

TURKEY, CYPRUS AND THE TURKISH CYPRIOT POLITICAL PARTIES: THE EPHEMERAL CATALYST OF EU?

The article investigates Turkey's impact on the Turkish Cypriot political parties before, during and after the Annan Plan referenda. It is argued that before the referenda on the "Annan Plan", a variety of reasons (the most important being the strong prospects for Turkey's EU candidacy) led Ankara to support a compromising solution to the Cyprus issue. In contrast, in the post-Annan era, the slower pace of Turkey's EU integration as well as the staggering negotiations on the Cyprus issue have not allowed for an equally decisive role of Ankara in Turkish Cypriot political parties

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The Cyprus issue, the long-standing dispute between the Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot communities of the Mediterranean island, is an important dimension of Turkish foreign policy, and has been since the start of the problem. Ankara has maintained strong economic, political, social and cultural links with the Turkish Cypriots, providing assistance in financial, diplomatic, military and political terms. In this context, Turkish policies, especially those related to the Cyprus issue, have affected the Turkish Cypriot domestic scene. For years, successive Turkish governments supported Turkish Cypriot claims for territorial and political independence. This attitude, however, was not helpful for Greek and Turkish Cypriots reaching compromise and solving the problem.¹ Instead, this stance of Ankara aided the success of Turkish Cypriot political elites with rather inflexible positions towards the Cyprus problem, such as the Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş and his National Unity Party (*Ulusal Birlik Partisi-UBP*) that dominated Turkish Cypriot politics until recently. However, the dawn of the new millennium saw a shift in Turkish policy towards the Cyprus issue, which also impacted the Turkish Cypriot political scene in a very interesting way. For this to happen, the EU played a catalytic role.

The Pre-Annan Era: The Emergence of a Catalyst

In late 1990s, the new dynamics created by Turkey's candidacy for EU membership profoundly affected Ankara's policy towards Cyprus. The European Council Summit in Helsinki 1999² recognized Turkey as a candidate for EU membership. However, according to the Presidency conclusions, the criteria for Turkey's accession into the EU included the contribution of the Turkish government to the resolution of the Cyprus problem. This linkage between the Cyprus issue and Turkey's EU prospects (combined with in the transformation of the Turkish government) evoked a highly flexible Turkish policy towards Cyprus and, ultimately, the support of the "Annan Plan", the UN-constructed plan for the reunification of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots under a federal state, first presented in November 2002. Consequently, this new Turkish policy also had an impact on Turkish Cypriot party competition and contributed to one of the most striking election results (parliamentary elections in December 2003, and presidential elections in April 2005) in Turkish Cypriot history.

After its recognition as a candidate for full EU membership (1999), Turkey refrained from acknowledging the links between her EU path and the Cyprus issue. In reaction to the outcome of the Helsinki Summit, the then-Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit stated that "there is no need for our Turkish Cypriot brothers to feel

¹ Işıl Kazan "Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean, Seen from Turkey", *The European Union and the Cyprus Conflict: Modern Conflict, Postmodern Union* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

² European Council, "Presidency Conclusions", European Council on 10-11 December, Helsinki.

the smallest concern; existence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is inevitable not only for Turkish Cypriots, but also for Turkey's security".³ This statement was indicative of Ankara's inflexible stance, which continued to support the existence of the Turkish Cypriots within a separate state. This position contradicted the framework of the international community's efforts for a solution of the Cyprus problem based on a federative formula. Turkey continued this policy in the following years. Even after the start of fresh negotiations on the Cyprus issue between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots in 2002, the Deputy Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz renewed Turkish support to Rauf Denктаş and reconfirmed Ankara's position that "there exist two different nations and two sovereign states in the island." At the same time, Yılmaz was keen to underline that Turkey's EU membership could not be associated to a settlement of the Cyprus Problem.⁴

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Nevertheless, sweeping changes in Turkey's political mosaic deeply affected Ankara's position towards the long-standing dispute in Cyprus and, therefore, in Turkish Cypriot politics. In late 2002, the Prime Minister of AKP (Justice and Development Party), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, won the Turkish legislative elections by a landslide victory and soon changed Ankara's policy towards the Mediterranean island. The new government clearly favored the reunification of Cyprus based on the Annan Plan that was under negotiations during that period. For this change of policy, a series of factors played a crucial role. The EU constitutes a recurring aspect of these incentives that led Turkey to support this type of solution and the Annan Plan.

