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European Union Center/ Jean Monnet Chair

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the EU: when good intentions turned into a
European deadlock**

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**UNIVERSITY
OF MIAMI**



**Vol. 20, No. 5
Paper Series
September 2020**

Published with the support of the European Commission

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The accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the EU: when good intentions turned into a European deadlock

Lou-Anne Ducos*

'I have always believed that Europe would be built through crises, and that it would be the sum of their solutions', Jean Monnet¹

Crises, as Jean Monnet insightfully wrote in his memoirs, have been the main vector of European construction. From wars destroying the European countries to economic and humanitarian crises, the European Union (EU) has grown when facing emergencies since the beginning. This observation is highly relevant and important to keep in mind in both the actual context of the sanitarian crisis challenging the EU once again, and in the Cyprus case, where it all began with a political crisis. If crises can make the EU stronger, as Jean Monnet believed decades ago, it would be beneficial to explore the solutions given by the EU when faced with the Cyprus dilemma. Thus, this paper will highlight the main features of the Cyprus crisis while also presenting how the EU tried responding to this crisis. Furthermore, this paper will explore possible consequences of the Coronavirus on the Cypriot predicament.

Keywords: Cyprus, European Union, Turkey, military occupation, partition, Coronavirus

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¹ Jean Monnet: Mémoires Paris, Fayard, 1976, p. 488

« *J'ai toujours pensé que l'Europe se ferait dans les crises, et qu'elle serait la somme des solutions qu'on apporterait à ces crises.* »

Cyprus: the unsolved dilemma?

Cyprus's accession to the European Union has been considered for some observers as the most "awkward" enlargement made by the organization. Many of these reactions stem from the uncommon status of Cyprus being composed of a territory with two separate entities. The Republic of Cyprus, (one of the two entities,) is a full member state of the EU whereas the other, the Northern Republic of Cyprus, does not apply the *acquis communautaire*. To understand this specific case, this paper will first present a brief overview of the history of the island and the causes of its partition. Then, (the reasoning behind the integration of the disputed territory of Cyprus in the EU will be explained and the consequences of it highlighted.

If at first glance Cyprus does not appear as the most famous island on Earth, its importance should not be underestimated. As the third largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, Cyprus enjoys an important strategic position: near the Greek and Turkish coasts and surrounded by Syria, Israel and Egypt. Due to the island's prime location, Cyprus represents an important gateway between Europe and the Middle East. Both its position and its eclectic population have been the causes of its partition. In fact, Cyprus is composed of nearly four-fifths of its population identifying as Greek Cypriots, with one-fifth of its remaining population identifying as Turkish Cypriots. Cyprus's long history of colonization, by Greeks, Turks, and lastly in the hands of the British between 1925 and 1960, created an ambivalent framework in which political tensions increased, especially when Cyprus obtained its independence in 1960. Due to the separation in identity within the country, many citizens of Cyprus, who identified as Greek Cypriots, wanted to be a part of Greece (*enosis*), unlike the Turkish minority who greatly opposed this project. In 1974, when Greek Cypriots with the help of officers from mainland Greece, tried to launch a coup d'état, Turkey decided to send soldiers to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority. The Turkish forces ended up not just defending the minority group, but also took control of an important part of the territory and proclaimed in 1975 the establishment of a Turkish Cypriot state. This proclaimed state, located in the North, occupies 35% of the original Cyprus territory and includes 25% of the Cyprus's population. Greek Cypriots living in this part of the island were displaced by force and lost everything. While this conflict was mainly non-violent, a buffer zone under the UN supervision was established. This green line marks the separation between the Turkish Cypriot new independent state in the North, solely recognized by Turkey, and the Republic of Cyprus in the South, recognized internationally except by Turkey. Nowadays, the Turkish-occupied area is still protected by a 40,000-strong troop occupation. ²

The candidacy status of Cyprus was decided in December 1999 when the Helsinki Summit decided that Cyprus should enter the EU despite the occupation of a part of its territory³. One might ask what thoughts were driving the European member states to take on such a decision. In fact, many observers would later criticize this choice of giving the EU membership to Cyprus without solving its problem first. For example, Smith highlights that giving up the conditionality for the accession

² Drevet, Jean-François. Theophanous, Andreas. "Cyprus and the EU: Appraisal and Challenges", *Notre Europe and Cyprus Center for European and international affairs*, 2012, p.53

