Cyprus: Seeking Ways to Restart the Negotiation Process

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The year 2014 was hoped by many to provide a rare opportunity for the unlocking of the Cyprus negotiations. The election of Nikos Anastasiades to the Presidency of the Republic of Cyprus in 2013 and the discovery of sizeable natural gas reserves within Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) appeared to offer a new window of opportunity for a breakthrough in the long-standing Cyprus conflict. Yet initial optimism proved unfounded. Throughout 2014, energy could not prove a catalyst in conflict resolution; on the contrary, the energy issue was framed within the existing sovereignty disputes.

THE ENERGY FACTOR

Claiming that Turkish Cypriot rights were infringed, Turkey disputed the right of the Republic of Cyprus to conduct exploration and drilling off its southern shore. In addition, in early October 2014 it issued a navigational telex (Navtex) blocking large areas in the Eastern Mediterranean and sent ‘Barbaros,’ a seismographic research/survey vessel owned and operated by the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) in order to conduct seismic surveys within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Republic of Cyprus. The issuance of a Navtex and the subsequent exploratory activities of ‘Barbaros’ stymied the government of the Republic of Cyprus and led to the decision to withdraw from the bi-communal negotiations in protest. This decision may have strongly manifested the determination of the Republic of Cyprus to protect its sovereign rights, but it did nothing to improve the prospects for conflict resolution on the island. The interruption of bi-communal negotiations led to yet another stalemate, despite the efforts of the August 2014-appointed new UN Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Cyprus Espen Barth Eide. While some hoped that the expiration of the Turkish Navtex at the end of December 2014 offered an opportunity to resume negotiations, these hopes were dashed when Turkey renewed the Navtex and once again began exploratory activities. As a result, the Republic of Cyprus, which in principle recognised that energy revenues belong to both communities on the island, took no concrete steps which would allow Turkish Cypriot participation in energy-related decisions. Thus, energy appeared – at least for the time being – not to be a catalyst, but rather another stumbling block to conflict resolution. Another opportunity to reframe the Cyprus question from a zero-sum to a positive-sum game has not been utilised.

Meanwhile, Cypriot hopes that initial energy discoveries at the Aphrodite natural gas field would be matched by new, more impressive ones were trimmed. Exploratory drillings that were held by the energy consortium ENI/KOGAS in the Onasagoras and Amathousa fields proved somewhat disappointing. Meanwhile in January 2015, the French energy company Total was reportedly
considering pulling out from licensed exploration in the Cypriot EEZ in light of disappointing early data. While the existence of additional energy reserves was not precluded, these failures cast a doubt on the viability of the construction of an LNG plant in Cyprus, which was the declared intention of the Cypriot government. Aphrodite’s proven reserves were not sufficient for the construction of such a plant. In addition, falling international energy prices have only made it more difficult for energy companies to commit to exploration activities in the Cypriot EEZ. Sizeable investments in Cyprus’ nascent energy sector therefore became more difficult.

**Building Civil Society Activities**

Apart from the election of Akıncı, developments at the civil society level were another reason for optimism. Despite the stalemate at the higher political level, civil society activities have substantially increased in recent months. The Bi-communal Famagusta Initiative (BFI), for example, developed several actions calling for the return of Varosha to its residents under UN control, the opening of the Famagusta port for trade, and the declaration of the old walled city of Famagusta as a UNESCO World Heritage Monument. Holding masses in the church of Agios Georgios Exorinos within the walled city of Famagusta for the first time in decades was also an event of great symbolism.

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Meanwhile, the work of the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage aimed at the protection and restoration of cultural and religious heritage on both sides of the ‘Green Line’ has led to the rescue of important monuments and won increasing appreciation on both sides. The restoration of the Panagia Melandrina church in the village of Kalograia/Bahçeli and of the mosque in the village of Deneia/Denya were two of the successfully completed projects. Planning more projects like these was hoped to increase popular support for conflict resolution, which was critical since any agreed solution would have to be voted upon in a referendum, and developing a bottom-up solution dynamic was sine qua non for this.

**Possible Steps towards a Solution – Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)**

Resuming the negotiation process would be the first crucial test for all sides. The termination of Turkish exploratory operations south of Cyprus and the involvement of Turkish Cypriots in the Republic of...
Cyprus’ procedures would be essential in that respect. Bundling energy together with water and other natural resources and discussing them in negotiations under the title ‘natural resources’ could be helpful. While Greek Cypriots would share access to information and decision-making on energy issues, Turkish Cypriots would let Greek Cypriots enjoy similar rights to water resources reaching Cyprus from Turkey. The ongoing construction of a water pipeline connecting Turkey with the ‘TRNC’ was expected to relieve Cyprus’ chronic water shortage and boost agriculture. Extending the scope of this project so it can cover Greek and Turkish Cypriot needs alike could give a strong cooperation signal. Nonetheless, generating a strong positive momentum towards solution would require some bolder steps. These could include the successful conclusion of negotiations on the opening of the closed city of Varosha to its Greek Cypriot inhabitants together with steps to lift the trade embargo against Turkish Cypriots.

CONCLUSION

Falling energy prices and the poor results of recent exploratory drillings in the Cypriot EEZ have limited aspirations concerning the pivotal role of energy in the Eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus. Nevertheless, while energy discoveries may not prove a game changer for the region, they maintain their significance for the economies of the countries concerned, such as Cyprus, as well as being a valuable instrument for the development of regional cooperation. Energy can still play a strong facilitating role to conflict resolution negotiations. On the other hand, Greece’s economic and political uncertainty, as well as Turkey’s upcoming parliamentary elections of 7 June 2015 may be seen as risk factors that are not likely to contribute to a more dispassionate public debate on the Cyprus question. It is true, however, that the Cyprus question no longer generates the public interest and emotions it used to in Greece and Turkey. On the one hand, Greece is struggling with a severe economic crisis and Cyprus -or any other foreign policy issues- does not appear high on the political agenda. On the other hand, Turkey faces far greater foreign policy challenges than that of Cyprus along its eastern and southeastern border. These make it easier for Greek and Turkish Cypriots to manifest their commitment to a solution and dispel views that the prolongation of the current stalemate is actually preferable to a compromise. A Cypriot-owned negotiation process would not depend on the good intentions of Cyprus’ guarantor states to thrive.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

CYPRUS 2015 INITIATIVE. Solving the Cyprus Problem: Hopes and Fears, Interpeace and Cyprus 2015 Initiative: Nicosia, 2015, pp. 120.