

## Europeanising Cyprus

By Mient Jan Faber, Mary Kaldor,  
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A short time ago, we crossed over to northern Cyprus, with a French colleague, at Ledra Street in Nicosia in order to meet our Turkish Cypriot friend from the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, Fatma Azgin. We sat down at a café and ordered lemonades. Fatma opened her handbag and proudly produced her brand new European passport. Unfortunately, she did not have much time because the next day, her family would cross over to the south in order to take her son to Larnaca airport where he is leaving to do a doctorate at Manchester University - as a European Union student.

Fatma's passport is a [Republic of Cyprus](#) [1] passport in three languages (Greek, Turkish and English). It is the whole island that has joined the European Union even though it is formally represented by the Republic of Cyprus, the government in control in the south. That means that Turkish people living in the north are entitled to claim the benefits of [membership](#) [2], even though that may involve going through the Republic of Cyprus. The membership of [Cyprus](#) [3] in the European Union allows Fatma and others like her to break out of the isolation but it also recognises her as a Cypriot and a European. The café owner offered us all extra lemonade because she was so happy to have fellow Europeans in her café.

Fatma's newfound European identity is a bright spot in an otherwise worsening relationship between the EU and Turkey. In Turkey, the process of democratic reform has slowed down. There were high hopes after the victory of the (moderate Islamist) Justice & Development Party (AKP) in the parliamentary elections of [22 July 2007](#) [4].

### The Turkish roadblock

The AKP had already shown its determination to introduce a raft of democratising measures. However since then, little in the way of democratic reform has been achieved, for instance in the field of press freedom. Moreover, the party continues to face attacks from the secularist fundamentalists. Parliament, dominated by the AKP, passed a resolution against banning the headscarf in universities. In response, hardline secularist groups managed to bring a case before the courts under the penal code to ban the AKP and also the DTP (the Kurdish Democratic Society Party) for its alleged relations with the outlawed PKK.

The situation in Turkey is becoming increasingly polarised between Islamic democracy and the secularist-authoritarian inheritance of the Kemalists, in a situation complicated even further by the indictment on 15 July 2008 of eighty-six people [charged](#) [5] with planning to overthrow the

Mient Jan Faber is professor of Citizens' Involvement in War Situations at the Free University in Amsterdam. For many years he worked for the Dutch Interchurch Peace Council (IKV) on civil-society initiatives.

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["Talking to terrorists in Gaza \[0\]"](#) (14 February 2005)

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government on behalf a hardline secularist group called Ergenekon. If the courts uphold the case and declare the AKP illegal, this will deliver a serious blow both to Turkey's democratic hopes and to the negotiations on Turkish membership of the EU. Indeed the deteriorating situation is already contributing to a growing anti-Turkish mood within the EU, which could become worse during the French presidency.

A solution to the long-running Cyprus problem [6] could, perhaps, break this deadlock - in four ways. First, a Cyprus solution would mean that Turkey would lift its current embargo on all trade that passes through Greek Cypriot ports. This would unfreeze some important parts of the negotiations that have been halted as a consequence of the embargo. Second, the Cyprus problem is one of the rationales along with the Kurdish problem for the dominant role of the military in Turkish politics. Third, solving Cyprus would weaken one of the arguments put forward by those who oppose Turkish membership because of the occupation since July 1974 [7] of part the island by the Turkish military. Fourth, and most important, a solution would mean that Turkish people living in northern Cyprus would be fully included in the European Union and that will demonstrate that the EU, in principle, is not anti-Turkish and remove one of the central arguments of the anti-European hardliners in Turkey.

### **A new momentum**

So what is the prospect for a solution? For more than forty years, there have been efforts to reach an agreement to overcome the partition [8] of the island. There is broad agreement that the solution is a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. Every so often, the talks seem close to fruition and then fail at the last moment. The most recent failure was the Annan plan in 2004 when Cyprus joined the EU. The plan was supported in a referendum in the north but overwhelmingly defeated in the south, thereby allowing only the government of the south to represent Cyprus in the EU.