First of all, Cyprus' ongoing EU accession process played an important role in Turkey's policy shift. The way Cyprus' EU accession would take place was thought to have an important impact on Turkey's interests. Cyprus' accession process had commenced in 1998 and, according to the decisions taken at the European Council Summit in Corfu 1994⁵, the country was set to be included in the next round of

³ "Ecevit addresses TGNA on EU decisions", *Anatolia Agency*. 14 December 1999, <http://www.hri.org/news/cyprus/tcpr/1999/99-12-15.tcpr.html#01>.

⁴ "Extract on Cyprus from an exclusive interview with Mesut Yılmaz in Turkish Daily News", *Turkish Daily News*. 28 and 29 March 2002, <http://www.hri.org/news/cyprus/tcpr/2002/02-03-29.tcpr.html#06>.

⁵ European Council, "Presidency Conclusions", European Council on 24-25 June, Corfu.

EU enlargement, regardless of achievement of a solution to the bi-communal dispute. Practically, this meant that Cyprus would accede in the administrative face of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), the failed partnership state that was established in 1960 and was now monopolized by the Greek Cypriots, but continued to be the only internationally recognized administration of the island. The full inclusion of the Turkish Cypriot part would be conditional on the resolution of the Cyprus problem and the emergence of a new bi-communal state, which would replace the RoC in the process of EU integration.

In this context, a possible accession of Cyprus in the absence of reunification was a highly risky option for the Turkish government. This development would have offered Greek Cypriots the opportunity to use their bargaining power within EU organs to push the candidate Turkey towards more concessions.⁶ Indeed, after the failure of reunification under the Annan Plan and the admission of a Greek Cypriot-controlled RoC to the EU in 2004, Greek Cypriots have opportunely used

"In the post-Annan era, the process of resolving the Cyprus issue has lost its momentum."

their EU membership status to push for Turkish compromises on the Cyprus issue.⁷ On the other hand, the entry of a united Cyprus would have been very beneficial for Ankara itself: firstly, Turkey would have an "insider" (Turkish Cypriots) within the EU to promote its interests and secondly, the accession of Cyprus with the Turkish Cypriots would have meant the admission of a solid Muslim group (one of the biggest

taboos with regards to Turkey's accession) into the EU. This could have paved the way for Turkey to follow into the EU more easily.⁸

In addition, domestic Turkish politics was another contributing factor for Ankara to alter her Cyprus policy. The AKP had won the absolute majority of the Turkish Parliament, the first party to do so in the span of a decade. That achievement offered the government extended legitimization to pursue radical policy changes, including those related to the Cyprus issue.⁹ Besides, the considerable amount

⁶ Semin Suvarierol, "The Cyprus Obstacle on Turkey's Road to Membership in the European Union", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 66.

⁷ "Cyprus threatens to veto Turkey talks", *Euractiv*, <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/cyprus-threatens-veto-turkey-talks/article-160171>, 1 December 2006; "Greek Cypriots may block more chapters in Turkey's EU negotiations", *Hürriyet*, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/world/10570510.asp>, 13 June 2010.

⁸ F. Stephen Laraabee, "The EU Needs to Rethink its Cyprus Policy", *Survival*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1998), p.7. Despite that the Turkish Cypriot society has grown largely secular, it can be argued that their admission to the EU would have played an important symbolic role and would have helped Turkey with regards to the religious-related arguments against her accession.

⁹ Ayşe Aslihan Çelenk, "The Restructuring of Turkey's Policy towards Cyprus: The Justice and Development Party's Struggle for Power", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.8 No. 3 (2007), p. 350.

of skepticism about the AKP's possible Islamic agenda led Erdoğan to prioritize the Cyprus settlement over other matters of Turkish foreign policy, in order to gain international support and, through that, fortify his domestic position.¹⁰ Finally, the government enjoyed important public support for its agenda on Cyprus, given that people favored compromises on the condition that they would open the way towards Turkey's EU membership.¹¹ Indeed, the AKP government managed to shift Turkey's position on the Cyprus problem, one of the "totemic" issues of Turkish foreign policy.

