

A NEW START OR MORE OF THE SAME?

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Demetris Christofias' victory in the presidential elections of February 2008 raised expectations about the prospect of fruitful developments in relation to the Cyprus problem. Indeed D. Christofias adopted different approaches to those of ex-president T. Papadopoulos both strategically and tactically. President Christofias called for "a Cypriot solution". One of his main objectives was to reduce outside pressures and also to prevent arbitration as had been the case with the Annan plan. Implicitly, however, a side-effect of this approach is that it diminishes the responsibilities of Turkey for the reasons that have led to the current *status quo* and for the stalemate that persists.

Be that as it may there was a new climate of "reserved optimism" which was further enhanced by the setting up of technical committees to address the main issues and the opening of Ledra Street on April 3. Finally, on July 25 it was announced that direct talks between the leaders of the two communities would start on September 3. The objective is to arrive "at a Cypriot solution by the Cypriots". Despite the excitement it was not clear whether something different in relation to the past could be expected.

Although the bicomunal dimension of the Cyprus question is an important one, the problem entails other aspects which in essence are far more important. The occupation of the northern part of Cyprus by Turkey creates

immense complications as does Ankara's insistence to retain guarantor rights over what is now a full EU member state; inevitably, there is an impact on Euro-Turkish relations not to mention that Cyprus is often used repeatedly in internal Turkish politics.

The important point is that a breakthrough may be possible if a series of different objectives are met. At this point Turkey does not seem to have a strong incentive to make serious concessions. If this is the case we may be moving into a new deadlock except if the dialogue is sustained in an effort to invest on the creation of a better climate and a better understanding by utilizing substantive confidence building measures.

As the new series of direct negotiations is about to begin we must also keep in mind that developments within Turkey as well as in the broader region are vital. Indeed we see the US, Russia and Turkey adopting inconsistent approaches to various issues of ethnic conflict. The US supports the territorial integrity of Georgia but also an independent Kosovo. Russia stresses the importance of the territorial integrity of states but in the case of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia its position is compromised. Turkey insists on a confederal solution in Cyprus based on two states but it is strongly opposed to such a scenario in the case of Iraq. And of course talk of such a stance for its own Kurdish question is considered *casus belli*. Not surprisingly, what is constant is that the perceived geopolitical and national interests of the powers involved constitute the most important factor for action in all cases.