

THE NEW UN INITIATIVE FOR CYPRUS: DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN

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With the consent of the leaders of the Greek and the Turkish Cypriot communities, the UN Secretary General and his team plan a new initiative for the Cyprus problem sometime in October. The question is whether that initiative will be fruitful. On reflection, there is little hope for a breakthrough. Actually, there are many reasons for expecting no actual progress in the Cyprus problem. Some issues around the UN initiative stand out as important to consider.

The UN team seems to ground its new initiative on three premises which are fundamentally flawed. The first premise is that the new leader of the Greek Cypriot community, Mr. Anastasiades, is the right man for pushing a compromise. At the individual level, Anastasiades is thought to make the proper figure for bridging the gap between the positions of the two communities, including the positions of Turkey. In reality however things do not work like that. Anastasiades may have supported the Annan Plan and he certainly has never changed his personal views on the Cyprus problem. The UN however should have learned a lesson from Christofias' reign; a "concessionist" party leader may grow into a "rejectionist" community leader, to use the UN jargon. Christofias conceded to certain issues on the so-called core chapters of the Cyprus problem, but the UN ultimately portrayed him as a stubborn figure. In the end, Christofias' legitimacy as a community leader was eroded and gradually perished. To be sure, Anastasiades is not in a better position. For being elected to the Presidency of the Republic of Cyprus he had to make some concessions to party leaders and give promises to the electorate. As a President and community leader, Anastasiades cannot adopt any policy he likes. He is constrained by the politics on the island with party politics being the most effective stumbling block for any individual initiative. If he follows a personal agenda he will be isolated and have a similar fate with his predecessor. The UN assumption that the possibility of a settlement to the Cyprus problem depends on individual preferences is wrong. The mistake here is that the UN team that deals with the Cyprus problem thinks that the settlement of the problem should be around the provisions of the Annan Plan and what is needed is a Greek Cypriot leader who will accept that plan. Mr Downer and his team have to accept the fact that that plan, or a similar one, will never be approved by the Greek Cypriots.

The second assumption that the UN team makes about the current contingency in Cyprus is that the economic situation on the island engenders a great opportunity for exerting some pressure on Greek Cypriots. The idea here is that a comprehensive settlement to the Cyprus problem shall yield economic benefits and opportunities. Again, Downer

and his team are wrong. A couple of years ago UN people realized that the cost of a settlement is enormous and disproportional to the potentials of a unified Cypriot economy. If that assessment was so daunting in 2008-9, today it must be really awful. How would the UN assure the people of Cyprus that a solution to the island's political problem today will be economically beneficial? Secondly, UN people tried in the past to assure that there are some donors who shall be eager to contribute. The results of a donors' meeting in 2004 however were quite disappointing. Thirdly, nobody could persuade a people that strive for economic survival to run the risk of a fragile political arrangement in Cyprus. Both the UN and the EU are not in position to guarantee the economic viability of a political settlement in Cyprus. With all that in mind, the UN assumption that economic benefits and opportunities will lure Greek Cypriots into a "yes campaign" is flawed. It is hardly difficult to see how the Turkish Cypriots will be of a different mind. At the moment, there is no evidence to support that.

The greatest mistake of all is that UN people believe that the discovery of natural gas in Cyprus' exclusive economic zone offers a great incentive for a compromise. That assumption is wrong for many reasons. Firstly, the exploitation and monetization of natural gas cannot and it should not be subject to a political dispute. It is not only the government of Cyprus that has a vested interest in the exploitation and monetization of natural gas, but also the private companies that invested (and plan to invest) millions of dollars into the natural gas enterprise. If that enterprise becomes a subject of inter-communal dialogue the prospects of successful monetization of Cyprus' natural reserves will be vanished. Second, the government of Cyprus and the private actors who are involved in the natural gas enterprise have no reason or incentive to add a political element in the process. In that case things will be perplexed so much that the whole energy project will go astray. Last but not least, national natural resources are dealt with at a state level, not at the community level. There is no good reason for making Cyprus an exception.

With all these flawed assumptions in mind the new UN initiative will be one of the same. As it happened in previous cases, UN involvement in the Cyprus problem makes things a little bit worse than they used to be before an initiative. Maybe it is high time for the UN to consider the Cyprus problem afresh.