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The Cyprus Problem: Why Solve a Comfortable Conflict?

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Several diplomatic efforts have been made both domestically and internationally to enhance peaceful unity since the start of the Cyprus Problem. Despite the shortcomings of past efforts, it is still desirable not only to resolve the issue, but also to do so in a timely manner.

The Cyprus Problem

Cyprus, the third largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, is home to 1.1 million and has a tempestuous history involving many actors ranging from different empires and nations of the past to regional and global actors of today, including the UN, EU and NATO. As George Christou highlights, the history of Cyprus "has been characterised by tension and conflict due to the diametrically opposed interests of Greece and the Greek-Cypriots on the one hand, and Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriots on the other". If we add the colonial heritage, proximity to the Suez Canal and interests of Great Britain, remnants of Cold War paranoia that the island was to become a Russian satellite or a 'Cuba in the Mediterranean', the British Sovereign Base Areas that host one of the biggest intelligence infrastructures in the region and the close links between the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches to the equation, the protracted conflict on the island starts looking multi-layered, multi-factored and multi-faceted.

Historically, the Cyprus conflict is usually boiled down to competing ethno-nationalisms between Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot communities; it is usually read in tandem with the 'motherland' nationalism in Turkey and Greece,

is entrenched in the 1960s constitution along consociational lines and traced back to the decolonisation period in the 1950s. At one time or another, both communities in Cyprus have linked their destinies to those of their ethnic kin, to that of the large-group outside the island. Due to the pursuit of mutually exclusive destinies, Cyprus suffered from inter-communal violence from late 1950s until its decolonisation and independence in 1960. However, the newly founded Republic of Cyprus was only ephemeral, and inter-communal conflict erupted once again only after 3 years in 1963. Since 1964, the island hosts one of the longest-standing peacekeeping missions – The *United Nations* Peacekeeping Force in *Cyprus* (UNFICYP). The next 50 years witnessed a long and frustrating process of inter-communal talks and several UN settlement plans, turning the island into a 'graveyard of diplomats'. As a result, the communities, who were psychologically divided under the new federation, would soon become physically and demographically divided. As such, following the Turkish intervention in response to the Greek coup on the island in 1974, Cyprus has effectively been divided in two, with Greek-Cypriots living in the southern part under the legally recognised Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and Turkish-Cypriots living in the northern part under the unrecognised, self-declared, administration called the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' (TRNC).

Despite the cease-fire and the protracted conflict, Cyprus is a safe place. This safety may be a common characteristic of small communities where social control is prevalent because of close familial and social relationships, but Cypriots are generally and unarguably non-violent people, demonstrated by low crime rates. In spite of the daily frustrations of the conflict, and its economic, social and political cost to Cypriots, it is hard to deny that the situation is 'comfortable' and 'normalised'. Not only does Cyprus remain a popular holiday

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destination for many Europeans, but it officially became an EU member state with all its 'anomalies' in 2004. At times, Cyprus markets itself as the home for the last divided capital of Europe—at other times, as the furthest Eastern corner of Europe that offers pristine and exotic beaches—or as the multi-cultural holiday resort that is simultaneously European, Middle-Eastern and Mediterranean.

The Cyprus Problem operates on local, regional and international levels. The local entails the relationship between the two 'ethnically' categorised communities. Owing to Turkey and Greece's involvement since its early stages, the conflict has also had a distinct regional dimension for many years. This regional dimension is also the product of islands geography as a bridge between 3 continents and due to the history and demographics of the region. At the international level, the problem has preoccupied the UN since 1964 and involved NATO, the United States and since 2004, the EU became more directly embroiled when Cyprus acceded the Union without a peace settlement.

Solving the Problem

Numerous diplomatic efforts have been made both domestically and internationally to enhance different forms of peaceful unity since the conception of the Cyprus Problem. Over the decades, myriad negotiations and peace-talks have also begun and have been later halted, fast-tracked, and revisited. Nevertheless, it is still imperative to find a comprehensive solution to the Cyprus Problem.

