



CENTER FOR EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
University of Nicosia

**4/3/2015**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**POLICY PAPER SERIES 2/2015**

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**THE CYPRUS PROBLEM IN 2015:  
AN ASSESSMENT AND PROSPECTS FOR A SOLUTION**

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Since its establishment the course of the Republic of Cyprus has been turbulent with intracommunal and intercommunal unrest and tensions as well as external interventions. The coup against President Makarios by the Greek Junta on July 15, 1974, provided a window of opportunity for Turkey to invade Cyprus on the pretext of restoring the constitutional order and protecting the Turkish Cypriot community.

The events of 1974 created new circumstances forcing the Greek Cypriot side to accept federation, which it had rejected before 1974, as the basis for the solution of the problem. Initially, there was discussion of a multiregional federation but gradually the idea of a biregional bicomunal federation became the mainstream orthodoxy. With the High Level Agreements of 1977 and 1979 the concept of bicomunal biregional federation began to develop further. The term "bizonal" was subsequently introduced which, despite many uncertainties and reservations, entailed serious political implications. Nevertheless, there were and still are different perceptions, assessments and interpretations of these agreements both intercommunally and intracommunally.

With the EU perspective there were expectations for the creation of conditions for the solution of the Cyprus problem. Cyprus' accession process and Turkey's EU aspirations were expected to provide the circumstances for substantial progress and eventually a solution. In 1999, a new round of negotiations began under the auspices of the UN which after a long course including arbitration by the Secretary General of the UN resulted in the Annan Plan which was put to a referendum in April 2004 in the two communities. But, once the Annan Plan was rejected, the Greek Cypriot side did not manage to articulate and put forward a new philosophy for solving the problem.

Despite years of negotiations, the Cyprus problem remains unresolved. The persistent goal of Turkey for strategic control of Cyprus critically influences negotiations. The Cyprus problem involves various aspects, inter alia, European, international, regional, Greco-Turkish and bicomunal. The emphasis in the negotiations however, has mainly been placed on the bicomunal dimension; this creates the impression that the problem is essentially between the two communities and that Turkey is merely a third party.

In recent years there have been significant developments which have not led to any break through or change in the philosophy for the solution of the Cyprus problem. Specifically, with the accession of Cyprus to the EU and the Eurozone and the subsequent discovery of rich offshore hydrocarbon deposits in the region high expectations were created.

At this juncture, various parties suggest that the Cyprus problem, the economic crisis and energy issues should be addressed together. While such an approach may be helpful, any kind of blackmailing of the comparatively weaker Greek-Cypriot side should be avoided.

After the Joint Communiqué of President N. Anastasiades and the Turkish Cypriot leader D. Eroglu of February 11, 2014, there was significant mobility

and expectations were created for quick resolution of the problem. At present, however, there are no positive developments to report. On the contrary, the provocative attitude of Turkey in the last months of 2014 and its unilateral actions in the Cypriot EEZ have forced President Anastasiades to withdraw (temporarily) from the intercommunal negotiations.

**It is expected that the negotiations will resume. But it is important that the resumption is accompanied by an appropriate reassessment of regional developments and that the priorities of the Republic of Cyprus are set out to serve its objectives.**

The wider context is also affected by the influence exercised by Turkey and Greece and key long-standing actors namely Britain, the US, Russia, the EU and Israel. It is important to evaluate the role of guarantor powers in Cyprus. Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus and its EEZ. Turkey consistently pursues the strategic control of the island. As a powerful member of NATO and a strategic player in the Eastern Mediterranean Turkey enjoys the support or at least the tolerance of the US, Britain and other powers. This does not mean that the Republic of Cyprus cannot seek support in these two large countries as well as in others. The role of **Greece** is limited despite the national and historical ties with Cyprus. The balance or rather imbalance of powers on the one hand and the internal problems and weaknesses on the other, do not allow Greece to play, at least at this juncture, a key role in reaching a solution, though the change brought by the elections of January 25, 2015, and the establishment of a coalition government between the left party SYRIZA and the right-wing Independent Greeks is a new element. **Britain**, as a country with military bases and strategic interests in Cyprus, considers that a successful conclusion of the negotiations should safeguard its continued presence on the island. Britain would support a solution that would ensure one state. For London whether the solution would be a loose or a strong federation is not a priority.

For the **US**, the Cyprus problem is viewed within the framework of greater stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader area. US policy on Cyprus takes into account many factors including the US-Turkish relations; despite difficulties Turkey is still viewed as a strategic partner of the US in the region.

