

CYPRUS

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Best Chance, Last Chance

A rare alignment of forces has created what may be the best opportunity yet for a reunification of Cyprus and a solution to the conflict. But the negotiations that started in September last year are progressing slowly. To some, that is simply because breaking a thirty-five year old deadlock cannot be easy. To others, it means this attempt, like so many previous ones, is bound to fail.

tHE PRESIDENTS OF GREEK AND TURKISH Cyprus are close ideologically, and their personal friendship goes back decades. President Mehmet Ali Talat and his Greek Cypriot counterpart, Demetris Christofias, are the main driving forces in the negotiations. When Christofias was elected president in February last year, it was the beginning of the first period since Cyprus was divided in 1974 with pro-solution leaders in power on both sides.

The parties are privately aiming for an agreement before the end of the year, although the Greek Cypriot side in particular – the Republic of Cyprus, which is the only internationally recognised government on the island – insists there is no negotiating deadline.

Parallel referenda on an agreement would take place before the presidential election in the Turkish Republic of North

Cyprus next April, which polls suggest Talat is likely to lose.

In 2004, both Republic of Cyprus president Tassos Papadopoulos and Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş came out against the United Nations Plan, brokered by its then Secretary-General Kofi Annan, which would have reunified north and south in a new federation.

The plan was accepted by Turkish Cypriot voters but rejected by Greek Cypriots. Shortly afterwards, Cyprus joined the European Union as a divided island. The international isolation of north Cyprus has mostly continued, and Turkey still keeps around thirty thousand soldiers there.

IMPATIENT

In today's conducive environment, the EU and NATO are both impatient to see an end to the Cyprus conflict. The Republic of Cyprus is exploiting its position in the EU, and Turkey its status in NATO, to create obstacles for the other, obstructing the operation of both organisations and their cooperation.

Another critical element is Turkey's role. In 2004, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan supported the Annan Plan. Today, he is clear in his backing for Talat. After the nationalist National Unity Party defeated Talat's party in parliamentary elections last April, Erdogan openly warned that no one should get in the way of the reunification talks.

Turkey's position is one reason why the nationalists' taking over the government has not affected the negotiations notably, although it has added a sense of urgency: if National Unity Party leader Dervis Eroglu should become president next year, any unfinished negotiations would most likely fizzle out.

However, there is also urgency related to Turkey's position itself: the country's EU application is up for evaluation in December. Should membership seem even more distant after that, Ankara could turn less supportive of the talks in Nicosia.

UNRESOLVED

In August, after forty meetings, presidents Christofias and Talat finally completed their first round of talks, covering six areas: governance and power sharing, EU matters, security and guarantees, territory, property, and economic issues.

A second round, reviewing the talks so far, began in September, when the presidents also agreed to speed things up and meet twice weekly. In a third and last phase, all the unresolved issues will be put on the table for a give-and-take session.

The talks are bilateral; the UN is limiting its role to easing contacts, while the EU, which the Turkish Cypriots see as partisan, is mostly absent. For the last phase, the Turkish Cypriots want the UN to step in as mediator, but the Greek Cypriots favour a solution 'by Cypriots, for Cypriots'.

Just how much remains unresolved is not clear, but it is well known that some issues are more difficult than others. The big stumbling blocks are security, property and government.

The main security question is the Turkish military presence. Greek Cypriots see the soldiers as a serious threat, and insist that they must all leave, and soon. The Turkish Cypriots want some to stay, and they also want to keep the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee, in which Cyprus, Greece, Britain and Turkey guaranteed the independence, territorial integrity and security of the island and which Turkey cited when invading in 1974.

The property issue affects most Cypriots personally. A third of the population was internally displaced in 1974 and earlier. Most properties in the north belong to displaced Greek Cypriots. There must be agreement on how many would be able to reclaim control over their properties, and how loss should be compensated.

As for government, there is agreement that the aim is a 'bizonal, bi-communal federation with political equality', but details still need to be hammered out. The Turkish Cypriots make up only a fifth of the population; they worry about being overrun and do not want to give up too much autonomy. The Greek Cypriots on the other hand want a strong federal center, and little in terms of group rights and guarantees.

CUT AND LEAVE

A reunification deal would also have to be accepted by the two communities. Although polls suggest that Turkish Cypriots are not as enthusiastic about reunification as they were in 2004, they can probably still be expected to vote 'yes'. The Greek Cypriot view looks less certain.

Life in the south is comfortable, and reunification would bring new uncertainty. But there are important incentives for a Greek Cypriot 'yes': reunification could spark new economic growth; thousands of Greek Cypriots would get their properties back; the Turkish military would – mostly – withdraw; and the relationship with Turkey could evolve from hostile to cooperative.

Papadopoulos's emotional recommendation against the Annan Plan in 2004 secured the Greek Cypriot 'no'. A similar turnabout is unlikely this time: in the words of UN special envoy Alexander Downer, Cyprus has 'two leaders who are very committed to a successful outcome'.

Meanwhile, international diplomats are eager to communicate to the communities – above all the Greek Cypriots – that they must be prepared to live with the consequences of their choice.

For one thing, another failure could entail the beginning of the end of the UN's longest-running peacekeeping mission, which Greek Cypriots see as critical for their security. In May, when the Security Council debated an extension of its mandate, some countries questioned the rationale for the mission, should the negotiations fail.

'The parties cannot count on being able to try again, and again, as if they have all the time in the world. If there is no solution, things will not go on the same way', said one senior international diplomat close to the negotiations. The best chance yet for a reunification deal may also be the last chance.

