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**Research Report**

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# A New President in Northern Cyprus

## The End of an Era but No Solution in Sight

Heinz Kramer / Kirstin Hein

The long presidential reign of Rauf Denktaş came to an end with the election of April 17, 2005. After almost thirty years in the highest office of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Denktaş—a resolute opponent of reunification of the divided island—has been succeeded by the prime minister, Mehmet Ali Talat. Does Talat's rise from head of government to become the leader of his ethnic community give grounds for new hope of reopening negotiations on the island? The rigid line taken by Greek Cypriot President Tassos Papadopoulos suggests not. The change in leadership in the north will not end the impasse in the Cyprus question and the conflict will remain an obstacle on Turkey's path to European Union membership.

Mehmet Ali Talat, a supporter of Cypriot reunification, was elected president of northern Cyprus in the first round on April 17, with a majority of 55.6 percent of the vote. Derviş Eroğlu of the National Unity Party (UBP), Talat's main rival and an opponent of the Annan plan, drew less than 23 percent. After almost three decades in office, Rauf Denktaş did not stand again in this election.

As president, Talat intends to move on from the "two states" theory that his predecessor had declared to be the starting point for any solution to the Cyprus problem, and attempt a fresh start of negotiations with the south of the island. The clear vote for Talat demonstrates yet again that the Turkish Cypriots would like to see an end to the conflict, which has dragged on in the eastern Mediterranean since 1964.

## The Rise of Mehmet Ali Talat

The Turkish Cypriots have expressed this wish repeatedly since summer 2003, when significant numbers of Turkish Cypriots first started protesting against Denktaş and his policies, which stood in the way of an accommodation with the Greek Cypriots. Mehmet Ali Talat became the spokesman for the protests and embodied the hopes for a political alternative.

The victory of his left-leaning, pro-European Republican Turkish Party (CTP) in the parliamentary elections of December 14, 2003, allowed Talat to replace UBP leader Eroğlu as prime minister. Now, for the first time in the history of the conflict, the parties loyal to President Rauf Denktaş found themselves in the minority. However, the outcome of the elections produced deadlock in parliament, and forced Talat to

enter a shaky coalition—holding a margin of just twenty-six to twenty-four seats—with the Democratic Party (DP) led by Serdar Denktaş, the president’s son. Talat’s victory attracted positive reactions abroad. The European Union and the United States had clearly sided with the Turkish Cypriot opposition, believing that an electoral victory for the opposition would improve the prospects for a solution to the conflict.

During the talks on the Annan Plan in spring 2004, Talat and Serdar Denktaş represented the president in the third and final round of negotiations in the Swiss resort of Bürgenstock. By personally staying away from the discussions, Rauf Denktaş kept open the option of campaigning against the negotiated proposal in the referendum. Talat countered the passionate “no” campaign of the Turkey-oriented nationalists with a powerful “Evet” (yes) campaign for acceptance of the Annan Plan. Serdar Denktaş, on the other hand, took a neutral position in the referendum campaign and merely stated that he personally intended to vote against the plan. Several factors contributed to the Turkish Cypriots’ clear 65 percent vote in favor of the Annan Plan, but Talat’s campaign certainly had a considerable influence on the result. Nonetheless, the even clearer “no” from the Greek Cypriot side prevented him from realizing the declared goal of his government, and on May 1, 2004, a divided Cyprus joined the European Union.

Shortly after the referendum, in May 2004, Talat’s government lost its parliamentary majority when several deputies left the coalition. The prime minister survived a confidence vote initiated by the UBP, but resigned nonetheless in October 2004 to hold new elections in the hope of broadening the base for his policies. Talat’s CTP indeed recorded gains of about 9 percent in the elections of February 20, 2005. Even though these votes came primarily at the expense of the second reformist party, the Peace and Democracy Movement (BDH), the 44 percent for Talat’s party demonstrated that Turkish Cypriots still sup-

ported a solution based on the Annan Plan. With twenty-four of fifty seats, Talat narrowly failed to achieve the absolute majority he aimed for, so the coalition with Serdar Denktaş’s DP was revived. The DP had gained six seats, so the government commanded thirty seats and a solid parliamentary majority.

