

# EMANCIPATED FROM 182 THE MOTHERLAND?

LEADERSHIP CHANGE IN NORTHERN CYPRUS OFFERS  
A CHANCE FOR REUNIFICATION OF THE ISLAND

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## LEADERSHIP CHANGE IN NORTHERN CYPRUS OFFERS A CHANCE FOR REUNIFICATION OF THE ISLAND



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- Since the 1974 division of Cyprus, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), internationally recognized only by the Republic of Turkey, has been heavily dependent on Turkey, both economically and politically. This is a feature that became even more pronounced after the Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in 2004.
- During the Islamic-conservative AKP regime in Turkey, the Turkey-TRNC relationship has witnessed two contradictory tendencies: first, from 2002 to 2004, encouragement for reunification, and subsequently, from 2005 onwards, a traditional nationalist stance accompanied by the AKP's imposed Islamic-conservative social engineering project within the Turkish Cypriot community.
- The election of Mustafa Akıncı, esteemed and trusted also by the Greeks, as the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community is a golden opportunity for the reunification of Cyprus.
- At a time of crucial reunification talks, the Turkish Cypriot community must re-evaluate its relationship not only with the Greek Cypriots but also with “motherland” Turkey.
- Turkey is currently witnessing a significant internal power struggle and unpredictability regarding the future, making it very difficult to evaluate how it would react in the event of a permanent agreement between the two Cypriot communities.

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## Introduction

The Republic of Cyprus is an exceptional case among the EU states – around 36 per cent of the island’s total territory is administered by the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which is recognized only by the Republic of Turkey. The international community regards the northern part of the island as territory of the Republic of Cyprus occupied by Turkish forces, and the occupation is viewed as illegal under international law, amounting to the illegal occupation of EU territory since Cyprus became a member of the European Union in 2004.

It has been widely acknowledged that the election of Mustafa Akıncı as the new President of the TRNC in April 2015 has (once again) opened a “window of opportunity” for reunification talks. This is because Akıncı is widely regarded as someone who is genuinely working for an enduring solution for the island. Akıncı is known for his pro-solution views and for his long-term attempts to cooperate with the Greeks, while serving as the mayor of the Turkish community of the capital, Nicosia.

Increasingly, it seems that the Turkish Cypriots maintain that the relationship often described as one between a mother (Turkey) and a baby (TRNC) should instead be a relationship between equal siblings. It is this component of the overall Cyprus question that this briefing paper addresses by asking what the current nature of the relationship between the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey actually is, and how this relationship is likely to express itself during the ongoing reunification talks.

## Key points in the history of the Cyprus conflict

The core elements of the Cyprus conflict are a combination of Britain’s imperial legacy, the Greek independence struggle, ethnic conflict, and animosity between the two neighbours, Greece and Turkey. For centuries, Cyprus was a natural part of the Hellenic world and was, subsequently, similar to other Greek areas, annexed to the Ottoman Empire in 1571. In 1878 the Ottomans, retaining nominal sovereignty, handed the island over to British administration. From that period onwards, the Greek community on the island has searched for *enosis*, that is, political unification with Greece.

Britain’s rule ended in 1960 as Cyprus acquired its formal independence. Its Constitution was based on a particular power-sharing model that incorporated minority rights for the island’s Turkish community, which at that time comprised 18 per cent of the population. Noteworthy in this regard is that in those days Turkish Cypriots did not reside neatly in one part of the island, but were scattered throughout Cyprus instead. A major component of the 1960 independence was the so-called Treaty of Guarantee between the Republic of Cyprus, Great Britain, Greece, and Turkey, stipulating that all activity tending to promote directly or indirectly either union or partition of the island was prohibited. In the event of this clause being violated, the Treaty reserved the right of the guarantor powers to take action to re-establish the current state of affairs in Cyprus, a provision which was used as justification for the Turkish invasion of 1974.