³ European Parliament's website, "Briefing No 1: Cyprus and the Enlargement of the European Union", 2000 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/briefings/1a1_en.htm

of the Republic of Cyprus has been depriving the EU of "one of its most powerful policy instruments to try to force a settlement."⁴ However, the European Commission and the Council had a different argument. First, they believed that launching this accession process would pave the way for an easier solution by using the leverage of a possible EU membership for Turkey to make it change its behavior. Then, hopes were linked to the UN Annan Plan consisting in the rebirth of negotiations between the two Cypriot communities which would have possibly allowed a reunification of the country. The global idea was to create a Cypriot federation, giving power to both communities and allowing the island to regain its unity while also protecting minorities. Nevertheless, this plan was not widely popular, especially among the leaders of the Republic of Cyprus. In fact, the former president, Tassos Papadopoulos, was staunchly opposed to this project. Thanks to his great influence over the media, he managed to hide an important part of the plan's benefits from the Greek Cypriot majority. A recurrent claim against the UN Annan plan was the lack of guarantees given by the organization for a post-reunification security and especially the fear of the uninterrupted presence of Turkish troops in the northern part of the island.⁵ The negotiations eventually failed when the Greek Cypriots rejected this plan by referendum.

Finally, the last EU argument was that refusing Cyprus's accession, even though it was one of the best candidates at that time in terms of Chapters completed, would have been like rewarding Turkey. That is why Cyprus officially became an EU member state in 2004.⁶

What are the consequences of this enlargement? Were the EU arguments right?

A simple observation of the current situation shows that giving the EU membership to the Republic of Cyprus was not enough to solve the crisis, since the island is currently still composed of two distinct entities. Moreover, it created an even more important distinction between the two communities. In fact, if all Cypriots became European citizens (even Turkish Cypriots), only the Southern part of the island, the Republic of Cyprus, applies the *acquis communautaire*, which is the essence of the EU. It has drastic economic consequences. The North, highly dependent on Turkey concerning its economy, has more difficulties developing itself than its Southern counterpart. In the early 2000s, their GDP per capita was less than a third of the Greeks'.⁷

Furthermore, this accession also had great consequences for the European Union itself. First, its leverage against Turkey appeared to be inefficient. More than being inefficient in this particular crisis, the EU lost an important tool of negotiation. In fact, now that Cyprus is a member of the EU, it is determined to do everything it can to block Turkey's accession to the EU. Hence, the EU lost an important part of its carrot towards Turkey.⁸ Moreover, the situation created tension in the

⁴ Smith, Karen. *European Union Foreign Policy in a Changing World*, 2014, Chapter 7: Conflict prevention, p.164

⁵ Wright, George. "Greek Cypriot leaders reject Annan plan", *The Guardian*, 04/22/2004
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/apr/22/eu.cyprus>

⁶ Drevet, Jean-François. Theophanous, Andreas. "Cyprus and the EU: Appraisal and Challenges", *Notre Europe and Cyprus Center for European and international affairs*, 2012, p.13-14.

⁷ Drevet, Jean-François. Theophanous, Andreas. "Cyprus and the EU: Appraisal and Challenges", *Notre Europe and Cyprus Center for European and international affairs*, 2012, p.34

⁸ Chamberlain, Alaina. "EU Enlargement and Membership through the Turkey Experience", April 2010

NATO-EU relationship. Actually, the EU is relying on the Berlin-plus arrangements agreed in 2002 to increase cooperation between both institutions. Since European member states did not find any agreement on the possibility of a European army, increasing cooperation with the organization already protecting an important part of the European countries is a sensible strategy. It is clearly a way to make its foreign policy more consistent. However, this strategy has one main issue: Turkey is a member of NATO while the Republic of Cyprus is a member state of the EU. Since both refuse to communicate and cooperate on their own affairs, it is quite obvious that they would refuse to share military information (with one another). As a matter of fact, the proper running of this agreement has been hindered by both countries. Turkey will not let NATO exchange information with the EU to prevent Cyprus from having access to this crucial knowledge, while Cyprus will not let the EU engage in most discussions with NATO.⁹ Hence, a conflict between these two actors prevents the whole organization from cooperating effectively. Another diplomatic issue blocked by Cyprus, among other EU member states, is the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state. Although both cases are separate issues, the acknowledgment of the existence of Kosovo would give leverage to Turkish Cypriots and their independent state.

Is the situation going to get better?

For the moment, negotiations between the two Cypriot communities remain ineffective and despite the sporadic expression of some political willingness to solve the crisis, no real compromise has been found. The President of the Turkish-occupied territory claimed in February 2020 in an interview with the Guardian that *"the differences between the two sides were growing more entrenched every year, diminishing the prospect of reunification. We need to hurry up. After all these years we have come to a crossroads, a decisive moment."*¹⁰ Hence, it looks like it is time for the EU to put an end to this crisis, and as Jean Monnet stated, to get stronger from the solutions found.

