

Frozen Conflicts: The EU and Future of Cyprus

Interview with Former President of the Republic of Cyprus George Vassiliou

Journal of Diplomacy: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. I would like to ask, given your experience as Chief Negotiator for Cyprus's European Union accession talks, could you describe some challenges you faced in that process?

President George Vasilliou: You think this is one question, it's twenty questions. If you want to have answers that will help you, we should take questions that are of interest to you one by one, but not generalities. On generalities I would say, we are all nice people, and we all want peace, and we all want Cyprus to solve its problem and so on, but that doesn't get us anywhere.

JD: Let me rephrase, is there a specific example in the European Union accession process you'd point to as challenging, what made the process especially difficult given "the Cyprus Problem"?

GV: If you negotiate the accession of a country there are thousands of challenges. The most important and also the most difficult is to accept and implement all the rules and regulations of the European Union. This is why negotiations need to last so long. The first major enlargement of the EU involved 10 countries: Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, the three Baltic States, the Czech Republic, Hungary plus Malta and Cyprus. We had to ensure that our rules, regulations, taxes, everything, would be in conformity with EU regulations. That's easy to say, but extremely difficult to implement. It takes time, but if you have decided you want to join, you do it.

With the accession of Cyprus, the biggest problem was that the EU always said they wanted a united Cyprus to join. In the beginning, it was very clear, "first you unite, and then you join." Mr. Denktaş, the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community at that time was against the reunification contrary to Mr. Akıncı, leader of the T/C community, today who supports the creation of a Bi-zonal Bi-communal Federation. We wanted very much to solve the 'Cyprus problem' but this was easier to desire than to achieve.

You ask, how did we succeed accomplishing this while the "Cyprus Problem" was not solved? By being consistent and honest in our desire to achieve the reunification while Mr. Boutros Ghali, the then UN Secretary General stated that Mr. Denktas was not prepared to accept the UN proposals. Accordingly, I raised the issue and stated that the EU cannot punish us because Denktas is so negative. The EU stated "we prefer to have a united Cyprus, but we will decide after things move forward".

The decision to accept Cyprus into the EU was taken at the Copenhagen Summit in 2002. There, we had final discussions with Mr. Denktas, he rejected again every proposal by the UN, and we accepted all.

Of course, no proposal from the UN would 100% satisfy either party. This was certainly the case with the Annan plan as well. So, I asked the then president of the Republic of Cyprus, Mr. (Tassos) Papadopoulos, "you understand that the main question that all member countries will ask is, will you accept the Annan Plan?" and he replied "of course I accept, I told them many times". I then asked "do you authorize me to say that you will vote yes (on the Annan plan)?" and he said "of course I authorize you". In response to his assurances, my answer was if he authorized me to say that and he would vote yes on the Annan plan I could guarantee we would join the EU.

And that's how it went, we were accepted. The understanding now was that the Cyprus problem was not solved beforehand as the EU had initially wanted, but since we were going to vote yes on the Annan Plan, the problem would be dealt with. But by then Papadopoulos had already started carrying out a campaign against the Annan Plan. He did so by saying that "We (ROC) accept the Annan plan but want improvements." but you can never reach an agreement if you don't say finally "Yes, ok." Until then, the conventional wisdom went that the Turkish Cypriots would vote no, and the Greek Cypriots would vote yes. When it became evident that Papadopoulos was against the plan, the instruction came from Ankara to the Turkish Cypriot leadership to vote yes. So, in a surprising reversal, the Turkish Cypriot side voted yes and the Greek Cypriot side voted no.

JD: What is your opinion on the ideas promoted by some for two states?

GV: There are some Cypriots both Greek and Turkish Cypriots that say, "Well we are used to it, so let us divide Cyprus, and we will live in peace, and we can both be members of the EU." This is a stupid idea and the EU

will never allow it. The EU is already a Union of 28, perhaps soon to be 32 countries. If tomorrow the EU is subdivided into different countries, how can they compete effectively with China, Russia, the US and so on? They cannot. The future lies in a stronger union, not in separation. The EU takes a very adamant position. They will never accept the division of any member country into two or more. Two examples of this attitude are that of Belgium and Spain. In Belgium the Dutch-speaking Flemings and the French-speaking Walloons wanted partition, but the EU refused it. The Belgians compromised, now the King is the head of both communities and Belgium remained one country. A newer case is that of Catalonia. A small majority of Catalans tried everything, but the EU refused to grant independence and split Spain in two.

JD: Since the accession of the Republic of Cyprus have the benefits of membership been sufficient for the people of Cyprus, are there detractors?

GV: The fact alone that the small island of Cyprus with just over a million inhabitants is an equal member in a union of 500 million, permits us to enjoy the many benefits of the Common Market. Being in the union means there is security. In the last 60 years Europe has lived in peace. It was the longest period in history with no wars. We are not fighting each other anymore and we are enjoying an unprecedented increase in the standards of living.

