

TIME FOR PLAN B – AN EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

In view of the new Geneva/Crans-Montana Conference for Cyprus*

Andreas Theophanous

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

In recent years the international community has invested much political capital in the process of resolving the Cyprus problem as well as for serving broader objectives in the Eastern Mediterranean. The latter includes the need for multilateral cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean for energy and security issues with the participation of Turkey. In addition, Western powers believe that such a development will remove an obstacle in the relations between the EU and NATO while at the same time Russia's influence in the region will be reduced. Furthermore, a solution to the Cyprus problem in times of regional turmoil and conflict will be considered a success for the UN and the international community.

Consequently, it is no surprise that the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres announced a new five-party conference in Geneva, despite the fact that there are still serious differences between the two sides in Cyprus as well as between Greece and Turkey. The conference is scheduled to start on June 28. It should be noted that the EU will be present merely as an observer.

To the present day there is still significant distance to be covered between the two sides. Furthermore, grey areas around crucial aspects of the Cyprus problem should be also addressed. The latter is largely the result of the UN tactic of constructive ambiguity to bridge disagreements between the two sides. We may recall that the same tactics were used by the UN in the case of the Annan Plan in 2004.

It is also recognized both in Cyprus and abroad that not much work has been done regarding the day after a solution. For example, still much work has to be done on the potential economic repercussions. Likewise, possible risks of destabilization have not been assessed. Additionally, apart from the disagreements, there is great mistrust between the two sides. What is even worse is that there is lack of a minimum framework of common objectives. It is noted in this regard that the political system in Cyprus has had over time as a priority avoiding incurring responsibility by the UN. A side effect was that this has been obscuring the essence of the conflict.

If, as a result of the new Geneva/Crans-Montana Conference, a solution framework is reached/"pushed", most likely there will be a new strife among Greek Cypriots like in 2002-2004. In such a case a new rejection

* This article was firstly published in *The Cyprus Weekly* newspaper on June 23rd, 2017.

in a referendum cannot be ruled out given the positions of Turkey which inevitably influence the outcome. These include the security arrangements, the replacement of the Republic of Cyprus by a new state structure and rotating presidency. But even if such a deal is approved in a referendum, it is highly possible that the current *status quo* may worsen with destabilizing effects. In short, the narrative of the bizonal bicomunal federation as discussed today, which stresses reunification, peace and robust economic growth, is dangerously overpriced. Obviously, it is about time that this is reassessed with pragmatism and free from ideological illusions.

We should keep in mind that addressing issues of governance in biethnic and multi-ethnic states is a critical issue in international politics. In cases where constitutional models have been chosen on the basis of ethnonationalist pillars, the overall record is rather negative. For example, Bosnia, Lebanon and even Belgium are indicative cases. Obviously, Cyprus has to take this into serious consideration and think outside the box.

Indeed, there are serious doubts whether it is possible to reach a comprehensive settlement under the current circumstances. Given the high level of mistrust between the two sides in Cyprus, their different approach on several issues as well as the overwhelming role of Turkey, it will be useful and appropriate to seriously consider an evolutionary process. This may include the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* in the occupied part of Cyprus, the return of Varoshia under the UN and the EU auspices, additional CBMs as well as addressing energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean with Turkey's participation and within the framework of normalization of relations with the Republic of Cyprus.

Consequently the goal should not be either to declare a deadlock or to end up with a solution without reasonable prospect for viability and success. This approach is oversimplified and unnecessary. Both the international community and the political system in Cyprus should understand the realities and try to alter the process. To put it bluntly it is worth adopting an evolutionary process that creates incentives for all parties concerned to break the deadlock. Such a philosophy will also encourage the avoidance of tensions at all levels. To this end, there must be specific initiatives. Such an approach will require the support of all interested parties and of the international community. This policy orientation may lead to tangible mutual benefits and will also preserve the prospect of a comprehensive arrangement eventually.