerial posts to two "no" parties in order to beat the conservative DISY candidate in the second round.

⁴ The naval forces commander, Admiral Özden Örnek, recorded details of the conspiracy in his diary. See *Today's Zaman*, Istanbul, 3 July 2008.

⁵ In an interview with the Greek Cypriot newspaper *Politis* on 15 July, Talat said he hoped democracy would prevail in Ankara and that there would be no complications to prevent a solution of the problem.

⁶ Serdar Ataç, "Count me out: refusing to be a member of this looter's club", Friends of Cyprus Report no. 50, London, 2008.

⁷ Interview with Kyprianou, Nicosia, 22 May 2008.

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