

Crans-Montana – A ‘now or never’ moment for a Cyprus settlement?

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On 28 June under the auspices of the UN, the leaders of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot Communities, Nicos Anastasiades and Mustafa Akinci, will meet in Crans-Montana, Switzerland, in a fresh effort to resolve the decades-old Cyprus problem following a recent five-month impasse in the talks. The three guarantor states, Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom will also participate.

A solution would be a win-win for both communities as well as the broader region. It would not only enhance the Cypriot economy, including possible new energy projects, but also bring a new climate of security and stability to the Eastern Mediterranean. However, while progress has been made on many areas, significant differences remain on the issue of security and guarantees. Overcoming these differences will on both sides require political courage, creative thinking and a readiness to compromise and let go of maximalist goals. Yet, even if the two leaders clinch an agreement, selling it to their respective communities will be a significant challenge as Cypriots are far from prepared for the compromises that an agreement requires.

The story so far

Negotiations between December 2016 and January 2017 created unprecedented levels of optimism that an agreement could be reached. Talks in Geneva in January were particularly historic because for the first time they incorporated a five-party conference with the participation of the guarantor powers and an exchange of maps outlining rival proposals for territorial boundaries took place. But, at the end of the day, no tangible breakthrough was achieved. Not only could no compromise be found on territory, but the conference also exposed the wide divide on the security and guarantor issues. Thereafter, the blame game kicked off again, thus poisoning the negotiations.

In February, talks came to a halt when the Cypriot parliament passed a bill instructing schools to commemorate the January 1950 ‘Enosis’ (Union) referendum, in which Greek Cypriots voted their preference for the island to be annexed to Greece. Akinci refused to continue the talks unless the legislation was reversed. For the Turkish Cypriots, the move went against the spirit of the settlement talks and the efforts to build mutual trust between the two communities. While it was partially lifted in April a lot of the goodwill and positive atmosphere that once existed between the leaders was lost, with Anastasiades claiming that Akinci was looking for a pretext to abandon the talks. The process was further disrupted in the run-up to the 16 April constitutional referendum in Turkey, as President Erdogan wanted to avoid making any decisions related to Cyprus that could drive away nationalist votes. Hence the talks were once again put on hold.

Now, the campaign for the 2018 presidential election in the Republic of Cyprus, in which Anastasiades seems very likely to stand for re-election, will soon begin. Given the Greek Cypriot plans to undertake new natural gas exploration, which is opposed by the Turkish Cypriots and Turkey, a prompt return to negotiations was essential. United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, made a last-ditch attempt to salvage the process by pressing for the meeting in Switzerland and asking the leaders to accept without pre-conditions.

What is required to make talks/negotiations a success?

Crans-Montana needs to be result-oriented. All core issues should be on the table and discussed in parallel and interdependently with a give-and-take across different dossiers taking place. Security and guarantees remain the biggest challenge. The bloody events of the past, which cost thousands of lives, continue to have a huge psychological impact on both communities and their approach to this issue. While the Turkish Cypriot community continues to insist that only Turkey can guarantee its security and

the estimated 35,000 Turkish troops should remain on the island, the Greek Cypriots view the Turkish troops as an occupying force and a significant security threat. They insist on their removal and the ending of a security system that allows a guarantor power to intervene if the safety of a community is deemed to be endangered. But abolishing guarantees remains, for the time being, unacceptable for Turkish Cypriots. Ultimately, it is an issue that boils down to a matter of trust, which is currently not there. This will only come in time, once a solution is implemented and sustained and when each community starts taking steps to better understand their respective historical narratives and build a path towards a shared future.

The measures adopted back in the 1960s need to be replaced by creative new alternatives that allow both Turkish and Greek Cypriots to feel safe. This would clearly need to entail a transition period that reflects the different aspects of the security question and the fears of both communities. To get to this point the maximalist positions of the two communities along with those of Greece and Turkey need to change. To this end, ahead of the conference, the UN Special Envoy for Cyprus, Espen Barth Eide, prepared guidelines for the procedure and the agenda of the conference to smoothen the discussions, including on security and guarantees.

Much greater flexibility and creativity from not only Akinci and Anastasiades, but crucially also from Turkey and Greece is necessary. There have been, however, few promising signs. For example, while reaching an agreement on a time table for troop withdrawal would represent a significant breakthrough, this is very much dependent on Ankara. Yet, it is far from clear to what extent a solution is a priority for Turkey given other pressing developments both domestically and in the region, not least in Syria.

Furthermore, selling a tentative deal to both communities in order to achieve positive results from two simultaneous referenda may prove difficult because the necessary groundwork to build trust has not been delivered. Successive peace processes have not been “inclusive”. Rather they have been leader-driven and excluded society, with little cooperation between the two communities. No meaningful confidence building measures have taken place and too much space has been left to the hardliners on both sides of the island to spread disinformation and carry out scaremongering.

The international community, namely the US and the EU, has an important role to play. At this crucial juncture, the negotiations would benefit from a big injection of Washington’s time and resources. Unfortunately, since President Trump took office, the US has reduced its role in the process. Still it is not too late for Washington to intervene at the last moment with a strong message of support. The EU has increased its activity on the island with many high-level visits and will also attend the Crans-Montana talks. If a settlement is reached, the EU may be called on to play a role in the implementation of the agreement. The EU’s experience in capacity building, security sector reform, early warning and crisis management should be beneficial for Cyprus. Moreover, based on its experience in other conflict areas such as the Western Balkans and Northern Ireland, the Union can support projects and operations to help reconcile communities and build sustainable peace.

The stage is set for big and enduring decisions. Finding an agreement will not be easy, but if there is sufficient political will and a genuine readiness for compromise it is not impossible. Yet, if the two leaders fail to reach an agreement or at least make significant progress; another conference in the foreseeable future is unlikely, if ever. The window of opportunity is going to close, all sides will blame each other and serious questions will be asked over what should happen next. For example, what rational grounds would there be to argue that the Cyprus problem can be solved in the future almost certainly under less favourable conditions? Cyprus risks entering alien territory with unknown consequences for the island and the wider region.

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