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Faraway, So Close: Approaching the Endgame in the Cyprus Negotiations

Ioannis N. Grigoriadis

Substantial progress was achieved in the bicomunal negotiations that were ongoing for almost two years and led to the decision to continue the talks in Switzerland. The aim was to create conditions conducive to a final bargaining agreement between the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots and the three guarantor states of the Republic of Cyprus: Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Although recent talks in Switzerland failed to deliver a breakthrough, negotiations continue, and hope survives. With the exception of negotiations on security and guarantees – a chapter whose negotiation inevitably also involves Cyprus' three guarantor states – convergence on negotiations in all other chapters, namely territory, property, governance and power sharing, as well as economic and EU matters, have resulted in agreement or have brought the positions of the parties within the radius of an agreement.

On 11 January 2017 the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders, Nicos Anastasiades and Mustafa Akıncı, exchanged maps in Geneva reflecting the territorial breakdown and adjustments between the two future constituent states of the Federal Republic of Cyprus. This was the first time in the history of Cyprus negotiations that this has happened. The maps differed by 1 percent only, but the difference was significant, as it involved the contested town of Morphou (Güzelyurt). Moreover, the parties were said to be close to agreeing on a presidency that would rotate between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. Regarding security and guarantees, the withdrawal of Turkish troops and the abolition of the guarantee

system are key issues of Greek Cypriots and Greece. On the other hand, Turkish Cypriots and Turkey insist on the permanent presence of Turkish troops and the continuation of the guarantee system after a solution is found. Attempts to bridge the gap and develop innovative security arrangements that could address the fundamental security needs of both communities without undermining the sovereignty of the post-solution Republic of Cyprus are underway. There are reasons to believe that this process has stronger chances of success than the one in 2004, which ended in the rejection of the Annan Plan.

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Two Moderate Leaders

The main reason for the resilience of hope is the presence of two of the most moderate Cypriot political leaders at the helm of the negotiation process than at any time before. Although the coinciding tenures of two prior moderate leaders, Demetris Christofias and Mehmet Ali Talat, between 2008 and 2010 failed to deliver results and ended in acrimony, things have gone better this time. The president of the Republic of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, in his capacity as leader of the Greek Cypriot community, and the president of the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Mustafa Akıncı, in his capacity as leader of the Turkish Cypriot community, enjoy credentials of moderation that are hard to dispute. As the leader of the Democratic Rally party (DISY), Anastasiades was the only major political figure who endorsed the Annan Plan in 2004. In his long political career as mayor of the Turkish Cypriot sector of Nicosia and political party leader, Akıncı has been one of the pioneers of bi-communal dialogue and cooperation. Both leaders have rebuffed scathing criticism from their respective hardliners, proven their commitment to a compromise solution in Cyprus, and made unprecedented progress toward reaching it. Both defined the process as a “Cypriot-owned” one. In the Annan Plan negotiations, the UN Secretary-General was allowed to act as arbitrator; as a result, the final version of the plan did not enjoy the full endorsement of the parties, which allowed the then president of the Republic of Cyprus, Tassos Papadopoulos, to call for its rejection. This time, there will not be a peace plan without the explicit endorsement of the leaders of both communities. If they reach an agreement, both would defend it in their respective communities and campaign for them before the respective referendums.

An Unusual Alliance

Another important reason for optimism is the common front that the two biggest

political parties of the Republic of Cyprus – DISY and the Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL) – have established with respect to the peace process. The alliance of the two biggest parties is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition for a successful outcome in a Cyprus referendum. AKEL’s decision to object to the Annan Plan in the 2004 referendum was one of the main reasons why the “no” vote reached 75.83 percent, while Turkish Cypriots approved the plan with 64.91 percent. Given that any new agreement is expected to be brought to a new referendum, the strong collaboration of the two biggest Greek Cypriot political parties reinforces the ability of President Anastasiades to make compromises, and it substantially increases the chance of a positive result in the event of a referendum.

The Guarantor States

Nevertheless, the goodwill of the two Cypriot leaders is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the resolution of the Cyprus issue. This would not only entail the commitment of the three guarantor states – most importantly Turkey, which, ever since its 1974 invasion and occupation of the northern part of the island, has maintained critical influence over the self-proclaimed “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” – but also Greece and the United Kingdom. Greece’s influence over the Republic of Cyprus may have waned since 1974, but it would be politically very difficult for any Greek Cypriot political leader to support a deal without the explicit and firm support of the Greek government. The United Kingdom, on its side, has maintained two sovereign military bases on Cyprus, which are expected to provide crucial leverage in the event of a solution, as far as security arrangements are concerned.

The Multiple Faces of the Greek Coalition Government

In view of the above, how do Greece and Turkey – the two countries whose historic

rivalry has also been reflected on Cyprus – view the prospect of conflict resolution? In the case of Greece, although the government has publicly endorsed the peace process, some statements on the question of security and guarantees shed doubts about Greece’s willingness to accept a compromise deal. To better understand the situation, one has to look into the background of the government coalition partners. Although the political movements that the major government coalition partner – the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) – originated from have historically supported conflict resolution and reconciliation in Cyprus, today’s enlarged SYRIZA is a less homogeneous party. A sizeable part of its current rank and file have professed nationalist views on the Cyprus issue and objected to conflict resolution along the lines of a bizonal, bicomunal federation. The decision of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to establish a coalition government with the far right-wing populist Independent Greeks party has further reinforced such views within the government. Although the prime minister himself has voiced support for the peace process, it is uncertain whether the Greek coalition government – already very unpopular because of the country’s economic woes – would be willing to bear the political risk of a compromise agreement in Cyprus. Although the decreasing interest that the Cyprus issue has been attracting in recent years may point to the fact that fears about domestic political costs may be exaggerated, it is certain that Greece’s decision to support a deal could be influenced by domestic political calculations.

