

PERSPECTIVES ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EU AND CYPRUS AND THE CYPRUS PROBLEM

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Introduction

On October 30, 2025, the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs (CCEIA) in cooperation with the European Policy Centre (EPC), hosted a high-level discussion entitled "*Perspectives on the Relationship between the EU and Cyprus and the Cyprus Problem*" at the University of Nicosia.

The event, chaired by Evie Mitsidou Phillips of the *Cyprus News Agency*, brought together Professor Andreas Theophanous, President of CCEIA; Ozdil Nami, former Negotiator of the Turkish Cypriot community; Menelaos Menelaou, Negotiator of the Greek Cypriot community and Amanda Paul, Senior Policy Analyst at the EPC.

The discussion examined how Cyprus's EU accession process and membership since 2004 has shaped domestic politics, economic performance and the ongoing efforts to resolve the Cyprus problem. It also explored the evolution of EU involvement and the prospects for renewed intercommunal negotiations. While the participants agreed on the continued importance of the EU framework, their perspectives diverged on the means of achieving reunification, the nature of sovereignty and the balance between domestic agency and international responsibility.

Andreas Theophanous

Professor Andreas Theophanous reviewed the evolution of Cyprus–EU relations and reflected on the broader political and economic record of membership. Following the 1974 invasion, he noted, Cypriot attitudes toward the West were defined by disappointment, but by the 1980s the island, encouraged by Greece, had embraced a European orientation that culminated in accession.

He recalled that expectations had been extremely high, as many Greek Cypriots believed EU membership would contribute to the solution of the Cyprus problem. “There was a rather naïve perception,” he said, “that participation in the European Union would address all challenges, including the Cyprus issue.” That hope was not realized. Turkey’s occupation persisted, while the EU remained largely passive. Theophanous also observed that all settlement plans proposed after 1974 failed to improve the *status quo* for the Greek Cypriots and, in fact, tended to reflect the priorities and demands of the Turkish side.

Turning to the 2013 economic crisis, Theophanous argued that Cyprus had been treated punitively compared with larger member states, though he also acknowledged the need for domestic structural reforms. He criticized the Union’s inconsistency, contrasting its firm stance on Russia with its silence toward Turkey. Theophanous further highlighted the limited European engagement in the peace process and the ongoing difficulties posed by Turkey’s stance, which has remained largely unchanged despite successive negotiation efforts. He recalled that the EU’s Special Envoy, Johannes Hahn, had not been included in previous talks following objections from Ankara, a development he viewed as indicative of the Union’s restrained role.

For the future, he advocated an evolutionary federal approach, suggesting that revising the 1960 Constitution could produce a functional model compatible with EU norms that could also serve as a model for the wider region. Confidence-building measures and additional actions involving both communities, the guarantor powers, and the EU could build trust over time. Cyprus, he concluded, is a “litmus test for the Union’s credibility and its capacity to act as a coherent global power.

Ozdil Nami

Former Turkish Cypriot Negotiator Ozdil Nami delivered a reflective and critical account of the EU’s role in the Cyprus process, drawing on his direct experience in negotiations. He began by affirming his belief in the EU vision for Cyprus, describing it as perhaps “the strongest common vision that Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots share.” Yet, he lamented, the very project that should have united the island became the most divisive factor.

Turkish Cypriots, he said, believed that the Annan Plan could allow both communities to join the EU together, a step toward reconciliation and shared prosperity. However, when the “Greek Cypriots entered the EU alone”, this expectation was shattered. He attributed this outcome to the decision by Greek Cypriot leaders to enter the EU prior to a settlement, thereby gaining leverage

over Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community. This, he said, created a perception of moral asymmetry that continues to fuel mistrust.

He recalled that the EU had promised to ease the isolation of Turkish Cypriots after the 2004 referendum but implemented only limited measures, such as the Green Line Regulation and financial assistance. More ambitious initiatives stalled for political reasons.

Despite these setbacks, Nami noted that Negotiators on both sides, with EU support, had ensured that the convergences reached at Crans-Montana were fully compatible with the *acquis*. Turkey, he added, had already accepted troop reductions and limits on the Treaty of Guarantee.

Looking ahead, he called for a time-bound, results-oriented negotiation process with clear consequences for non-compliance. Open-ended talks, he argued, only perpetuate stalemate. Responding to fears that a federal settlement would leave Cyprus vulnerable to Ankara, he countered that “a member of the Union cannot be a protectorate; its sovereignty is guaranteed by the EU itself.”

