

# THE CYPRUS PROBLEM AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

George Vassiliou

---

## Abstract

*In the first part the author presents the arguments as to what membership would imply.*

**Supporters** considered that with accession we could address the two major worries of Greek Cypriots: (a) the functionality of the solution, (b) the threat from Turkey. **Opponents** believed that: (a) Cyprus will enjoy the full support of the EU but instead, the EU's main objective now is how to help the Turkish Cypriots and not to 'punish' the Greek Cypriots as they now claim, (b) There will be prospects for a 'European' solution. The EU disagrees; it considers the Plan compatible with the *acquis* and made it clear that it will not take any initiative to help solve the problem.

*We need to take action now, before and not after the December Council, says the author. We need at last to spell out what we want and never forget Makarios' doctrine to demand what is *feasible* to achieve and not what we *desire*. We cannot afford not to take action now; the Union can afford to wait but not Cyprus. In twenty years' time, when Turkey might be joining we may end switching from the *de facto* to the *de jure* partition.*

---

Cyprus is a full member of the European Union since 1 May 2004. This is undoubtedly the greatest achievement of the Republic of Cyprus since independence. We are a full and equal member of the European Community; we can take advantage of the many opportunities membership offers and for the first time since the invasion in 1974 feel really safe.

Practically every Cypriot supported the accession mainly for political but also for economic reasons. The reasons for support, however, were not necessarily identical. There were many common elements but also many differences.

Probably the most important difference was the assessment as to what accession to the Union would mean in terms of a solution of the Cyprus problem, i.e., whether

(a) we could reject the Plan at the referendum and expect that as full members

- of the Union we could achieve a better solution, or
- (b) support the Annan Plan knowing that accession to the Union would contribute to the success of the proposed solution while rejection of the Plan would create problems in our relations with the Union and offer no guarantees whatsoever of a better plan with the EU's help.

Let us look at the arguments of both sides.

**Supporters** of the Annan Plan pointed out that membership of the Union would help address the two major worries of the Greek Cypriots: firstly, the functionality of the solution; second, the threat from Turkey. Let us consider these issues in some more detail.

- (a) Within the EU the functionality of the solution would be ensured. The two communities would be encouraged to cooperate as the Union itself is based on the principle of compromise. As a rule, whenever a controversy arises, after some initial period, a compromise is always reached acceptable to all parties involved. It is for this reason that the supporters of the Plan considered that whatever the differences between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots within the Union they would end up cooperating. Even if they were to continue disagreeing, however, the Union would still take its decisions, which Cyprus would have to implement, whether they like them or not. Faced therefore with the perspective of implementing resolutions in the taking of which we would not participate we will realise that it is to our advantage to reach our own compromises.
- (b) The role of Turkey in Cyprus would change now that Turkey has decided that its future lies in the EU. Prior to that there were several efforts by the Turkish governments to create a new world centre based on Turkey and incorporate some of the Arab countries and the Republics with Moslem population of the ex-Soviet Union. All these efforts failed and Turkey recognised that only by acceding to the Union can its future development be ensured. The best example of this attitude is the recent controversy concerning the adoption of the new criminal code. The Turkish government wanted to include a clause making adultery a crime and the Union reacted strongly to these intentions. Despite statements to the contrary the Turkish government realised that it had no option but to call an urgent meeting of the National Assembly and adopt the criminal code as the Union prescribed and not as the political leadership of Turkey wanted.

The road towards membership to the Union implies the democratisation of Turkey, the full respect of human rights of all, including rights for religious

minorities, the subordination of the military to the political leaders, the adoption of a friendly policy towards neighbours, etc. This is why Greece, realising that this ambition of Turkey served Greece's national interests, has wholeheartedly supported granting a date for the beginning of negotiations with Turkey. In the same way for Cyprus, the fact that Turkey was now determined to do everything possible in order to join the Union, was the best guarantee that it would end up in normalising relations with the Republic and support the creation of a genuine federation.