**Russia**, a country with traditionally good relations with Cyprus, confirmed by President N. Anastasiades' recent visit to Moscow, and with strong political, economic, cultural and historical ties, plays its own important role on the chessboard of the Cyprus problem at a critical time of changes due to the developments in Ukraine. However, despite Russian support towards Cyprus, the Russian-Cypriot relations could not be classified as strategic at this stage. For Russia, a successful conclusion of the Cyprus problem will ensure that Cyprus is not brought under the strategic control of Turkey.

Regarding the **EU's** position on the Cyprus problem it is clear that over time and for a range of reasons tolerance towards Turkey was shown. Taking all relevant developments into account, currently in Cyprus there are low expectations from the EU. It should also be noted that the EU does not operate with a single voice. At this juncture there are still different interests among member states on most issues including the Cyprus problem. Repeatedly, the Republic of Cyprus felt that the attitude of several EU members was tolerant, if not supportive, of Turkey.

At the same time, **Israel** is particularly concerned about the geopolitical changes and instability in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The geopolitical context inevitably dictates the policies of Israel's options and gives them a strategic dimension which aims to guarantee the national security of the country. At this juncture and in this current geopolitical context, the need of Israel for a safe way out to the West makes Cyprus very important.

Today, a bizonal bicomunal federation remains the strategic objective of the Greek-Cypriot side and the consistent position of the international community. But there is no mutual understanding between the two sides for the content and substance of the bizonal bicomunal federation. It is also noted that the interpretation and scope of the bizonal bicomunal federation in recent years has shifted closer to the Turkish Cypriot positions. In this context, it is underlined that under the veil of a bizonal, bicomunal philosophy lies an "acquis" accumulated by years of negotiations, which in turn appear to lead to a loose federation or even a confederation.

For years now the impression has been cultivated that any solution of the Cyprus problem would be an improvement of the *status quo*. By the same reasoning the view that any solution of the Cyprus problem entails economic benefits was also promoted. These assumptions are wrong and dangerous. The reality is that the content of a solution will definitely affect the viability, stability of the settlement including the economic prospects.

The last Joint Communiqué incorporates elements of the negotiating acquis as well as additional bold steps taken by President N. Anastasiades. At this stage, it constitutes the strategic framework for solving the problem. But the ethnic pillars on which it is based on, with the divisive elements and constructive ambiguities cannot lead to a promising future. **Therefore, no matter how many corrective amendments are achieved in the negotiations, they may not offset the fact that the adopted strategic objective remains problematic.**

Recent literature emphasizes the importance of promoting integrationalist elements in multi-ethnic states in order to cultivate unifying trends and contain divisive elements. The examples of Bosnia, but also of Belgium in the heart of Europe, are indicative of the malfunctioning of models based on ethnocommunal and/or religious pillars. It is one thing to respect the different ethnic and

religious identities individually and collectively and another to pursue policies based on them. Above all, President N. Anastasiades and the political system will have to assess the importance of the continuity of the Republic of Cyprus. It is tragic for this major issue to constitute a gray area.

Unfortunately, the Republic of Cyprus is stuck in a recycling of the negotiations for achieving the bizonal bicomunal federation without any alternative proposal or plan. It is also noted that Turkey, a country of over 80 million and considerable minorities, rejects a federal model based on ethnocommunal pillars when it comes to itself.

**The strategy followed on the Cyprus problem must be reassessed and revised. It is extremely important to redefine the basic guidelines and alter the framework for seeking a solution. It is also important to re-evaluate the available options as the conventional philosophy that focuses on a loose federation with confederal elements could prove fatal.**

The issue of the new strategy was repeatedly raised on the basis that any implementation of a bizonal bicomunal federation as discussed will create more problems than it would solve. However, after the 2004 referendum a historic opportunity to reassess the whole strategy was lost.

**In this context, several alternative options should be examined. These include a functional federation with loose bizonality (i.e. what the late President Papadopoulos described as "a bizonal federation with the appropriate content") or even the establishment of more than just two regions. It is also important to assess the prospect of integrating the occupied northern part of Cyprus as a region within the EU. It is understood that such an arrangement would be accompanied with significant territorial adjustments. Such an interim solution should be**

**considered as part of an evolutionary process. It is also important to evaluate the management of the *status quo* combined with Confidence Building Measures and steps toward normalization of relations with Turkey within the framework of its respect for the sovereignty of the Republic of Cyprus. Finally, the elaboration and submission of a set of fundamental guidelines for a solution for the Cyprus problem should be seriously considered by the Republic of Cyprus.**

The Greek Cypriot side should rationally evaluate all relevant factors. It is important to have clear goals, to avoid contradictions and to understand the importance of legitimacy and symbolism. It also critical for the Republic of Cyprus to regain the moral high ground and to elaborate and project a convincing narrative.