

The EU (and UN) Should Not Make Fun of Our Intelligence: How Realistic Is It To Make Progress Under The Current Circumstances? - Mehmet Ögütçü



I was frustrated to read yet another European Council [joint declaration on April 17, 2024](#), reiterating old decisions, devoid of any execution prospects. A classic

introduction is spelled out: “The European Union has a strategic interest in a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey”, and then goes on to say, “...the Cyprus issue will be resolved within the framework of the UN and the relevant UNSC resolutions. It remains fully committed to a comprehensive solution in accordance with its decisions and in line with the principles and *acquis* on which the Union was founded. ...The EU stands ready to play an active role in supporting all stages of the UN-led process with all appropriate tools at its disposal.”

The topic of Turkey and enlargement has not been even on the agenda for a long time. Hence, the outdated “stick and carrot” approach towards Turkey does not work any longer since there is no incentive. Furthermore, vital issues in the positive EU-Turkey agenda such as updating the Customs Union to include agriculture and services have also been sidelined and subjected to conditionality.

I tried to read between the lines of “the Conclusions of the Extraordinary European Council of 17-18 April 2024” from a former diplomat’s perspective and could not see any “strategic” dimension at all. Instead of a fresh, action-oriented and constructive approach, the decisions lack a fresh, actionable approach. The “mountain gave birth to a mouse” as the Turkish saying goes.

A new approach needed

I guess the leaders and bureaucrats in Brussels no longer study their files duly as well as they used to. The quality, diligence and strategic depth have decreased while absent-mindedness and short-sighted approach has been amply demonstrated. I would still like to humbly remind them that they need to refresh their understanding of historical backdrop, reality on the ground and geopolitics to forge a new approach in line with the changing conditions and the spirit of the time.

To start with, we should all recognize the plain truth that the EU's stature is dwindling on the global scene, still referred to as an "economic giant, political dwarf." Notably, no EU member ranks among the world's top four economies. Only Germany (with its GDP of \$4.4 trillion) comes after the USA (\$23 trillion), China (\$17 trillion), Japan (\$5.4 trillion) and India (\$4.8 trillion) in the fifth place. So, its economic success story is also on the decline. By 2050, no European state will belong to the [G7 group of the world's biggest economies](#). While Europe will likely continue to offer a comparatively high quality of life, its overall weight on the global scale is bound to decline, as other countries catch up or move ahead.

The European Project has sometimes given the impression of being in perpetual crisis. Indeed, its spiritual father, Jean Monnet, saw this as the best way to advance to his preferred goal of "ever closer union", arguing that "Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises." Yet it is today in deeper trouble than ever. The bloc's confident self-image as a role model and vanguard of rules-based international order has been replaced by a defensive attitude, lower ambitions, and a narrower regional focus.

Manipulation by smaller EU nations must end

The upshot of everyone having a seat at the table, both metaphorically and literally, is a rather odd distribution of power. For whereas a handful of participants represent countries such as Germany, France and Italy with tens of millions of citizens each, the fellow from Malta or Greek Cyprus is there by dint of a population the size of an Istanbul neighborhood or Parisian *arrondissement*. A club which is happy to negotiate through the night to reach consensus is one that ends up giving a disproportionate amount of power to the small states.

If the EU wants to become a real global power, the era of small-state privilege must be drawing to an end. To the contrary, what we still see some small country diplomats, who are very vocal during the Council discussions and the European Commission management, and some member states which tend to abuse the

unanimous decision-making mechanism as leverage, can impose the paragraphs or changes they want in the common declarations and vision documents, ignoring the real strategic interests and larger global agenda of the EU.

The EU's stance on Cyprus is a stark example of this phenomenon, echoing past rhetoric, devoid of strategic depth. The failure to resolve the Cyprus issue persists, with past referenda showcasing disparate reactions from Turks and Greeks. Despite the EU promises, Greek Cypriots' rejection of the Annan Plan led to unjust consequences for Turkish Cypriots. Post-referendum measures aimed at easing Turkish Cypriots' isolation faced delays due to Greek obstruction. The EU's hasty acceptance of Greek Cyprus into its fold undermined its credibility as an "honest broker" and damaged relations with a major regional power and EU accession aspirant, Turkey.