Last but not least, Turkey's relations with Greece also played a key role for Ankara's new and more flexible approach towards the dispute in Cyprus. By the late 1990s, the two neighboring countries maintained very good relations, as a result of a diverse set of reasons. The then-socialist Greek government of Costas Simitis pursued a political program which, in foreign matters, aimed at the integration of the country's neighbors into the EU, something which presupposed reconciliation with Turkey.¹² As a result, a pack of agreements concerning issues such as the economy, trade, tourism and people was signed between the two sides of the Aegean.¹³ Also, the earthquakes, which struck both countries during the year 1999 and the effect they had on mutual rapprochement, first at a public opinion and, then, at a governmental level, should not be underestimated.¹⁴ Finally, the role of the EU in shaping the relations between the two countries was also very significant. Greece's positive position towards Turkey, which apparently led Turkey to be recognized as a candidate for EU membership in the Helsinki Summit (1999) was a key strategic move: Athens realized the diplomatic power that it would attain over Greco-Turkish affairs if Turkey's future became linked to the EU. On the other hand, Turkey also understood that the improvement of bilateral relations with Greece would contribute to her own EU aspirations. Therefore, the two countries, strongly linked by the EU factor, displayed perhaps their brightest moment of cooperation in recent years.

The Turkish government's change of attitude towards the Cyprus issue also impacted the Turkish Cypriot domestic political dynamics. The support of a more compromising solution for the Cyprus issue resulted in growing problems between Ankara and the then-Turkish Cypriot leadership of Rauf Denktaş, who was skeptical about the ongoing UN efforts for mediation in Cyprus based on the Annan Plan. Just some days after his election to office and during his first visit to North

¹⁰ Müge Oktay and Emel Kınacıoğlu, "The Domestic Dynamics of Turkey's Cyprus Policy: Implications for Turkey's Accession to the European Union", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.7 No.2 (2007), p. 264.

¹¹ Alexis Heracleides, *Cyprus Problem, 1947-2004* (Athens: Sideris, 2006), p. 303.

¹² James Ker-Lindsay, "The Policies of Greece and Cyprus towards Turkey's EU Accession", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2007).

¹³ H.J. Barkey and P.H. Gordon, "Cyprus: The Predictable Crisis", *The National Interest*, Winter 2001-2002

¹⁴ Ayten Gündoğdu, "Identities in Question: Greek-Turkish Relations in a Period of Transformation?", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.5 No.1 (2001)

Cyprus, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan started to put more pressure on the Turkish Cypriot leader and suggested that “mutual sacrifices” from both communities of the island were required for the achievement of a lasting solution.¹⁵ Less than a month later, the Turkish Prime Minister moved a step further, when he stated: “I’m not in favor of the continuation of the policy that has been maintained in Cyprus over the past thirty to forty years [...] we will do whatever is required of us; this is not Mr. Denktaş’ private matter.”¹⁶

Denktaş’s regime and his party UBP were also facing strong domestic opposition from various Turkish Cypriot civil society organizations and political parties. Through rallies and other public events,¹⁷ these civil actors demonstrated their opposition to the leader and to his inflexible position on the negotiations table, which was risking the combined prospects of a solution and EU future for the Turkish Cypriots. The Turkish Prime Minister was very keen to draw attention to this mounting Turkish Cypriot public resistance to Denktaş: “This [the rally] is not an ordinary event [...] you can’t push aside the views of the public. A decision should be taken with the largest public participation and should be implemented.”¹⁸

