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Grigoriadis, Ioannis N.

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Cyprus After Elections

Recapturing the Crans Montana Momentum for Peace Negotiations

Ioannis N. Grigoriadis

The beginning of 2018 coincided with elections on both sides of the “Green Line” in Cyprus. The 7 January 2018 parliamentary elections in the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)” and the 28 January–4 February 2018 presidential elections in the Republic of Cyprus reshuffled the Cypriot political landscape. The disillusionment and the fatigue of pro-conflict-resolution forces became clear, and the Cyprus question was relatively low on the agenda of electoral candidates. Nevertheless, the aftermath of the elections finds hardliners and opponents to a UN-brokered peace deal in a weaker position. This provides an opportunity for the resumption of peace negotiations from the point at which they stalled at Crans Montana last July. Both communities should move fast to restore trust and resolve the remaining issues, as international interest should not be taken for granted. Inertia or a new failure in peace negotiations is likely to lead to the end of UN operations in Cyprus, which would boost insecurity across the island.

Two-round presidential elections in the Republic of Cyprus on 28 January and 4 February 2018 as well as parliamentary elections in the internationally unrecognized “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)” on 7 January 2018 have reshaped the political landscape in Cyprus. Despite the minor role that the Cyprus issue played in both electoral campaigns, the post-election political landscape appears more conducive to a solution. The absence of the strongest political party – the right-wing National Unity Party (Ulusal Birlik Partisi, UBP) – from the new coalition government in the “TRNC” and the sound defeat of the hardliner Greek Cypriot presidential candidate, Nicolas Papadopoulos,

improve the political conditions for the resumption and successful conclusion of the inconclusive peace negotiations at Crans Montana.

Parliamentary Elections in the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)”

The results of the 7 January 2018 parliamentary elections in the “TRNC” pointed at the declining hopes for a peace settlement among the Turkish Cypriot population. The Cyprus issue did not feature high in the election campaign, as disenchantment from the recent failure of the latest round of the Cyprus peace negotiations

took hold. Instead, domestic political issues and relations with Turkey were the leading issues. The UBP was able to impose its agenda of strengthening economic and political bonds with Turkey as the key item of the election campaign. This happened despite the extraordinary conditions set under the emergency law declared in Turkey shortly after the abortive coup of 15 July 2016. This tactical move proved very successful. Corruption allegations against the incumbent UBP–Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti, DP) coalition government failed to harm the UBP, which increased its vote share from 23.15 to 35.61 percent and won 21 seats. The vote share of the second-largest party – the Republican Turkish Party (Cumhuriyetçi Türk Partisi, CTP) – sharply fell from 38.36 to 20.95 percent, and they won 12 seats. The newly founded People’s Party (Halkın Partisi, HP) of former chief negotiator Kudret Özersay came in third, winning 17.07 percent and 9 seats. The vote share of the center-left Communal Democracy Party (Toplumcu Demokrasi Partisi, TDP), with the Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı, rose from 7.40 to 8.65 percent and they won 3 seats, whereas the vote share of the right-wing DP fell from 23.15 to 7.82 percent and they gained 3 seats. The New Birth Party (Yeniden Doğuş Partisi, YDP) – claiming to represent the interests of Turkey-born “TRNC” citizens – collected 6.99 percent of the vote and 2 seats. Despite the sharp increase of the UBP’s appeal, the decision of its junior coalition partner, DP, not to extend its partnership with the UBP paved the way for a new multi-party coalition government under Tufan Erhürman, leader of the second-largest party, CTP. In its recently announced program, the coalition government pledged to improve governance structures and deal with corruption without antagonizing Turkish interests in the “TRNC.”

Although Cyprus peace negotiations are considered a prerogative of the president and leader of the Turkish Cypriot community, the government still maintains considerable leverage in smoothening or hard-

ening the environment of the peace negotiations. In fact, the UBP-DP coalition government had proven rather obstructive to the reinforcement of bonds between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots at the civil society level. The discontinuation of regular mass services in Greek Cypriot churches in the north of Cyprus – attended by displaced Greek Cypriots who reside in the south due to “security concerns” – was one example. Attempts to impose tariffs on UN-administered food deliveries from Greek Cypriot authorities toward Greek Cypriots and Maronites still residing in some villages in the north was another. The new coalition government looks as if it will be forthcoming as far as the promotion of confidence-building measures and initiatives aiming to facilitate peace negotiations are concerned.

Table 1
Parliamentary election results
in the “TRNC”

	7/1/2018 (%)	28/7/2013 (%)
UBP	35.61	23.15
CTP	20.95	38.36
HP	17.07	–
TDP	8.65	7.40
DP	7.82	23.15
YDP	6.99	–

Presidential Elections in the Republic of Cyprus

The incumbent president, Nicos Anastasiades, achieved a rather comfortable re-election. In the run-off elections of 4 February, Anastasiades collected 55.99 percent of the vote, while Stavros Malas, an independent candidate supported by AKEL, collected 44.01 percent. In the first round, on 27 January, Anastasiades, who was supported by the center-right Democratic Rally (Dimokratikos Synagermos, DISY) party, had won 35.74 percent of the vote, while Stavros Malas, an independent supported by the left Progressive Party of Working People (Anorthotiko Kinima Ergazomenou Laou, AKEL) won 30.35 percent of the vote.

Nikolas Papadopoulos – leader of the center-right Democratic Party (Dimokratiko Komma, DIKO), who objected most strongly to a compromise on the Cyprus question and even questioned the fundamental premises of a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation – failed to make it to the second round. By collecting 25.74 percent of the vote, despite his long and well-funded electoral campaign, he was the big loser of this election. Two other hardline candidates completed the picture of the leading candidates. The candidate of the far-right neo-Nazi National Popular Front (Ethniko Laiko Metopo, ELAM), Christos Christou, collected 5.65 percent of the vote – a performance that went above expectations and reeled moderate Cypriots – while the former minister and leader of the Citizens’ Alliance (Symmachia Politon) party, Giorgos Lillikas, won a meager 2.18 percent of the vote.