Immediately after the ratification of the 1960 Constitution, the Greek Cypriot community started to have second thoughts about the power-sharing model and all the formalities and – as they saw it – impracticalities that it included. At the time, the Greek Cypriots’ leader, Archbishop Makarios, also asserted that the 1960 Constitution was in reality ratified under enormous external pressure rather than being accepted willingly. This was soon followed by the Greek community’s attempt (the so-called 13 proposals) to amend the existing power-sharing model. The proposals were duly rejected by the Turkish Cypriots.

A period of inter-communal conflict erupted, culminating from 1967 onwards when an aggressive military junta, eagerly supporting the *enosis*, seized power in Greece. After several years of increasing tension, the situation in Cyprus reached breaking point on 20 July 1974 as Turkey invaded northern Cyprus and occupied almost 40 per cent of the island. After 1974, the island’s two ethnic communities were completely separated, with both being socialized into two contradictory and mutually exclusive narratives of the island’s history.

## The most recent determinants

The application by the Republic of Cyprus for EU membership in 1990 raised expectations that the EU could offer a significant inducement to both



Mustafa Akıncı campaigned with a promise of “solution-oriented policies”.  
Photo: <http://www.mustafaakinci.com>

Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots to pursue reunification talks before EU accession. This was, however, in all practical terms hampered by the European Council’s subsequent decision in 1994, according to which the Greek Cypriot part, namely the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus, would be included in the forthcoming enlargement round irrespective of whether or not a successful reunification had taken place. On the other hand, a powerful argument at the time as well as today maintains that it would have been unfair to postpone the Republic of Cyprus’s EU membership until Turkey had agreed to withdraw its forces, as this would have meant giving Turkey a *de facto* veto right regarding Cyprus’s EU membership.

The present stalemate in the island was consolidated by the fatal 2004 referendum regarding the reunification of the island on the basis of the Annan Plan. The Annan Plan (named after then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan) provided for the reunification of Cyprus as a federation with some power-sharing features similar to those in Belgium and Switzerland, but it was rejected by the Greek Cypriot community. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that ever since 2004 there has been an ongoing polemic over whether it was a wise decision or not to accept Cyprus’s EU membership before the island’s reunification.

At the present moment there are some basic issues that define the parameters of all conceivable reunification efforts. These largely consist of four main

topics, namely *property, territory, security guarantees* and *energy*.

In terms of property, the main problem concerns, first of all, the approximately 150,000 Greek Cypriots living in the north who were forced to resettle in the south, and, secondly, the close to 50,000 Turkish Cypriots living in the south who were forced to flee to the northern part of the island. Both communities had to leave behind massive amounts of vacated property. In terms of territory and form of governance, all serious talks are currently based on the idea of a loose federation composed of two equal states taking care of their own internal issues. Third, security guarantees are still a major issue in the reunification talks. The Greek Cypriots argue that all Turkish military forces would have to leave the island, whereas many in the Turkish Cypriot community and in Turkey still maintain that the original 1960 Treaty of Guarantee justifies the presence of Turkish Armed Forces on the island.

The fourth issue, energy resources, is a controversial new issue that both parties have, at least until now agreed should not be included in the current reunification talks. At the time of writing, the general feeling was that the re-emerged negotiations had started in an exceptionally positive way, and there were calls for President Nicos Anastasiades and President Akıncı, as the leaders of their respective communities, to develop a common media strategy in order to prevent the anti-unification groups on both sides from sabotaging the positive current.

## Northern Cyprus during the AKP era

Since 1974, the Turkish Cypriot community (officially declaring itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 1983) has been heavily dependent on Turkey, both economically and politically. However, the relationship between the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey has always been ambiguous. This relationship and, obviously, the future relationship with the Greek Cypriots, was further complicated after 1974 when many uneducated farm workers from mainland Turkey moved to the island. By 2005 these settlers numbered more than 105,000, out of which around 37,000 had been granted TRNC citizenship.