Erdoğan’s statements are exemplary of the more flexible Turkish rhetoric towards the Cyprus problem and Turkey’s denouncement of the hard-line position towards the Cyprus issue, along with the Turkish Cypriot elites that represented them. Indeed, the Turkish Cypriot legislative elections of 2003 saw the defeat of the UBP – the party of Denktaş which had monopolized the Turkish Cypriot government until that time. The opposition and strongly pro-solution/EU Republican Turkish Party (Cumhuriyetçi Türk Partisi-CTP) won the elections, which were defined by extensive support of the forces that favored the Annan Plan and EU membership. These results gave renewed justification to the Turkish Prime Minister, who further challenged the counterproductive role of Denktaş, who remained the leader of Turkish Cypriots and chief of their negotiating team. This position of Ankara was a clear support to the Turkish Cypriot political parties which supported solution and which were calling for the resignation of the Denktaş from his duties as a negotiator in the Annan Plan.¹⁹ The change in the Turkish Cypriot party scene was completed in 2005, when the CTP was re-elected with increased share of vote, while

¹⁵ “Erdoğan visits the occupied area of Cyprus and says the UN plan is negotiable; Supports simultaneous accession of Cyprus and Turkey to the EU”, *Hellenic Resources*, <http://www.hri.org/news/cyprus/tcpr/2002/02-11-18.tcpr.html#04>, 18 November

¹⁶ “Turkey must negotiate on Cyprus, says new leader”, *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-must-negotiate-on-cyprus-says-new-leader-601801.html>, 3 January 2003.

¹⁷ “Turkish Cypriot Call for Reunification”, *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2607099.stm>, 26 December 2002; “10.000 Turkish Cypriots March to Support Annan Plan”, *Turkish Press Review*, <http://www.byegm.gov.tr/YAYINLARIMIZ/CHR/ING2002/11/02x11x28.HTM#%209>, 28 November 2002.

¹⁸ “Turkish Cypriot Leader is Criticized by Ankara”, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/03/world/turkish-cypriot-leader-is-criticized-by-ankara.html>, 3 January 2003.

¹⁹ “Mr Talat called on Denktaş to resign during the meeting of the party leaders”, *NTV*, <http://www.hri.org/news/cyprus/tcpr/2003/03-01-03.tcpr.html#02>, 2 January 2003.

its leader Mehmet Ali Talat succeeded Denктаş, in what he himself called a Turkish Cypriot “silent revolution”.²⁰ Along these lines, Turkey played a very important role in the prevalence of the pro-solution/EU parties in Turkish Cypriot politics. Turkey’s compromising rhetoric as well as the support that the Turkish government provided to the Turkish Cypriot opposition forces was a crucial reason behind the change of the preferences of the Turkish Cypriot electorate, which remains subject to Turkish discourse and narratives, through the various cultural and socio-political links that exist between the two sides.

“...the support of EU membership has dropped from 62 percent in 2004 to 47 percent in 2010.”

The Post-Annan Era: Momentum Lost?

In the post-Annan era, the process of resolving the Cyprus issue has lost its momentum. In April 2004, 65 percent of Turkish Cypriots approved the Annan Plan, but reunification failed as the 76 percent of Greek Cypriots rejected the plan and proceeded to join the EU as representatives of the RoC. In the following period, the Cyprus problem entered a limbo until 2008, when the emergence of a new and more flexible Greek Cypriot leadership in the face of Dimitris Christofias led to the reinstatement of new bi-communal negotiations. Despite initial enthusiasm, the process of negotiations has so far been slow. This comparative decrease in the relevance of the Cyprus problem for the politics of the island has limited Turkey’s aptitude to play a decisive role with regards to the Turkish Cypriot political parties that support or oppose a compromising solution on the bi-communal dispute.

What is more, the slow-down of Turkey’s EU accession process has also mediated Ankara’s stance towards the Cyprus issue. Compared to the years when Turkey supported a resolution of the dispute which would facilitate her accession prospects, Turkey’s stance today is far less fervent. The EU’s post-2004 enlargement fatigue as well as its internal crisis related to the constitutional reform and the Lisbon Treaty ²¹ considerably reduced the speed of Turkey’s EU integration. In addition, the rise of Turko-skeptics among EU circles,²² such as France and Germany, has also slowed down the accession process. Lastly, the Cyprus problem itself has posed a very large barrier towards Turkey’s EU aspirations and fast-track

²⁰ “Pro-EU leader seeks to unify Cyprus”, *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/18/world/europe/18iht-cyprus.html?_r=1, 19 April 2005.

²¹ Attila Eralp, “Temporality, Cyprus Problem and Turkey-EU Relationship”, *EDAM Discussion Paper Series 2* (2009).

