CYPRUS CENTER FOR EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
UNIVERSITY of NICOSIA

ISSN (online): 2547-8702

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN POLICY NOTE

May 2025, No. 111

21 YEARS AFTER EU ACCESSION
A Review and the Way Forward

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When Cyprus joined the EU, there were high expectations in all aspects. First and foremost, there was the belief that the Union's institutional framework and the Acquis Communautaire would contribute to a just resolution of the Cyprus problem. Beyond that, there was a widespread belief that the country's socioeconomic prospects would be positively influenced. It was also considered that participation in the Union would enhance democracy and simultaneously reinforce the country's value system.

21 years later, there is a growing concern about developments as well as the EU's trajectory. It is therefore important to briefly review this period and reflect on what lies ahead.

With respect to the Cyprus problem, admittedly there has not been the expected solidarity from the EU. I emphasize, in this context, that during the recent five-party meeting in Geneva (March 17–18, 2025) under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General, the EU was not represented—not even as an observer. Obviously, there were objections from the Turkish side. It is also emphasized that the EU's stance toward the Russian invasion of Ukraine differs significantly from its approach to the ongoing occupation of the northern part of Cyprus. Undoubtedly, the Union has been pursuing a policy of double standards. Inevitably these issues raise concern and scepticism among Cypriots.

It is, however, important to also evaluate Cyprus' responsibilities. The policy of the Republic of Cyprus has not led to the desired outcomes. One could say this is due to Turkish maximalism. That is correct; at the same time though Cyprus has not effectively utilized the EU's institutional framework. Moreover, 51 years after the invasion and 21 years after accession to the EU, Cyprus' presence in the international fora of discourse and exchange of ideas remains insufficient (some

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would even say poor). This is unacceptable. And for this sad situation, there are longstanding responsibilities.

It is inconceivable that Turkey's relationship with the EU can be upgraded while Ankara still occupies 37% of the Republic of Cyprus, which it does not recognize. Furthermore, it continues its hybrid warfare against it. The Cypriot leadership must bring various related issues to the forefront.

Furthermore, the socioeconomic implications of EU accession—and particularly of joining the Eurozone a few years later—were not fully understood. There was complacency and the belief that high economic growth rates would continue. Officials did not even question whether Cyprus' economy could effectively compete in such a highly demanding environment. It was also taken for granted that living standards and prosperity would continuously improve.

The economic crisis that led to the Memorandum in 2013 was the result of both internal and external factors. Yet the EU's response was not characterized by economic rationality and solidarity. On the contrary, it was punitive. Cyprus recovered despite the Troika at a very high socioeconomic cost though. Notably, in the cases of Spain and Italy, the EU's stance was supportive and lenient. Citizens may reasonably question whether there is now a better understanding of the existing realities.

Unfortunately, the state today does not adequately exercise its strategic, social and referee role. In addition, we cannot overlook the fact that significant sectors of the economy as well as land are being bought by foreign capital. To a great extent, the banking sector is now owned by foreign interests. Private hospitals and universities are also being bought. In addition, inequality has increased, while the goal of home ownership for young people is now much more difficult to achieve than in the past.

At the political level, rather than strengthening democracy, there are serious issues. Beyond the Cyprus problem, there are economic concerns, illegal immigration and disillusionment with the EU on various fronts. Above all, the current party and political system does not seem capable of effectively addressing these challenges. The results of the last European Parliament elections are indicative of the voters' perceptions.

Additionally, one would have hoped that EU membership would lead to a state of affairs marked by greater transparency and less corruption. Unfortunately, these expectations were not fulfilled.

The question is how we move forward. There is an urgent need to upgrade the party and political system at all levels. New ideas as well as new personalities are needed. The EU has its own serious problems that affect member states and their citizens. Despite the disappointment, Cyprus' place is within the EU.

The Republic of Cyprus must operate in the best possible manner to defend its legitimate interests. Nicosia is justified in emphasizing that it is inconceivable for EU-Turkey relations to be upgraded while Ankara obstructs the electrical interconnection between Cyprus and Greece/the EU. Nor is it acceptable for Turkey to be considered a key pillar of the European security architecture while occupying the northern part of Cyprus and simultaneously challenging Greece's sovereign rights. Moreover, despite its small size, Cyprus must actively participate in and contribute to the debate about the future of Europe.

This issue is supported by the Cyprus Forum