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Youth and Politics in Protracted Conflicts: a comparative approach on hope for a settlement and return of IDPs

Policy Brief

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Reassessing the Cypriot Reunification Debate? Insights from Public Opinion Research

The Project

The Youth and Politics in Protracted Conflicts: A comparative approach on hope for a settlement and return of IDPs is funded by LSE Hellenic Observatory through an A.G. Leventis Research Innovation Programme on Cyprus call. This briefing is based on the project's survey of 536 Greek Cypriots and 550 Turkish Cypriots and completed in the period 22/07/2020--12/08 2020 in the Greek Cypriot community (by the University Centre for Field Studies) and 07/12 / 2020-06 / 01/2021 in the Turkish Cypriot community by LIPA Consultancy Ltd. For more information, data and graphics please visit: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Hellenic-Observatory/Research/Cyprus-Projects-2019/Youth-and-Politics-in-Protracted-Conflicts-a-comparative-approach-on-hope-for-a-settlement-and-return-of-IDPs> .

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Key Insights:

- Wish for BBF in the present research was registered by a clear majority of 66,5% among Greek Cypriots and 63,6% among Turkish Cypriots.
- A settlement that assures political equality for Turkish Cypriots and security (from Turkish influence) for Greek Cypriots is endorsed by 85.5% of Greek Cypriots and 67% of Turkish Cypriots
- Support for the settlement is relatively lower among the Greek Cypriot youth and middle ages for Turkish Cypriots
- Contact between members of the two communities during the pandemic has now moved on social media platforms.

Public opinion in Cyprus seems to be turning increasingly against the current stalemate in favour of a federal settlement. The most important finding relates to the Greek Cypriot community previously associated with the rejection of the Annan plan in 2004. The fact that Greek Cypriot public opinion is making this noticeable turn towards federalism might not be intuitive to non-specialists on the topic given the recent history of the Cypriot peace negotiations. We point to a number of possible explanations for the rise of Greek Cypriot support for federalism (BBF) including various demographic and social factors, discuss comparable findings in the Turkish Cypriot community, and draw relevant recommendations for the UN-led Cyprus peace talks.

A major reason for the support of BBF is prejudice reduction via contact. Previous research findings demonstrated that increasing bicomunal contact during the period after the opening of the checkpoints in 2003 has led to more reconciliatory attitudes (see Yucel & Psaltis 2020a,2020b). The active engagement of bicomunal associations is driving this trend among broader sectors of the society; our survey also demonstrates that pro-reunification groups have managed to effectively re-organize themselves online during the pandemic very efficiently . Contact between members of the two communities during the pandemic has mostly transferred on social media platforms. We find that 41% of Turkish Cypriot youth (18-35) state that they come in contact with Greek Cypriots over Facebook at least once a month. However, the corresponding percentage for Greek Cypriot youth is low around 8%. Around 30% of Middle-aged Turkish Cypriots and 28% of older Turkish Cypriots also have contact with Greek Cypriots at least once a month. The corresponding percentages for Greek Cypriots are 9% and 15% respectively. Importantly, for TCs it was found that the frequency of digital contacts with Greek Cypriots was related to decreased prejudice and increased trust.

An equal important demographic shift involves, Greek Cypriot refugees who are now more likely to support power sharing and mutual trade-offs in the negotiations compared to the past. This was also demonstrated in the analysis of data from 2016 and 2017 surveys (Psaltis, Cakal, Loizides, Kuscu, 2019). it was not however obvious in the Annan Plan referendum results or surveys conducted after the Annan plan period (e.g. data collected back in 2009 by Alexandros Lordos et al). Political figures and analysts often make the simplistic assumption that refugees are a declining constituency. In an earlier survey, we found that a majority 51%

of the Greek Cypriot population relates to refugee status either via property, parents, grandparents or spouse (see Stefanovic, Psaltis, Loizides, 2016.).

