

A Mediterranean maelstrom

Turkey's fading hopes of joining the European Union would be hugely boosted by a Cyprus settlement, for which the next few weeks will be critical.

IT IS no secret that negotiations on Turkish membership of the European Union are going slowly. Only one of the 35 "chapters", on research, has been completed. Five are blocked by a French veto on anything implying Turkey's eventual accession. Eight have been frozen since December 2006 to punish the Turks for not opening their ports and airports to Cyprus (ie, the Greek-Cypriot republic). On December 8th the EU agreed to open just one new chapter, on the environment.

This week's annual stocktake on progress with Turkey was gloomy. Public opinion is shifting, too: Turkish support for EU accession fell from 70% in 2004 to 42% in 2008. The new president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, once said Turkey would never be part of Europe, a sentiment shared by the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy. Yet Western diplomats tell the Turks that time is on their side, and that presidents come and go.

There is, however, a more urgent problem: Cyprus, divided since the Greek-backed coup and Turkish invasion of 1974. Turkey cannot join the EU without a deal on Cyprus because the Greek-Cypriot republic, an EU member since 2004, has a veto. This week the Cypriot government showed its teeth by promising to block the opening of five new chapters in the Turkish negotiations next year. A Cyprus settlement is thus essential if Turkey is to have any hope of progress towards the EU.

It matters for other reasons, too. Cyprus is a main cause of today's scratchy relations between the EU (of which Cyprus is a member, but not Turkey) and NATO (of which Turkey is a member, but not Cyprus). If the Cyprus problem were solved, the way should be clear for closer co-operation between the two organisations, which often seem to occupy different planets even though both are based in Brussels.

It would be brave to express any optimism about a Cyprus deal. David Hannay, a British former special envoy to Cyprus, notes in a recent paper for the Centre for European Reform that "no one has yet lost money betting against...a comprehensive settlement." Even so, this ought to be a propitious moment since, for the first time, the leaders of both sides want a deal.

For 30 years after 1974, the Turkish-Cypriots were led by the obstinate Rauf Denktash, who preferred partition to the "bizonal, bicomunal" federation that both sides agreed to aim for in the late 1970s. By the time he was sidelined, the Greek-Cypriot presidency had gone to the hardline Tassos Papadopoulos. Mr Papadopoulos pushed for a Greek-Cypriot rejection of the UN's Annan plan for unification in April 2004 (see article). Cyprus joined the EU a week after the Greek-Cypriots said no (with the union's *acquis communautaire* suspended for the Turkish-Cypriot north).

From its new vantage-point the Cypriot government vetoed an EU promise to reward the Turkish-Cypriots for voting yes by ending their trade and travel isolation. It was in response to this that Turkey refused to open its ports and airports to the Greek-Cypriots, even though this became a legal obligation as soon as Cyprus joined the EU. Many diplomats muttered (as they still do today) that it was a mistake to guarantee the Greek-Cypriots EU membership without a settlement. The worry had been that Greece might veto new EU members from eastern Europe if Cyprus were left out. But it was also assumed, wrongly, that the main obstacles to a deal were Mr Denktash and the Turkish-Cypriots.

In February 2008 things improved when Demetris Christofias ousted Mr Papadopoulos as president. Mr Christofias comes from the Akel (communist) party. Not only is he pro-settlement, but he is also an old trade-union friend of Mehmet Ali Talat, the Turkish-Cypriot leader. Mr Christofias says he ran for president with the specific aim of solving the Cyprus problem. The coincidence of the two presidents opens what William Chislett, an analyst at Spain's Royal Elcano Institute, calls "a unique window of opportunity to lay the Cyprus problem to rest once and for all, but it will not remain open for ever."

A communist to the rescue

Mr Christofias and Mr Talat duly set about new formal talks in September 2008. They opened an extra crossing-point over the "green line" on Ledra Street, Nicosia's main shopping street. The UN wearily agreed to join in again and Alexander Downer, a former Australian foreign minister, was made special envoy.

