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The island of Cyprus, which has been frequently referred to as a “diplomatic graveyard” and an island of “missed opportunities”, has once again come to the attention of the international community at the end of April. President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) Ersin Tatar, Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades and the foreign ministers of the three guarantor states; Turkey, Greece and the UK came together under the auspices of UN Secretary General António Guterres at the informal 5+UN meeting in Geneva on 27-29 April 2021.

The purpose of the informal meeting, which brought together the two sides in Cyprus and the three guarantor powers around the same table for the first time since the collapse of the latest round of talks aiming to find a lasting comprehensive solution to the decades-long Cyprus issue in Crans Montana in July 2017, was exploring whether common ground exists between the two sides for launching a new process. The meeting was held in an informal setting to allow for a frank and open exchange between the parties. As it can be recalled, the five-party conference in Crans Montana, widely viewed as the last best chance for a settlement according to a bi-zonal and bi-communal federal formula broke down at a crucial point due to the intransigence and maximalist demands of the Greek Cypriot side. Since then, initiatives aimed at the resumption of the Cyprus settlement talks have proved tenuous amid rising tension over hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Understanding the Turkish Cypriot Side’s New Vision

The Turkish Cypriot side went to Geneva with a new vision for a two-state solution based on sovereign equality. Indicating that the federal formula which has been negotiated for over 50 years has been exhausted, the Turkish Cypriot side argues that cooperation between two states on the basis of sovereign equality and equal international status is the only realistic and viable solution to the Cyprus issue. Turkish Cypriot side’s two-state vision based on sovereign equality enjoys strong support from Ankara. Meanwhile, arguing for a solution based on a bi-zonal and bi-communal federation, the Greek Cypriot side insists that the talks should continue from the point left off in Crans Montana.

The failure of the latest round of Cyprus settlement talks, which were viewed as the best opportunity for finding a lasting solution to the half-century long Cyprus issue after the Annan Plan, has created frustration and disappointment on part of the Turkish Cypriots. Despite the convergences reached on crucial issues thanks to the constructive and flexible approach displayed by Ankara and the TRNC, the Greek Cypriot side’s insistence on “zero troops, zero guarantees” had led to the breakdown of the latest round of settlement talks after ten days of negotiations at the Swiss resort of Crans Montana.

The collapse of the talks in Crans Montana was a stark reminder of the fact that the crux of the Cyprus problem has remained unchanged: The refusal on part of the Greek



Cypriot side to accept the Turkish Cypriots as equal partners and co-owners of the island and to share power and prosperity with them. This realisation, coupled with the deteriorating relations between Turkey and the EU throughout 2019 and 2020 due to rising tension in the Eastern Mediterranean over hydrocarbon exploration rights and the sanctions rhetoric, has led to a paradigm change in Turkish Cypriot side's official stance on the Cyprus issue. This shift was evident in the partial opening of the fenced-off area of Varosha/Maraş, which had previously been regarded as part of a comprehensive settlement, under the administration of the TRNC in October 2020. Moreover, the victory of the National Unity Party candidate and Prime Minister Ersin Tatar known for his support for a two-state solution over independent candidate and incumbent President Mustafa Akıncı in the October 2020 presidential elections, largely perceived as a referendum between the two competing solution models, albeit by a small margin has further confirmed the departure from a federal solution. Besides, Ankara has confirmed its support for a two-state solution at the highest level on numerous occasions. Turkey's National Security Council on 31 March 2021 formally endorsed the two-state model as an essential element in attempts aimed at an equitable, comprehensive and lasting solution in Cyprus.

Reunification under the umbrella of a bi-zonal and bi-communal federation (BBF) with political equality has been framework for a solution since the High Level Agreements of 1977 and 1979. All initiatives in the context of the UN have since then focused on the pursuit of reaching a settlement on the basis of a BBF. Despite the overall agreement on the BBF as the general framework for a solution, the two sides have held diverging accounts as to what BBF would entail in real practical terms. BBF has come to take on different meanings based on the preferred solution models of the two communities on the island. As suggested by Faustmann, the Turkish Cypriot side has interpreted the BBF, as a loose federation, verging on a confederation of two largely sovereign states while the Greek Cypriot side has advocated for a strong central government within a federal state.¹

It is important to note that a solution on the basis of a BBF has never been the top preference of the either community on the island. A majority of the Turkish Cypriot people would want to see the Cyprus issue resolved on the basis of a two-state model, whereas the preferred solution for a majority of Greek Cypriots would be a unitary state. Given the mutually exclusive nature of the objectives pursued by the two sides, BBF has come to identify a compromise formula tolerable to the two communities on the island.

