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*Cyprus After the Elections:  
Comfortable Stalemate, Gradual Possibilities,  
and Turkey's Strategic Crossroads*

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For more than six decades, the Cyprus problem has oscillated between crisis and negotiation, between cautious optimism and bitter disappointment. Yet today the island is not in turmoil. It is not on the brink of violence. The Cyprus conflict is not dominating the agenda of the United Nations or the European Union. The Green Line is mostly very quiet. Cypriots and other European Union citizens can cross between the two sides of Cyprus. Tourism flows on both sides, and so on...

And that is precisely why the conflict has become so difficult to resolve.

Cyprus conflict today is not frozen in the classical sense. It is stabilized in the division. It functions in separation. It operates within what can best be described as a “comfortable stalemate”<sup>1</sup> – a situation in which the status quo is undesirable but manageable, unjust but sustainable, unresolved but not unbearable.

Recent elections on both sides of the island have brought new leadership dynamics. In the (Greek Cypriot-dominated) Republic of Cyprus (RoC), continuity under a new presidency emphasizes cautious federal rhetoric. In Northern Cyprus, the election of Tufan Erhürman signals recalibration, moderation in tone, and renewed emphasis on governance and engagement. Yet the main question remains: do these electoral shifts alter the structural equilibrium of the Cyprus conflict?

The short answer is no – at least not yet. But the longer answer, especially from Turkey’s perspective, is more nuanced and strategically significant.

### *The Long Aftermath of Crans-Montana*

The collapse of the 2017 Crans-Montana negotiations, according to many observers, was a watershed moment. For the first time in decades, the two sides had approached the core issues – governance, territory, property, and even security and guarantees – with serious intent. Expectations were very high, while international attention was intensified. In that sense, the possibility of a comprehensive settlement was almost tangible.

Yet in the final hours, mistrust prevailed. The Greek Cypriot leader Nikos Anastasiades saw this “tangible” settlement and concluded that he would not be able to get the majority of the Greek Cypriots to endorse it. Rather than taking the leap of faith and risk another Greek Cypriot NO vote in the future referendum, similar to the 2004, he opted to leave the negotiation table where the UNSG Guterres announced the collapse of the Cyprus peace talks. The psychological impact of that failure has shaped the island ever since. Turkish Cypriots felt that federal compromise might never be fully embraced by the Greek Cypriot side. Greek Cypriots, on the other hand, feared that security assurances and implementation guarantee remained insufficient. Meanwhile, mutual skepticism on both sides hardened.

Since 2017, formal negotiations have not resumed in any meaningful way. The UN framework of a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation remains formally intact, but politically suspended. It has neither been abandoned nor actively advanced. In any case, since the collapse of the talks in Crans-Montana the Turkish side started to emphasize the failure of a “federal solution” and the need to look for “alternative” solution models, and starting in 2020, the Turkish side emphasized a solution

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<sup>1</sup> Ersözer, Fadıl, and Ahmet Sözen. 2025. “Ripeness Theory and Cyprus Conflict: Understanding How Comfortable Stalemate and External Pressure Influence Conflict Resolution.” *Peacebuilding*, published November 7, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2025.2577084>.

based on equal sovereignty and equal status of the two sides – which is coined with a “two-state solution”.

What followed since then was not escalation, but stabilization. The island entered a new phase: normalization without a solution.

### ***The (Greek Cypriot) Republic of Cyprus: Stability Without Urgency***

The election of Nicos Christodoulides in 2023 did not fundamentally shift Greek Cypriot strategy. Instead, it reinforced a post-2004 pattern shaped by structural realities.

The Republic of Cyprus operates from a position of institutional security. EU membership provides economic stability, diplomatic legitimacy, and structural leverage. The state is internationally recognized and fully integrated into European decision-making structures. It holds veto power within the European Union. It benefits from European funding and institutional anchoring.

This structural advantage profoundly shapes the negotiation incentives of the Greek Cypriot side. Before 2004, EU accession created some kind of urgency. However, after accession, that urgency dissolved. The (Greek Cypriot-dominated) Republic of Cyprus joined the EU regardless of the settlement.

As a result, non-agreement carries a limited immediate cost for the Greek Cypriot side. The economy functions. Tourism thrives. EU funds continue to flow. International legitimacy is secure. In such a context, compromise becomes politically risky and strategically optional.

