

THE DISASSOCIATION OF THE CYPRUS ISSUE FROM THE GREEK-TURKISH RELATIONSHIP: A NEW ERA FOR GREEK FOREIGN POLICY?

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Introduction

The 24th April 2004 referendum in Cyprus for the ratification of the UN Plan for the unification of the island attracted the attention of world diplomacy. Both Greece and Turkey were involved in the process of coming to an agreement for Cyprus. For many years the Cypriot problem has been a thorn in the bilateral Greek-Turkish relations. Recently, the rapprochement process between the two neighbouring countries advanced and enhanced. The referendum in Cyprus and the Greek-Cypriot rejection of the plan affects the Greek-Turkish bilateral relations. However, following the visit of the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan to Athens in May 2004, it was made evident that Greek-Turkish relations speeded up the pace of rapprochement.

The paper studies whether there has been a change in the traditional approach in Greek-Turkish relations that the solution of the Cyprus issue is a pre-condition for the improvement of bilateral relations. It is argued that after the referendum for the UN plan, its approval by the Turkish side and its rejection by the Greek side in the island, Greek foreign policy orients itself towards a process of disassociation of the issue from its bilateral relations with Turkey. This is done so as to avoid any possible Greek-Cypriot intransigence affecting the constant improvement of Greek-Turkish rapprochement.

An evaluation should be made as to whether the above is the case and how this is illustrated in Greek foreign policy development and behaviour. In addition, the foreseen new initiatives by Greece to create an environment so that the Greek-Cypriot side can accept the plan in a new referendum highly involve EU institutions who have an interest in a positive development for Cyprus.

Finally, the paper assesses whether there is a new era for Greek foreign policy and evaluates its consequences for the region as a whole.

Traditional Impact of the ‘Cyprus Issue’ on Greek-Turkish Relations

Following the 1974 Turkish invasion in the island of Cyprus, the issue of the division of the island has been on the agenda of both Greeks and Turks in their rhetoric, foreign policy planning and action as well as in bi-lateral talks. For decades, following 1974, every presentation of Greek foreign policy included the element that improvement of bilateral relations with Turkey had as a condition the solution of the Cypriot problem. Greece developed a stable and significant foreign policy priority after 1974 that perceived Turkey as a neighbour with serious revisionist demands in the Aegean Sea, Thrace and Cyprus. It was foreseen therefore that the most effective way to hold back such demands was to develop a strong and consistent foreign policy based on three pillars. The first pillar was the traditional development of a military balance of power. The steady build up of a strong army to balance the Turkish forces and the placement of these forces in the sensitive border areas of Thrace, eastern Aegean islands, formerly demilitarized by the Treaty of Lausanne, and Cyprus. Thus, both Greece and Turkey have been engaged in a huge race of army build- up that cost a significant percentage of the annual budget and so nearly came to an open confrontation during the Imia/Kardak crisis.

The second pillar was European integration. Perhaps the most wise and successful move in Greek foreign policy was the application during the late 1970s and final accession to the European Community in 1981. This initially developed both the dynamic and the potential for significant economic development but also the participation as a partner in the most important source of power and influence in the European continent and its surrounding regions. It was perceived that in this way Greece could address an open invitation, from a position of power, to Turkey to enter into the

logic of western interdependence relations, where international borders of countries are not questioned.¹

Following the above, the third pillar involved Cyprus. Turkey could prove, by following the above Europeanized path, that she had made the historic choice for a fair solution of the Cyprus problem. As a consequence, Turkish occupation forces would be removed from the island and the united Cyprus would accede to the EU and NATO. As a result of this third pillar development in Greek foreign policy since the late 1970s, developments in Cyprus and the solution of the Cyprus issue was made a precondition for both the improvements of Greek-Turkish relations and the European orientation for Turkey. It is understood that Greek policy followed this principle in the 1980s when Greece vetoed the EU fourth financial protocol to Turkey and the development of EU-Turkey customs union, not to mention the prospect for EU membership for Turkey.

Although the Cyprus problem did not start in 1974, I have mentioned this date because it signifies a change in Greek foreign policy. What is described as the ‘traditional’ approach is actually 30 years old. The traditional approach was the one proclaimed by Prime Minister Constantine Karamanlis in the Greek Parliament on 14 March 1957: “Greece is obliged to assist in the Cyprus issue under the auspices of its allies. This last statement makes the Cyprus problem a problem with significant contradictions. There are times when an action to favour the Cypriot cause could be harmful for Greece. There are to the contrary other times when an action which is sound for our national policy may be harmful for Cyprus”.² On these lines, the ‘traditional’ Greek foreign policy before 1974 was one of co-decision and common approach development between Athens and Nicosia. In this way, Greek interests were preserved whenever developments in Cyprus came to block other important issues for Greek foreign policy. To the contrary, the later-developed attitude of ‘Nicosia decides and Athens supports’ according to the 1957 statement of Karamanlis

¹ Couloumbis, Th. & Dalis, S., 1997, p.48

² Romaïos, G., 2004

obliged Greece to hold hostage some of its foreign policy developments to the will and decisions of the Greek-Cypriot leadership, particularly when the development of the Cyprus issue is linked to the improvements of Greek-Turkish relations.