The election result was a personal success for Mr. Anastasiades. He lost only 1.49 percent of the vote, as compared to the 57.48 he had won in the second round of the 2013 presidential elections. His reelection was mainly due to his harsh, but ultimately successful, economic policies, which led to the recovery of the Cypriot economy following the banking crisis, the bank bail-in, and the memorandum agreement of 2012–2013 with the EU authorities. Anastasiades disappointed many of his supporters when he failed to strike a deal in the latest round of Cyprus peace negotiations at Crans Montana, Switzerland, in July 2017. Despite the failure of the negotiations, Anastasiades remains the politician who could use his personal charisma to convince Greek Cypriots of a compromise agreement. Having renewed his popular legitimation, he has the opportunity to convince skeptics of his resolve to solve the Cyprus question.

Beyond the election of Anastasiades, it is important to underline the strong combined performances of the candidates of the two parties that have comprised the backbone of the conflict-resolution process within Greek Cypriot public opinion. Both

DISY and AKEL, which have historically endorsed the peace process and the principle of a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation, collected almost two-thirds of the votes. In contrast to poor electoral performances in the previous 2016 parliamentary elections, DISY and AKEL reconfirmed their positions as the two dominant actors within the Greek Cypriot community with the potential to mobilize Greek Cypriot public opinion in favor of a solution. This points to the fact that the majority of Greek Cypriots would not, in principle, object to a bi-zonal, bi-communal federal solution. The attempt of Papadopoulos to make a new, more nationalistic approach to Cyprus conflict resolution his flagship issue in the election campaign did not pay off. On the other hand, the relatively successful performance of ELAM underlined an alarming radicalization trend among the opponents of a bizonal, bi-communal federation. The election results confirmed that if DISY and AKEL collaborated – and if Anastasiades employed his personal political weight – convincing Greek Cypriots of the necessity for a compromise solution would be possible. Yet, this window of opportunity may not last for long. If the actors miss the post-election opportunity and disenchantment from the peace process turns into cynicism about the futility of peace negotiations, then conflict-resolution prospects will fade again.

Table 2
Presidential election results in the Republic of Cyprus

	27/1/2018 (%)	4/2/2018 (%)
Anastasiades	35.51	55.99
Malas	30.24	44.01
Papadopoulos	25.74	
Christou	5.65	
Lillikas	2.18	

Restoring Trust and the Peace Process Momentum

The failure of the latest negotiations round at Crans Montana, Switzerland, in July 2017

understandably demoralized conflict-resolution supporters. It also damaged the levels of trust between Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders – a precious and indispensable commodity for any breakthrough. Some considered peace deal efforts to be futile because all involved parties appeared more comfortable with the status quo than they were willing to admit publicly. Hence, they would not be ready to take the courageous steps necessary for a compromise agreement. Such views would underestimate the risks that the collapse of the peace process would incur to all involved parties, and Greek and Turkish Cypriots, in particular. On the other hand, one should not underestimate the progress achieved in several chapters of the recent Cyprus peace negotiations, including security. The resumption of the negotiations within the framework set by the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, at Crans Montana remains the optimal option. Deadlocks in security negotiations that stalled the peace talks at Crans Montana could be smoothed by applying a human security-centered approach on issues such as environment, cultural heritage, and governance. Reaching compromise solutions that address the fundamental concerns of all parties and overcoming a zero-sum game mentality that all sides condemn in theory – but not in practice – are essential steps. The election results have pointed at the disenchantment and demoralization of Greek and Turkish Cypriot peace supporters but have also made a possible compromise easier.

Although sharp differences in opinion within the Turkish Cypriot administration and the specter of upcoming presidential elections in the Republic of Cyprus functioned as a pretext not to take the hard but necessary steps toward a solution, both concerns are no longer valid. Turkish Cypriots have now elected a government whose views resonate with those of Mustafa Akıncı. The newly reelected president of the Republic of Cyprus has the popular legitimacy to take the necessary difficult steps and does not have to think while under the Damocles’ sword of upcoming elections. Making the harsh but necessary economic decisions in the beginning of his first term paid off well in the recent elections because there was ample time for the economic measures to have their beneficial effects on the Cypriot economy. Hard but necessary decisions on the Cyprus issue could prove equally wise. Time is working against efforts to achieve a negotiated federal solution, but any outcome other than that, such as partition or the continuation of the *status quo*, would leave both communities worse off. It is also in the interests of both Greece and Turkey to resume and conclude the Cyprus peace negotiations. Otherwise, Cyprus will continue to poison both Greek-Turkish and EU-Turkish relations. The recent escalation in the Greek-Turkish dispute over the Imia/Kardak islets and Turkey’s attempt to obstruct natural gas exploration activities within the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone underline that a negative spillover between the Greek-Turkish and Cyprus disputes remains possible. On their side, both Anastasiades and Akıncı must show the leadership that the world had expected from them but were unable to deliver; they will have to display the commitment and resolve that lacked in the last phase of the recent negotiations round. The decades-long support of the international community could soon expire if it turns out that Greek and Turkish Cypriots are not willing to rise to the occasion. The presumed “comfort” of the current status quo is contingent upon the presence of the UN peacekeeping and good offices missions, the departures of which would dramatically alter the security environment on the island. It is up to the willingness of Anastasiades and Akıncı to conclude an agreement that protects the fundamental interests of all Cypriots.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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