However, already in September 2004, Mehmet Ali Talat had announced that he would stand in the regular presidential elections in April 2005 unless visible progress toward a resolution of the conflict had been made by then. As a consequence of the clear failure of his “no” campaign, President Rauf Denktaş had already declared in May 2004 that he would not stand for another term.

Denktaş’ withdrawal was a sensible decision, given that the polls forecast a decisive defeat should he have stood again. This cleared the way for Talat to rise from head of government to become the leader of his nation. Talat strove for the presidency in the conviction that only in that office would he be able to act as the undisputed chief negotiator for the northern part of the island.

In order to be able to act as head negotiator in the otherwise symbolic office of president—as Rauf Denktaş did—Talat needs not only the support of the populace, as expressed in the result of the April 17 elections, but also the backing of parliament. There, however, he will continue to meet the resistance of the parties loyal to Denktaş. Like his father, Serdar Denktaş also opposed Talat’s candidacy, so even within the governing coalition Talat could face difficulties in organizing support. Talat’s move to the presidency made it necessary to appoint a new prime minister. Meanwhile Ferdi Sabit Soyer, who followed Talat as leader of the CTP, has also been appointed his successor as leader of the government. The rest of the cabinet remains unchanged.

## **The Positions of the Main Actors**

Talat's main task will be to launch a new and auspicious initiative for solving the Cyprus problem. Here, however, he will have to depend not only on the support of his own population, but also to at least the same degree on the cooperation of the other parties on the island and among the international community who are indispensable for a solution. A brief examination of their current attitudes to the Cyprus conflict shows that Talat faces no easy task.

## **Why the Greek Cypriots**

### **Rejected the Annan Plan**

Although regarded by the international community as the best possible solution, the Annan Plan—in its fifth version, with the final details decided personally by the UN Secretary-General (Annan V)—was decisively rejected by the Greek Cypriot side in the nationally separate referendums of April 24, 2004. At least for the time being, four and a half years of negotiations and work on the plan had come to nothing.

The most obvious reason why the Greek Cypriots rejected the Annan Plan was that they, unlike their Turkish neighbors, were under no particular pressure to find a solution. Back in December 1999 the Helsinki European Council had dropped its precondition that the conflict had to be resolved before accession. In other words, the Greek Cypriot side faced no decisive disadvantages if the status quo continued. The gains that could be achieved through a solution—land restitution, resettlement, and compensation—were not enough to outweigh the expected losses, beginning with the sharing of power between two politically equal communities.

Tassos Papadopoulos, President of the Republic of Cyprus and a firm opponent of the Annan Plan, had complained in particular that all the suggestions of the Turkish Cypriots had found their way into the Annan Plan, while many of the concerns that were important for his national

group had been ignored. In his letter to Annan of June 7 last year, informing the Secretary-General of the plan's rejection, Papadopoulos identified security as the part of the plan containing the greatest shortcomings. The president—and, as opinion polls showed—the majority of his population too—regarded the permanent presence of up to 650 Turkish troops on the island and Turkey's continuing right of intervention as unacceptable. To many Greek Cypriots the number of Turkish settlers the plan would have allowed to remain on the island seemed too high and unreasonable. Although there is no real basis for most of these security worries, they can be explained as a psychological consequence of the Greek Cypriots' "invasion trauma" of 1974.

Under the Annan Plan the Greek Cypriots—unlike the Turkish side—would have had to fulfill their obligations, such as giving up sole sovereignty over the island, immediately, while implementation of the Turkish Cypriot contributions to reunification, such as reducing troop levels and returning Greek property in the north of the island, would have been phased over several years. Precisely this implementation of Turkish Cypriot obligations appeared to Papadopoulos to be uncertain, and he was unwilling to take the risk of being dependent on the good will of the north's leaders. Another reason for the Greek Cypriots' rejection is that they would have had to bear the most of the financial burden of reunification with the economically much weaker north. The no campaign, led by Papadopoulos and according to Annan bristling with misinformation about his plan, fanned insecurity and worries about the consequences of reunification among the Greek Cypriots, and ultimately led to rejection of the Annan Plan.

