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Local Political Responses to European Integration: The case of North Cyprus

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Abstract

This paper analyses how local political actors instrumentalise legal and normative frameworks provided by the European integration process by linking their political agenda to the EU to re-formulate policies, approaches and discourses regarding the conflict in the case of North Cyprus. What is the underlining reason of the local actors' method and preferences of linking their political agenda to the EU? How do the dynamics of European integration alter the power balance between local political actors? What consequences does this have for the conflict resolution process?

The paper argues that while the preference of political actors to link their agenda with the Integration process is determined on the one hand by their position towards further integration with the EU, and on the other hand the degree of overlap between their political orientation and the EU, their ability to facilitate change depends on the image and performance of the EU as a credible actor.

Keywords: *Cyprus, Turkish Cypriot Community, European Integration, conflict resolution*

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Introduction

The role of the EU in conflict resolution is not only limited to the Union's interventions as an actor; "it also takes place through the discursive, legal and institutional framework offered by the integration and association process" (Albert et al. 2008:26). Through these discursive, legal and institutional frameworks the Union provides a favourable environment for local political actors "to link their political agendas with the EU and through reference to integration, justify desecuritisating moves that may otherwise have not been considered legitimate" (Albert et al. 2008:27)ⁱ. Yet, local political actors who possess the ability to trigger mass movements in a conflict can also abuse the framework of European integration to construct stronger securitization discourses and impede positive development. What is the underlining reason of the local actors' preferences? How do the dynamics of European integration alter the power balance between local political actors? What implications does this have for the conflict resolution process? This paper aims to answer these questions by analysing how local political actors use the integration framework to re-formulate their policies in the case of North Cyprus.

Pre-Accession Period

In the case of Cyprus, the instruments accompanying the European integration process range from the terms of the Copenhagen criteria, to various Council Presidency conclusions and to statements of the Commission, the Parliament and member states delivering support messages for reunification. Especially, the agreement reached at Copenhagen European Council in December 2002 at the presence of Greek Cypriot and Turkish leaders, provided a solid framework for local political actors in North Cyprus to "legitimise whatever concessions each side would have been asked to make internally" (Demetriou 2008:78-79). Turkish Cypriot civil society and opposition parties did not miss this opportunity and starting from 2002 they gathered under the movement of 'This Country is Ours Platform' (Bu Memleket Bizim Platformu)ⁱⁱ, not only instrumentalise the positive atmosphere created by the Copenhagen Council Meeting, but using the entire European policy framework and the possibility of the European membership to legitimize their alternative approach to bi-communal negotiations. The Platform organized some of the biggest demonstrations of Turkish Cypriot history to challenge the intransigent position of the incumbent leader of the Turkish Cypriot Community, Rauf Denktas and existing ethno-political discoursesⁱⁱⁱ.

For the oncoming elections, the EU integration process is "used by progressive Turkish Cypriot parties to craft their political strategy" (Yakinthou 2009:313). The EU's principles of justice, democracy and right to free speech and political pluralism utilised to argue by the opposition forces that this is the shape that the TRNC politic needs to take as well (Yakinthou 2009:314). The EU is presented as a force for good and a symbol of brotherhood and unity that will bring security and peace for Cyprus as well^{iv}. The new political strategy legitimized a stance that is more reconciliatory than the hardliner president Denktas. This resulted in the victory of the main opposition party CTP's in December 2003 by promising Turkish Cypriots more moderate approach to negotiations that will bring peace, EU membership and better standards of living. CTP and other pro-solution parties such as BDH won more than half of the seats in the parliament.

Prominent analysis agrees that without this 'catalyst effect' of the prospect of the European membership, and the risk of Greek Cypriot-led Republic of Cyprus achieving it without Turkish Cypriot participation altered the stance of Turkish Cypriot community (Lacher and

Kaymak 2007; Yakinthou, 2009). The positive instrumentalisation of this framework by civil society and opposition parties' convinced Turkish Cypriots to vote positively for referenda (Lacher and Kaymak 2007; Yakinthou, 2009). They also actively participated and expensively benefitted from the EU organized education seminars and bi-communal events^v.

In the North, political forces are mainly divided between the right wing parties that support the idea of 'taksim' (partition) and the left wing that is in favour of 'reunification'. After 1974 in the North, the political scene was monopolised by the nationalist right wing pro-taksim parties (UBP and DP). These parties continued to gain the majority of the seats in the Turkish Cypriot parliament and dominate the political life until towards the end of 1990s. Right wing parties that dominated the political life in the North for a few decades refer to their community as 'Cyprus Turks', implying ethnic ties with 'motherland' Turkey. The incumbent president of de-facto Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC), Dervis Eroglu (2010) clearly states his position by explaining that "The people of Cyprus are Greek and Turks. Yes, I was born in Cyprus, but here we came from Turkey. We are proud to be Turk and we never made any compromise". The right has long regarded the 1974 division as a peace movement, the end point of the conflict; therefore they form their policies for protection and recognition of TRNC. Nearly every aspect of life was securitized by these parties using ethno-nationalistic discourses (Diez 2002 quoted in Lacher and Kaymak 2005:152). This led to marginalisation of the left due to their moderate stance and these parties were also accused of betraying to their nation (Lacher and Kaymak 2005:152).