It has always been well known that Turkey plays a part in any conceivable solution to the Cyprus conflict. The Turkey-TRNC relationship has recently been defined as one of a “paternal protectorate”.<sup>1</sup> The faith of the Turkish Cypriot community and its close links to the Republic of Turkey has for decades occupied a very central position in the national (and nationalist) imagination of nearly all Turkish constituencies, irrespective of political orientation. Thus, whereas for the secular nationalist Turks Cyprus is seen as the last of fortress against Greek dominance in the Mediterranean (in practice, Turkey is surrounded by Greek islands and this is why the Turkish military presence on Northern Cyprus is often seen as a crucial strategic asset), for the Muslim conservatives and proponents of political Islam securing the rights and existence of the island’s Turkish community indicates the ability to halt the Christian forces eager to dominate what are perceived as historical Muslim territories.

The most significant aspect that characterizes Turkey’s position towards the Cyprus question during the Justice and Development Party’s (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule in Turkey is its dual nature. When it came to power in 2002, the AKP presented itself as a fresh, new political party created to resolve Turkey’s democracy deficit by implementing good governance, and it also seemed to take an exceptionally constructive and pro-solution position regarding the Cyprus question. While the

preparation for the Annan Plan and the subsequent referendum was at its peak, the AKP leadership, at least in its public statements, dismissed many of the traditional nationalist arguments put forward by the then Turkish Cypriot leader, Rauf Denktaş. This helped to create a pro-solution trend among the Turkish Cypriots, and this trend then took concrete shape in the approval of the Annan Plan by the clear majority.

However, similar to its increasingly authoritarian Islamic-nationalist trend in domestic politics, the AKP’s position towards Cyprus changed considerably after 2004. The discourse emphasizing flexibility and the need to find an enduring solution based on mutual understanding has been replaced by what can be described as a “social engineering” project, a mixture of traditional Turkey-centred nationalism and Islamic-conservatism, which is being implemented among the Turkish Cypriot community. The result has been a forced attempt to make the traditionally very secular Turkish Cypriot community more aware of its allegedly natural Muslim identity.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, one can conclude that during the 13 years of uninterrupted AKP rule, the relationship between the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey has undergone several, even contradictory, phases: firstly, encouragement to support the re-unification, and later an explicit attempt to establish an Islamic-conservative society in the northern part of the island similar to what has been attempted within Turkey itself.

From the viewpoint of the Turkish Cypriot community, the ten-year period after the Greek side’s rejection of the Annan Plan has been marred by increasing frustration and international isolation, but also growing ambiguity toward its “protector”, the Republic of Turkey. Several commentators have emphasized that the election of Mustafa Akıncı as the new President of the TRNC indicates the presence of an increasing number of those Turkish Cypriots who would like to redefine their relationship not only with the Greeks but also with Turkey.

1 Bryant, Rebecca and Christalla Yakinthou (2012): *Cypriot Perceptions of Turkey*. Istanbul: Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV).

2 Aksoy, Mustafa, “AKP’nin Kıbrıs yenilgisi”, *Millet*, 29.4.2015. Available at: <http://www.millet.com.tr/akpnin-kibris-yenilgisi-yazisi-1266501>.

## Political parties and their agendas in Northern Cyprus

One, often somewhat neglected, perspective from which to analyze the Cyprus conflict is through the political parties and their agendas. In the Turkish Cypriot community, political debates, the reunification issue included, are channeled mainly through two dominant parties, the social democratic Republican Turkish Party (*Cumhuriyetçi Türk Partisi*, CTP) and the conservative National Unity Party (*Ulusal Birlik Partisi*, UBP). Besides these two big parties, the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Partisi*, DP) and the Socialist Democrat Party (*Toplumcu Demokrat Partisi*, TDP) currently have representatives in the 50-seat TRNC parliament.

A noteworthy point is that in 2014, a completely new party – the National Justice Party (*Ulusal Adalet Partisi*, UAP) – was established. This party's presence in the current situation is especially interesting because it seems to be a rather straightforward extension of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The establishment of such an AKP-affiliated party in northern Cyprus at this point immediately raised eyebrows among its ideological opponents, with some commentators openly asking whether the party's function was to sabotage the prospects for the island's reunification. It is indeed noteworthy that the new party's programme strongly underlines the Turkish Cypriot community's Islamic-Turkish distinctiveness, claiming that this could easily come under threat in a reunified federal state.

