

THE CYPRUS PRESIDENCY: TOWARDS A BETTER EUROPE AND BEYOND

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Just under a month ago, Cyprus assumed the helm of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The challenges this 8-year old member state faces, until it hands over the baton to Ireland, are stark. If the issues Nicosia has inherited from Copenhagen and Warsaw, as well as new ones which inevitably will arise, are handled well, then Cyprus' Presidency will be lauded as successful. Nevertheless, the potential pitfalls are many.

There is the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020; the EU's budget, for short. The instructions are clear; the European Council has given the Cyprus Presidency the mandate to reach an agreement "by the end of 2012." Yet, how does one do this when it is all too apparent that there is a great chasm between the various member states? The rich countries squabble amongst themselves about the levels of their net contributions; why do some pay more per capita than others? Then there are the less wealthy, newer member states gritting teeth at the thought that funds that have visibly helped their states may be slashed. Mediating between the 26 different voices, while keeping its own national position at bay, is what Cyprus has been called upon to do. Is this possible? Or will one witness a repetition of the June 2005 scenario, when an agreement was within reach, but because of last-minute wrangling, it all collapsed like a house of cards? In 2005, Europe was at its most prosperous; while in 2012 the tidal wave of the economic crisis has shaken the European Union and many a member state to the core. Agreeing on the budget, therefore, will be no easy feat.

Meanwhile on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, another form of fighting and in-fighting is taking place. From the peripheries and the suburbs, the hostility has now reached Damascus and there's talk of a spill-over into Lebanon. Similar images – of the tens of thousands of refugees, dishevelled and frightened, emerging from ships anchored in Cyprus waters, having left Lebanon in precarious circumstances during the hot and humid July of 2006 – may soon be repeated. And this time the numbers are expected to be greater. Cyprus, as Presidency, but also as the southeastern-most border of the European Union, must be prepared on the ground to provide shelter, comfort, while also offer a helping hand to Baroness Ashton in steering the European Union in its response to this looming humanitarian and political crisis.

As oft-stated in Brussels, if the Multiannual Financial Framework is sealed by the end of this year, Cyprus will be lauded as having veered a successful Presidency. For this to take place, however, it is imperative that one does not work in a vacuum and that there is open cooperation and communication not just with all member states but also with the various institutions, such as the European Parliament and the Commission. This is a vital ingredient for success. One of Cyprus' strengths is that due to its small size, Nicosia does not have various biases attached to it and is not seen as a bully intent on having its own way. It will listen to the various viewpoints and mediate, trying to build bridges, narrowing gaps, cooperating with all stakeholders in the effort to meet the obligation it has assumed. It is hoped that the Cyprus Presidency will indeed be successful in achieving this.

Yet Nicosia also has to deal with a candidate member who refuses to recognise and furthermore enjoys routinely provoking and threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Cyprus. Turkey's cutting off ties with the EU during the second semester of 2012 is for many ridiculous. However, when rounds of live fire are shot within Cyprus' EEZ, Nicosia rightly feels weary, especially since Cyprus refuses to use its new role to serve its own national interests. Nicosia knows that to be an honest broker and to successfully steer the EU it has to rise above and beyond and not allow Ankara's provocations to hijack the Cyprus Presidency.

Thus, amidst all the existing and potential challenges, little Cyprus has to muscle its way through the Multiannual Financial Framework negotiations as an honest broker, working towards a *Better Europe*, while countering the grave consequences of the economic crisis. It will have to effectively face the problems resulting from the looming geopolitical upheaval in its neighbourhood. Yet, while there are many odds to counter, Cyprus has a remarkable tendency to rise above and beyond itself. Throughout its ten thousand year history, the island of Aphrodite has suffered colonisation and occupation, its people often decimated by plagues and invasions. Yet, it has managed to survive because in times of dire need, it has a remarkable way to regroup, organise, and use its people's talents to its best. Even in the event of unexpected crises, Cyprus will pull together and, with ingenuity, rise to meet any challenge effectively in order to pave the way for a *Better Europe* a Europe of solidarity, social cohesion, prosperity, security and growth, a Europe closer to its citizens.