Such a solution, which would also advance the wider cause of peacebuilding and reconciliation, is crucial for several main reasons:

- The prolongation of the conflict presents a myriad of human rights violations for the communities of Cyprus. While the RoC enjoys full EU membership, Turkish-Cypriots—who are also EU citizens—live in the northern part of Cyprus where the RoC does not exercise effective control and where the Acquis Communautaire is suspended. The Acquis Communautaireis the accumulated body of European Union (EU) law and obligations from 1958 to the present day. It comprises all the EU's treaties and laws (directives, regulations and decisions), declarations and resolutions, international agreements and the judgments of the Court of Justice. The unrecognised status of the northern administration also amounts to a violation of the human rights of those Greek-Cypriots who became internally displaced people during 1974 and had lost access to their properties. As such, Cyprus is an explicit case of legality and politics persistently challenging each other, a situation which creates inherent contradictions for the EU project.

- The accession of the RoC to the EU without the inclusion of the Turkish-Cypriots also presents a significant challenge for EU governance across a diverse range of issues, including the EU objective of achieving stability in the eastern Mediterranean. The EU accession also creates a state of exception that galvanises Cyprus' 'special status' that is in reality not that special. As Harry Anastasiou eloquently puts it, Cyprus was "... the first EU member country that was ethnically divided; that was represented at EU level exclusively by members of one of the rival ethnic communities; that was partially occupied by the military forces of an EU candidate state; that had the institutional means to apply the Acquis Communautaire in one part of its territory but not in another; that had a cease-fire line and a buffer zone manned by UN peacekeepers; and that had one portion of its citizens deprived of the right to their property and residence and another portion of

its citizens deprived of the right of access to and participation in the EU economy and EU political institutions. Moreover, Cyprus was the only EU member where its major ethnic communities recognise the EU law while simultaneously rejecting each other's law; where its major ethnic communities accept the legitimacy of the EU while rejecting each other's legitimacy within their own shared island".

- The ramifications of the conflict on the NATO–EU relationship and European energy policy is disconcerting due to newly discovered natural gas resources in Cyprus, competing claims over these resources and the fact that Turkey's geographical location makes it an important corridor- particularly for gas and oil for the EU. When we look at regional alliances and hydrocarbon interests, we can see a highly intricate web of relationships. These include the hyper-securitisation, where threats are constructed and legitimised through security speech acts, of Turkey in the RoC, the latter's close links with Russia and Greece, Turkey's significance for NATO, and the fact that Russia and Cyprus are not part of the alliance. Such dynamics clearly add further tension to Turkey-EU, EU-Russia and Russia-Turkey relations, and create further instability in the region. Thus, solving the Cyprus problem can ease tensions in the region and positively influence the regional dynamics particularly those about regional energy policies.

- Even though the intentions of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) regarding full EU membership are highly questionable, non-resolution of the Cyprus Problem presents an obstacle for Turkey's EU accession as well as being a persistent and bitter thorn in Turkey–EU relations. Solving the Cyprus Problem may also help normalise Turkey's relationship with its neighbours. Considering the deteriorating diplomatic relationships between

Turkey and the 'West', deep polarisation among different groups in Turkey, crumbling economy and intra-state violence, conflict and terrorism, Cyprus can help relieve much pressure off Turkey and restore its diplomatic stance.

- Considering Cyprus' geographical proximity to Syria and Iraq and to the Middle East and North Africa, it could be argued that the instability in the region (including Turkey)—and the subsequent 'refugee' crisis—are factors that add to the urgency of finding a comprehensive solution to the protracted conflict. The Cyprus Problem is a non-violent, 'normalised', and 'comfortable' conflict (see Adamides and Constantinou 2011), thus the regional dynamics can help cultivate a sense of urgency for reaching a comprehensive solution, which may contribute to eventual increased stability in the region, as it would not only 'reconcile' Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots but ease much pressure off Turkey, Greece and the EU as well.

