

The EU-Turkey-Cyprus Triangle: "Time for Turkey and Greek Cypriots to Start Talking",

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In Cyprus, leaving things until the last minute, then scrambling to try to get them done as a deadline approaches, is as popular as it is in other Mediterranean cultures. It has cursed several past rounds of talks on reunifying the one million people on the island, divided politically since 1963 and militarily since 1974. With the latest process stalling, the time has come for a radical move that brings Greek Cypriots and Turkey fully into the negotiations.

After holding over 60 tête-à-tête meetings during 16 months, the leaders of the 80 per cent majority Greek Cypriot and 20 per cent minority Turkish Cypriot communities have now launched a new and “intensified” phase of reunification talks. A first three-day session starting on 11 January focused only on governance, with two other negotiating areas – economy and EU affairs – waiting to be discussed in the second round scheduled for 25 January. Time allowing, deliberations on property issue may also take place. But even the successful completion of these talks would still leave unresolved the three remaining thorny issues of territory, security and guarantees and citizenship. The UN has already announced that the leaders will take a break at the end of the month so that Turkish Cypriot leader Talat can start campaigning for re-election in April.

Hopes for achieving a quick convergence on governance were set back when a package of proposals given by Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat to his Greek Cypriot counterpart Demetris Christofias on 7 January was rejected as “unacceptable” three days later in a meeting of Christofias with all Greek Cypriot party leaders. On 12 January, Christofias brought his own package to the table, but his proposals restated his government’s previous positions and did not respond directly to the Turkish Cypriot ones.

The Turkish Cypriots’ ten-item package included broad rights to be given to constituent states in external relations (e.g. signing treaties with third parties), although it also allowed a future president or vice-president to take such agreements to a Constitutional Court before they entered into force. At the same time, the package underlined the single sovereignty principle, while maintaining the “equal status” of the constituent states and the “distinct identity and integrity of both communities” whose relationship is based on “political equality” where one does not claim authority over the other.

One hard-to-implement demand was to grant the same rights – including the four freedoms of movement of goods, capital, services and persons – to Turkish and Greek citizens on the island until Turkey joins the EU. The package also asked for two separately-managed flight information regions (FIRs), local police for each constituent state in addition to a federal force, and legal recognition for past acts of the legislative,

executive or judicial authorities in the north prior to the agreement.

In previous rounds of negotiations, the Greek Cypriot side had already made the key concession of a rotating presidency and vice presidency, with four years as president for the Greek Cypriot leader against two years for the Turkish Cypriot. The Turkish Cypriot proposals demanded a three-to-two-year ratio. The Turkish Cypriot side demanded that there be a 12-member Cabinet with a seven-to-five ratio, instead of the Greek Cypriot proposal of a nine-member cabinet with a six-to-three ratio. The package wanted to grant veto rights to the president and vice president.

The proposals demanded enhanced representation for Turkish Cypriots in the legislative and administrative institutions of the new state. Passing laws would need qualified voting that effectively include the possibility of one community vetoing proceedings by walking out, and Turkish Cypriots would be over-represented in relation to their population in certain governmental institutions. At the same time, a key Turkish Cypriot concession was to accept Greek Cypriot demands for simultaneous cross-voting in presidential elections and an eventual 20 per cent weighted vote granted to Greek Cypriots when voting for Turkish Cypriot candidates.

In addition to the contents of the package – very unrealistic in some parts, but in others clearly the product of hard-fought compromises between Turkish doves and hawks – the way it was presented clouded its chances. Even though it is prefaced with a statement that “insofar as the internal balance of the proposal is observed, the Turkish Cypriot side is ready to consider any constructive suggestion that may come from the Greek Cypriot side,” presentations in Turkish media smacked of a “take-it-or-leave-it” attitude. For sure, Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot side could help the process by toning down anything that can sound like a demand for a confederal arrangement, which fuels Greek Cypriot fears that Turkey is trying to legitimise the current de facto state in the north.

Despite the Greek Cypriot parties’ dismissal of the Turkish Cypriot proposals, Christofias has gone on with the talks, apparently understanding that the Greek Cypriot side risks seeming the less constructive side in the eyes of the international community. Having rejected the last U.N. plan for a settlement in 2004 – a plan strongly backed by the EU and the U.S. – the Greek Cypriots cannot once again risk another public relations failure.

And the Greek Cypriots seem to have realized that time is running out to reach a deal. The Turkish Cypriot side had been asking for months to speed up the negotiations, yet Christofias only agreed to intensified talks now, when the April elections amongst Turkish Cypriots are already looming ominously over the process.

There is still time to get out of this impasse. The Turks and Greek Cypriots must establish broader channels of communication through which misinformation can be corrected and prejudices on both sides overcome to secure the confidence needed for a comprehensive federal deal.

As the larger party (not to mention the one maintaining a garrison on north Cyprus of at least 21,000 soldiers, or, according to the Greek Cypriots, 43,000 soldiers), it would make sense for Turkey to take the lead in reaching out broadly to Greek Cypriots and generating a minimum of trust. The Greek Cypriots should not miss that chance if the invitation comes. They must find a way to start talking directly to Turkey. Turkey has already offered direct talks with Greek Cypriots, on the condition that the Turkish Cypriot leader and the Greek government are also involved in a balanced way. This could even be in the form of Christofias and Talat visiting Ankara, and then Athens, in turn. The Greek Cypriots have rejected this format for a meeting, although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with it. Greece and the Greek Cypriots may not want Athens to be involved, but historically, it has always been linked to the problem and can be part of the solution. Even today, there are probably as many Greek flags in the Republic of Cyprus as there are Turkish flags flying next to the Turkish Cypriot flag, and Christofias is heading to Athens next week for special consultations on Cyprus with Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou.

The Greek Cypriot argument that this will pave the way to partition by somehow promoting the status of the Turkish Cypriot leader is not a strong argument, and certainly misses the point of what is at stake. If this round of talks fails, that will be the surest route to partition, resulting in great losses for Cypriots and all others affected by the dispute.

The mutual lack of understanding between Greek Cypriots and the Turks of Turkey was amply voiced by Greek Cypriot coalition-partner DIKO's deputy head Andreas Angelides when he said last week, "Turkey has no reason to give us anything". Greek Cypriots seem blind to the fact that Turkey feels the same about them, since Greek Cypriots appear to be sitting pretty in the EU, from where they block nearly half of Turkey's EU membership negotiating chapters.

People should not fool themselves: further postponements of a settlement will have dire consequences for all sides. A breakthrough that brings the Turkish government and the Republic of Cyprus into the same room is now urgent. After so many decades of delays to a solution on the bicomunal, bizonal basis first set out in 1977, the problem is that if indeed there is to be yet another postponement, the basis for any such reunification will have been completely whittled away.

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