Following Greece's accession to the EEC in 1981 and although part of the accession agreement was that Greece would not export its bilateral problems with Turkey to Brussels, a process of Europeanization of Greek-Turkish relations started and was made a condition for the improvement of EU-Turkish relations.³ Turkey-EU relations have a longer past than one might think. Turkey applied for membership of the European Economic Community as early as July 1959, one month after Greece's application and signed an Association Agreement on 12 September 1963. An Additional Protocol was signed in November 1970 where the rules for Turkey's prospective customs union with the European Economic Community were elaborated, which was to be followed by a decision on Turkey's accession to the Community. However, unfavourable political developments in Turkey, and most important, the military coup of 12 September 1980 precluded any possibility of Turkey's EU membership. Turkey's isolation ended with its return to civilian government in 1983. Trade barriers were removed, and on 14 April 1987 an application for full EEC membership was submitted by the government of Turgut Özal. Nonetheless, Turkey-EEC relations would be impacted by Greece's accession to the Community in 1981. The rule of unanimity in the EEC decision-making process provided Greece with leverage in influencing Turkey-EEC relations. While Turkish-Greek disputes in the Aegean - ranging from the delineation of territorial waters, airspace and continental shelf to that of Flight Information Regions (FIR), the unresolved Cyprus problem - and the rest of bilateral differences remained unsettled, Greece decided to exploit Turkey's interest in improving its relations with the European Union by conditioning its consent to the improvement of Turkey-EU relations on the modification of Turkey's policies on their bilateral disputes.⁴

³ Kavakas, D., 2000

⁴ Grigoriadis, I., 2003

As Turkey did not seem willing to alter its policies, Turkey-EU relations suffered a stalemate as any decisions that could improve Turkey-EU relations were blocked by Greece's veto. The channeling of financial aid provided by the Fourth Financial Protocol of 1981 between Turkey and the European Union was frozen. Moreover, the EEC Commission politely rejected Turkey's application in December 1989. The Commission based its decision on the "substantial economic and developmental gap between the Community and Turkey", which implied that Turkey could not fulfill its obligations deriving from the EEC economic and social policies. Besides, it cited Turkey's disputes with Greece, the Cyprus issue and the fact that its human rights regime and "respect for minorities" had "not yet reached the level required in a democracy".⁵ To appease Turkey's discontent for the polite rejection of its EEC membership application in 1989, the European Commission initiated a renewed effort to accomplish a customs union between Turkey and the European Economic Community, improve cooperation in the industrial and other fields and release the funds provided for in the Fourth Financial Protocol.⁶ Nonetheless, it was Greece again which blocked the last part of the Commission initiative. However, the EU leaders agreed in the EU Lisbon Summit of June 1992 that "the Turkish role in the present European political situation is of the greatest importance", and negotiations on achieving Turkey-EU customs union were resumed in November 1992. In the EU Copenhagen Summit of June 1993 the EU leaders agreed on a set of conditions to be met by all states aiming to accede to the European Union. The "Copenhagen criteria" included, first, the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities; second, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union, and third, the ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

⁵ Hale, W., 2000, p. 178-179

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 234-235

Increasing pressure from EU member states coincided with Greece's decision to set the membership of Cyprus to the European Union as one of its primary foreign policy strategic objectives. After a series of bilateral and UN-brokered negotiations failed to solve the political problem of Cyprus, Greece hoped that Cyprus' accession to the European Union would boost the conflict resolution process. Greece's intention to achieve concrete steps to achieve Cyprus' EU membership facilitated the beginning of a bargaining process whereby Greece would agree on the piecemeal improvement of Turkey-EU relations while it would secure the progress of Cyprus' EU membership application.⁷ So on 6 March 1995 Greece lifted its veto against the Turkey-EU customs union agreement and the release of EU funds for Turkey provided for by the Fourth Additional Protocol on the condition that accession negotiations between Cyprus and the European Union would commence within six months after the end of the EU Intergovernmental Conference-in effect within 1998.