**Opponents** of the Annan Plan also used the prospect of membership as probably the strongest argument in favour of the rejection. They claimed that:

- (a) The Republic of Cyprus will be stronger after it joins the Union. Nobody will be able to challenge its independence and sovereignty and will have a veto, in the same way as the other members, on all issues and particularly on issues relating to Turkey.
- (b) The accession to the Union will make the Annan Plan obsolete and lead to a 'European solution' of the problem, with EU initiative, in other words the immediate free settlement of all refugees, withdrawal of all foreign troops, repatriation of settlers, etc.
- (c) The accession of Cyprus to the Union will oblige Turkey to change its attitude realising that Cyprus is not alone anymore. Furthermore, the desire of Turkey to join the Union will make it liable to pressures by the EU in order to accept aspects of a solution that it was not prepared to accept before.

The above arguments had a significant influence on the attitude of Cypriots, they undoubtedly influenced the results and contributed towards Cyprus joining the Union without a solution.

We are now six months after accession and the key question is how membership is influencing the perspective of a solution of the Cyprus problem. We will examine in sequence:

- Attitude of the Union towards Cyprus after the referendum
- The prospects of a 'European solution' and of an EU initiative
- The perspective of the EU exercising pressure on Turkey concerning Cyprus.

#### ***Attitude of the Union Towards Cyprus After the Referendum***

The first reaction of the Commission after the results of the referendum were made known was one of anger. Both the Commission and the various members of the

Council made it abundantly clear that they felt they were let down. The Helsinki Summit's decision in 1999 was taken based on the facts of the continuous Turkish objections to a solution. On the other hand, the EU members were convinced and had assurances all along that the Greek Cypriots would support the efforts of the UN's Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, - an expectation that did not materialise.

It is not important, in relation to this article, to prove whether, in addition to President Clerides, President Papadopoulos also made such a commitment or not. The fact remains that the Union was under the impression that Greek Cypriots would accept the UN proposals and therefore they felt let down. As a result we witness a negative attitude and a tendency to isolate or ignore Cyprus in the Union.

Many Greek Cypriots believed that the Union wanted to 'punish' us for our negative vote in the referendum. In my opinion this has never been the case. It is true that they were upset with the results, but they respected the outcome. At the same time, however, they made it clear that they wanted to help the Turkish Cypriots who had voted 'yes' and who were until that moment isolated and received no help whatsoever. The desire to help the Turkish Cypriots was expressed through the decision to provide an initial financial assistance of 256 million Euros for the years 2004-2007. The Union's officials insist that they do not even consider recognising the 'North'. They are fully aware, however, that the Turkish Cypriots have a much lower standard of living than the Greek Cypriots and are suffering as a result of their isolation for so many years. Thus the EU attitude is not 'to punish' the Greek Cypriots but to help the Turkish Cypriots. The fact that some supporters of the 'No' vote try to present this EU attitude as 'punishment', is not in anyway affecting the determination of the Union to find ways to support the Turkish Cypriots.

#### ***The Perspective of a 'European' Solution and an EU Initiative***

Several politicians promoted the idea that accession to the Union would lead to a radical overhaul of the Annan Plan, to the abolition, for example, of all constraints on the return of refugees, etc., thus ensuring a 'European' solution. We are now six months after the accession and there is no indication whatsoever that the EU is trying to promote a 'European' plan or any plan at all. On the contrary, it has been repeatedly pointed out that, as far as the Commission is concerned, the Annan Plan is indeed a European plan, as there was no contradiction between the various points of the Annan Plan and the basic concepts of the Union. Even on issues for which a derogation was requested originally, the Commission insisted and the UN agreed to change its position and make no provision for permanent derogations. It is significant in this respect that in Protocol 10 of the Agreement it is clearly stated that "... the European Union is ready to accommodate the terms of such a settlement in line with the principles on which the EU is founded ...".