The prospect of EU membership challenged the dominance of these ethno-nationalist securitization policies and discourses and enabled pro-solution actors to find a legitimate ground for their peace propaganda and eventually eroded the commitment of the TCC to nationalist actors. After coming to power, not only at the discourse level but also in practice, pro-solution parties made an effort to go beyond temporary policy changes and attempted form the ground for permanent de-securitizing. This was first done by changing the ethnocentric history books that were taught in schools. Secondly despite the lack of directions or support from the EU institutions, the new leadership initiated a self-motivated EU integration process that is supported by civil society to adapt the *acquis*^{vi}.

Post-Accession Period

Despite the Greek Cypriot rejection of the Annan Plan, as the positive atmosphere continued in the North, during the 2005 elections, pro-solution forces managed to stay in power. The biggest pro-solution party CTP entered the early parliamentary elections of February 2005 election campaigns with the slogan, "We have a promise, to Cyprus to Europe"^{vii}, referring to their motivation to solve the Cyprus problem under the EU framework and increased their votes to 44.5%^{viii}.

Yet, the real change of power balance between pro-unification and pro-taksim political forces in the North, emerged as a result of the presidential elections of 2005. The election results carried the pro-solution CTP's leader Mehmet Ali Talat to presidency, ending the era of the hardliner R. Denktas who was in power since the unilateral declaration of independence. Nevertheless, as the progress of bi-communal negotiations and the hopes for EU integration dramatically decreased in the following years due to the lack of concrete results reached, the positive atmosphere gave way to great disenchantment and dissatisfaction among Turkish Cypriots. Gradually, the argument and policies of the new president Mehmet Ali Talat and other pro-unification forces lost ground to instrumentalise integration framework to employ de-securitization policies. "They continuously lost votes

starting from pro-EU, pro-solution mayors to government and at last the president; they are all gone”^{xix}. With the decline of pro-unification forces, the process of adaptation to the *acquis* decelerated and at the time of writing it was standing still. Consequently, pro-unification forces not only lost their transformative power, due to the enabling impact of integration but they also lost the following elections. In North Cyprus, some still believe that the integration process will not happen in a day therefore this self-designed accession processes must proceed. However the EU is not providing enough incentive to make the process feasible^x.

The failure of pro-unification forces to dominate local politics to adopt de-securitization policies through enabling impact is firstly due to disappearing hopes of a European future as advertised by many pro- unification forces^{xi}. Secondly, the Turkish Cypriot community realised the fact that the only impediment to a solution is not the hardliner leader Denktas^{xii}. “Having defeated the status quo forces in the North, the pro-settlement parties and civil society organizations only belatedly came to realize that few on the Greek Cypriot side share their eagerness for reconciliation” (Lacher and Kaymak 2005). Thirdly, the promise of the EU to lift isolations, proposals of Direct Trade, Financial Aid and Green Line Regulations are utilized by pro-solution forces for a while yet, EU failing to fulfil its promises caused great disenchantment.

As a result, the idea of “modern and fair” EU left its place an “unreliable and biased” EU^{xiii} and “the position of the EU damaged pro-solution parties very badly”^{xiv}. On the other hand, the decision of some Greek Cypriot political actors to utilize some key EU principles to craft the idea of European Solution decayed the EU’s image as a force for good among Turkish Cypriots. The main advocate of this approach is the EVROKO and a prominent party member explains that;

“We believe that now we are in the EU, this creates the framework of the solution of the Cyprus problem. The fact that Turkey itself is proceeding to EU, it reinforces even more our opinion that the solution must be what we called as a party is the European solution. European solution means all the people of Cyprus live according to the European rules, *acquis communautaire* and European principles”^{xv}.

The argument seems harmless and even convincing, but in many aspects it also contradicts the common framework of the bi-communal negotiations that has hardly been reached by two sides; the bi-zonal and bi-communal federation. The same interviewee further explains this point that “the fact that the others project the so called bi-zonal, bi-communal federation is only because they do not accept the European principles and human rights and they want to use this very vague political frame to undermine, human rights and European principles”^{xvi}.