Moreover, a new important component is at stake: the energy sector. Recent discoveries of natural gas in the Levant region had an important impact regarding Cyprus's geopolitical importance. Five to eight trillion cubic feet of natural gas deposits have been found in Cyprus's Exclusive Economic zone which awoke an important interest from the international energy companies. This also opened the way for the construction of a pipeline between Israel and Cyprus, while enhancing tensions with Turkey relating to who detains these resources.¹¹ The EU decision to punish Turkey for the illegal exploitation of these resources on July 15th, 2019 is a relevant illustration of the strategic importance of Cyprus's energy resources. This punishment, actually taken by European foreign ministers, aimed at reducing the financial aids given to Ankara¹². Thus, when major economic

⁹ Smith, Karen. European Union Foreign Policy in a Changing World, 2014, Chapter 2, p.35

¹⁰ Harding, Luke. "Turkish Cypriot leader warns Cyprus is facing permanent partition", *The Guardian*, 02/06/2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/06/turkish-cypriot-leader-warns-cyprus-facing-permanent-partition-mustafa-akinci>

¹¹ Drevet, Jean-François. Theophanous, Andreas. "Cyprus and the EU: Appraisal and Challenges", *Notre Europe and Cyprus Center for European and international affairs*, 2012, p.70

¹² Petitjean, Sophie and Stroobants, Jean-Pierre. « L'UE sanctionne la Turquie pour ses activités gazières au large de Chypre », *Le Monde*, 07/16/2019

consequences are at stake, especially with interests of big European corporations such as Total or Eni, the EU is able to react quickly and punish Turkey.

Consequently, the European Union is going to face different challenges. First, it should promote further dialogue to solve the Cypriot situation and not let the actual status quo get settled. Second, it has to clarify its relationship with Turkey. How can the EU promise a membership to Turkey when one of its official member states, which would have to agree on Turkey's accession to the EU, is not even considered a state by this same candidate country? The solution would be to use the EU economic leverage on Turkey, threatening their economic partnership and the possibility of a more intensive cooperation containing strict consequences if it does not comply to international law, which means calling back its forces. As Cyprus becomes more and more important, in terms of energy resources and in terms of position (proximity to Syria), the EU should transform this member state into a real asset and therefore allow the creation of a strong, united state respecting the *acquis communautaire*. This would also allow Cyprus to be part of the Schengen area which has been prevented due to its current external frontier with Turkish-occupied territory. Hence, the idea is not to say that the enlargement of Cyprus was a mistake but letting this unusual, toxic situation in its current state without further trying to solve the conflict would be a clear failure of the European Union.

The Coronavirus outbreak: Towards a greater disparity between the two parts of the island?

The Coronavirus spares no one, not even a small island in the Mediterranean. Cyprus, along with its European neighbors, is going to face a great challenge that will be even more complicated regarding its unusual political situation. Previous conclusions have been made before the spread of the coronavirus, and if they still apply in an after-crisis plan, these conclusions can be relevant to analyze how the coronavirus pandemic is going to affect both parts of Cyprus and what the consequences will be.

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, took an unprecedented decision in March 2020: all Schengen borders were going to be closed for at least thirty days. This decision, which aimed at limiting the spread of the coronavirus, led to possible consequences. This was the first time that the EU, or at least the countries within the Schengen area, closed themselves off from each other and from the rest of the world, which may raise some concerns about the situation in Cyprus). In fact, because of its internal border with the occupied part of the country, the Republic of Cyprus has always been prevented from joining the Schengen area. Does that mean that Cyprus is isolated from the other European states? Does it prevent Cypriots from travelling to other member states?

Luckily, the answer is no. Cypriots from the Northern part of Cyprus and from the Republic of Cyprus are considered European citizens. Hence, since this travel ban only affects non-EU nationals willing to visit the bloc, Cypriots don't have to worry about that decision.¹³

However, since the Republic of Cyprus is not part of the Schengen area, it had to take decisions on its own. That is why it decided to close all of its external borders until at least the 30th of April 2020. As a consequence, only Cypriot citizens are authorized in the country, which prevents other

¹³ Schengen visa info, "Breaking: EU decides to close all Schengen Border for 30 days", 03/17/2020 <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/breaking-eu-decides-to-close-all-schengen-borders-for-30-days/>

European citizens from coming to Cyprus, with the exception of those detaining a specific visa or a resident status. The same decision has been taken by the Northern part of the country which has closed all its borders since March 12th, 2020. Only residents from the Northern part of Cyprus are allowed into this area. Thus, controls at the internal border of the country dramatically intensified and the prospect of a reunification seems to have been fading away in this context of increased isolationism from most European countries.¹⁴

What about the economic consequences of these decisions?