Coming now to the issue of a European initiative the truth is that there has never been such a perspective. The EU as a matter of policy avoids getting involved in national conflicts. Thus the Union never tried to solve the Irish or the Basque problem or interfere in the conflict between the UK and Spain on Gibraltar. France was one of the founders of the Union but still there has never been an effort on behalf of the Union to contribute towards addressing the conflict between Corsican nationalists and the French government.

The EU therefore is not and will not take any initiative to help solve conflicts of member countries. Furthermore, they made it clear that the Union is firmly against nationalist policies. There are two recent examples to this extent: those of Slovakia and Croatia. In both countries their nationalist leaders - Meciar and Tujman - followed policies that were not considered compatible with the Union's principles. The EU isolated them and waited until there was a change in policy before Slovakia was accepted in the Union and Croatia was considered as a possible candidate for opening negotiations.

In the case of Cyprus, the EU has clearly pointed out that it is not happy with the impasse, that they would like to see a solution, but at the same time they are insisting that it is not their job to solve the Cyprus problem. They say that it is up to the Government of the Republic to state the points they wish to see modified on the Annan Plan and try to secure the support of the United Nations for a new round of negotiations if that is possible. In such a case, the EU is willing to support a UN effort but under no circumstances would they take the initiative. The ball therefore is in our yard, it is our responsibility to start the effort and it is an illusion to think that if we do nothing the Union will interfere in one way or another.

### ***The Union Will Now Exercise Pressure on Turkey to Solve the Cyprus Problem***

This is probably the greatest illusion and has been very cruelly demolished by the statements of Commissioner Verheugen in Ankara and the position the Commission is taking towards Turkey's application. The reactions of some of the Cyprus media and politicians expressing their clear dissatisfaction with the position taken is the best proof that it was a grave miscalculation to think that the Union would try to oblige Turkey to solve the problem. The Union was exercising pressure on Turkey to accept the Annan Plan which was considered fair. To that extent they made everything possible and conveyed a very clear message to Turkey that without a change in policy they should not hope to get a favourable position by EU members. From the moment however, that Turkey accepted the Annan Plan and advised the Turkish Cypriots to vote favourably, which they did, Turkey is claiming that it has fulfilled its obligations. Thus, whenever, on our side, a statement is made that the EU should press Turkey, the answer by Turkey is that they did everything they were asked to do and that it is now the Greek Cypriots' responsibility to act.

It is not surprising therefore that it was repeatedly clarified that the solution of the Cyprus problem was not part of the Copenhagen criteria. The Commission, in its Report published on 6 October, proposed the start of accession negotiations with Turkey with the Cyprus problem unsolved. It is significant that in its reference to Cyprus it makes a specific reference to the European Council's 18 June Decision which "... welcomed the positive contribution of the Turkish Government to the efforts of the UN Secretary General to achieve a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem". Furthermore, in its recommendations to the Council and the Parliament it highlighted that "... Turkey has and continues to actively support efforts to resolve the Cyprus problem; in particular Turkey agreed to the solution put forward in the peace plan of the UN Secretary-General."

### **What Should be Done and When?**

In the preceding pages it has been demonstrated that membership in the Union is not changing the facts on the ground. The EU is prepared to leave things as they are, will not take any initiative on its own, nor exercise any further pressure on Turkey, it will certainly cooperate with the UN, however, if and when a new initiative begins.

Let us now examine the perspectives of a solution and the options available to us, taking into account the fact that we are now full members of the EU.

Practically everybody on our side keeps repeating that the rejection of the Annan Plan does not in any way imply that the Cypriot people do not wish a solution of the problem. If we therefore acknowledge the desire of the great majority for a solution, the question is: what should be done and when?

If anything, membership in the Union increases the pressure on the Greek Cypriot side to do something as early as possible. The financial assistance and the prospects of direct trade with the Turkish Cypriots, in one way or another, clearly indicate the position of the Union. Furthermore, the regulations on intra-Cyprus trade through the 'Green Line', the free movement of EU citizens all over the island, even if they arrive through unauthorised points of entry, contribute to the need for action.