JD: I suppose pushing back on that I'd ask does Cyprus get its due within the EU. In regard to the banking crisis, it seems unlikely that another country in the union would have to adhere to the terms of the Cypriot "bail-in."

GV: You're talking about the so-called 'haircut'. This is, indirectly, a result of the accession. People with money from Russia, Ukraine and other Eastern European countries wanted to take advantage of the fact that Cyprus was an EU state, part of the Euro area, and they deposited several billions in Cyprus. This led to a bubble; the banks had so much money they didn't know what to do. For example, if someone was going to buy a car, he would be granted immediately a loan and even asked "don't you want to buy another car for your wife?" But when later the Banks were obliged to request repayment of the loans, many debtors were unable to meet their obligations. Thus, we ended up with all these nonperforming loans. But you are right. The 'bail-in' used in Cyprus was never repeated in other member country.

JD: Moving beyond the EU and Cypriot accession, looking to your presidency, what would you say is your legacy in that position?

GV: It is not easy to speak about yourself. When I became president, we had no real democracy. You could not be a civil servant without reading the paper of the government party; you could not criticize the president. So, I said from now on, you can read any paper you like, you can say anything you like because you live in a free country. We insisted the state-monopoly over the radio and television should be abolished. People remember my Presidency years as the time when Cyprus became a real democracy.

Another thing I'm proud of is the establishment of the University of Cyprus. Some Greek Cypriots were hesitant in creating a domestic university, saying that they didn't want to "cut the umbilical cord" to Greece. I insisted that without a University a country cannot really have a future. After a lengthy fight, I succeeded in establishing that university.

I also insisted that we should have a proper, comprehensive town planning law and ensured that all political parties accepted it. Furthermore, there were no regulations about the environment. We created the Department of Environment and all related rules.

JD: It sounds like those are the building blocks of a successful state, good governance, democracy, autonomy, free press, uniform regulations. That seems like a robust legacy to me.

GV: Yes. That is my legacy.

JD: I'm going to ask what is probably an expected question. You said earlier you cannot imagine a two-state division of the island or an indefinite continuation of the status quo. Given current political developments, the elections that just took place both in the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot community, is there, in your opinion, a chance for fruitful talks to begin again?

GV: The answer is very simple, we will have to do it, full stop. If we don't do it both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots will suffer. It's not to the advantage of Turkey either; Therefore, it's to the benefit of Turkey to solve it, and it's to our benefit not to have problems. If we stumble, we will both pay in one or another way.

JD: You said, we have to do it, that the status quo or permanent partition isn't an option. What is the catalyst we need to break out of this cycle?

GV: The catalyst should be realization by the Cypriots how dangerous is the continuation of the current stalemate. Greek Cypriots know that if we don't solve the Cyprus Problem, we will be in trouble. Turkish Cypriots recognize that if there is no solution, after some years Turkish Cypriots as an entity will not exist. There will be Turkish speaking people but not a separate Turkish Cypriot entity. Imagine 300,000 Cypriots in a country (Turkey) of 80 million.

JD: This controversy over natural gas exploration in the Cypriot EEZs, Eni came to drill, now Exxon is on its way, can that be a catalyst?

GV: Yes, it can be. Turkey would never permit us to exploit the natural wealth, but on the other hand, Turkey will also not be able to exploit this wealth. Everyone will lose. Whether we like it or not we have to sit down and be prepared for compromise and by the way let me point out that building a pipeline through Turkey would benefit all of us.

JD: Do you think Akıncı and Anastasiades may sit down for a face to face meeting soon?

GV: Yes, but both of them must say what is and what is not feasible. Talks need to start, but importantly, must end, you cannot have unending talks.

JD: To conclude we'd like to ask what drove you to seek the presidency of Cyprus.

GV: I was not consciously preparing for it; I was not dreaming of being president. But when I realized that a change was necessary, I submitted my candidacy. When I became president, I continued behaving as I did before, bringing the same attitude to the job I had always held. We worked hard, and we achieved a lot of things. Unfortunately, the most important thing I wanted to see was Cyprus reunited, but we didn't have enough time to achieve it.

In a democracy, you have influence over a certain number of factors in the political environment, but it's really up to the electorate. I lost the re-election

by a few hundred votes and since then I've met many, many people who said to me, "oh how stupid I was not to vote for you, I would have better cut off my hand rather than not vote for you." When I hear this, I answer in joking "ok, but what would I do in a country with so many people with one hand!" What I really regret is that since 1993, 25 years passed and Cyprus is still divided. But we are not permitted to give up. We have to continue trying.

This interview was conducted on March 8th, 2018 at President Vasiliou's Office in Nicosia, Cyprus, and has been edited for length, content, and clarity.