Cyprus, like many Mediterranean islands, heavily relies on tourism. Yet, the closure of both borders and airlines traffic will endanger this sector on this isolated island, especially since they are located relatively far from other European countries. This issue may result in drastic consequences. Since its independence in the 1960s, the island has rapidly grown into a popular summer destination. More than just a simple asset, tourism represents a major part of the island’s economic success. Even the Turkish invasion in 1974 did not put an end to this incredible rise.

Table 1 Cyprus tourist arrivals and receipts 1980–90

	<i>Arrivals (thousands)</i>		<i>Average annual growth (%)</i>	<i>Receipts (\$USm)</i>		<i>Average annual growth (%)</i>
	1980	1990	1980–90	1980	1990	1980–90
World	285,000	429,000	4.2	102,000	249,000	9.3
Europe	196,000	275,000	3.5	62,000	136,000	8.3
Cyprus	353	1,561	16.0	203	1,258	23.0

Source: CTO (1990)

CTO: Cyprus tourism organization

As can be seen in this table¹⁵, in only 10 years, from 1980 to 1990, the average annual growth of Cyprus for tourist arrivals increased by 16% and by 23% (Receipts in \$USm). Yet, because of the political situation, tourism does not affect both parts of the island equally. Even if tourism is also accountable for an important part of the Turkish Republic of Cyprus’s economy, counting for almost 23% of the GNP in the late 90s, it is much more vital for the Republic of Cyprus. Tourism

¹⁴ French Embassy in Cyprus’ website (visited in May 2020 but regularly updated by French government) <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/conseils-aux-voyageurs/conseils-par-pays-destination/chypre/#derniere>

¹⁵ Sharpley, Richard. “Tourism in Cyprus: challenges and opportunities”, *Tourism Geographies* 3(1), January 2001, 64-86.

in the Republic of Cyprus has become a major element of the government's economic growth and its development policies. It allowed Greek Cypriots, who displayed before their independence symptoms of underdevelopment, to enjoy the third highest standard of living of all Mediterranean countries after France and Italy in 1995. Moreover, tourism is a major component in explaining why the Republic of Cyprus has maintained such low levels of unemployment. In fact, over one quarter of the working population is directly or indirectly employed in tourism. Hence, the actual rate of unemployment of 5.8% in February 2020 may sharply increase during the summer season.¹⁶ Thus, this dependence on tourism for both economic growth and employment is the promise of long-term damaging effects for Cyprus. The Republic of Cyprus, which is more reliant on tourism, may be suffering the most. It is once again an element of disparity between both parts of the country instead of an invitation to reunification.

Nevertheless, Cyprus is not the only European country to suffer from this pandemic crisis. That is why the EU and particularly the EU finance ministers have decided to create important economic aid to sustain the region economic activity.

How is this plan going to help Cyprus? Would it be factor of cohesion or of greater division?

Most Europeans have heard about this breaking news: the EU agreed on a 500 billion euros rescue plan to protect the European economy against coronavirus damages. This plan concerns different sectors such as business owners with 200 billion euros allocated to help small and medium businesses or people facing partial unemployment with a 100 billion euros help. Both these initiatives would respond to the difficulties that Cyprus may be facing regarding the previous comments. However, despite video conferences held almost every week between the European leaders, Ursula von der Leyen, and Charles Michel, some aspects of the rescue plan remain unclear. The diversity of the European Union, which is usually one of its greatest strengths, can also be one of its greatest weaknesses in times of crises when decisions need to be agreed upon quickly. Hence, an important debate remains on the future 2021-2027 EU budget, and on the modalities of this rescue plan. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that this plan will not affect the Republic of Cyprus and the Northern part of this territory the same way. As a reminder, the Northern Republic of Cyprus is not recognized by the European Union, which considers Cyprus island as a whole entity under the authority of the Republic of Cyprus. Concerning the occupied territory of the North, the decision has been to suspend the *acquis communautaire*. Thus, it does not seem possible for the EU to provide economic help to a country that has its existence denied by that same institution. As a matter of fact, only the Republic of Cyprus, in which the *acquis* is applied, will benefit from this EU rescue plan. The plan will most likely increase, once again, the already growing economic and development gap between the two parts of the island.

The only solution: an increased cooperation on the island?