The constant failure of the negotiations aimed at reunification according to a federal formula with political equality, has made it clear that the Greek Cypriot side, having hijacked the "Republic of Cyprus", has no incentive to share power with the Turkish Cypriots and thus reach a compromise solution. The EU's historic mistake by admitting the Greek Cypriot Administration as a fully-fledged member at the expense of its fundamental values and international law has further reduced Greek Cypriot side's willingness to compromise and left the EU with effectively no leverage over the Greek

¹ Hubert Faustmann, "Can the Cyprus Problem be Solved?", *The Cyprus Review*, Vol. 5, No:2, Fall 2013, p.117



Cypriot Administration. Enjoying a monopoly over the island's international status and natural resources, misusing the EU's decision-making procedures when feeling threatened, the Greek Cypriot Administration is not genuinely interested in establishing a new partnership with the Turkish Cypriots under a federal formula.

What's New in the Cyprus Equation?

The endeavour for redefining the parameters and the *modus operandi* of the Cyprus settlement talks will not be easy. The first challenge will be convincing the Greek Cypriot side of the merits of a two-state solution. Then the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, which hold a veto right, will have to give their seal of approval so that the mandate of the UN Good Offices mission could be changed in line with the new parameters. Despite question marks surrounding these, one thing is clear: fresh thinking is required to resolve the Cyprus issue. For, the Greek Cypriot side lacking genuine political will to share power with the Turkish Cypriot side, has for too long used the negotiations for a settlement based on BBF as a cover to perpetuate the *status quo* in its favour.

UN Secretary General Guterres' remarks urging the parties to be creative and indicating that "this time must be different" have been interpreted as encouraging signals.^{2,3} UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, during the press conference on his priorities for the year ahead on 28 January 2021, while recalling that his current mandate made reference to a federal solution, indicated his openness to listen to the respective views of the sides, leaving an open door for the parties to bring up alternative proposals for a solution.⁴ Moreover, Guterres voiced his readiness to convey to the Security Council should a common understanding emerge for "enlarging the scope of negotiations".⁵

In addition, there is reason to believe that the UK, a guarantor power and one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, could be motivated to adopt a more independent and flexible approach towards the Cyprus issue after Brexit. For, as a third country since it formally left EU membership on 31 January 2020, the UK is no longer obliged to align with the common positions and joint declarations under EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Prior to the Geneva meeting, the Turkish Cypriot side has voiced expectations that London could act in a more neutral manner to ensure that both Greek and Turkish Cypriots were treated in a balanced way. Moreover, British newspaper Sunday Express reported that according to Whitehall sources the UK was

² Emma Farge, "U.N. chief urges "be creative" as Cyprus talks open", *Reuters*, 27 April 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/un-chief-urges-be-creative-cyprus-talks-open-2021-04-27/> on 3 June 2021.

³ "Cyprus talks may resume in UN-led informal meeting", *Daily Sabah*, 20 January 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/cyprus-talks-may-resume-in-un-led-informal-meeting> on 4 June 2021.

⁴ Antonio Guterres, "Secretary-General's press conference on his Priorities for 2021", *United Nations Secretary-General*, 28 January 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2021-01-28/secretary-generals-press-conference-his-priorities-for-2021> on 4 June 2021.

⁵ *ibid.*



considering recognising the TRNC as an independent state.⁶ In addition, a staunch supporter of the two-state formula, former British Secretary of State Jack Straw has urged London to start direct flights to the TRNC.⁷

TRNC'S Six-Point Roadmap for a Cyprus Settlement

The informal meeting in Geneva meeting presented an important opportunity for the Turkish Cypriot side to explain its new vision based on sovereign equality to the stakeholders of the Cyprus issue. On the second day of the Geneva meeting, TRNC President Tatar put forward a six-point roadmap for translating the Turkish Cypriot side's sovereign equality vision into action. As a first step under the roadmap, the UN Secretary General will be tasked with taking an initiative for the Security Council to adopt a resolution securing the equal international status and sovereign equality of the two sides. It is argued that such a resolution will form the basis for the establishment of a cooperative relationship between the two states. As a second step, once their equal international status and sovereign equality is ensured, the two states are to start negotiations on their future relationship as well as on property, security, border adjustments and EU matters. The negotiations would be supported by the guarantor states and when deemed appropriate by the EU, as an observer. It is stated that the two states would mutually recognise each other and the guarantor states are to support that. As a last step, it is envisaged that any settlement reached during the negotiations would be submitted for approval in separate simultaneous referenda in the two states.⁸

Given the diametrically opposed official positions of the two sides, expectations for a breakthrough during the three-day informal Geneva meeting were low on both sides. On the third and last day of the talks, UN Secretary General Guterres announced that not enough common ground was found between the two sides to allow for the launch of formal negotiations and stated that the parties agreed to reconvene again to make a fresh attempt.⁹ Although no firm date has yet been set, as suggested by the UN Secretary General a second 5+UN meeting could take place in two to three months' time.

