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Bringing Oxygen To Reunification: Cyprus Opens New Border Crossings

On November 12, 2018, two new border crossings were opened in Cyprus [*Euronews*, “New border crossings open in divided Cyprus, first in eight years”], as agreed by the president of the Republic of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, and the president of the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (“TRNC”), Mustafa Akinci, in 2015.

The crossings are located at Dherynia, in the Northern part of the island next to Famagusta, and at Lefka-Aplikli, fifty kilometers from the capital Nicosia. This happened for the first time since 2010: nine border crossings exist now along the 180 km buffer-zone dividing Cyprus.

The opening of border crossings in the contested island is a powerful confidence-building measure, able to trigger concrete changes in daily life, acting as a driver of contacts, exchanges and inter-communal socialization. The mobile telephony interoperability, another confidence-building measure previously agreed, has not been implemented yet.

After the collapse of reunification talks at Crans-Montana, in July 2017, negotiations have stalled, with institutional and political leaders debating on framework and timing of the next diplomatic round. Cyprus needs creative, ‘out of the box’ solutions to overcome the enduring political stalemate, forging alternative ways to build Cypriots’ shared future.

In this context, micro-politics, as the opening of border crossings, brings oxygen to a crystallized, high-level political scenario: removing or limiting material fences help to reduce immaterial boundaries, thus

offering to Cypriots more opportunities for mutual understanding and bottom-up initiatives on the reunification path.

Recently, president Anastasiades has openly started to propose decentralization as a core value of the post-solution Cypriot state, introducing the idea of a “loose federation”. This kind of hypothesis could work also for Turkish Cypriots, as stated by Akinci after a meeting with Anastasiades on October 26. “*What he said today is that he is not thinking outside the UN parameters*”, declared Akinci about his counterpart’s words, “*he is not thinking of an option outside the bizonal, bicommunal federation*” because, concluded Akinci “*he wants to evaluate a model with fewer powers in the centre and more with the constituent states*” [quoted in George Psyllides, “Leaders agree to open two crossing points next month (update 4)”, *Cyprus Mail*, October 26, 2018].

After years of failed reunification talks, Cyprus’ leaders have understood that stalemate has become a permanent dimension of the negotiation process. At the eyes of the two communities, threat perceptions are different and continue to be different: however, crystallization is not a viable option for the island, since Cypriots’ economic, social, generational needs and aspirations have been inevitably changing (especially in the “TRNC”), together with a fluid and tense regional context.

The opening of new border crossings suggests how much it is important looking ‘beyond’ the reunification path, and not only to the formal and codified high-level process.

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