Yet no sooner had the talks started than they began to drag. Mr Christofias was determined not to revert to the Annan plan, whereas Mr Talat wanted it to be the basis of discussion. Under each of the six headings for the talks—economics, the EU, governance, territory, security and property—the positions staked out by the two men's chief negotiators (George Iacovou for Mr Christofias and Ozdil Nami for Mr Talat) seemed far apart.

Even so, some progress has been made, partly because the number of meetings between Mr Christofias and Mr Talat has risen to two a week (it may rise to three in January). Economics and the EU are largely resolved. After months of argument about the roles and voting arrangements for a rotating (Greek-Cypriot) president and (Turkish-Cypriot) vice-president, the differences over governance also look bridgeable.

The territorial split between the two communities will be harder. Yet in principle the Turkish-Cypriots are ready, as under the Annan plan, to hand back some 9% of the 38% of Cyprus that they now occupy, including Varosha, a ghost resort town south of Famagusta. A renewed British offer to give up some land from its two military bases will help. There may however be a row about Morphou, which under the Annan plan would have gone to the Greek-Cypriots but has since seen a big influx of Turks from the mainland.

Indeed, some Greek-Cypriots say mainland Turks are a bigger problem than territory. It is common to hear that "we have no problem with Turkish-Cypriots, only with Turks and their army." Yet the numbers can be exaggerated. Mete Hatay, who works on demographic issues at PRIO, a think-tank in Nicosia, says there are some 50,000 "citizens" of mainland Turkish origin in the north (plus 35,000 troops and a transient population of 100,000). He reckons there are 140,000 Turkish-Cypriots left, comprising 17.5% of the population, close to their 18.6% in 1960.

The two biggest sticking-points in the negotiations are security and property. Mr Christofias insists that he cannot accept a deal that preserves Turkey's role as a guarantor power and keeps many Turkish troops on the island, since that would be a "Damocles sword hanging over us". Like all Greek-Cypriots, he distrusts the Turkish army. He hints that a Cyprus deal may fall victim to the power struggle between Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his generals. For his part, Mr Talat is adamant that, after their experience of the 1960s, Turkish-Cypriots cannot forgo some protection from Turkey.

Men of property

Property may prove tougher still. When the Turkish army overran the north, as much as 80% of property there belonged to Greek-Cypriots, who either fled or lost their lives. In many cases

they or their heirs still hold the title deeds, even though the property has been seized by Turkish-Cypriots, developed or, in some cases, sold to foreigners. Mr Talat says property questions must be settled by an independent commission, with compensation paid to former owners (though he is vague about where the money will come from).

Asked for his views, Mr Christofias says endearingly that, as a communist, he does not like private property. Yet the Greek-Cypriots have a clear policy: the original owners must decide. A few might return; others might sell; still others might accept compensation. A new complicating factor is the Orams case. The Orams are a British couple who bought land in the north from a Turkish-Cypriot and built a holiday home. The original (Greek-Cypriot) owner sued for compensation and won in Cyprus. He took his case to Britain, and earlier this year the European Court of Justice ruled that, even if a Greek-Cypriot judgment against British owners were unenforceable in northern Cyprus, it could be enforced in Britain. The Orams ruling has chilled further investment by foreigners.

Resolving differences over security and property will clearly be hard. But with enough time and goodwill, and sufficient pressure on both sides, it could be done. Unfortunately, all three are lacking.

Sitting in his presidential palace, by the window through which Makarios escaped in July 1974 and in sight of the Turkish-Cypriot flag painted provocatively on the Pentadaktylos mountains, Mr Christofias is emphatic. Substance must prevail over speed; there can be no deadlines and no arbitration. He blames the failure of the Annan plan on excessive haste.