### **Do the Greek Cypriots Want Another Try? Under What Conditions?**

Although the Greek Cypriot hard-liner Papadopoulos is always at pains to stress that he is not per se against a resolution of the conflict, but only rejects the specific reunification plan put to the referendum last year, he has failed to follow his words with deeds. For example, he has yet to comply with Annan's request of February this year to list in detail the points he would like to have changed. Papadopoulos believes that his demands were sufficiently clearly articulated in his letter of June 7, 2004, and regards Annan's request to be more specific as an attempt to weaken the Greek Cypriot negotiating position in advance. In other words, there is no sign at the moment that Papadopoulos is seriously interested in a solution. In any case, the Greek Cypriot side is not going to agree to a new attempt before Ankara has signed the Protocol on the adaptation of the Association Agreement of 1964 in the course of its accession negotiations. But even then the basis for negotiations would have to be an Annan Plan clearly revised to the benefit of the south of the island.

The Papadopoulos government has also repeatedly stated that any new attempt would have to dispense with the powers of arbitration for the UN Secretary-General. A solution in all its details would have to be the direct result of negotiations between the two parties on Cyprus. The Greek Cypriots would seem to favor a solution within the European Union framework, or at least one clearly based on European Union principles. That, however, seems almost impossible, because after accepting Cyprus as a member the European Union is no longer in a position to act as a neutral mediator.

However, according to the polls only 25 percent of Greek Cypriots reject reunification out of hand. This figure suggests that under other conditions a solution to the conflict could find acceptance. According to a study by Cyprus expert Alexandros Lordos the citizens have three main demands: com-

plete withdrawal of Turkish troops, fairer distribution of the costs caused by reunification, and the removal from the island of a larger number of Turkish settlers than stipulated in Annan V. Here the attitudes of the Greek Cypriots largely concur with those of their political leaders.

The main obstacle to greater Greek Cypriot flexibility continues to be the lack of any incentive to achieve a solution. Although the blame for blocking agreement passed from Rauf Denktaş to his Greek Cypriot opposite number last April, the resulting pressure applied to Nicosia by the international community and the European Union partner states has not been great enough to bring the Cypriot president back to the negotiating table. Above all, Papadopoulos feels that his stance is backed by Russia, which in the Security Council blocks any relaxation of the official international position. In a continuation of traditional Soviet policy, Moscow plainly regards the smoldering conflict and the resulting insecurity in the eastern Mediterranean as a welcome disruption weakening the Western position in a region of crucial importance for international development.

### **The Turkish Cypriots: Caught between the Wish for Recognition and the Will to Reach a Solution**

The situation in the north is quite different. Talat continues to insist on a resumption of negotiations within the United Nations framework. His foreign minister Denktaş supports him in this position, but also describes international recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as a feasible alternative to reunification. The latter is, however, absurd. Despite international praise for the Turkish Cypriot community after their approval of the Annan Plan, both the UN Secretary-General and representatives of the European Union reject any suggestion of international recognition, and neither verbal references to the "Turkish-Cypriot state" by the Organi-

zation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) nor the efforts by the European Union and United States to end the north's economic isolation are going to change that. There is still not the slightest realistic basis for setting up an independent state in northern Cyprus.

The Talat/Denktaş government has repeatedly signaled its willingness to make concessions to the south's demands, and according to the polls the northern population would agree to such concessions. However, to date the government has said not a word about the possible substance of the concessions under consideration. To do so would on the one hand underline the seriousness of efforts to find a solution and on the other make it clear to the south the extent to which it might expect to benefit from a revision of the Annan Plan. However, the status of political equality for the Turkish Cypriots in a united Cyprus is a point where even Talat would not consider making concessions.

Unilateral steps toward implementing some of the provisions of Annan V, such as beginning the withdrawal of Turkish troops or starting the process of resettlement in the north to vacate areas that would return to Greek Cypriot administration under the plan, would also substantiate the credibility of the Turkish Cypriots. But for the Turkish Cypriot side, such unilateral steps also contain the risk of possibly irreversibly weakening their negotiating position if a solution were not to come about quickly.

### **Annan's Hesitancy**

It would seem that a solution to the Cyprus conflict can only be achieved under the auspices of the United Nations. But Kofi Annan hesitates to resume negotiations, because what was at stake in the referendum of April 24, 2004, was not only the most detailed proposal to date, but also considerable prestige on the part of the Secretary-General. Annan will not risk his initiative failing again, so he will not launch a new round until both parties have

signaled serious willingness to negotiate. Furthermore, he knows that a new attempt to solve the conflict will only have a realistic chance of success if the international community gives sustained support to the process—and that is ruled out by the Russian blockade in the Security Council.