What's more, it is not only pertinent to solve the Cyprus Problem, but to do so in a timely manner too. In 2004, Cypriots came close to finding a solution to their intractable problem. A comprehensive settlement plan (a.k.a The Annan Plan) on a bi-zonal bi-communal federal state with single citizenship was accepted by the Turkish-Cypriot community but rejected by the Greek-Cypriot community in a simultaneous referenda in April 2004. Following the disappointment of the peace referenda, Cypriots became disengaged from the peace process, which was further exacerbated by the global economic crisis. Following the financial crises that hit the RoC in 2012, the economic concerns of communities have gradually pushed the Cyprus Problem behind other concerns and priorities, specifically unemployment, inflation and increasing crime rates.

The peace negotiations resumed in 2008 but failed again in 2011. After independent left-wing Turkish Cypriot presidential candidate Mustafa Akıncı assumed office in the northern part of Cyprus in April 2015, hopes were revitalised. Known for his pro-solution and Turkey-defying stance and surprisingly clean political slate, many accounts argue that the centre-right Nicos Anastasiades, who has been the President of Republic of Cyprus since 2013 from the only party that supported the Annan Plan, and Akıncı duo has created a very favourable environment and that the stars are perfectly aligned this time, bringing the island closer than ever to reaching a comprehensive settlement. This gave birth to increasing public engagement in the peace process, which contributed to the 'favourable' environment by supporting and legitimising the mandate of the negotiation teams and creating a more convincing and prosperous 'vision' for the future of Cyprus without 'the Problem'.

Unfortunately however, this trend was showing signs of reversal. Following the Geneva summit disappointment, lack of convergence on the security dossier of the negotiations is reproducing sense of insecurity and triggering historic traumas, which underpins highly polarised internal narratives based on zero-sum discourse. Especially after the parliamentary Enosis commemoration vote in the RoC and Turkey's four freedoms demand in Cyprus, the 'peace fatigue' is starting to set in once again. Frustration over lack of progress and impetus showing itself in low hope: While 53% of Greek Cypriots and 48% of Turkish Cypriots wish for the peace process to succeed, 43% and 50% respectively express no hope that the peace process will produce results. As the new security architecture proposal of SeeD Security Dialogue Initiative provides a four-step road map to break the current deadlock:

Step 1: Shift the focus away from hard security and guarantees that only emphasize on last resort, deterrence and worse case scenarios to soft security and preventative measures that emphasize on sustainability and viability, by broadening the concept to include human security, economic, social and ontological security. The underlying objective should be to achieve an endogenously resilient Federal Cyprus that relies on its own institutions to guarantee the security of its citizens.

Step 2: Acknowledge that a transitional period will be required before Federal Cyprus can be endogenously resilient and secure, where special arrangements and external support will be necessary to build the capacity of Cypriot institutions and provide a sense of security to all citizens and communities. Focus on benchmarks and performance indicators that can ensure a smooth implementation period.

Step 3: Negotiate and agree those aspects of transitional arrangements that are less controversial (e.g. timelines for implementation of the settlement, what support will be provided by an international mission) in order to prevent deadlock, increase points of convergence and reinforce hope and public engagement in the process before negotiating those aspects of transitional arrangements that are more controversial (e.g. 'last resort' provisions, role of historic guarantors).

Step 4: Enshrine all agreements and steps in a Treaty of Implementation, which will outline a robust bridge from the current status quo, to the ultimate vision of an endogenously resilient Federal Cyprus.

What is needed to revitalise the peace process in Cyprus is innovation and reflection both on the process and on the content. Specifically relating to the

security dossier, we need a different approach that broadens the concept of security beyond the realpolitik regional bargaining and beyond the narrow understanding that talking about the security of a federal Cyprus is talking about military arrangements and guarantees. It is crucial to capitalise on these proposals and regional dynamics and add a success story to the world's peacemaking and peacebuilding record.

Image of the United Nations Buffer Zone, also known as the Green Line, a demilitarised zone patrolled by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Nicosia, Cyprus. Image credit: Marco Fieber/Flickr.

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