This shift in favour of BBF is also evident in the social media as most of the vocal reunification voices tend to be refugees. There is a sense of betrayal that promises given in 2004 have not been implemented now more vocal than ever in the social media. Additional corroborating evidence is the new party 'Famagusta for Cyprus' despite its failure to make it to the parliament in the last elections. Exclusion of the refugees as a demographic group from decision making is another factor as we observe almost no representation of IDPs in the cabinet, national council or negotiation team. Developments in Varosha, have added to the mobilization of this group. This is supported by our current findings in the LSE funded project where we have seen that IDPs who entertain thoughts about return are more likely to support peace in initiatives and wish for peace.

Indeed, the recent parliamentary elections in the Greek Cypriot community confirmed the increasing dissatisfaction of voters with the clear anti-federalist stance of key figures of the No campaign back in 2004 like Eleni Thoecharous's Solidarity (Αλληλεγγυη) and Yiorgos Lillikas Citizen's Alliance (Συμμαχία Πολιτών) who did not make it to the parliament.

A third major interpretation of the pro-federalism turn relates to the 2020 crises in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although expected to create more polarization, the crises have instead exacerbated fears of a new escalation where Cypriots risk bearing the consequences. However, the present findings would seem to support this interpretation more in the TC than the GC community. This is because we have seen that expectations of escalation were positively related to wish for BBF in the TC community whilst negatively related to wish for BBF in the GC community. The Guterres package addressed these anxieties through its security and implementation mechanisms (its key approach to the Cyprus settlement was safeguarding political equality for the Turkish Cypriots while assuring security to Greek Cypriots from any Turkish influence).

Overall, the present findings bring to the surface the important role played by hope in peace processes and the demobilising impact it has when it is absent on support for peace building

activities and an agreed compromise solution on the basis of BBF. Given the hope for a renewed 5+1 meeting it now seems imperative that the two leaders do their utmost to bring the two communities back together and create a new environment of cooperation especially among middle-aged and the youth. The high level of distrust (especially among middle-ages in the TC community) could be addressed by new CBMs promoting cooperation among professional groups and the reopening of the checkpoints under a regime that allows people to cross by showing rapid test results offered for free at the checkpoints and allowing vaccinated Cypriots to cross without restrictions. Whilst digital contact seems to fill some of the gap left by the lack of physical contacts in prejudice reduction mechanisms in the TC community unfortunately we found no evidence of beneficial effects of the frequency of digital contacts in the GC community which is disconcerting and underlines the need for the resumption of unconstrained crossing through the checkpoints as soon as possible. The pandemic itself revealed broader problems of digital literacy in the island causing long delays in the management of COVID-19 and its consequences.

In the Turkish Cypriot side, despite the hardline rhetoric so far, of newly elected Ersin Tatar, there is still scope for hope and cooperation. Even Tatar's constituency seems to be willing to tolerate (if not to support) a federal settlement. This suggests that there is still space for leaders for political manoeuvring in the upcoming talks if the GC leadership accepts without conditions the political equality as described in UN Security Council resolutions which was a constant demand of the Turkish Cypriot leadership. The UN itself and members of the Security Council should take note of these findings to maintain a more active role in the Cyprus peace talks and build on the progress made in the Guterres package. As mentioned above, the findings support the core idea of the UN plan and is unfortunate that the UN did not persist further in its proposal back in 2017; ending the Cyprus problem in a way that assures political equality for Turkish Cypriots and assures security for Greek Cypriots from any Turkish influence was found to be supported by 84% of the GCs and 60% of TCs in the present research.

Finally, the present findings stress the urgency of finding a solution to the Cyprus issue as soon as possible. This comes from the age related findings. Every year that passes by with the Cyprus issue unresolved thousands of first generation of IDP's are lost which are now a

positive force for a solution and keep the spirit of return alive. While our survey demonstrates positive trends in the last few years, there is also warning signs apparent among the Greek Cypriot youth who are more reluctant to accept BBF. In the Greek Cypriot side, this finding reveals a gap particularly in the education system as federalism has so far received no attention and no education campaign at the societal level has ever taken place. There is therefore an urgent need not just for intergroup contact schemes like the Imagine Programme but also of a revision of history textbooks that still cultivates the one sided sense of victimization in both communities which leads to threats, prejudice and distrust. More importantly, civic education lessons are in demand specifically a wide information campaign about what a Federation is, why it is the supported solution by the UN and the international community as well as its respective benefits of subnational governance for each side in the island.

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