### **The Attitude of the "Motherlands"**

Although the Turkish Cypriot yes to the Annan Plan removed one decisive obstacle to the European Union agreeing to begin membership negotiations with Turkey, for Ankara the Cyprus question continues to hang as a sword of Damocles over the accession process. Turkey's interest in resolving the conflict is also motivated by the justified fear that it will otherwise face a flood of compensation claims by dispossessed Greek Cypriots. Plaintiffs are entitled to go directly to the European Court of Human Rights and it can be expected that claims following the Loizidou precedent will be granted. The ECHR ordered Turkey as the "occupier" of the northern part of the island to pay the Greek Cypriot Titina Loizidou €1.1 million in compensation for her seized property. Another reason for Prime Minister Erdoğan to favor a quick solution is his hope for a success in the Cyprus question to counterbalance his promise to sign the Protocol on the adaptation of Turkey's Association Agreement with the European Union to cover all ten new members, which many political circles in Turkey regarded as a defeat. But Erdoğan's calls for a return to the negotiating table have not so far been accompanied by statements of substance on possible Turkish concessions to the Greek Cypriots. It is also hard to understand why Ankara continues to give the green light for more mainland Turks to settle on the island.

After its cautious agreement to Annan V last year, the Greek government under Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis is still looking for a solution based on that plan. It

would be impossible for Greece to advocate the same rigid position as Papadopoulos, because that would endanger relations with Ankara, which have improved greatly in recent years. However, great efforts to find a solution are not to be expected from Athens, because the Greeks expect the initiative for a solution to come from Nicosia, and because like the Greeks on the island, the mainland Greeks would suffer no obvious disadvantages if the status quo were maintained. On the other hand, the Greeks are undoubtedly aware that it will be difficult to achieve a lasting resolution of the points of bilateral conflict with Turkey unless the Cyprus problem is resolved.

### **The Role of the European Union**

Because one of the parties to the conflict is one of its own members, it is impossible for the European Union to take an active mediating role in the Cyprus conflict. Although prevented from adopting an institutional role in the unification process, the European Union is still concerned to support developments leading to a solution. It would like to ameliorate the north's economic isolation and thus lessen the economic gap between the two parts of the island. This would increase the chances of unification. However, Greek Cypriot resistance in the Council of Ministers has so far ensured that the promises made by former Enlargement Commissioner Günter Verheugen, of providing €259 million in economic aid and allowing direct trade with the north, have remained unfulfilled. The Papadopoulos government particularly opposes direct trade, fearing that this would represent the beginning of a creeping or even open recognition of the TRNC. Nicosia has enforced so many restrictive conditions for European Union economic aid that, divorced from direct trade, it appears unattractive and unacceptable to the Turkish Cypriots.

So far only the "Green Line regulation" has been implemented, allowing goods

from the north to be exported to the south of the island. But exporting northern Cypriot products onward from the southern half of the island requires the cooperation of the Greek Cypriot authorities. In this respect the rule is no great gain for the north, because it implies strong dependence on the good will of the south. However, for many Turkish Cypriots who have found employment in the south the rule brings perceptible advantages.

The failure of the promised aid to arrive represents a bone of contention for the Turkish Cypriots. In the controversy over the EU Directives it became clear that the Union is condemned to acting as Cyprus's hostage and in that sense is itself part of the conflict rather than a mediator. Where the Council of Ministers makes fundamental decisions concerning Cyprus, the representatives of the twenty-four other member states are dependent on Cyprus's willingness to compromise. This unfortunate situation within the European Union also has a negative effect on the Turkish accession process.

### **Cyprus as a Stumbling Block on Turkey's Path to Membership**

Disagreements over Turkey's recognition of the Republic of Cyprus were the sticking point of the negotiations before and during the Brussels European Council of December 16 and 17, 2004. Papadopoulos initially contented himself with Ankara's readiness to sign the Protocol on the adaptation of the Association Agreement as a condition for opening membership negotiations. However, the rather circumstantial formulation of this point in the summit's final declaration allows for a wide range of interpretations and thus bears potential for further disagreement. Whereas Papadopoulos believes that signing the document expresses at least implicit recognition of Cyprus by Turkey, Erdoğan continues to deny this. The EU Commission does not see the signature as formal recognition, but does regard it as implicit de facto accep-

tance of the existence of the Republic of Cyprus. Ankara and Brussels agreed the exact wording of the protocol at the end of March after weeks of negotiations, but the signing of the document will still have to wait until at least July 2005, because it must first be ratified by the Turkish parliament. This is by no means certain, and will take some time.