The seventh UN Secretary General steering the efforts to resolve the intractable Cyprus issue, Guterres is expected to engage in shuttle diplomacy both with the two sides and the three guarantor powers and try to find ways to bridge the diametrically opposed positions of the parties. At this point, none of the parties want to assume the political responsibility for walking away from the negotiation table, therefore the 5+UN process

⁶ David Maddox, "Britain urged to use Brexit freedoms to recognise North Cyprus as a sovereign country", *Sunday Express*, 24 April 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1427534/North-cyprus-officially-recognised-brexite-britain> on 31 May 2021

⁷ "Ex-UK foreign secretary proposes 'two-state solution' to Cyprus issue", TRT World, 27 March 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/ex-uk-foreign-secretary-proposes-two-state-solution-to-cyprus-issue-45366> on 2 June 2021.

⁸ "Turkish Cypriot Proposal for a Sustainable Settlement [İşte 6 maddelik öneriler]", *BRTK*, 28 April 2021. Retrieved from <https://brtk.net/iste-6-maddelik-oneriler/> on 3 June 2021.

⁹ António Guterres, "Opening remarks at press conference following the informal 5+1 meeting on Cyprus", *UN*, 29 April 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2021-04-29/opening-press-remarks-following-informal-51-meeting-cyprus> on 2 June 2021.



is likely to linger on with no realistic chance of a breakthrough under the present circumstances. The announcement that the parties would reconvene in a few months' time is seen as an effort aimed at keeping up appearances in the hope for a more favourable political climate.

Despite the outcome, the Geneva meeting proved pivotal for the Turkish Cypriot side's new vision to be put on record by the UN Secretary General. Evaluating the Geneva meeting in a joint press conference with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, TRNC President Tatar stressed that there was no point in starting formal negotiations before TRNC's equal international status was confirmed. For his part, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu criticised the Greek Cypriot side for failing to bring new proposals to the table and expressed Ankara's determination to support the Turkish Cypriot side's new vision for a two-state solution based on sovereign equality.¹⁰

The Cyprus Conundrum in Turkey-EU Relations

Absent in the informal Geneva meeting was the EU. The EU had requested to join the 5+UN informal meeting in its capacity as an observer to the previous editions of the five-party Conference on Cyprus. However, the UN did not extend an official invitation to the EU after the Turkish Cypriot side voiced rightful concerns over its impartiality due to Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration being EU members.

As put by former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt ahead of the 5+UN informal meeting, "The tragedy was when in 2004 the Greek Cypriots voted down the Annan Plan. The Turkish Cypriots supported it."¹¹ The EU's asymmetric use of conditionality under intense pressure from Athens has resulted in a divided island with the Greek Cypriot Administration as its sole representative – as argued by the EU- accede to the EU. In a move still regretted as a huge historic mistake by numerous esteemed EU policy-makers, by admitting the Greek Cypriot side as a member despite its rejection of the Annan Plan, the EU has imported a territorial dispute into its ranks. Once in the EU, the Greek Cypriot side has wasted no time to upload its policy preferences regarding the Cyprus issue onto the EU level. Not only has it blocked the attempts to end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots, but it has also emerged as a key veto player in Turkey's EU accession process. Today, the opening of a total number of 14 chapters and the provisional closing of all chapters in Turkey's EU accession negotiations remains suspended as a result of the strategic mistake the EU had committed by admitting the Greek Cypriot Administration as a member prior to a solution to the Cyprus issue.

¹⁰ Behlül Çetinkaya, Nazlı Yüzbaşıoğlu, "Dışişleri Bakanı Çavuşoğlu: KKTC'nin iki devletli çözüm vizyonuna destek olmaya devam edeceğiz", *Anadolu Agency*, 29 April 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/disisleri-bakani-cavusoglu-kktcnin-iki-devletli-cozum-vizyonuna-destek-olmaya-devam-edecegiz/2224608> on 2 June 2021.

