SOFTENING OR HARDENING THE STATUS QUO IN CYPRUS?

Giorgos Kentas, Assistant Professor of International Politics, University of Nicosia

In an attempt to pave the way for a comprehensive settlement to the Cyprus Problem, Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders, Mr. N. Anastasiades and Mr. M. Akinci respectably, undertook some initiatives to boost confidence and build trust across the island. Encouraged by the UN and other third parties the two leaders announced a package of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in May 2015 and exchanged some social visits in May, June and July 2015. These steps were hailed by the supporters of the new process of negotiations on the island, as well as by external actors who are traditionally involved in the Cyprus Problem. The rationale behind these steps is that Anastasiades and Akinci could be the last two leaders of Cyprus' divided communities to pursue a mutually agreed settlement and thus they need to take every necessary step to demonstrate their resolution to a successful result.

At first sight these steps soften the status quo in Cyprus and make the dividing line so transparent that people across the divide would feel confident about the potential of reunification. In that regard, softening the status quo entails bold decisions and overtly expressed determination to rise above traditional approaches and to de-politicize intercommunal contact in all fronts. Take the list of CBMs for instance. By opening new crossing points, joining the two electricity grid systems, interconnecting the two telecommunication networks and putting an end to radio frequency interference between the two sides, a strong sense of unity, as well as an even stronger sense that re-unification is irreversible, shall emerge and ease off well-embedded reservations for (the necessary) concessions that each side needs to make for achieving a settlement. A softened status quo shall also lead into the mutual acknowledgement of the two would-be constituent states of a future bi-communal, bi-zonal federation.

There is indeed some serious investment of political resources and funding in support of that idealist design of a softened status quo as a means for achieving a settlement to the Cyprus Problem. Of course that design is neither unique for the case of Cyprus nor unknown on the island. Similar attempts have been pursued for at least a couple of decades, without any concrete results so far. A quick rejoinder to such a remark could be that 'this time things are different' or that 'this is the last chance for resolving the Cyprus problem'. These views however are wanting for they lack some concrete evidence. First, in every new round of negotiations over the Cyprus Problem 'things are different' and thus things will be necessarily different this time as well; second, 'last chance' positions were heard before and they can only function as a motivating factor for a blame game, i.e. a pursuit of the side that must be blamed for spoiling that 'last chance'.

Taking up some more interesting suggestions, the idea of mutual acknowledgement of some realities across the divide appears appealing. It is suggested that to move forward in the Cyprus Problem both sides need to come to terms with some 'realities on the ground' that are difficult to reverse or undo. Accepting these 'realities' is part and parcel of the 'new state of affairs' in the post-settlement era. Such a proposition however is not that new. It dates back to 1990s and it was advocated in many occasions by certain mediators in the context of negotiations. The critical question however is to what extent such an acknowledgement should be pursued? What would be the implications of such an attempt for the Cyprus Problem? Positions vary on these puzzles but very few researchers of the Cyprus Problem noticed that the further mutual acknowledgement goes the further the status quo will be enhanced. In other words, in an attempt to soften the status quo in Cyprus through a process of 'mutual acknowledgement of some facts on the ground' the outcome would be to make the status quo in Cyprus even more hardened.

Another interesting suggestion concerns social exchanges between the leaders of the two communities. Through social exchanges the two leaders –the two would-be co-Presidents or rotating Presidents or President and Vice-President of a united federal Cyprus– show character and promote an image of friendship that militates against the image of conflict. If the two leaders can build trust and social affiliation they would also be able to negotiate in good faith and mutual understanding the tough aspects of the Cyprus Problem. Anastasiades and Akinci seem to take full advantage of such an image and its boarder implications. In hindsight however the 'social exchange' argument is equally problematic with the 'mutual acknowledgement' argument. To begin with, social meetings and exchanges were attempted since early 2000s between late Clerides and late Denktash, without any substantial results on the essence of the Cyprus Problem. Greek Cypriot leader Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Talat had some strong political and social ties long before they engaged in an effort to negotiate a solution to the Cyprus Problem, but both testified that negotiations could not depend on these ties. In the course of ongoing negotiations, Anastasiades and Akinci took even bolder steps than their predecessors did and made some impression on Cypriots and foreigners. So far however these steps were not reciprocated on negotiations.

The fact that social exchanges do not determine political outcomes should have been well-understood by now. Apart from some good mode and a positive atmosphere among the two leaders, social exchanges do not leave a visible mark on negotiations. A least mentioned ramification however is that the bolder these exchanges may become the bolder the sense of a firm status quo in Cyprus becomes. The image that prevails through these initiatives is that Cyprus has two leaders of an equal status that reciprocate social exchanges on an equal footing. That image is well-broadcasted by leading world media.

In protracted problems like the Cyprus Problem deadlocks and failures are part of the process and maybe they have better chances than breakthroughs. In the case of Cyprus, idealism and teleological language elude the statistics, or at least they try not to take them into account. That is a mistake. When miscalculated or unsuccessful, soft steps in conflict resolution attempts may bring about hardened results in conflict management in the aftermath of a stalemate. The history of the Cyprus Problem shows that consecutive failures of soft steps have indeed hardened the status quo in Cyprus and minimized the chance for a comprehensive settlement. Each party however is eager to pursue soft steps for various reasons that should concern researchers and mediators.