The trouble is that time is once again running out. Mr Talat faces a presidential election in early April that he may well lose. His party was defeated by nationalists in a general election last April. The prime minister is now Dervish Eroglu, a man cut from the same cloth as Mr Denktash. Mr Eroglu, who speaks little English and barely knows Mr Christofias, is now ahead in the polls for the presidential election. Mr Talat has invested so much political capital in his settlement talks that, if he gets no deal, even more voters may turn against him.

The pressure on Mr Talat may be more immediate, but Mr Christofias's room for manoeuvre is also circumscribed. Both coalition parties in his government are harder line than he is. His foreign minister, Markos Kyprianou, wanted new sanctions on the Turks for refusing to open their ports and airports to the Greek-Cypriots, something Mr Christofias was anxious to avoid. The Cypriot media are also vociferously sceptical about the settlement talks.

The big question is how much the two sides really want a deal. The Turkish-Cypriots clearly do. Without a settlement, they will remain unrecognised and isolated, dependent on the Turkish army and an annual subsidy of some \$600m from Turkey. But even they feel the pressure for a settlement less than they did. Until the global recession hit, their economy had improved a little. Now they can cross the green line and get Cypriot passports, they can in a worst-case scenario always move to Britain or elsewhere in the EU.

In the end, though, the Turkish-Cypriots would surely say yes. Far more worrying is the absence of pressure for a deal among Greek-Cypriots. Since they rejected the Annan plan in 2004 they have had the benefits of EU (and now euro) membership. The economy has done well, even if it is now in recession. Some fear unification might be costly: GDP per head for Turkish-Cypriots is half as big as for Greek-Cypriots, and taxpayers may have to compensate property-owners. Greek-Cypriots seem unimpressed by studies suggesting a settlement could raise GDP per household in the island by €5,500 (\$8,150) or more.

The best way forward may be pressure from outside. But this needs care. Mr Christofias is not alone in lamenting that "our tragedy has its roots in intervention by outsiders." The rejection of

the Annan plan in 2004 was partly a response to pressure from the UN and the EU. And both sides are past masters of the blame game—preparing for failure to reach a deal by pinning the blame in advance on each other.

Mr Downer, who says he is “cautiously optimistic”, is being careful to act as facilitator, not as negotiator. The EU is largely hamstrung because the Turkish-Cypriots see it as tainted by the membership of both Greece and Cyprus. Britain, still a guarantor power, is mistrusted by both sides, as is America. So outside pressure will have to come from the two sides’ main patrons: Greece and Turkey.

On this front there are grounds for hope. The new Greek prime minister, George Papandreou, elected in October, may have economic distractions, but he is keener on a Cyprus settlement than his predecessor, and he acts as his own foreign minister. He has visited Nicosia and Ankara already, and gets on with Mr Erdogan. Mr Erdogan’s foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, has a policy of no disputes with the neighbours. If Cyprus were to remain unresolved, it would be a glaring exception. A study by the International Crisis Group suggests it might help if the Greek-Cypriots talked directly to Turkey—Mr Christofias met Mr Erdogan in New York in September. But the Turks are reluctant.

The best source of pressure is the knowledge that there may never be a better chance than now. UN officials mutter about packing their bags and leaving, perhaps taking their peacekeepers with them, if these talks fail. The successors to the two present leaders will be less pro-settlement. As the ICG study concludes, failure would mean more talk of formal partition. Both sides fear that young Cypriots, with no memory of a united island, are less inclined than their parents to compromise—and less attached to lost property.

A deal still looks elusive, and time is short. It would have to be done by the end of February if voters on each side were to approve it before Mr Talat faces his electorate in early April. Talk of reaching a framework agreement that is sufficiently robust to win Turkish-Cypriot voters back to Mr Talat is risky and may well not work.

If these talks fail, another chance is unlikely to arise for years. Turkey’s EU hopes would be crushed. And Europe’s aspirations for a bigger role in the world would be dented: if it cannot solve a dispute in its own back yard, how can it do much elsewhere? The stakes in Cyprus in the next few weeks could hardly be higher.

Fonte: The Economist. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 15 dez. 2009.