²² “Sarkozy election win deepens Turkey’s EU gloom”, *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSL0722300620070507>, 7 May 2007.

progress of integration: as early as 2006, the EU froze eight EU law adoption chapters within the negotiations process with Turkey and decided to conclude no more (besides the “science and research” chapter, already closed earlier that year) before Turkey fully applied the “Additional Protocol”²³, which calls for the opening of Turkish ports to all EU member states, including the Greek Cypriot-led RoC. Turkey refuses to apply the protocol as long as Greek Cypriots veto the approval of the pending “Direct Trade Regulation”²⁴, which calls for trade between Turkish Cypriots and the EU member states. The application of the protocol remains to this day the official reasoning behind the EU’s reluctance to “unlock” Turkey’s accession negotiations.

This slow-down of Ankara-Brussels relations has also had an important impact on domestic Turkish politics and the public attitudes towards the EU. As a result of the staggering EU integration progress, the Turkish public has lost their early zeal with regards to an EU future: the support of EU membership has dropped from 62 percent in 2004²⁵ to 47 percent in 2010.²⁶ In this context, people are less prepared for concessions, such as a more flexible position on the Cyprus issue. The consequent empowerment of domestic Turkish nationalist factors has also made EU integration a gradually costly option for the AKP government.²⁷ As a result, the momentum created in Helsinki 1999 has shrunk and so have the incentives provided to Ankara for a decisively contributing position towards the Cyprus issue.

As a result of the staggering process of negotiations on the Cyprus issue, the slow pace of Turkey’s EU integration and Brussels’ decreasing appeal within Turkish society, the role of Ankara in the more recent Turkish Cypriot elections was not as extensive as before. In the Turkish Cypriot legislative elections of April 2009, during which the issues of the EU and solution played a considerably smaller role than before, the UBP reclaimed the government. A year later, the UBP’s leader Derviş Eroğlu replaced Talat in the Turkish Cypriot leadership and ended the short intermission by the pro-solution actors.

²³ “Additional Protocol to the Agreement establishing an Association between the European Economic Community and Turkey following the enlargement of the European Union”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 30 September 2005.

²⁴ European Commission, “Proposal for a Council Regulation on special conditions for trade with those areas of the Republic of Cyprus in which the Government of the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control”, 2004.

²⁵ European Commission, “Eurobarometer 62 Public Opinion in the European Union: National Report, Executive Summary, Turkey”, 2004.

²⁶ European Commission, “Standard Eurobarometer 73 Public Opinion in the European Union: National Report, Executive Summary, Turkey”, 2010.

²⁷ David Hannay Cyprus: *The Search for a Solution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006)

Conclusion

Almost a decade since the negotiations on the Annan Plan, the dynamics in the EU-Turkey-Cyprus triangle have changed considerably and so has Ankara's role in the domestic Turkish Cypriot politics. The EU accession of a divided island in 2004 gave Greek Cypriots increased bargaining power (in the form of their participation in EU bodies) but, on the other side, added to the legitimacy of the Turkish Cypriots and Turkey, who, despite supporting the Annan Plan, both remain far away from their full European integration as members of the EU. As far as Turkey-EU relations are concerned, the slow-down of the accession process led to a decrease of public interest in the EU and mediated the government's previous enthusiasm about EU affairs, especially in relation to the Cyprus issue. Besides, the impressive external policy record of the AKP, which is indicative of Turkey's emerging profile as a peripheral power, provides alternative international routes and makes the "carrot" of EU membership look less appealing. In this context, Ankara's more compromising policy towards the Cyprus issue is expected to be (re)triggered by increased momentum in the Cyprus negotiations and more realistic prospects of full EU integration for Turkey. In this context, Brussels needs to perform a difficult balancing act and overcome various member states' positions which remain Turkoskeptic. At the same time, momentum in the Cyprus negotiations could be reinstated by the EU (as the rest of international community and the UN) to reach a settlement. It is anticipated that a renewed Turkish eagerness in resolving the Cyprus problem will also drastically affect Turkish Cypriot political parties, in a similar way to what was documented in the eve of the Annan Plan referenda.