



Cyprus – a way out of the stalemate?

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April 2006

A rare chink of light in the gloomy Cyprus situation is the agreement, just reached, between Tassos Papadopoulos, the President of the Republic of Cyprus, and his Turkish Cypriot counterpart, Mehmet Ali Talat to meet in Nicosia. Their talks will be confined to talks to discussing the fate of more than 2,000 Greek and Turkish Cypriots missing since the 1974 Greek Cypriot coup and the subsequent Turkish invasion.

Could this act as an ice-breaker to persuade both sides to resume meaningful negotiations on bringing an end to the division of the island? Hopes for this are not very high, and a new report by the International Crisis Group, entitled *The Cyprus Stalemate: What Next?* concludes that the short-term prospects of a constitutional settlement are not good.

For this it places the primary blame on the Greek Cypriots and their hard-line government. Papadopoulos has consistently declined to respond to the request of the UN Secretary-General to indicate what changes to the Annan plan would be acceptable to his government, a refusal he maintained when the two men met in Paris on 28 February.

The Greek Cypriots defend their position by saying it is unreasonable to ask them to disclose their negotiating position before any new talks are convened. The Crisis Group responds by saying that all recent experience, from the Balkans and elsewhere, is that negotiations never get anywhere unless both sides are willing, at least, to indicate their opening bids in advance.

The ICG report sternly warns:

They should realise that if they persist in their refusal to engage with the United Nations and with Cyprus's other international partners, the island will slip by default toward permanent partition and the independence of the north, whether formally recognized or not.



In the meantime, the continued division of the island, with only the Greek Cypriot part admitted to membership, is insidiously introducing a “poison”, into the workings of the European Union. This word was used by Michael Emerson, a senior fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), who presided at the launch meeting of the ICG report.

He cited as examples not only the complication of the membership negotiations with Turkey, but the delay which disagreements over Cyprus were causing to the conclusion of ‘Neighbourhood agreements’ with the three Southern Caucasus states of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia.

In the absence of a genuine prospect for a constitutional settlement, the report concentrates on recommending ‘unilateral’ steps which the various parties could take to make the present situation more bearable and to leave open the possibility of future progress.

For the EU, these steps would include energetic measures to end the isolation of the north, including the implementation of its existing pledges on aid and trade, the opening of a Commission delegation in the north of the island, and the incorporation of northern Cyprus into the EU customs union with Turkey.

The US is recommended to upgrade its office in the north to a branch of its embassy in Nicosia and to increase its contact at all levels with officials and civil society. The UN is urged to redouble its efforts to achieve negotiation over the Annan Plan, and to proceed with the creation of a Trust Fund for Northern Cyprus, under its development programme.

The Turkish Cypriots are advised to take more vigorous steps to reinstate Greek Cypriot property, to adopt the EU *acquis* in such areas as trade and public sector reform, and to adopt the Common External Tariff. So far as the Greek Cypriot side is concerned, the ICG’s recommendations are addressed more to the opposition and to civil society, in the hope of pressurising the government into a more co-operative stance.

The Greek and Turkish governments are also pressed to take action to calm the situation: Greece by exerting its moderating influence over the



Cyprus government, and Turkey by implementing its customs union with all 25 member states of the EU as committed, by beginning a limited withdrawal of Turkish troops and by committing itself to repatriating a number of its settlers back to Turkey.

There is little doubt that if such steps were to be taken, the long-term prospects for a settlement would improve. Yet in the end, it would depend upon a change of mind by the present government of Cyprus, or perhaps its defeat in a general election.

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