

Northern Cyprus presidential victory revives hopes of reunifying the island

William Chislett | Associate Analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute | @WilliamChislett3 

The overwhelming victory of **Mustafa Akinci** in the **Turkish-occupied northern Cyprus** presidential election raised hopes of progress finally being achieved in reunifying the ethnically divided island, split since Ankara's 1974 invasion in response to a Greek-engineered coup seeking union with Greece.



Akinci, a former mayor of the Turkish-Cypriot part of the capital Nicosia from 1976 to 1990, stood as an independent and won 60.4% of the vote compared with 39.6% for the outgoing Dervis Eroglu, a conservative.

A pragmatist, Akinci campaigned on a platform of peace and signalled he is open to confidence-building measures such as returning the resort town of Famagusta, occupied by the Turkish army, in a goodwill gesture long demanded by Greek Cypriots as a sign of good faith that Ankara is sincere about reunification, in return for some concessions.

Talks between **Nikos Anastasiades**, the President of Cyprus, and Eroglu to reunite the island, which joined the EU in 2004 (the writ of Union law does not run in the north), were resumed in February 2014 after a break of 18 months and on the basis of a **common communiqué**. Before embarking on negotiations, the Greek Cypriots wanted to ensure they would be talking about one sovereignty, one citizenship and one international personality.

Anastasiades suspended the negotiations last October in protest at Ankara's gunboat diplomacy to begin seismic research in the southern part of the Cyprus exclusive economic zone. Turkey is not party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and disputes the Greek Cypriot claims to the energy wealth.

Figure 1. Partitioned Cyprus



Source: BBC.

The **Aphrodite field** is close to Israel's Leviathan gas field –the very name suggests how much energy it might contain–. According to the US Geological Survey, an estimated 122 trillion cubic feet of recoverable **natural gas** lie, along with 1.7 billion barrels of recoverable oil, beneath the seabed of the Levant Basin, about as much as the world consumes in a year.

But instead of galvanising reunification talks, **the energy discoveries created a stand-off**.

Both Anastasiades and Akinci voted in favour of **the UN's Annan Plan to reunite the island in 2004**, which was put to a referendum on both sides of the UN buffer zone. It was supported by 64.9% of Turkish Cypriots and rejected by 75.8% of Greek Cypriots. Since then, little progress has been made.

The election of Akinci opens a window of opportunity. Not only are the two leaders more in tune, but there has also been a pause in exploratory drilling off Cyprus, while Turkey has halted its search in the same waters and brought a research vessel home. According to UN envoy Espen Barth Eide, the suspension of drilling by oil and gas companies, including France's Total and Italy's Eni, is due to commercial reasons (lower prices) and not political pressure.

Akinci is more consensual and believes there must be a solution so that future generations will not live the tragedy of the current generation.

The climate is also changing in the internationally unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) where there is a growing sense of Cypriotism and identity. According to a recent poll in the TRNC, 18% feel they are Cypriots, 48% Turkish Cypriots and 7% Turks of Cyprus.

Turkish Cypriot identity is being eroded by settlers from mainland Turkey and the more Islamist agenda of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's President since 2014 and Prime Minister before that for 11 years.

‘Turkish Cypriots are beginning to understand that securing their identity can only be achieved through Cyprus as a homeland and a member of the European Union and through a solution, and not through Turkey’, said a Greek Cypriot diplomat. ‘By voting Akinci, the Turkish Cypriots have brought to the surface something very important to them –survival and keeping their identity. On this, the Greek Cypriots can be their willing partners because they also need the Turkish Cypriots to avoid the division of Cyprus and the occupied areas becoming a district of Turkey’.

Akinci was born in Limassol in the southern part of Cyprus and speaks Greek. His positions are basically those of the leftist Republican Turkish Party whose leader Mehmet Ali Talat was the TRNC President between 2005 and 2010 and **defeated by the more hawkish Eroglu**. Talat was more disposed towards a unified state than Eroglu, who favoured two separate states living side by side if no solution could be reached.

As Turkey is the paymaster of the TRNC, which cannot exist economically on its own, and the occupier of the territory, a key issue for Akinci will be the extent to which he can be his own man and not beholden to Ankara.

In a recent interview Akinci said he wants Turkish Cypriots to have the kind of relations with Turkey that the Greek Cypriots have with Greece (ie, one of independence).

International frustration at the frozen conflict in Cyprus for more than four decades is legendary. ‘This is a problem that just has gone on for far too long and is begging for international efforts to try to help bring about a resolution, a lasting settlement’, said US Secretary of State John Kerry a couple of days before Akinci’s victory.

Reuniting the island would bring economic benefits for the whole territory, reduce tensions in the eastern Mediterranean and, although there is no direct linkage between the two issues, enhance Turkey’s flagging negotiations to join the EU, which have made little progress since they started in October 2005.

Later this year a 107 km pipeline, estimated to cost more than US\$680 million, carrying water from Turkey under the sea to the TRNC, is expected to be inaugurated. All of Cyprus is drought prone. The logic (in short supply on both sides) in the event of reunification would be for the Turkish Cypriots to share the water and the Greek Cypriots the benefits of the energy discoveries.

If Ankara was to give its blessing to reunification it would probably then follow through with implementation of the 2005 additional Ankara Protocol which would extend Turkey’s customs agreement with the EU by opening its ports and airports to goods from Cyprus.

This, in turn, **would unblock one-quarter of Turkey’s 32 EU chapters** it has to open and close and which the European Commission put in the deep freeze in December 2006 as a punishment for Ankara’s failure to recognise Cyprus.

Hopes have been raised many times in the past that a settlement would finally be reached. This opportunity really could be the last one.