Although in December Papadopoulos did not make any additional preconditions for opening membership negotiations with Turkey, he never tires of reiterating the demands he raised in the run-up to the summit. Above and beyond the signing of the protocol, his main demands were and are for Turkey to recognize Cyprus under international law, for Turkey to open its ports and airports to ships and aircraft operating under the Greek Cypriot flag, and for Turkey to end the blockade that excludes Cyprus from various trans-Atlantic processes and institutions.

Immediately after the summit, the Greek Cypriot president also threatened Turkey with the many veto options available to Nicosia during the course of the negotiating process, which he could make use of if the situation on the island remains deadlocked. The first occasion could be the dispute over full and complete implementation of the protocol, which according to the EU Commission also encompasses the aforementioned opening of Turkish ports and airports. So far Turkey has strictly rejected this interpretation of the protocol. A veto based on this issue would also find the approval of the Greek Cypriot population, where a majority rejects Turkey's entry to the European Union. Parts of the population felt that it was a defeat when their president returned from Brussels with nothing but Turkey's readiness to sign the Protocol on the adaptation of the Association Agreement.

In view of Papadopoulos's threats and Turkey's rigidity on critical issues it can be expected that Cyprus will delay or even block the membership negotiations as long as the conflict on the island remains

unresolved. As in the case of economic aid for the north of the island, the European Union's room for maneuver with respect to Ankara depends on the Greek Cypriot's readiness to make concessions. For Turkey's process of accession to the European Union it is also a problem that the Cyprus conflict prevents Ankara from adopting particular parts of Union's *acquis communautaire*. For example full adoption of the existing body of European law on transport is incompatible with the controversial embargo against Greek Cypriot ships and planes mentioned earlier.

Finally, it is not imaginable that Turkey could join the European Union as long as the status quo continues on the island. For that reason a solution will *have* to be found during the accession process. The Greek Cypriot side will probably use its newly strengthened position as a member state to enforce an outcome that largely corresponds to its wishes. Turkey's willingness to make concessions will depend on how long President Papadopoulos waits before agreeing to Erdoğan's calls to resume negotiations. If Papadopoulos waits too long, Erdoğan might fall back on a more rigid position and then initially be less willing to compromise.

## Conclusion

Talat's accession to the presidency will defuse the political antagonism between opponents and supporters of reunification, because the president and government will generally pull in the same direction. Nevertheless, nationalist forces will continue to struggle against Talat's reunification course, possibly even with Rauf Denktaş as their figurehead; Denktaş has already announced his intention to remain active in politics. Some parliamentarians will refuse to back the new president's course, but Talat's ability to act in unison with the Turkish government will have a positive effect on his negotiating position.

However, until Talat approaches the Greek Cypriots with substantial concessions



they will not be willing to resume negotiations. There is nothing impelling Papadopoulos to move quickly toward a solution. Instead, he will delay the process until he finds an appropriate opportunity in the course of Turkey's membership negotiations to force the Turkish Cypriot side to accept a deal that largely conforms to his wishes.

The only way to accelerate the process would be to massively increase the international pressure on the Greek Cypriot side. However, the situation would also fundamentally change if Russia were to abandon its support for Papadopoulos's course. This would mean Moscow giving up its veto against the Security Council resolution welcoming the "Report of the Secretary-General on his mission of good offices in Cyprus" (document S/2004/437). Russian support for the resolution would lead to a decisive change in the United Nations' stance on the Cyprus problem and make it considerably easier to end the north's isolation without this involving crossing the threshold of recognition.

In recent months Putin has signaled that the Russian side might reconsider its position, but the Russian president will probably only actually do so if he is strongly urged to by the strongest supporters of a solution. To date, however, there is no evidence that the United States or Great Britain or the European Union or Germany intend to take a lead on this issue.

Unless the circumstances for talks improve decisively, the negotiating table will remain empty and even a proponent of reunification as enthusiastic as the new President Talat will be unable to bring about a resolution of the conflict. The impasse continues.

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