



Call for Papers "Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?"

**MEMBER STATES SOFT POWER SKILLS.
THE IMPACT OF CYPRUS ON EU EXTERNAL ACTIONS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the fact that Cyprus is one of the smallest states of the European Union, with all that this entails in the exercise of external policy, the Republic of Cyprus, the last few years, has taken several initiatives in various areas, especially in building new alliances with its neighbours. The overall objective of this paper is to examine the role of Cyprus as a member state after the COVID-19 pandemic, in conjunction with other hot topics of external policy, such as energy, security, migration, Brexit, solidarity issues as well as the economy today and recent developments and to suggest actions both on local and European level. The paper will aim to answer the question: what is needed for a more "united Europe"?

Short bio

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Table of Acronyms

EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EU	European Union
RoC	Republic of Cyprus
SBA	Sovereign Base Areas
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
U.K.	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

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Perhaps the greatest challenge today is the EU's loss of its raison d'être (Theophanous, 2014)

1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has definitely created new unforeseen challenges both for the EU and its Member States. Indeed, the new pandemic has created enormous pressure on states and the EU as a whole, not so much because the states were unprepared, which is true, but also the EU once again failed to act with a unified action plan. In conjunction with other chronic issues such as security, integration, EU external relations, financial crisis, migration and Brexit; the COVID-19 crisis could act as a catalyst for the EU in promoting its values through external actions.

Each member state has its own share and responsibility in order to contribute and promote those values. For smaller states the challenges are even bigger either because they lack resources or they lack expertise. But as argued by Neumann and de Carvalho (2015) small states are seeking to establish their status in the international arena. Cyprus presents an interesting example, given its size but more importantly given, its political problem, which extends beyond its territorial borders making it a European issue (Theophanous, 2004: 21).

In addition to the above, challenges still exist in the economic field. Cyprus has successfully managed to exit a bail-out program in 2016 (Euractiv, 2016). But despite positive steps, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new unforeseen pressure over the economy. Top of that, a new scandal arose regarding the Cyprus Investment Program and the so-called "golden passports".

The aim of this paper is to discuss EU and Cyprus' challenges in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with other hot topics of external policy, such as energy, security, migration, Brexit, solidarity issues as well as the economy today and recent developments and to suggest actions both on local and European level.

2. Cyprus: Its Historic Background

Cyprus is the only member of the EU with 38% of its territory being occupied by a foreign army. Moreover since 1974 more than 40 000 Turkish troops have settled in the Northern part of the island. Along with the settlers brought over the years from Turkey, the demographics on the island are constantly changing not only against the Greek-Cypriot population but also against the Turkish-Cypriots (Hatay, 2017 ; Djavit An, 2018). Therefore, the priority of the political elites, with the support of the majority of the society, was to join the EU with the hope that a membership could act as a catalyst to the Cyprus problem (Ker-Lindsay, Faustmann and Mullen, 2011: 5). The same opinion was shared by the European institutions (Christou, 2004: 61-2).



Even though the EU preferred to see a united Cyprus joining the Union this has not been possible as a UN backed referendum on reunification held in 2004, only days before Cyprus membership to the Union, was rejected by the majority (75.8%) of Greek Cypriots (Varnava and Faustmann, 2009). Sixteen and so years after the referendum there is a lot of literature in relation to the "Annan Plan", the referendum and the aftermath. However, if we could sum-up the reasons why it was rejected by the Greek Cypriots the main points would be the ongoing concerns regarding security issues and specifically Turkey's influence in the internal affairs of the newly "unified" state, in conjunction to the prospect of membership even without a solution of the political problem (Faustmann, 2011).

But it would be a mistake to address Cyprus' membership solely on the grounds of its political problem. In fact, a major motivation for membership has also been the economic benefits of joining the EU. Being the third smallest country of the Union as well as the member state which is (geographically) distanced the most from Brussels (Nugent, 2006), Cyprus' economy faces particular challenges. Cyprus' economy is highly dependent on exports and has high production costs (Sepos, 2008).

Having outlined the two major issues behind Cyprus' aspiration for joining the EU a crucial question arises: Has Cyprus gained what it hoped for from its membership? The fact that Turkey does not recognize the right of the RoC to exist makes it difficult if not impossible to find a lasting settlement to the Cyprus problem despite constructive efforts from both the UN and the EU. And this is the core behind the political issue which remains unresolved for so many decades. As stated by professor Theophanous in a recent interview (Dalitis, 2020a) despite the personality of the leader of the Turkish Cypriot Community, the decisive role belongs to Ankara. And there should be no misperception that a Turkish Cypriot leader could deviate from Ankara's positions.

Having said the above, clearly Cyprus does not wish to be associated only with problems; on the contrary, it wishes to play a constructive role in the region and to advance broader objectives of the EU. Especially at these very sensitive times when initiatives are required to promote networks of cooperation, economic growth and tolerance in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East (Pedi and Kouskouvelis, 2019: 151-152). Cyprus can utilize its geographical position as well as its historical relationships in positive ways (Drevet and Theophanous, 2012: 1-2). It is within this framework that regional cooperation with neighborhood states gains importance and simultaneously creates new challenges on security issues.

