

## Cyprus - The beginning of a new era

*Amanda Paul*

As predicted, Dervis Eroğlu, leader of the right-wing National Unity Party (UBP) became the new leader of the Turkish Cypriot Community earlier this week, beating incumbent leader Mehmet Ali Talat by 50.38% to 42.85%. Given Mr Eroğlu's reputation as something of a hardliner, many people fear his election will endanger the ongoing reunification talks on the island, in turn putting Turkey's EU membership negotiations in jeopardy. However, these fears may prove to be exaggerated with both processes continuing as long as all actors, including Turkey, the Greek Cypriots, Greece and the EU maintain their push for progress.

Talat's defeat was on the cards for months. Although he enjoyed the support of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) he went into the elections in a weak position. His Republican People's Party (CHP) had already been punished in last year's 'parliamentary elections' after a series of corruption scandals, and a poor economic performance.

With nationalism on the increase, concessions in the peace talks with his Greek Cypriot counterpart, Dimitris Christofias, proved very unpopular, particularly on the issues of single sovereignty and cross voting. To many this implied Talat might have been ready to compromise the fundamental Turkish Cypriot demand for political equality and equal sovereignty rights in a future federation. Mr Eroğlu also benefited from the substantial media support he enjoys and from the presence of the thousands of Turkish settlers on the island. Not surprisingly, many Turks who came to the island following the 1974 operation support Eroğlu because they believe Talat sold them out. Under an eventual peace deal it is very likely that a considerable number will be asked to return to Turkey.

### **EU let Talat down**

Talat was also let down by the international community and in particular the EU. In the aftermath of the 2004 referendum on the UN Annan Plan (which 65% of Turkish Cypriots supported and 76% of Greek Cypriots rejected), the EU promised to lift the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots and adopt a Direct Trade Regulation. Unfortunately, the Direct Trade Regulation has been blocked by the Republic of Cyprus ever since Nicosia entered the EU in May 2004.

The Greek Cypriots fear adoption would mark the beginning of the end of a one-state solution. This cost Talat dearly because he was relying on EU leaders to deliver this to his people. Today, the EU is seen as a biased and untrustworthy partner because of the (Greek) Cyprus membership. Furthermore, the EU's failure resulted in Turkey refusing to open its airspace and harbours to the Republic of Cyprus (something it is obliged to do under the Customs Union signed with the EU in 2005) until the EU delivers. This resulted in a number of EU accession negotiating chapters being frozen and further ill-feeling towards Brussels in both Turkey and Northern Cyprus.

### **Talks unlikely to collapse**

The latest UN-brokered negotiations for a bicomunal, bizonal federal solution have been going on for some 18 months, supported by the international community and the two 'mother states': Turkey and Greece. Although progress has been slow, the talks have started to produce some concrete results and have closed a number of gaps. Earlier this year talks intensified and leaders of both communities have been increasingly ready to make compromises. Furthermore, some taboos have been broken along the way - Turkish officials have met with Greek Cypriot civil

society representatives and the Greek Cypriot church has been welcomed in the north. This was unimaginable only a short time ago.

It is highly unlikely that the talks will collapse as a result of Mr Eroğlu's election because Turkey will not allow this. As long as Ankara continues to believe a settlement is in Turkey's broader interests the process will continue. Turkey wants to continue to be viewed as an increasingly powerful regional player and therefore needs to act accordingly to project this new image to the world. Ankara will press Eroğlu not to stray from the path opened by the Annan Plan when Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots gained the moral and political high ground after the Greek Cypriots rejected it.

Turkey was praised by the international community for its efforts towards a settlement and Ankara has endeavored to have a "one step ahead" approach ever since. Under no circumstances does Turkey want to return to the bad old days when Ankara was labeled as the intransigent party. Eroğlu will come under pressure to pursue a constructive approach and avoid deviating excessively from already agreed parameters. Among other things, he has indicated that his negotiating technique will differ from Talat's (which he described as "submissive"). He says he will never accept single sovereignty and rejects returning Morphou/Güzelyurt to the Greek Cypriots. These positions are unacceptable to the Greek Cypriots and it will be interesting to see to what extent he will maintain them and the reaction this brings.

Turkey supported Talat's position in the negotiations and the line they take with Eroğlu will be an important indicator of their desire for a settlement. Furthermore, Eroğlu also has to consider economic factors: with Northern Cyprus dependent on financial aid from Ankara for its survival he simply cannot afford to create waves with Turkey. However Turkey cannot bring about a settlement alone and the roles of other actors, including Greece, the Greek Cypriots, the UN, EU and US, to bring about a settlement, are also crucial.

Over the next few weeks Eroğlu will reshuffle the negotiating team as well as create a special National Security Council to advise on the negotiations before his first meeting with Christofias. Clearly, his personal relationship with Christofias is somewhat cool and the Greek Cypriot reaction to his appointment has, not surprisingly, been negative given his position of favouring a two-state solution. However, at the same time Christofias has made it clear that he will not walk away from the negotiations.

### **Time for the EU to deliver**

The possibility of a helpful move from the EU arises from the new Lisbon Treaty which gives the European Parliament a co-decision-making role in trade agreements. This means that the blocked Direct Trade Regulation has a chance to progress. A recent request by the European Commission for the Parliament to reconsider the legal basis of the proposed Direct Trade Regulation could open the way for its adoption providing there is a qualified majority in the Council of Ministers.

The Greek Cypriots will no doubt fight to create a blocking minority to prevent adoption but it is not impossible. If the Regulation passes Turkey would be expected to open its ports and airspace to the Republic of Cyprus. This, in turn, would remove the veto that the Republic of Cyprus' currently exercises on a number of chapters in Turkey's accession negotiations.

If all this were to happen, it should improve the EU's image among Turkish Cypriots, showing that the EU is a credible and trustworthy partner. It could also clear Turkey's path to the EU, giving Turkey an even greater incentive to get a deal in place on the island. In this scenario, Mr. Eroğlu may find a tough approach difficult to maintain.

However without some movement of this kind the future looks bleak. Contrary to what Prime Minister Erdoğan now says, Turkey could well lose the incentive to push for accession as Turkey only has four negotiating chapters left to open, all the others being blocked. Now, more than ever, the EU needs to show it has long-term vision and will help Aegean friends move to a future beyond the past.

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