

Extract from:
Jean-François Drevet and Andreas Theophanous,
'Cyprus and the EU: Appraisal and Challenges',
Policy Paper No. 58, Notre Europe, September 2012.

Postword

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Engraved on the hillsides of the Pentadaktylos, the flag of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' imposes itself on the vision of those strolling the streets of Nicosia's Greek quarters. The impression is even more dramatic at dusk: lit up for the first time on 28th October 2003, on the date of the Greek national holiday, and illuminated every night since then by thousands of lanterns, the Turkish star and crescent appear to float above the town. In a written question to the Council, dated 21st October 2009, one Cypriot MEP gives the full measure of the offense: with its 425 metres long and 250 metres wide, flanked by the Kemalist slogan *Ne mutlu Türküm diyene* ['How happy is he who calls himself a Turk'], the giant flag occupies a total surface of more than 200,000 square metres. One may smile at such meticulous exactitude.

Yet, more sadly, being partly occupied by a third country which is itself a candidate for EU accession – namely Turkey – the Republic of Cyprus stands out as a unique case since the end of the Cold War in Europe. The island's division also recalls us back to an unfulfilled promise: that of the European integration's capacity to soothe territorial conflicts and nationalist hardening – in Cyprus and elsewhere. For the situation at the Cypriot frontier-town conjures up

other frozen conflicts of the European South-East. In Mostar, the huge Catholic cross that stands on top of mount Hum, on the Western bank of the Neretva, is perceived as a provocation by the Muslim population; in Skopje, the Millenium cross planted by the Macedonian Orthodox church on Vodno mountain is the object of resentful comments among the Albanian minority, while the massive equestrian statue of Alexander the Great erected at the centre of Plostad Makedonia rears up to boldly defy neighbouring Greece, who contests the former Yugoslav Republic's share of the Hellenistic legacy and therefore blocks the progress of her accession negotiations with the EU.

Such symbolic devices, which weigh up identity balances by the kilo of bronze or the square meter of barren land, are at odds with the supranational ideal fostered by the European project. The Republic of Cyprus taking over the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU for the first time could have been the occasion for a great debate on the future of these 'suburbs of Europe.' Instead, the new Presidency took office in the midst of the turmoil affecting the island's banks, and right after the request for financial aid put forward by Nicosia in the last days of June 2012. Who cares for the fate of North Cyprus, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Serbia, when the heart of the Union is under siege? The Republic of Cyprus is the fifth country in the Eurozone to ask for external help, but it distinguished itself by not limiting itself to soliciting the ECB and IMF. President Christofias, the only communist head of state in the EU, and a professed admirer of the Chinese and Russian regimes, made it known that he was considering the possibility of requesting a loan from these two countries.

This was particularly unfortunate, arising at a juncture when the European debt crisis highlights the frailty of the sense of European identity, and when national stereotypes opposing Northerners and Southerners are resurfacing. Whether the Cypriot Presidency will be able to make up for its troubled debut within the few months it has in office remains an open question.