Turkey and Turkish Cypriots ahead of the Constitutional Referendum

The overwhelming weight of the domestic political agenda is also a key parameter of Turkey’s approach to the Cyprus peace process. Following the abortive coup of 15 July 2016, Turkey has been under a state of emergency, which has led to the suspension

of key constitutional human rights guarantees and tens of thousands of arrests of suspected coup plotters and dissidents. Major concerns have arisen among Turkish Cypriots about the spillover effects of Turkish political turmoil in northern Cyprus. Akıncı’s election in April 2015 had already been understood as a signal from the Turkish Cypriot public to reduce dependence on Turkey and boost chances for conflict resolution. Nevertheless, Akıncı’s status in Ankara sharply improved following his early and outspoken support for the Turkish constitutional order and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the evening of 15 July 2016. Although the interpersonal relationship of the two leaders has clearly improved, the Turkish Cypriot coalition “government” – controlled by the nationalist National Unity Party (UBP) and Democratic Party-National Forces (DP-UG) party and led by Hüseyin Özgürgün – continues to drive a wedge between the two leaders and undermine the prospects of conflict resolution. Tensions within the Turkish Cypriot community rose sharply when Prime Minister Özgürgün announced his decision to follow Turkey’s controversial decision to scrap daylight saving time (DST) in September 2016, and in early January 2017 when Barbaros Şansal, a Turkish fashion designer, was arrested and summarily extradited to Turkey following a video he shared on Twitter containing sharp criticism against the Turkish government.

Meanwhile, a constitutional amendment draft was voted in January 2017 in the Turkish parliament and referred to a referendum that will most likely take place in mid April 2017. If approved, Turkey will be transformed into a presidential republic, with President Erdoğan enjoying wide and unchecked executive powers. It is clear that a positive vote in the upcoming referendum is President Erdoğan’s utmost priority. Initial opinion polls have shown that the referendum is likely to be close. In light of that, many argued that it is unlikely that Turkey would accept a compromise settlement in Cyprus before the referendum.

President Erdoğan has to court the far-right nationalist vote in order to win the constitutional referendum. As a result, the only chance for Turkey to agree to a Cyprus deal would be after the popular approval of the constitutional draft.

Reduced Interest As Opportunity

On the other hand, one needs to point out that – like in Greece – the Cyprus issue has lost the appeal it enjoyed in Turkish public opinion some decades ago. A series of other domestic and international issues have taken precedence, and this is likely to reduce the negative repercussions of a compromise agreement, especially if this is positively linked with another pressing issue of Turkish foreign policy. In other words, the way a Cyprus deal is framed could have a major impact on the way it is received by the Turkish public. Erdoğan himself ended the long-standing Turkish objection to any compromise agreement in Cyprus in 2004 with his support for the Annan Plan. It is therefore possible that he would support a compromise deal that is designed in a win-win structure in which Turkey's strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean are advanced. Energy could be a significant instrument in that respect, given that conflict resolution in Cyprus would pave the way for the monetization of Eastern Mediterranean gas reserves; the construction of a pipeline from the offshore Eastern Mediterranean gas fields of Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel to Turkey appears as the most cost-effective way to achieve this.

The Time Factor

Although buying time may improve the chances of a post-referendum cooperative Turkish position on a Cyprus agreement, time is working against other crucial conditions of a prospective deal. Presidential elections are scheduled in the Republic of Cyprus in February 2018. As President Anastasiades is again likely to be the candidate of his former party, DISY, and with

AKEL appointing its own party candidate, the prospects of continuing their alliance on the Cyprus issue become dimmer the closer the election date comes. Both parties will be tempted to shift to more hard-line positions with the aim of courting the nationalist vote, which is normally concentrated in the smaller “center” parties that have opposed any compromise agreement on the Cyprus issue. Moreover, in spring 2017, new natural gas exploratory drillings are scheduled in the exclusive economic zone of the Republic of Cyprus. As Turkey has disputed the right of the Republic of Cyprus to commission such activities, it is likely to resort to unilateral acts that could derail the negotiation process.

However, it would be futile to expect all parties of the Cyprus dispute to actively promote conflict resolution. Especially given the waning significance of the Cyprus issue and preoccupation with other issues in Greek and Turkish domestic politics, one does not need to exaggerate the costs of conflict resolution. Although Greece and Turkey do not have to take a lead in the process, their consent is crucial as a deal becomes crystallized. The window of opportunity that the collaboration of Anastasiades and Akıncı has created is closing fast, and the moment of truth is approaching. The convergences that both Cypriot leaders have achieved need to be maintained and completed with the help of the international community. The pledge of €3.1 billion in financial aid for both communities by the president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, in the event of a solution is a strong positive message. In the coming weeks, Cypriots will have to make a stronger case about the urgency of turning 2017 into the year for a solution to the Cyprus issue.

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