Domestic politics reinforces caution. The memory of the 2004 referendum still influences elite behavior. Political leaders operate within a society where skepticism toward power-sharing with the Turkish Cypriot community remains significant. No Greek Cypriot president can move boldly without facing domestic backlash. Meanwhile, internal governance challenges, migration pressures, and EU border politics increasingly dominate the agenda. Cyprus, as an EU frontline state, is embedded in European debates over asylum and border control, issues that often overshadow the inter-communal dimension.

The result is the Greek Cypriot leadership’s rhetorical commitment to federalism without structural urgency to pursue it.

### ***Northern Cyprus: Erhürman and Strategic Repositioning***

In Northern Cyprus, the election of Tufan Erhürman represents a meaningful recalibration in tone and political orientation. Erhürman’s political identity emphasizes institutional reform, governance credibility, and constructive engagement with both Greek Cypriot and international actors. His discourse is less confrontational, more pragmatic, and more attentive to restoring diplomatic channels. Importantly, he does not dismiss the federal framework outright, but sort of conceals it with broader and vaguer terminologies like the political equality of the two sides.

Erhürman’s victory reflects fatigue within Turkish Cypriot society — fatigue with stagnation, economic fragility, and diplomatic isolation. It demonstrates that the community remains diverse in its aspirations and that a significant segment still sees engagement as preferable to remaining in perpetual limbo. However, structural constraints remain decisive. Northern Cyprus is economically and security-wise deeply intertwined with Turkey. This interdependence is

foundational. Any shift in negotiation posture by the Turkish Cypriot leadership must align with Ankara's broader strategic calculations.

Furthermore, the asymmetry between the two sides persists. One side enjoys EU membership and full international recognition; the other does not. This imbalance shapes bargaining leverage, diplomatic flexibility, and psychological posture.

Erhürman's presidency opens space for incremental confidence-building and recalibrated rhetoric. It does not, by itself, reopen a clear path for resumption of formal peace negotiations to reach a comprehensive settlement to the Cyprus conflict.

### ***Comfortable Stalemate and the Absence of Ripeness***

Conflict resolution theory often refers to "ripeness", a moment when parties perceive that the pain of non-agreement exceeds the risks of compromise. Cyprus today does not meet that condition. Instead, it embodies a comfortable stalemate:

- the Greek Cypriot side (the RoC) enjoys EU security and international legitimacy,
- the Turkish Cypriot side ("TRNC" – Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus) relies on Turkey's economic and security backing,
- violence (between the two Cypriot communities) is almost absent on the island,
- division is quite institutionalized,
- everyday life proceeds on both sides of the UN Green Line (the buffer zone), and
- though non-agreement is not ideal, it is, nonetheless, manageable.

When non-agreement becomes tolerable, compromise becomes politically dangerous. Leaders calculate that bold moves may cost them power and loss of popular support, while maintaining the status quo carries fewer immediate consequences.

Elections alone cannot create ripeness. Ripeness must be cultivated through shifting incentives, altered regional dynamics, or gradual cooperative engagement.

### ***The Missing Ingredient: Cooperation Culture***

For decades, Cyprus negotiations have focused on constitutional architecture, such as rotating presidencies, veto mechanisms, territorial maps, and property compensation schemes. These elements are necessary, but they are not sufficient. A federation cannot function without a culture of cooperation. Trust cannot be legislated into existence. Shared governance requires practice.

Institutions must learn to operate and cooperate together before they are tested at the highest political level. This is why gradualism matters. Rather than expecting a comprehensive agreement to suddenly generate harmony, cooperation must be cultivated step by step. Joint technical committees, environmental cooperation, energy dialogue, public health coordination: these are not cosmetic measures. They are foundational exercises in shared governance. Without such gradual preparation, even the best-designed constitutional settlement risks fragility.

### ***Energy: Conflict Multiplier or Peace Catalyst?<sup>2</sup>***

Hydrocarbon discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean transformed regional geopolitics. Initially, energy appeared to offer a shared economic incentive. Joint exploitation could have fostered interdependence. Instead, energy became securitized. Maritime boundaries were contested. Alliances formed. Drilling activities escalated tensions. Sovereignty narratives hardened. Yet, against all odds, energy retains transformative potential.