Although we study the impact of the Cyprus referendum that led to the rejection of the UN Plan by the Greek-Cypriot population and its acceptance by Turkish-Cypriots, it is evident that the disassociation of the Cyprus issue from Greek-Turkish relations started a few years earlier. It was in May 1999 when the Greek and Turkish Foreign Ministers George Papandreou and Ýsmail Cem initiated a dialogue initiative on low-profile bilateral issues, e.g. trade, tourism and environmental protection. The display of mutual goodwill at both the governmental and grassroots levels during the earthquakes that hit Turkey and Greece in August and September 1999 respectively contributed to a dramatic reversal of hostile attitudes in public opinion and the press, thereby facilitating *détente* efforts. The historic decision was made in the EU Helsinki Summit of December 1999: Turkey was officially recognized as a candidate state for accession to the European Union.⁸ On the other hand, important conditions were set as regards Turkish-Greek relations and the Cyprus problem. For the first time it was agreed that Greece and Turkey will try to solve any bilateral dispute by the end

⁷ Suvarierol, S., 2003, pp. 62-66

⁸ Nikolaidis, K., 2001, pp. 247-8

of 2004 independently from developments in Cyprus.⁹ In this way, both EU-Turkish relations could progress since the Copenhagen criteria required the Greek-Turkish rapprochement and also Cyprus could progress towards membership of the EU independently of the solution of the problem.

The Impact of the Cyprus Referendum

From the 1960s until today both Greece and the Greek-Cypriot community followed two major ambitions for Cyprus. The first ambition was the 'Enosis' prospect, the irredentist goal for the unification of Cyprus with the Greek State, an ambition that was abandoned after the 1970s. The second was independence of Cyprus with the dominance of the Greek community and the existence of a Turkish-Cypriot minority with some rights.¹⁰ Unfortunately this last ambition still dominates at least the Greek-Cypriot leadership and majority of population as is evident from the referendum result. It is suggested that for years the proclaimed solution for an independent Cyprus based on a federation between two sovereign ethnic groups was supported by the Greek-Cypriot community under the assumption that the solution will bring dominance to the Greek-Cypriots.¹¹ During those years Greek-Cypriots took advantage of the Turkish-Cypriot refusal to negotiate under UN auspices in order to reach a federal solution. This refusal covered a long-held strategy by the Greek-Cypriots to avoid the extension of Turkish influence over the whole island and to develop what was called a 'common defence space' uniting the Greek and Greek-Cypriot defence spaces. This strategy, however, contradicted the proclaimed desire for the solution of the problem based on a dual-community federation.

The fixing of the date for the latest EU Enlargement, which was set to be the 1st May 2004, influenced the will to compromise on the Greek-Cypriot side. It is thought that if Cyprus were not to become a member of the EU the result of the referendum would have been

⁹ Moroni, M., 2004

¹⁰ Hrakleidis, A., 1995, p.191

¹¹ Tsardanidis, Ch. 1995, p.212

different. Greek-Cypriots elaborated on following the Greek example of the 1980s when participation in the European institutions exercised significant leverage and increased the country's weight towards Turkey.

The impact of the referendum in Cyprus can be considered as threefold. First, the Greek-Cypriot community could no longer hide behind the refusal of the Turkish-Cypriots to negotiate and thus had to make a real decision on whether they were willing to accept a compromise. The outcome of the referendum suggests that the traditional ambition of Greek-Cypriots to maintain their dominant position in any federal solution is present and enhanced by EU membership. However, on the other hand, it is also similarly evident that Turkish-Cypriots voted in favour of the compromise because of EU membership. It is suggested that if EU membership was not an issue, the votes of the Turkish side would also have been different. Therefore, the first impact of the referendum result would be on the participation and influence of Cyprus in the EU institutions. Already there is a feeling in international public opinion that the Greek-Cypriots refused to compromise at the expense of the Turkish-Cypriots given that they were coming from a dominant position, that of an EU member. Experience, however, in the European councils saw that negative behaviour can never be for the advantage of a member state.¹²

The second impact of the result is related to the Turkish-Cypriot community. Following the demonstration of their willingness to compromise and to accept a federal solution for the re-unification of the island, the international community seems to be trying to find ways for their *de facto* recognition, although no legal form of recognition of a Turkish-Cypriot state exists. The EU announced its decision to develop trade and aid relations with the northern, up to now isolated, side of the island. The EU's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, said just before the referendum and following the prediction of the result that: "those who think the situation will continue as if nothing has happened - they are making a wrong analysis of the situation. Things will not be the same the day

¹² See Kavakas, 2000, Chapter 5

after”.¹³ The Greek-Cypriots’ rejection of the plan was met with dismay and anger among the world powers that had pressed both sides to accept it. Gunter Verheugen, the EU’s commissioner for enlargement said that the Greek-Cypriots would join the Union under a ‘shadow’.¹⁴

