

REVISITING THE CYPRUS PROBLEM

Andreas Theophanous

Professor of Political Economy and President of the Center for European and International Affairs of the University of Nicosia

Despite years of intercommunal negotiations and repeated efforts by the international community the Cyprus problem remains unresolved. The overwhelming presence of Turkey as well as Ankara's unchanging objectives to dominate have been and continue to be the most important factor shaping developments on the island. Be that as it may, the fundamental question is what model can lead to a viable solution.

At this particular juncture Cyprus has to also work hard to get out of the economic crisis, and utilize effectively and efficiently its newly found energy resources and find its place in the regional and broader international environment. Inevitably it also has to reassess its allies in the midst of growing Euroscepticism but also more substantially given the sweeping changes taking place around it.

One of the issues raised is whether there are plans outside Cyprus to push for a package deal involving the economic crisis, the newly found energy resources and the Cyprus problem. President Nicos Anastasiades, who was elected in February 2013 (and who had supported the UN Plan in 2004), seems not to rule out addressing these issues comprehensively provided that the outcomes are acceptable. On the other hand, many Greek Cypriots suspect that the current weakness of Cyprus may be exploited against the interests of this country.

From the outset it must be clear that there are very specific conditions which may lead biethnic and multiethnic states either to social prosperity and progress or alternatively to tensions and even conflict. Models which do not encourage the advancement of common institutions and instead are exclusively based on ethnic pillars are likely to lead to tensions.

The European and the American historical and political records, for example, have similarities as well as differences. One of the fundamental differences is how nationalism was perceived in Europe and also how it influenced the overall political landscape. In the American experience, nation-building revolved essentially around a common value system as well as common institutions with respect to diversity despite the fact that the USA had its own history of ethnic and racial strife. And it is of utmost importance that this record did not lead to a federal system based on ethnic and racial pillars. It is indeed essential to stress the election of President Obama, an election which signified, among other things, the triumph of politics over ethnoracial considerations. This is significant not only for Americans but also for the international community as a whole.

It is also interesting that in the last years we are witnessing two opposing forces in various parts of the world: on the one hand integrationalist forces advancing and on the other hand the forces of disintegration leading to radical political, social and economic ramifications and, in many cases, disruptions.

Furthermore, conflict and violence on the one hand and efforts for reconstruction and reconciliation on the other are emerging in increasing numbers around the world. One of the great tasks is to understand the factors and prerequisites that affect these variables and be able to act preemptively. It is also important for policymakers and international institutions and organizations to have an understanding of those forces and factors which may encourage and advance the objectives of reconstruction, reconciliation and integration.

In several parts of the world, including in Cyprus, one of the challenges is to arrive at a political structure and framework which respects the ethnic background and identity of individuals and groups but also advances a common value system and common institutions. To what extent this can be done and how it can be achieved is of course an entirely separate matter. At

the same time it must be acknowledged that different countries and peoples having their own historical experiences and record may choose alternative options.

Coming back to the case of Cyprus it may be difficult to have the best possible opportunity for a creative breakthrough when Turkey maintains more than 40.000 occupation troops on the northern part of Cyprus and while there are more Anatolian settlers than Turkish Cypriots. It should be also noted that in previous efforts, including the one which culminated with the rejection of the UN Plan by the Greek Cypriots, international pressures were directed toward the weaker Greek Cypriot side rather than the Turkish Cypriot side and Ankara.

At this point developments are not encouraging. While there are efforts for a new round of negotiations the two sides have not yet been able to agree on a joint statement. At the same time Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey declares that there is no country called Cyprus. Thus, the fundamental issue is that Turkey does not recognize the right of the Republic of Cyprus to exist. Not surprising, the Turkish Cypriot leader states that for the solution of the Cyprus problem the Republic of Cyprus must be put aside.

If indeed there will be a momentum for substantial progress and eventually a solution of the Cyprus problem Ankara must recognize and respect the Republic of Cyprus as an independent state member of the UN and the EU. Once this step is made the rest will follow.

Last but not least, it has been pointed out that addressing simultaneously the Cyprus problem, the current economic crisis as well as the utilization of the newly found energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean could create a window of opportunity. Although this perspective has its merits, Greek Cypriots are sceptical that the crisis could be used in a way that would amount to pressuring them to arrive at outcomes they do not wish.

It is rational to assume that potential economic gains could encourage cooperation between the players involved. Nevertheless, we should not forget that for a comprehensive settlement there must be an agreement on the fundamentals. And this does not exist. We should also not forget that while in the past there were high expectations in relation to the role of the EU, following the March 2013 decision of the Troika this has changed considerably.