What has changed is that there are now (after the election in Cyprus [9] of February 2008) governments in both north and south, for the first time, that favour a solution. As a consequence, efforts are already being made to improve the communications between the two halves of the island [10]. Border restrictions have been lifted; crossing is very easy. There is no obvious police presence. Northerners can use Larnaca airport and work in the south. All this has taken place without a single violent incident. Greek and Turkish Cypriots are able to mingle freely. And this in itself has important implications for the peace process. The main rationale for the division of the island is that the north needs Turkish troops to protect them from the Greek Cypriots. That argument still persists but is much weaker than before.

Mary Kaldor is professor of global governance at the London School of Economics (LSE), co-chair of the Helsinki Citizens Assembly and governor of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Her books include *New & Old Wars* (1999) and *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (2003) Among Mary Kaldor's many articles in **openDemocracy**:

"Safe democracy [5]" (23 December 2004)

"Parallel politics in Iraq [5]" (22 March 2005) - with Yahia Said

"Iraq: the wrong war [5]" (8 June 2005)

"London lives [5]" (7 July 2005)

"America's Iraq plight: old and new thinking [5]" (13 February 2007)

"How to free hostages [5]" (29 September 2004)

"Palestine's human insecurity: a Gaza report [5]" (20 May 2007) - with Mient Jan Faber

"The Balkans-Caucasus tangle: states and citizens [5]" (9 January 2008)

In parallel, with the improvement of everyday life, the preparatory process of negotiations is now taking place with working groups and technical discussions. Unlike previous efforts which were largely the consequence of outside pressures, the current peace process is initiated from within Cyprus.

Despite the new momentum, there is caution both among civil society and within the political class, mainly because they have been disappointed too many times in the past. We were given many reasons for this caution. The negotiators are sometimes caught up in the obsessions and sticking points of the past. Turkish military influence could still be a powerful constraint in the north. The south has a minority government dependent on the support of the rejectionist parties, including the party of the former president Tassos Papadopoulos [11]. Finally, there is a tendency among the political class on both sides to feel comfortable with the status quo. The impression we gained was that there is much more enthusiasm for an agreement within civil society than among politicians and negotiators.

### **A Cypriot pioneer**

Nevertheless, there is no going back. What is happening in Cyprus could be viewed as an example of the way deepening can follow the widening of the EU. If a solution is indeed achieved, then it is important for the future of the EU that it is seen to play a crucial role in promoting a solution.

The EU could do three things. First, the European parliament could offer to host a gathering of civil society in north and south to initiate a sort of democratic convention about the future shape of Cyprus. This could increase pressure on the political classes to reach a solution. Holding it in the European parliament and involving all the guarantor powers especially Turkey, would greatly enhance the visibility and legitimacy of such a convention.

Second, the European Union should make it clear to Turkey that any solution of the Cyprus problem will speed up the negotiations [12] over Turkish membership.

Third, the EU should also consider what kind of security arrangements will be needed after an agreement. The EU brought the conflict inside the union by admitting Cyprus and now it has a responsibility to make sure the islanders are secure. This does not mean security in a traditional sense. Rather it means everyday personal security - freedom from fear and freedom from want. The military threats have disappeared but there remains organised crime, poverty in the north, and ethnic tension. Much of this will be the responsibility of a future Cyprus government. But it will need outside help since many of these new sources of insecurity are transnational. That outside help should come from both the EU and Turkey. At present there are British and Turkish troops on the island. The south wants demilitarisation of the island. Nevertheless, the agreement should include some visible security presence from Turkey and the EU (not necessarily military) to show the commitment of both to peace and stability in Cyprus.

These measures would not only strengthen and Europeanise the peace process in Cyprus. They would also bring Turkey closer to Europe. Let us hope that Fatma is blazing a trail for all other Turks to get a European passport.

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[2] [http://europa.eu/abc/european\\_countries/eu\\_members/cyprus/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/abc/european_countries/eu_members/cyprus/index_en.htm)

- [3] [http://go.hrw.com/atlas/norm\\_hm/cyprus.htm](http://go.hrw.com/atlas/norm_hm/cyprus.htm)
- [4] <http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=242>
- [5] <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/mass-indictments-turkey-alleged-coup-etat/article-174241>
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- [11] <http://kypros.org/Ekloges2003/index.php%3flocale=en&district=0>
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