Finally, the third impact would be on Greek foreign policy and Greek-Turkish relations. Both Greece and Turkey would have hoped that the UN Plan had been accepted by both sides. This would have automatically given a boost to the Turkish ambitions to get a date in December 2004 for the start of accession negotiations. For Greece it would have been an opportunity to concentrate on the rapprochement process with Turkey having overcome the Cyprus problem. The result put both parties in a difficult situation. Turkey on the one hand did its best to ensure that the Turkish-Cypriots approved the plan; however, the rejection by the Greek-Cypriot side deprived her of the possibility to retaliate in any way, since the European orientation of Turkey is considered very important. On the other hand, Greece found itself supporting the decision of the Cypriot government, a decision of which she did not approve and which was not in her interest. The visit of Prime Minister Erdogan to Athens in the beginning of May 2004 was primarily aimed at securing the continuation of a fragile rapprochement that could be troubled by the Cyprus referendum.¹⁵ In their meetings the two Prime Ministers confirmed that Greece and Turkey were willing to move forward in their bilateral relations independently from any developments in Cyprus. Although Cyprus remains an important foreign policy priority for both Greece and Turkey, it seems that it has been disassociated from Greek-Turkish bilateral relations.

New Era for Greek Foreign Policy?

On March 6, 2004, the Greek general elections signified a government change. It appears that there has been a change in the

¹³ Kathimerini newspaper, article entitled ‘Greeks prepare for the day after’, Saturday 24 April 2004

¹⁴ The Economist, *A chance for peace and unity wasted*, 25 April 2004

¹⁵ Adam, K., 8/5/2004

strategy whereby the two parties handled the Cyprus issue. The previous Foreign Minister, George Papandreou, followed a strategy of intervention, presentation of the Greek position and pressure to get influence on its implementation. This included the government of the Republic of Cyprus with which many times he ran into disagreements that were publicly displayed. It seems that the previous strategy, although pursued by a socialist government, was closer to the 1950s strategy of Karamanlis, as explained above. The new policy of the nephew of the late Karamanlis, Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis, was to follow the 'Nicosia decides Athens supports' strategy. This choice created a significant contradiction that the new government tried to overcome by using the disassociation policy. Prime Minister Karamanlis has steadily maintained that Greece will stand by Cyprus no matter what the Greek-Cypriots decided. He also, however, said that 'the government's effort to solve the Cyprus problem will continue irrespective of the results of the referenda, because the potential for solving the problem has to be safeguarded'.¹⁶ These two sentences can be in contradiction to each other. The Greek government dedicated to the solution of the Cyprus problem stands by any decision that the Greek-Cypriots make even if this decision is against the solution.

Greek foreign policy will face new challenges in the near future and will certainly enter a new era. It is a post-enlargement era with the Republic of Cyprus sitting in the Council of Ministers and participating in all European institutions. Greek foreign policy will face three main challenges in this new era. The first challenge would be its behaviour and strategy inside the EU institutions concerning Cyprus. Following the recent developments and the signals that EU partners received from the first days of Cyprus' participation in the EU institutions it is expected that President Papadopoulos will follow a hard line in the European Council. The question will be how Greece will respond. If the Greek representatives follow the recent 'Nicosia decides, Athens supports' strategy, significant Greek interests and a positive image

¹⁶ Kathimerini newspaper, article entitled 'Greeks prepare for the day after', Saturday 24 April 2004

might be at stake; an image that took a long time to improve and hard work to change following the negative periods of the 1980s and early 1990s.

The second challenge would be the approach of the Greek government towards the Cyprus issue. Following the rejection of the UN Plan, there will be international initiatives and pressures on the Greek-Cypriots for discussions about the Plan, a campaign for the information of the public about its benefits and a possible new referendum. However, it is evident that Greek-Cypriot leadership at the moment demands a re-negotiation of the plan, something that is difficult given the fact that Turkey is hostile to such a development. It is also considered as unfair for the Turkish-Cypriots having accepted the plan by an overwhelming majority of 65% to have to renegotiate and put it to a new referendum. This is a very delicate situation that demands active and constructive foreign policy. It is the argument of this paper that in order for Greek foreign policy to be effective and overcome these challenges successfully, the current doctrine of 'Nicosia decides, Athens supports' has to be adapted to a 'co-decision' regime.

The final challenge involves the bilateral relations with Turkey. It is in the interests of Greece that Turkey progresses towards its European orientation. The December 2004 deadline for a start date for EU accession negotiations signifies an important political decision on behalf of the EU. What will be the reaction and position of Greece if Cyprus decides to veto the process? This challenge is linked to the previous two and illustrates the significance of a constructive and pro-active foreign policy as opposed to a reactive and passive stance that is supportive of already-made decisions.

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