Let them focus on other problems

Amidst calls for a solution, the core issue remains: Greek Cypriots' dominance within a federated Cyprus. Turkish Cypriots vehemently oppose such a scenario, making a mutually acceptable resolution extremely unlikely. Therefore, instead of trying to take the frozen negotiations out of the deep freeze to achieve the impossible, the UN and the EU should be invited to devote their attention and scarce resources to more urgent issues such as Ukraine-Russia war, Gaza drama, Red Sea and Hormuz crisis, the situation of Syria and Lebanon, Russia's increasing presence in the region, China's acquisition of new ports in the Mediterranean through COSCO and like.

In Cyprus, where peace has reigned since 1974 and there has been no serious crisis other than a few provocations on both sides, the UN peacekeeping force has almost no work to perform - beyond observing the green line. In fact, every time it is time to extend the mandate, the number of people in the UN who want this force to be transferred to other conflict regions of the world where serious bloody actions are taking place, and to efforts to reduce poverty in the world, is

increasing.

Look in the mirror

EU member states see Turkey as the “occupying power” in Cyprus. They expect the TRNC to abolish itself and fall under the Greek yoke again. In that direction, they keep pushing settlement proposals whose ultimate goal is to corner the Turks into a minority status and make the island a full EU territory. This will not happen.

Slightly larger than the Esenyurt district of Istanbul, Cyprus is a negligible island on a world scale by virtue of its land, population and economic asset, but it is described by strategists as “an unsinkable aircraft carrier” at the most critical point of the Mediterranean, surrounded by Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Greece and Israel. The adjective “aircraft carrier” determines its real importance. Especially in the last few years, the strategic value of Cyprus has skyrocketed in light of the Gaza-Israel conflict, the Ukraine war, the Russian presence in Syria spilling over into the Mediterranean, the Red Sea crisis and the struggle for energy and geopolitical influence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Think about it empathetically! The British consider the Strait of Gibraltar, which connects the Mediterranean and the Atlantic at the tip of the Iberian Peninsula, the Falklands islands off the coast of Argentina, Bermuda, Cayman, and other islands in the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian oceans, and military bases in Cyprus, as their sovereign territory for strategic considerations.

What about the Americans, do they intend to abandon their overseas territories such as Guam, Samoa, Puerto Rico, Virgin, their military bases in dozens of countries, and the right of intervention of their 47 aircraft carriers plying the world’s oceans to anyone?

What will you say to the Spaniards? They reluctantly left Gibraltar within their own territory to British sovereignty, but they do not want to move, let alone the Canary and Balearic Islands, let alone the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, which overlook Gibraltar on the Moroccan coast. Likewise, the French still insist on retaining their colonies, such as Guyana, Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion, which are thousands of kilometers away from their own lands.

And from the comfortable seats they sit, labeling Turkey as an “occupier” overlooks historical context and strategic imperatives.

I wonder if they forgot?

It is a gross injustice to underrate the efforts by the Turkish side. Rauf Denktaş and Tasos Papadopoulos, the Greek Cypriot leader at the time, held intense meetings within the framework of the UN Secretary General’s Annan Plan. Finally, this plan was put to a referendum by both parties on April 24, 2004. The Turks were actually reluctant to approve the plan, which included concessions beyond what could possibly be accepted, but still, in the face of the EU’s enormous pressure and promises showing “carrots”, an overwhelming majority of 65 percent were persuaded to say “yes” for the UN-brokered solution. So what did the Greeks say? 76 percent rejected the plan without slightest hesitation.

Immediately after the referendum. On May 1, 2004, South Cyprus was virtually rewarded for voting against the UN plan and was made a full member of the EU under the “Republic of Cyprus”, ignoring its other partner on the island. While the Greek Cypriots were hastily admitted to the EU without resolving the conflicts between Southern and Northern Cyprus by extracting concessions at the expense of Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots, the EU gave some non-binding verbal promises to Ankara and Lefkose that their relations with the EU would not be affected by this development. Of course, promises were promises only.