It is true that the agreed common framework of negotiations^{xvii} is contradicting the European principles, especially the free movement of persons and capital. However, the European Union declared both with Protocol No. 10 to the Act of Accession that the EU could accommodate a settlement that would contain derogations from the *acquis*: ““ready to accommodate the terms of such a settlement [in Cyprus] in line with the principles on which the EU is founded”. The notion of a ‘European Solution’ favours “a unitary state where the Turkish Cypriots are relegated to the position of a privileged minority” (Cremona and Skoutaris 2009:382). This perception makes it harder for Greek Cypriot society to accept the necessity of a compromised agreement. By containing the name of Europe and instrumentalising the European principles of free movement of people and capital and basic human rights, it is at the same time damaging the credibility of any political actor who attempts to utilise the EU’s principles to legitimize any desecuritization policies in the North.

The interesting fact is that the loss of power did not alter many of these actors' support for the resolution and re-unification of Cyprus, Instead, they abandoned instrumentalising the EU framework for their policies or/and utilising the prospect of EU membership as an incentive to have the wider community agree with them. Despite feeling betrayed by their Greek Cypriot counterparts and the EU, pro-solution actors in the North still believe an agreement under the EU framework is a better option^{xviii}. This idea based on the lower security risks attached to the any solution that will reach as an EU member because they anticipate the EU institutions and principles will protect their rights^{xix}. Yet, since the image of the EU has changed this over time the idea does not take place in public discourses of political actors anymore^{xx}.

When nationalist forces turned back to power, firstly with the parliamentary election of 2009 and then in the following presidential elections of 2010 they reversed some of the progress recorded before. UBP, which is the biggest winner of the elections, did not use the EU framework to legitimize desecuritization; to the contrary they benefitted from the allegedly biased position of the EU to promote idea that the EU is unreliable so the only option Turkish Cypriots have is integration with Turkey^{xxi}. With this argument they won both parliamentary and presidential elections in 2009 and 2010 respectively. "Currently in the North, being opposed to the EU sells at a premium. Resisting the EU, defending our own rights and not to be subordinated is the position"^{xxii}.

Conclusions

Consequently the paper argues that, regardless of the normative and legal framework that the EU provides, the preference of political actors linking their agenda with the integration process is determined by their political orientation. The EU integration provides a favourable environment for the pro-solution actors to legitimize their stance regarding the conflict. But at the same time this framework can be utilized by others as well in order to introduce further desecuritization moves. The decision of the local political actors to utilise the EU in one way or the other in the case of North Cyprus is stemming from these parties' previous stances regarding the conflict. The process of instrumentalization of the EU to craft new policies is accompanied by changes in the power balance between local political actors. Yet this change can either be in favour of pro-solution actors or the opposite. Because the change comes as a result of gaining the support of a wider community and regardless of the legal and normative framework this is directly linked to the EU's performance of the EU as an actor and the position of the other side.

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ⁱ Albert et al. 2008 builds this theoretical explanation on the capacity of the EU's legal and normative framework base on Buzan et. al. 1998's analysis on security

ⁱⁱ Included number of civil society institutions (including labour and trade unions) and opposition parties of CTP, BKP, YBH, CAP etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ This argument is on the same line with Demetriou 2008 and Sommer 2005

^{iv} Interview with a member of Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce, January 2011.

^v Interview with a politician from CTP, January 2011.

^{vi} Interview with a politician from CTP; Interview with a civil servant from EU Coordination Centre, January 2011.

^{vii} Author's own translation.

^{viii} Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Legislative Elections of 20 February 2004. Available From: <http://psephos.adam-carr.net/countries/n/northcyprus/northcyprus2005.txt>

^{ix} Interview with a civil servant from EU Coordination Centre, January 2011.

^x Interview with a member of Cyprus-EU Association, January 2011.

^{xi} Interview with an academic from Cyprus Policy Centre, January 2011.

^{xii} Interview with a politician from CTP, January 2011.; Interview with a civil servant from EU Coordination Centre, January 2011.

^{xiii} Interview with a civil servant from EU Coordination Centre, January 2011.

^{xiv} Interview with a civil servant from EU Coordination Centre, January 2011.

^{xv} Interview with a politician from EVROKO, January 2011.

^{xvi} Interview with a politician from EVROKO, January 2011.

^{xvii} 1977 and 1979 High Level Agreements, which is confirmed by Christofias and Talat in 2008 as the parameters of a solution, suggests that the framework of settlement bases on a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation under equal representation of two communities.

^{xviii} Interview with a politician from CTP, January 2011.

^{xix} Interview with a politician from CTP, January 2011.

^{xxxx} Interview with a former member of the Turkish Cypriot negotiation team, June 2011.

^{xxi} Interview with a politician from CTP, January 2011.

^{xxii} Interview with a politician from CTP, January 2011.