

INTERVIEW WITH DEMETRIS CHRISTOFIAS*

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*Demetris Christofias is the President of the Republic of Cyprus.

** Editorial note: Turkey does not recognize the "Republic of Cyprus".

The Republic of Cyprus will soon take over the Presidency of the EU in a rather critical moment for the latter (e.g, trying to effectively address the current economic crisis etc). Could you please identify the top priorities and goals of your upcoming Presidency? Should we hold high expectations?



The Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union will contribute everything within its power in the quest “For a Better Europe” for its citizens and neighbors. A Europe of social cohesion, prosperity, security and development. We will work tirelessly and to the extent of our powers during the six months of the Cyprus Presidency to promote within the European Council any initiative that will advance the objective of a socially cohesive and effective Union, one with more visible benefits for the welfare of European citizens.

The issues expected to top the agenda of the Cyprus Presidency include efforts to end the current economic crisis, as well as the completion of negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework, the Common European Asylum System and the Common Agricultural Policy. Furthermore, as an island nation, Cyprus will focus on revitalizing the Integrated Maritime Policy of the Union. We will also promote the accession negotiations of Iceland and the European prospects of the Western Balkans.

Additionally, with recent developments in neighboring countries in North Africa and the Middle East, the Cyprus Presidency will seek to bring Europe closer to its southern neighbors.

The Republic of Cyprus has been an EU member state since 2004. How did this affect the daily life of the average citizen?

As a small country, we have limited our priorities to what we can realistically achieve. It should be noted, however, that on several occasions small states have been effective mediators between the different and conflicting interests of larger EU member states, thus serving a successful presidency.

We should note that we will not use our position as Presidency of the Council for the promotion of national positions, as is being claimed in Turkey. Quite the opposite, in exercising the Presidency, we will be representing the European Union as a whole and not just Cyprus. We will implement the decisions of the EU in relation to the candidate countries, including Turkey, with objectivity and neutrality, as proponents of the Council's common positions. We hope that Ankara will respond in good faith and understand our sincere intentions.

The benefits for Cyprus derived and accrued both through the accession process and as a result of integration, contributing to the effort to modernize its institutions and society for prosperity and sustainable economic development. At the same time, we gained the right to equal participation in European affairs. For a small island state, the inclusion in such a family provides security.

It should be noted that the Turkish Cypriots, on account of their Cypriot citizenship, are citizens of the European Union. To be able to enjoy the benefits of Cyprus' accession, the Turkish Cypriot community as a whole should prioritize ending the *de facto* division of Cyprus so that the *acquis communautaire*, presently suspended due to illegal occupation, can be applied throughout the island. This can only be done with a solution that will bring about reunification.

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How can the Greek Cypriots deal with the current economic crisis (particularly if the natural gas option does not materialize or until the revenues from natural gas are received)?

Unfortunately, the global economic crisis evolves constantly, bringing about twists and unexpected results in a globalized environment in which one country can greatly affect another.

A classic example of this is the exposure of Greek Cypriot banks to Greek loans and bonds, which is the main problem facing the Cypriot economy. But our Government has taken significant corrective measures to address structural problems and distortions within the Cypriot economy that have accumulated over

decades. These measures have been well received by the European Union. At the same time, we have taken steps to boost growth in key sectors of the economy, while supporting the welfare state and those among the population who need its care.

We are proceeding resolutely on the issue of exploitation of gas fields that have been discovered within the demarcations of the Exclusive Economic Zone of the Republic of Cyprus and will continue efforts to locate further deposits, endeavors that have always been based on international law, most notably the Law of the Sea.

We are taking measures to boost the economy while remaining mindful about their social implications. We place special emphasis on tackling unemployment, particularly among young people.

Many people (in Cyprus, Turkey and Greece) had high expectations about the resolution of the Cyprus problem during your negotiations with Mr Talat. What went wrong?

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In the joint statements issued with Mehmet Ali Talat on 23 May and 1 July 2008, we agreed to reach a solution that would be a bizonal, bicomunal federation with political equality, as defined in the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, for a state with a single sovereignty, a single citizenship and a single international personality.

This is the basis for a solution that complies fully with the UN resolutions.

On this basis we worked together with Mr Talat within the framework of direct negotiations for nearly eighteen months. These yielded results, and progress was made in some core aspects of the Cyprus problem, but it is true that there were several problems and disagreements that prevented us from making as much progress as we had been expecting.

Unfortunately, Mr Eroğlu's attitude at the negotiating table has not allowed for further progress. He has continually reneged on agreements reached with Mr Talat and breached commitments that had been undertaken.