Whereas the UAP, at least at the moment, has no representatives in the TRNC parliament, the National Unity Party (UBP) can be said to be the AKP's "real" ideological ally in northern Cyprus. The UBP's programme suggests the strengthening of religion in a secular society,<sup>3</sup> as the party has aimed to implement Quran courses and made the course on "religious culture and moral science" obligatory during its rule.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Moudouros, Nikos (2013): "The 'Cypriot Version' of the AKP Model: Neoliberalism and the Turkish Cypriot Community". Available at: <http://thewpost.com/2013/08/20/the-cypriot-version-of-the-akp-model-neoliberalism-and-the-turkish-cypriot-community/>.

4 Dayıoğlu, Ali (2012): "Kıbrıs'ta Külliye Tartışmaları: Siyasi Bir Proje mi? Toplumsal Bir İhtiyaç mı?". Available at: <http://alternatifim.org/2012/07/03/kibrista-kulliyeye-tartismalari-siyasi-bir-proje-mi-toplumsal-bir-ihhtiyac-mi/>.

Further, in a recent interview the leader of the UBP, Hüseyin Özgürkün, emphasized several times that newly-elected President Akıncı's polemic concerning the "motherland Turkey/baby TRNC" dichotomy was unfortunate as the Turkish Cypriot cause needed to be supported in close connection with Turkey and the Turkish people. He continued by defining the UBP as a party composed of those people who explicitly say that "my motherland is Turkey".<sup>5</sup> On 25 August 2015, Özgürkün also stated, as an official stance of the UBP, that the party would never support those who claim that the following clauses need to be established as a precondition for a permanent solution: the return of the Turkish population that moved to the island after 1974; the end of the guarantor status of motherland Turkey; and the withdrawal of Turkish military forces from the island.<sup>6</sup>

One can thus conclude, at least at the present moment, that the UBP, the second biggest party in the current TRNC parliament, has very eagerly promoted AKP-friendly policies within the Turkish Cypriot community and that it now takes a tough and very sceptical stance towards the newly started reunification talks. For this party, all the talk about the Turkish Cypriot community being "emancipated" from motherland Turkey is not only fruitless but also threatening, and is merely giving rise to an unfortunate situation whereby the vital national interests of both Turkish Cypriots and Turkey are being crucially sacrificed.

On the other hand, the party that currently holds the most seats in the TRNC parliament, the social democratic CTP, has quite purposefully started to back President Akıncı and the current reunification talks. A noteworthy aspect of this support was the establishment of a common committee with the Greek Cypriot AKEL Party in order to create a pro-resolution atmosphere on both sides.

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5 For Özgürkün's interview, see [http://www.cafesiyaset.com.tr/muhalefet-yeni-kktc-cumhurbaskani-ni-elestirdi\\_444481.html](http://www.cafesiyaset.com.tr/muhalefet-yeni-kktc-cumhurbaskani-ni-elestirdi_444481.html).

6 "Hüseyin Özgürkün: Yillardır bilinen Rum-Yunan tezlerinde bir değişiklik yok". Available at: <http://www.abhaber.com/huseyin-ozgurgun-yillardir-bilinen-rum-yunan-tezlerinde-bir-degisiklik-yok/>.

At the present time, it is among the CTP circles that the most determined individual Turkish Cypriot actors speaking in favour of reunification are to be found. One such prominent figure is Asım Akansoy, the CTP's previous General Secretary, whose thoughts are presented below as an example of the pro-solution Turkish Cypriot stance. In an interview published on 28 August 2015, Akansoy explicitly argued that a whole new state was to be established in Cyprus, one that would bring together not only political leaders but also intellectuals, civil society representatives, and individuals from both communities. According to Akansoy, the current status quo on the island could not continue, and this was something that both sides understood. In this respect, there was a need for a radical re-evaluation, out of which a completely new state was about to emerge.<sup>7</sup>