¹¹ @carlbildt (Carl Bildt), "The tragedy was when in 2004 the Greek Cypriots voted down the Annan Plan. The Turkish Cypriots supported it. Much would have been much better for Flag of Cyprus and the entire Mediterranean today if that hadn't happened. And 2017 in Crans Montana was another missed opportunity.", *Twitter*, 27 April 2021. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/carlbildt/status/1386954207362682880?lang=en> on 2 June 2021.



The dire effects of this mistake are being felt on wide-ranging areas which go well beyond Turkey's accession negotiations and essentially hurt the EU's collective interests by undermining the potential of Turkey-EU cooperation in vital domains such as energy and security. Turkey's potential participation in the projects under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which is considered vital to the EU's quest for strategic autonomy, has become the latest casualty to the unilateral membership of the Greek Cypriot Administration. The recent discoveries of considerable hydrocarbon deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean have further complicated the situation. Initially seen as a blessing, the associated wealth of which could help bring the two sides closer, East Med hydrocarbons have entered the Cyprus equation as a destabilising factor due to the Greek Cypriot Administration side's unilateral steps. Disregarding the legitimate rights of the Turkish Cypriots and acting as the sole owner of the island's natural resources, the Greek Cypriot side has turned down proposals foreseeing the establishment of a bi-communal committee for joint exploitation of offshore hydrocarbons and has entered into agreements with littoral states aimed at excluding Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots from the energy equation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Viewing the steps Turkey took to defend its own interests within international law and those of the Turkish Cypriots in pejorative terms and backing Greek Cypriot narratives under "Union solidarity" the EU imposed a series of sanctions on Turkey since July 2019.

Progress in the Cyprus dossier holds paramount importance for the "positive agenda" the European Council proposed to overcome the tension characterising the relations in the last two years and put Turkey-EU relations on a more cooperative track. Sustainable de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean is stated as the most important parameter which will be decisive in operationalising the steps envisaged under the positive agenda; namely launching the talks aimed at the modernisation of the Customs Union, initiating additional high-level dialogues with Turkey on public health, climate, counter-terrorism and regional issues and enhancing people-to-people contacts and mobility – as an indirect reference to visa liberalisation.¹² The European Council convening on 24-25 June 2021 is set to revert to the issue and decide on additional steps in the aforementioned areas.

References to the "progressive, proportional and reversible" character of the positive agenda and the emphasis on EU's readiness to resort to all the instruments (i.e. both carrots and sticks) in its disposal as outlined in the joint report presented to the Council by the High Representative and the Commission in March 2021 creates the impression that Turkish foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean will be under constant review by the EU. It is likely that certain EU Member States could try to exert indirect pressure on the Turkish Cypriot side through Turkey. The risk that Turkey could come under increasing pressure to review its support for a two-state solution based on sovereign equality was also pronounced by Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu at the joint press conference after the Geneva talks.¹³ Greek Cypriot leader Anastasiades, in an interview with Euronews a month before the June European Council, where EU leaders are set to

¹² European Council, "Statement of the Members of the European Council", SN 18/21, Brussels, 25 March 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48976/250321-vc-euco-statement-en.pdf> on 2 June 2021.

¹³ Behlül Çetinkaya, Nazlı Yüzbaşıoğlu, *ibid.*



discuss relations with Turkey and possibly agree on the next steps to translate the positive agenda into practice, signalled his intention to veto the steps under the positive agenda, unless Ankara gave up its demand for a two-state solution.¹⁴

We hope that the attempt to link the Cyprus settlement process with the positive agenda will be countered by Member States which hold a more balanced view on the issue and have acted as moderating forces in relations with Turkey, and that common sense will prevail. If this is not the case, the positive agenda risks becoming hostage to the strategic mistake the EU had made by admitting a divided island to its ranks. More importantly, given the EU's waning influence on Turkey mainly because of the weakening of the accession perspective due to political blockages and the tendency to treat Turkey as a strategic partner/rival rather than a candidate country destined for EU membership, the EU has been left with effectively no leverage over Turkey. It is vital that the EU prevents the latest opportunity to advance Turkey-EU relations along a positive trajectory from being derailed because of the strategic mistake it made years ago.

¹⁴ Efi Koutsokosta, "Nicos Anastasiades looks to veto the EU's 'positive agenda' with Turkey", *Euronews*, 25 May 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/25/nicos-anastasiades-looks-to-veto-the-eu-s-positive-agenda-with-turkey> on 2 June 2021.