Upon the assumption of the Turkish Cypriot leadership by Mr Eroğlu, the UN Secretary-General asked us directly if we accept to continue from the point we

left off with Mr Talat in 2010. We responded, accepting the agreements and undertaking to continue the talks. Mr Eroğlu also committed himself to this, but for two years now, the Turkish Cypriot side has backtracked significantly on various convergences between the two sides on issues such as sovereignty, the executive, and on the implementation of the Four Freedoms after a transitional period, as well as on the FIR (Flight Information Region) issue. All of these were agreed with Mr Talat, before Mr Eroğlu made “new proposals,” “dragging” the negotiation process backwards.

Unfortunately our efforts to achieve a solution come up against the negativity of the Turkish side, which breaches the agreements between the two sides. At the same time Turkey is not only continuing but intensifying its provocations and threats against Cyprus by promoting its so-called “Plan B” for upgrading the occupied areas, which, as you can understand, does nothing but contribute to a solution of the Cyprus problem.

It is widely believed in Turkey that the Greek Cypriots simply have no incentive to compromise towards reaching a solution with the Turkish Cypriot leadership, because they already have the upper hand as an EU member state. Can you explain what incentive the Greek Cypriots and their administration still have to reach a solution?

The illegal occupation by Turkey of a significant territory of the Republic is causing several problems and will involve many risks for the present and future of this country and its people. We know very well that the status quo is not a solution. The Cyprus problem must be solved, the occupation and colonization by settlers must end, and Cyprus must be reunified as a bizonal, bicomunal federation. To this end, we have worked intensively and with devotion towards a principled settlement of the Cyprus problem and will continue to do so. We are driven by the need to put an end to this uneven and potentially dangerous situation. Besides, our undertakings and policy so far are the best evidence of our will to achieve a solution, as is recognized by every objective observer internationally.

The reunification of Cyprus is not only my vision of life, but a desire of the whole of the people of Cyprus. It can be done, provided that everyone involved works in this direction.

Are you considering a formula through which revenues from the potential natural gas production would be shared with Turkish Cypriots? For example did you consider reserving a portion of the revenues for a prospective Turkish federated state of a federal Cyprus?

The discovery and extraction of hydrocarbons would be a strong incentive to Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots to reach a solution of the Cyprus problem sooner. Subsequently the two communities together can enjoy the wealth that nature has given our homeland. I said in my speech to the UN General Assembly last year that the Turkish Cypriots will benefit from the fruits of discovery and exploitation of hydrocarbons. Turkey can also benefit from the exploitation of the deposits. However, the Cyprus problem must first be solved to enable the development of partnerships and synergies for the benefit of all involved and the whole region.

Do you think that the bi-communal reconciliation initiatives organized by NGOs, academic institutions, international organizations, and foreign governments have been useful in helping people of the Island deal with past traumas and be able to conceive a life together in the future?

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We attach great importance to the rapprochement of the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. As you know, I come from a political and ideological position that prioritizes rapprochement and cooperation between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. Rapprochement is a necessary condition to lead to the solution and ensure the sustainability of the solution. That is why, for decades now, I personally have been working

towards rapprochement and building the necessary trust between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. Of course, the rapprochement between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots can not by itself solve the Cyprus problem, but can give impetus to a solution. The solution, as I explained earlier, requires the cooperation of all stakeholders towards the implementation of UN resolutions on Cyprus, and necessitates the restoration of human rights and fundamental freedoms of all the people, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots.

I therefore think that rapprochement events and trust building initiatives between the two Cypriot communities are important for reaching a solution as long as they serve and support this prospect.

How can reunification talks be injected with momentum?

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Cyprus Presidency is independent of the efforts aimed at the settlement of the Cyprus problem and the reunification of the country and our people.

It is up to the Turkish side to respond with good will and tangible deeds. We call upon the Turkish Cypriot leader to prove with actions, not words, that he is working towards the reunification of Cyprus and the bridging of the distance between the two sides, instead of widening this gap with counterproductive proposals and positions.

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We call upon Turkey to end its provocative and aggressive behavior and its threats to promote a so-called "Plan B" for upgrading the occupied areas. We also call upon her to respect the UN resolutions on Cyprus. We urge her to respond positively to the initiatives by the Republic of Cyprus, which are also to the benefit of Turkey.

We reiterate our 2010 proposal for the return of Famagusta to its lawful inhabitants under the administration of the United Nations on the basis of United Nations Security Council Resolution 550 of 1984. In parallel our proposal includes the opening and use of the city's port by the Turkish Cypriots under the supervision of the European Union, which would create jobs and wider prospects for the Turkish Cypriot community. The restoration of the town of Varosha for the return of legal inhabitants will not only benefit the Greek Cypriot community, but will also strengthen the viability of the port. The implementation of this proposal will greatly enhance the negotiations, cultivating trust between the two communities. Turkey can also gain by implementing this proposal, as what we are proposing includes the prospect of unblocking chapters in its accession negotiations with the EU.

I wish to thank the Turkish Policy Quarterly and its editorial board for this opportunity to briefly relay our positions on the upcoming Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union as well as the Cyprus problem. Allow me to wish TPQ and all members of its staff the very best.