Menelaos Menelaou

Menelaos Menelaou, expressed the positions of the Greek Cypriot community. He began by acknowledging the significance of the recent Turkish Cypriot election, interpreting it as a rejection of the two-state solution and a potential turning point. Nevertheless, he cautioned that optimism must be tempered by realism given Turkey’s control of the northern part of Cyprus.

Menelaou stressed that Turkey’s influence remains decisive but not absolute, pointing to the protests over education and religious policy in the northern part as evidence that the Turkish Cypriot community possesses its own agency. He urged Greek Cypriots to interpret these developments realistically, not merely through the lens of their own expectations.

Reaffirming the official position of the Greek Cypriot community, Menelaou stated that the agreed framework for any settlement remains the bizonal, bicomunal federation with political equality, in accordance with UN resolutions. He opposed any attempt to impose timelines or punitive conditions. “You cannot expect a happy marriage if you begin by defining the terms of divorce”, he observed, arguing that pressure-based approaches have repeatedly failed.

For Menelaou, the way forward requires patience, confidence-building, and institutional legitimacy. He reminded the audience that substantial progress had already been achieved in areas such as telecommunications, electricity connectivity, cultural heritage restoration, education, and health cooperation. Yet he cautioned that CBMs are not substitutes for substance and must serve reunification rather than “normalizing coexistence between separate entities.”

Rejecting claims that Greek Cypriots are complacent about the status quo, he stressed that Nicosia had consistently advocated for dialogue, the appointment of a UN envoy, and measures to benefit the Turkish Cypriot community. “Had we been comfortable,” he said, “we would not have taken the initiatives that brought us here today.”

Amanda Paul

Amanda Paul examined the Cyprus issue through a wider European policy lens. She recalled that Crans-Montana marked a turning point, after which Turkey expanded its presence in “the north”. She cited the opening of Varosha and the deepening of Turkey’s political, economic, and religious control in the north as evidence of this shift. This, she argued, eroded trust between the two communities and intensified insecurity among Greek Cypriots, coinciding with what she described as “the end of Turkish democracy.”

Paul viewed the recent Turkish Cypriot election as a “remarkable expression of agency and independence,” a moment when voters resisted Ankara’s attempts to influence the outcome. Despite years of disillusionment, the result demonstrated that “Turkish Cypriots still see their future as part of a reunited Cyprus.” The result, she argued, offers a new opportunity that must not be wasted.

Paul warned against undermining the new Turkish Cypriot leadership before it has the chance to engage Ankara and the UN. At the same time, she urged reflection within the Greek Cypriot community, cautioning that “continuing with division should not be seen as the least-worst option.”

Paul called for a whole-of-society approach to any new process, arguing that peace cannot be achieved through elite negotiations alone. She proposed reinvigorating the bicomunal technical committees, which have often been underfunded and constrained by limited mandates. “We need to build trust, she insisted, “and that requires the involvement of citizens from both communities.”

For Paul, Cyprus's future hinges on social participation as much as on political agreement. A sustainable peace, she argued, must be grounded in public ownership, civic education, and trust-building; elements too often neglected in past efforts.

Conclusion

The discussion highlighted that, despite different approaches, all speakers agreed that the EU remains the central framework for Cyprus's political future. At the same time, the panelists noted that confidence-building measures, while useful, cannot replace structured political engagement and sustained commitment from both sides for a comprehensive settlement.

The differences among the speakers concerned method and emphasis. Theophanous underlined the need for a gradual and institutionally grounded process that strengthens legitimacy and functionality. Nami stressed that open-ended negotiations risk perpetuating deadlock and called for a time-bound process with clear expectations and outcomes. Menelaou warned that strict timelines and conditionality could undermine the legitimacy of any settlement and emphasized that progress must be rooted in agreed principles. Paul highlighted the importance of broader public participation, reminding that political agreements cannot succeed without social support.

These differing viewpoints reflect a broader tension that has long characterized the Cyprus negotiations: the balance between diplomacy conducted at the leadership level and the need for trust-building within society; between pragmatic compromise and the constraints imposed by geopolitical realities. The discussion illustrated once again that the Cyprus problem remains both a regional issue and a European challenge.

Despite these divergences, the panel converged on one fundamental point: that a reunited Cyprus within the EU framework remains the only sustainable and strategically coherent outcome. Whether articulated through constitutional evolution, accountability mechanisms, safeguards of sovereignty, or greater civic inclusion, each perspective pointed to the same objective: a functional, secure, and European Cyprus.

As long as Cyprus remains divided, the EU's credibility as a community grounded in law, solidarity, and shared values will remain incomplete. The task, therefore, is not to reconsider the goal, but to determine the most realistic and inclusive path toward achieving it.