In the case of crises, people are capable of the best and of the worst. An incredible solidarity exploded in Europe, illustrated with countries such as Germany or Belgium helping France with its patients, but at the same time, xenophobic and ultra-nationalistic movements also increased in

¹⁶ Eurostat and trading economics. Website updated every month with new data, visited on May 2020
<https://tradingeconomics.com/cyprus/unemployment-rate>

many European countries. Hence, one can wonder if this pandemic is going to provoke the greatest economic crisis of all time, threatening everyone's life, asking for more medical resources and for more knowledge, or whether it will promote increased cooperation in the context of world competition.

In Cyprus, a light of hope has dawned between both parts. In fact, the Republic of Cyprus announced on April 16th, 2020 that it was willing to help the Northern part of the country. Panayiotis Sentonas, the government spokesman, announced in a communiqué that 2000 pills of chloroquine and 4000 protective equipment parts were sent to the Northern authorities¹⁷. Although Cyprus is not heavily endangered by the coronavirus currently, with only 105 cases and 4 deaths in the Northern Republic as well as 735 new cases and 12 deaths in the Republic of Cyprus on April 14th¹⁸, the island may soon see more serious damage, if it does not act with urgency. Due to the island's unbalanced European association and underdevelopment of its hospital system compared to other Western countries, many are asking Cyprus to become more cautious of the pandemic. The Republic of Cyprus responded to a demand for help expressed by Mustafa Akinci, president of the Northern part. Such demands are very rare, since communication in general remains largely limited between both sides. Hence, both, this demand and the fact that the Republic of Cyprus responded positively and acted in consequence, are elements of hope for a possible dialogue re-opening between the two parts of the island after the end of this sanitarian crisis.

Moreover, the postponement of the presidential election in the Turkish area, due to Covid-19, will allow to keep political leaders that know each other in charge and thus, they may be willing to cooperate together as previously demonstrated. It is particularly important since president Akinci claimed during his recent presidential campaign that "*the only viable solution to Cyprus's nearly half century of division was reunification under a federal roof*"¹⁹. Hence, both parts understand that together they will be stronger, and this incentive may greatly increase in the future when the Republic of Cyprus benefits from the EU rescue plan. If Turkey does not come to the Northern Republic's help, it would have no other choice than to rely heavily on the help of the European Union which would give an important leverage to the EU.

Final thoughts

Overall, this crisis may be the opportunity to re-open negotiations with the Northern Republic of Cyprus that will not be able to come out of this crisis unscathed if it acts alone without any outside support. Two different paths can be foreseen. One with a pessimistic lens might envision Turkey

¹⁷ Le figaro, « Coronavirus : la Chypre dit avoir envoyé de l'aide médicale à la partie nord de l'île divisée », 04/16/2020

<https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/coronavirus-la-chypre-dit-avoir-envoye-de-l-aide-medicale-a-la-partie-nord-de-l-ile-divisee-20200416>

¹⁸ Figures from Le Figaro « Coronavirus : la Chypre dit avoir envoyé de l'aide médicale à la partie nord de l'île divisée » (04/16). It is a fast-evolving situation, according to the WHO the Republic of Cyprus is now at 850 cases and 20 deaths (05/01)

¹⁹ Harding, Luke. "Turkish Cypriot leader warns Cyprus is facing permanent partition", *The Guardian*, 02/06/2020

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/06/turkish-cypriot-leader-warns-cyprus-facing-permanent-partition-mustafa-akinci>

offering an important help to the occupied territory, preventing new negotiations and even creating a more important gap in which the Republic of Cyprus would heavily rely on the European system and the Northern Territory would be dependent on one single country not willing to negotiate: Turkey. The current president of the Northern Republic of Cyprus, Mustafa Akinci, has already expressed his concerns about it. He claims that if a solution with the Republic of Cyprus is not found, the north will become more dependent on Ankara until the point where it will be swallowed up completely by Turkey and become a de facto Turkish province.

The other scenario would be more optimistic for the EU. Turkey, for political or economic reasons due to the current pandemic crisis, would not be able or willing to help the Northern Republic of Cyprus. Hence, this small territory would be in a predicament and would have no other choice than to find help elsewhere. The EU, despite the (ongoing) crisis, still has strong institutions and is able to gather large amounts of money to help its members and would therefore have a great attractive power. With a power relationship in favor of the EU, the organization would get back the leverage it lost when it decided the accession of the Republic of Cyprus without solving the crisis first. This may be a solution to re-open discussion about the reunification of the country which would actually favor both parts, especially in this complicated context in which unity is clearly what makes the European Union stronger.

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