Economically viable export routes from the Eastern Mediterranean logically pass through Turkey. In the ideal world, infrastructure realities favor cooperation over exclusion. A cooperative settlement in Cyprus would:

- reduce maritime disputes,
- enable pipeline routes via Turkey,
- integrate Cyprus (and Turkey) into regional energy corridors,
- enhance EU energy diversification,
- reduce geopolitical polarization in the broader (Eastern Mediterranean) region.

Energy can entrench division. But under the right framework, it can encourage cooperation. For Turkey, this dimension is strategic. Cyprus is not merely a political dispute; it is a node in a broader maritime and energy architecture. Since 2020, personally, I have been saying that “Cyprus became a meze (small appetizer) in the broader geopolitical table.”

### ***Rethinking Security Architecture***

Security remains the most emotionally sensitive issue in the Cyprus peace talks. Greek Cypriots fear external (Turkish) intervention and implementation failure in a future reunification. Turkish Cypriots fear marginalization and vulnerability in a unified state. The debate often collapses into a binary: zero guarantees versus permanent guarantees. Yet such binary framing blocks creative solutions.

A new security architecture<sup>3</sup> must combine:

- preventive institutional safeguards,
- international monitoring mechanisms,
- phased adjustments,
- hybrid domestic-international oversight structures,
- security must evolve from unilateral protection toward shared reassurance.

For Turkey, this is perhaps the most delicate dimension. Any adjustment to the guarantee system touches upon national security doctrine and historical memory. Yet innovation does not imply vulnerability. Creative arrangements can preserve deterrence while reducing perceptions of domination.

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<sup>2</sup> The author edited the volume entitled *Conflict Resolution in the Mediterranean: Energy as a Potential Game-Changer*, which can be accessed here for more detailed analysis: <https://diplomeds.org/conflict-resolution-in-the-mediterranean-energy-as-a-potential-game-changer/>.

<sup>3</sup> Before Crans-Montana negotiations, a group of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot researchers, including the author of this opinion piece, wrote a white paper entitled “A New Security Architecture for Cyprus” based on scientific evidence-based research. It can be seen here: [https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/PB\\_SD116\\_White-Paper.pdf](https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/PB_SD116_White-Paper.pdf)

### ***What This Means for Turkey***

Cyprus occupies a unique place in Turkey's strategic landscape. It is:

- a national security concern,
- a maritime sovereignty issue,
- a regional energy consideration,
- a diplomatic variable in Turkey-EU relations,
- a symbol of geopolitical positioning.

Hence, the current moment presents Ankara with strategic crossroads. Maintaining the comfortable stalemate consolidates influence and avoids political risk. It preserves leverage in the North and maintains a clear security posture. However, prolonged division sustains friction with the EU, limits the potential for energy integration, and reinforces regional polarization. In this regard, Erhürman's presidency offers calibrated flexibility. A more dialogue-oriented leadership in Northern Cyprus allows Ankara to test incremental engagement without appearing strategically retreatant.

The key question is whether reshaping the incentive structure of non-agreement better serves Turkey's long-term regional objectives than indefinite stabilization. If Turkey prioritizes energy integration, improved EU relations, and regional de-escalation, incremental engagement in Cyprus becomes a strategically rational approach. If consolidation and strategic clarity remain paramount, the comfortable stalemate will endure.

### ***Between Normalization and Possibility***

Cyprus today is stabilized in division. The danger is not renewed war. The danger is the normalization of permanent separation. Yet political space exists for a settlement based on power sharing of the two Cypriot communities. Leadership tone matters. Cooperation culture matters. Regional recalibration matters. In that sense, the recent elections, modest as they may appear, create an opening, a window in which tone can shift, trust can cautiously rebuild, and gradual cooperation can resume. But that window will remain narrow unless regional actors decide to widen it.<sup>4</sup>

For Turkey, the decision is not merely diplomatic. It is strategic. It is about positioning within a transforming European security architecture. It is about shaping the Eastern Mediterranean energy map. It is about determining whether Cyprus remains a stabilized fault line or becomes a managed bridge. History has shown that Cyprus moves when regional structures move. The island rarely changes in isolation. If the broader theatres shift, Cyprus may shift with them.

Until then, the comfortable stalemate will endure — not because the problem is unsolvable, but because the incentives to solve it remain insufficient.

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<sup>4</sup> For the author's deeper analysis on the election of the Turkish Cypriot leader Tufan Erhürman and prospects for a solution, see his opinion piece right after the election at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/leader-to-watch-in-2026-tufan-erhurman-226474>.