Immediately ahead of us we have the perspective of the Council's December decision on whether to give a date for the commencement of negotiations with Turkey. The Cyprus government considers that if there is going to be any initiative it should be after December and not before. On the contrary, my opinion is that these next few months are ideally suited for raising the problem of Cyprus and insisting on a positive attitude by Turkey. This however implies that we should have

specified clearly what we want and ensure that these requests are more or less acceptable to the international community. In such a case we would have had a good chance of securing a positive reference to the Cyprus problem in the Council's resolution in December. We could justifiably expect that guarantees for the implementation of any agreement and the aspects of security would be adequately spelled out. Unfortunately, if we want to be realistic the Government does not seem willing to make any move in this direction at present. Therefore, most probably, no developments must be expected before next year, which means that we will have lost this unique opportunity of December.

The only option left, therefore, is to specify clearly what we want so that negotiations can take place. In such a case we must never forget the famous statement by Archbishop Makarios that there is a difference between what we '**desire** to achieve' and what we '**can** achieve', i.e., what is feasible. The speech by President Papadopoulos at the General Assembly of the United Nations outlining what Greek Cypriots desire, made no reference to the Annan Plan. The Turkish Cypriots, however, have clearly stated that they accept the Annan Plan, but might be willing to consider a number of modifications that would not affect the substance of the Plan. The fact that we are members of the Union is not making the prospects better. The EU insists on remaining neutral and they keep repeating that "they have accepted the Annan Plan; if we wish to make any changes we are free to do so as long as the two sides agree to that". Whichever way we look into the subject therefore it is obvious that the responsibility to take an initiative lies with us.

The final question that we have to answer is: when is the best time to move? This is related to the assessment of **whether time works in our favour or against**. In other words, whether, having succeeded in becoming members of the Union we can wait, hoping that later Turkey will change its attitude and be willing to accept a solution that will be radically different from what has been offered.

I am afraid that this would be wishful thinking as time works against us and not in our favour. Already, since the accession, we have seen an unprecedented increase of construction activity in the occupied areas and what is even more important is the readiness of foreigners to purchase properties in the 'North'. We have complained and protested but it is doubtful whether all these protests will have any effect. If nothing happens in the immediate future then the construction boom will continue and this will dramatically change the basic facts concerning the Greek Cypriot properties in the occupied areas. At the same time an effort is being made in the North to build new hotels and develop their ability to attract tourists. There is no doubt that if things remain as they are the number of beds in the occupied areas will increase at a dramatic pace and instead of cooperation between the Republic and the occupied areas we will have fierce competition which will hurt us all. At the

same time the number of settlers will keep on increasing while many Turkish Cypriots, particularly well educated young persons, may take advantage of their EU citizenship and move on to the European member countries.

We should also point out the great significance of the recent decision by the Cyprus High Court to order the return of the property of a Turkish Cypriot that is at present occupied by Greek Cypriot refugees. In the pre-referendum period it had been repeatedly pointed out by the supporters of the 'Yes' vote that in the case of a 'No' vote, there was a real danger of while Greek Cypriots will remain refugees, Turkish Cypriots would be entitled to return to their properties and take possession thereof. This danger was ignored but the recent decision by the High Court completely changes the situation. The danger of a very serious social upheaval is becoming evident, despite efforts to overcome the recent High Court decision.

All the above clearly indicate that time is not working in favour of Greek Cypriots and what is even worse is that both the international community but also many Cypriots get used to the realities of the status quo. The argument by some, that Turkey needs to solve the Cyprus problem, if she wants to accede to the Union, is not a consolation, because the perspective of Turkey being ready to join the Union is at least fifteen to twenty years away. It is very difficult to imagine that in about twenty years from today, if we leave things as they are, there would be a possibility for a solution other than the legalisation of partition.

If we want to reunite the island we have to do something now; in the next months, at the very latest in the next year. Otherwise, we are simply accepting the *de facto* and later the *de jure* partition under the worst possible conditions. The fact that Cyprus is a member of the Union does not eliminate this perspective.