To be honest, some European leaders, who felt remorse and were aware of what was going on, rolled up their sleeves to provide some flexibility to the TRNC in return for the Turkish Cypriots saying “yes” at the time and standing in favor of the solution. First of all, in his report submitted to the UN Security Council on May 28, 2004, Kofi Annan, then UN Secretary General and the father of the Cyprus peace plan, stated that “it was unfair to put further pressure on the Turkish Cypriots who voted for unification of the island” and called for the removal of the embargo imposed on the Turkish Cypriots. The EU Foreign Ministers also made a decision to lift the isolations for the TRNC before the referendum. The EU Commission prepared an aid package consisting of commercial and financial practices and envisaging direct trade between the EU countries and the TRNC. However, due to the obstruction efforts of Greece and Southern Cyprus, some of this package was implemented with a delay and some of it suspended.

No talks again

In my opinion, on the very day when the referendum results were announced, Turks should have said on a high moral ground: “There will be no further meetings with the Greeks from now on, this page is now closed.” Turkish Cypriots should also have announced to the world: “In another referendum, we will either decide to unite the TRNC with Turkey if there is no international recognition or continue on the path towards full independence, and we will never sit again at the negotiating table with the Greek Cypriots.”

The Greek Cypriots have not and will not give up their policy of pocketing the concessions in the Annan Plan that they flatly rejected and asking for new concessions until they get the ultimate outcome they want. Despite all this, continuing to put pressure on the Turkish side to keep the conversation traffic alive really means mocking our intelligence. The Greek Cypriots’ stand has *de facto* removed the EU’s “honest broker” role. EU’s decisions are of no value to either the TRNC or Turkey because it belies all reason, conscience and realpolitik. In a similar vein, the appointment of the UN Secretary-General’s personal representative for Cyprus, Maria Ángela Holguin Cuéllar, (likely to be elected in

June 2026 to replace the current Secretary-General António Guterres), and her efforts putting pressure on Ankara to restart talks is futile.

Give-and-take deals

My classmates, with whom I studied side by side at the College d'Europe in Bruges, which breeds Eurocrats for EU institutions and member countries, have now taken up key positions in both their countries and the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council. When I talk to them personally in Brussels from time to time, they admit that it was a grave mistake to accept the membership of Southern Cyprus and to allow it to have a disproportionate say in the decisions regarding an important regional power and accession candidate like Turkey. They also say that such paragraphs, which were included in the EU joint declarations under the pressure of Greece and Southern Cyprus as a result of "give-and-take" negotiations, are doomed to remain on paper. We hear the same story from others, as well but they do not take any action to stem this one-sided efforts.

The EU cannot serve any purpose with regard to the Cyprus question because its two member countries have their own agenda and ulterior motives. Therefore, my advice is that Ankara and Lefkose should not take the EU's decisions very seriously and not show such reactions at length. They should not get tired of repeating their very clear and unchanging strategic position only in one paragraph if they need to say anything at all.

No going back to the pre-1974 situation

In conclusion, without an equitable progress on this problem, it seems that not many people will have the chance to see the light of a genuine solution in our lifetime. The Cyprus issue's complexity defies simplistic solutions, necessitating a

nuanced understanding from international actors. It is the benefit of both the EU and UN to acknowledge Turkish Cypriots' concerns and grievances. Only through acknowledging the realities on the ground can meaningfully progress towards peace be achieved in Cyprus. The common view of the Turkish Cypriot leaders I spoke recently to is that it is impossible for Turkish Cypriots to consent to a solution in which the majority will dominate the minority within the Federation of Cyprus. Therefore, my piece of advice whatever it is worth: "the EU and the UN should not waste their breath and ink since there is no way the Turks of Cyprus will go back to the pre-1974 situation and sacrifice their hard-earned sovereignty on the Turkish part of the island."



Mehmet Ögütçü

Chairman, Global Resources Partners, UK, and The London Energy Club. Former diplomat, prime minister adviser, IEA and OECD senior executive, director and independent board member at British Gas, Genel Energy, Invensys, Şişecam, Yaşar Holding companies. Chairman of the Middle East Institute, Washington DC, Advisory Board. He can be contacted at mehmetogutcu@me.com

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