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A United Cyprus: First fruit of Kosovo's independence?

By Marko Attila Hoare, 24th March 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The resumption of talks on Cyprus's reunification has disproved the thesis that recognition of Kosovo would encourage separatism globally, and has in fact vindicated the decision to recognise.
2. As a likely catalyst of the positive developments in Cyprus, the recognition of Kosovo is already promoting stability and reconciliation in South East Europe, and the resolution of an old conflict in the ranks of the Western alliance.

3. Serbia's loss of Kosovo provides a powerful incentive for oppressive regimes to behave more reasonably toward secessionist regions and minorities, and may thereby facilitate the resolution of other national conflicts globally.

We were warned that recognising Kosovo's independence would open a Pandora's box, triggering global chaos by encouraging innumerable other secessionist territories across the world to declare their own independence in the hope of recognition. The threatened consequence was always something of a non-sequitur, since the secessionist territories most frequently cited - Northern Cyprus, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria - had all already seceded from the countries to which they formally belong. How could recognition of Kosovo's independence spark the secession of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), when the TRNC had already declared independence from Cyprus back in 1983, twenty-five years before Kosovo was recognised? It's a riddle to which President Vladimir Putin of Eurasia no doubt has the answer, one that he may reveal to us in the course of his current propaganda war against Oceania. Putin is [himself fond](#) of the supposed Kosovo - TRNC parallel. It is therefore particularly poignant that the recognition of Kosovo's independence appears to be having the exact opposite result to the one that he and other prophets of doom predicted. Namely, on Friday, the Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat and Cyprus's newly elected president Dimitris Christofias [met and agreed to](#) restart negotiations on reunifying the country.

There is reason to believe that this positive development is not unrelated to the independence of Kosovo, as Professor Mehmet Ozcan of the [International Strategic Research Organisation](#) has [persuasively suggested](#). Under Christofias's hardline nationalist predecessor Tassos Papadopoulos, it was the Greek Cypriots, not the Turkish Cypriots, who were most to blame for obstructing Cypriot unity. In a referendum in 2004, the UN's Annan Plan for Cyprus's reunification was overwhelmingly approved by the Turkish Cypriot electorate but, on Papadopoulos's urging, overwhelmingly rejected by the Greek Cypriot electorate.

Papadopoulos believed that, with Cyprus entering the EU and able to veto Turkey's entry, he would eventually be able to extract more favourable terms from the Turks than those represented by the Annan Plan. It is also entirely possible that he actually preferred a permanently divided Cyprus to one reunited on the basis of an Annan-style compromise; at the very least, he was prepared to postpone reunification for the foreseeable future. From the perspective of most Greek Cypriots who would like in principle to see their country reunited, this strategy only made sense if it was indeed going to lead to unity on favourable terms in the long run. But the upcoming recognition of Kosovo's independence showed them that the international community could not be relied upon to uphold the principle of the inviolability of state borders indefinitely, particularly when it was a question of a country, such as Serbia or Cyprus, whose leaders were behaving consistently unreasonably. Hence the surprise electoral victory of the moderate Christofias last month. Symbolically, the first round of Cyprus's presidential election, in which Papadopoulos came third and was therefore knocked out, took place on 17 February - Kosovo's independence day.

As leader of the Communist AKEL party, Christofias represented the non-nationalist option. AKEL has long upheld a cross-national ideology of brotherhood and unity between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and has a history of persecution at the hands of both Greek and Turkish extremists. When, prior to his meeting with Talat, Christofias was asked by a reporter whether they would be drinking Greek or Turkish coffee (they are the same drink), Christofias **replied** 'Cypriot coffee, we will both be having Cypriot coffee'. Christofias and AKEL should not be viewed through rose-tinted spectacles; they opportunistically collaborated with Papadopoulos, helping to bring him to power and defeat the Annan Plan. Christofias continues to follow the Greek-nationalist line of insisting that Macedonia change its name. Nevertheless, under his leadership, Cyprus's prospects for reunification seem incomparably better than they did barely more than a month ago.

The other element of the equation is that Talat did not respond to Kosovo's recognition by launching a new separatist drive, as the anti-Kosovar prophets of doom had predicted. Indeed, he **explicitly rejected** a parallel between

Kosovo and the TRNC: ‘We do not see a direct link between the situation in Kosovo and the Cyprus Problem. These problems have come up through different conditions.’ And he is right. Although it was the Greek side that was primarily responsible for provoking the crisis that culminated in the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, and although Turkey arguably had a legal basis for its invasion, nevertheless the form that this invasion took, involving as it did the dismemberment of the country and the ethnic-cleansing of the Greek population of the north, constituted an act of aggression and conquest. The Turkish Cypriot entity that became the TRNC in 1983 was therefore an artificial product of foreign invasion and ethnic cleansing - in contrast to Kosovo, which was established as an autonomous region under the legitimate Yugoslav authorities, and whose Albanian demographic majority predated its conquest by Serbia in 1912.

Talat may or may not recognise this distinction between Kosovo and the TRNC. But he is undoubtedly aware of something of which the prophets of doom are not, but which is blindingly obvious: the fact that Kosovo is being recognised internationally does not mean that other secessionist territories will be recognised internationally. The ‘Pandora’s box’ model would only hold true if a secessionist territory, encouraged by Kosovo’s recognition, could translate this sense of encouragement into international recognition. As there is no way for a secessionist territory to do this, the model does not hold. The prospects of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria for recognition by Russia may have improved, but this would be because of a conscious policy decision on Moscow’s part, not because the territories in question felt ‘inspired’ by Kosovo’s recognition. Talat is no knee-jerk separatist but a rational, moderate politician who supported the Annan Plan; he has no reason to jeopardise the Turkish Cypriot community’s chance to enter the EU because of Kosovo.

There is a final lesson to be learned from this. Although Cyprus has much more justice on its side vis-a-vis the TRNC than Serbia has vis-a-vis Kosovo, yet it is Christofias who speaks the language of reconciliation and ‘Cypriot coffee’. Serbia’s leaders have never been able to speak in this way to the Kosovar Albanians; they did not speak of Kosovo and Serbia as lands that

belonged alike to Serbs and Albanians, or speak of the fraternity of the two peoples. Christofias may understand something that Serbia's Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and President Boris Tadic clearly do not: that if you want to keep your country united and prevent one of its peoples from seceding, you need to treat the latter as your fellow countrymen and women, not as the enemy.

This is a lesson that should be learned by all regimes around the world whose oppression drives subject peoples to secede: if you want to avoid losing part of your territory, it pays to be reasonable. Meanwhile, the leaders of the Western alliance may congratulate themselves on having, with their decision to recognise Kosovo, helped to promote stability and reconciliation in South East Europe and the resolution of an old conflict in their ranks.

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