In Akansoy's thinking, one can find, in the most explicit form, the idea that the Turkish Cypriots and Turkey should completely renegotiate their relationship. Furthermore, he considers that Turkish Cypriots are far from able to govern their own affairs at the current time because of the organic link between Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community, palpable at every level of life. The most crucial example of this state of affairs, defined above as a "paternal protectorate", is the so-called "Republic of Turkey Assistance Committee" (*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Yardım Heyeti*)<sup>8</sup> which, according to Akansoy, functions as a "parallel state" within the TRNC and which, accordingly, should be abolished immediately. Thus, Akansoy would have the TRNC become independent of the Republic of Turkey immediately; this is something that can't wait until a solution with the Greek part established. In Akansoy's view, it is also clear that once the reunification project is resolved in the form of a new federal state that guarantees the dignified status of both Turkish and Greek communities, there will be no place for Turkish military forces in the island's north.

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7 For Akansoy's interview, see <http://www.haberalkibrisli.net/kibris/akansoy-kibrista-yeni-bir-devlet-doguyor-h28075.html>.

8 The "Republic of Turkey Assistance Committee" operates under the Turkish Embassy in Nicosia. It functions as a kind of "shadow cabinet" and often has the final say regarding important policy sections in the TRNC.

As expected, now that the reunification talks are again in a crucial phase after a stalemate of more than ten years, both of the island's ethnically defined communities need to face their deepest anxieties and fears as much as their hopes. This process of coming to terms with the tense situation is exacerbating the party political struggle as well. In the Turkish Cypriot community the reunification talks are seen, depending on whose view of the situation and learned patterns of political calculations one adheres to, as either a stimuli to end the TRNC's status as a "paternal protectorate", or alternatively, as a threatening course of events that jeopardizes the TRNC's crucially needed organic link with motherland Turkey.

## Conclusions

The EU enlargement agenda, the application by the Republic of Cyprus for EU membership in 1990, and the EU's transformative power raised expectations that the EU prospect would induce both Cypriot communities to achieve a workable solution on the island. This opportunity was lost with the EU's decision to detach the Republic of Cyprus's membership negotiation process from the island's reunification talks. On the other hand, the next option, the Annan Plan, was rejected by the Greek community, resulting in the complete international isolation of the Turkish Cypriot community. In those circumstances it was more or less inevitable that the TRNC would become even more dependent on its sole external protector, Turkey.

However, during the last ten-year period, marred by economic hardship and political isolation, a new "independentist" stream has emerged among a significant number of Turkish Cypriots. To a considerable degree, this is a reaction to the "motherland" Turkey's tendency to implement an Islamic-conservative social engineering project on the island, combined with neoliberal economic restructuring.

On the other hand, there are several signals indicating that through its assistance mechanism, business enterprises, and civil society organizations, Turkey's AKP regime has tried to put its ideological supporters in many key positions in the TRNC. This has in all likelihood produced a group of Turkish Cypriots that see their own and their community's interests as being best served by maintaining the

close organic link with the “motherland”. What all this means is that the mutual relationship of the island’s two communities, as well as the Turkish Cypriot community’s relationship with Turkey, are largely determined by internal logics that can be only very modestly affected by the external powers.

The election of Mustafa Akıncı as the new leader of the Turkish Cypriot community, and the emergence of what is described here as the “emancipation” movement, undoubtedly creates a fresh new opportunity for the reunification of Cyprus. However, the crucial question that still remains concerns what the Turkish government – that has in recent years been animated not only by traditional nationalism but also by neo-imperial dreams – will do in the event that the two Cypriot communities actually manage to reach a permanent solution in the form of a new federal Cypriot state.

Turkey is currently undergoing a very brutal internal power struggle between the supporters and opponents of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP, and it is thus very difficult to evaluate Turkey’s stance regarding a possible solution in Cyprus. What can be said with considerable certainty is that if the AKP wins the upcoming 1 November elections and President Erdoğan is able to speed up the concentration of power, Turkey’s nationalist and neo-imperial foreign policy agenda will continue unabated – a situation which is likely to pose significant obstacles for the reunification of Cyprus.

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