3. Energy Security in the Eastern Mediterranean and New Alliances

The discovery of natural gas reserves back in 2011 in Cyprus' EEZ created a new momentum for both security and cooperation opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean. From the Cypriot point of view, the discovery of what is estimated to be 3 to 9 trillion cubic feet of natural gas just in one of the licensed blocks, created both opportunities but also new threats (Leventis, 2012).



Cyprus intention is to utilize its geographical position by becoming an energy hub, bringing together regional gas reserves (from Israel, Egypt, Cyprus itself and future producers such as Lebanon) into a local terminal and then exporting them to the EU. Cyprus intention is to transfer the gas through pipelines to Greece and from there to be distributed across Europe. There are still ongoing discussions over logistics as some studies project the most viable economic solution: the transfer of those reserves through Turkey (Stergiou, 2019).

It should be clear that, as long as the political problem remains unresolved, there would be no government or political party in Cyprus to support the option to transfer gas through Turkey despite the financial cost of other options. Having said that, the discovery of gas reserves could act as a catalyst for finding a solution to the political problem forcing the two communities to accelerate their negotiations. Unfortunately, in the last few years, Turkey's aggression has expanded, with its climax being a "second invasion" after 1974, as President Anastasiades said (AP, 2019), this time within Cyprus' EEZ using its drilling vessels. It is within this framework that Cyprus asked for European solidarity, in order to tackle this new aggressiveness (Nicolaidis, 2019).

In November 2019, the European Council adopted the framework for sanctions against Turkey's illegal drilling activities (Council of the European Union, 2019). The sanctions consist of a "travel ban to the EU and an asset freeze for persons, and an asset freeze for entities. In addition, EU persons and entities will be forbidden from making funds available to those listed". Despite the sanctions placed, Turkey continued its provocations; this time not only against Cyprus but also against Greece (BBC, 2020). Within this framework, the Cyprus government made an effort in October 2020 for the adoption of new measures against Turkey in parallel with sanctions on Belarus.

From a European point of view, the effort of Cypriot Government to "link" the sanctions against both Turkey and Belarus was perceived as a failure for the EU to act fast and to implement its common foreign policy against Lukashenko. What is important to underline is that Cyprus had not used its veto right. On the contrary the efforts were to reach a compromise something that was materialized on the next council meeting (Euronews, 2020).

From a Cypriot point of view, the EU failed to share the same empathy towards Cyprus' request for sanctions as with Belarus. It is a fact that two different subjects were on the table; on the one hand the violations of Cyprus' and Greece's EEZ from Turkey and on the other hand the rigged election results in Belarus and the repression that followed. Nevertheless, both subjects are or should have been core European Foreign Policy issues, directly connected with security and common value principles; and Cyprus expected from its counterparties to apply the same sensitivity in decisively and swiftly matter and nothing less.

It is within this context that Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission President "urged Member States to embrace qualified majority voting on external relations" (European



Commission, 2020a). The discussion whether the veto right should be abolished is not something new (read for example Spinant, 2003).

But Europe and the European project in general is not the United States of America. What makes it unique and perhaps fascinating is that there are currently 27 member states around a table arguing, collaborating, disagreeing and agreeing but in general compromising on foreign issues matters. Of course it is not the most efficient mechanism, not at least time efficient, but it works (for Europe). Abolishing unanimity it's like opening Pandora's box.

Despite tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, emphasis should also be given to the new regional cooperation and alliances that were created or enhanced following the discovery of natural gas in the region (Lerman, 2019). In the last few years Cyprus and Greece (two EU member states) have established tripartite alliances with various regional countries such as Israel, Egypt, Jordan, while more are expected in the upcoming years (Papaioakeim, 2018: 96).

The emergence of trilateral partnerships was in part a product of a renewed Cypriot foreign policy that tries to be a more proactive one by capitalizing on a number of geopolitical and geo-economic developments (Tziarras, 2019). According to the Cypriot Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Christodoulides, "the policy of deepening and broadening the relations of Cyprus with neighboring countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region, including the strengthening of tripartite partnerships, was also part of the EU's policy to promote security and defense issues in the region" (Golden, 2018).

Even though the starting point of these alliances was indeed the discovery of natural gas and finding ways to utilize it, it also extends to other issues of common interest such as security, cooperation, peace and in general prosperity for participating countries and the region. Part of this "energy diplomacy" momentum was the formation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in January 2019, which has officially turned into a regional organization following the sign of its charter by the seven member states last September (Middle East Monitor, 2020 ; Matalucci, 2020).

It should be noted that, despite the COVID-19 effects, Cyprus external actions have remained undisrupted, mainly due to Turkey's aggressive rhetoric and provocations in the region. A few examples of active actions are: the efforts at EU level, during the recent EU meetings (either with physical presence or online) for the adoption of sanctions against Turkey, the trilateral meeting of Cyprus, Greece and Egypt that was held in Nicosia in October 2020 and the online signing of Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum charter in September 2020.

4. **Cyprus and the Migration Issue**



The refugee crisis and the ongoing migration issue has put pressure on the European project and on member states in general. Some countries (mainly in Southern Europe) due to their geographical position are in the front line, taking up more pressure than others. This creates an uneven balance and despite efforts and all the relevant policies in place, there are still discrepancies among member states.

More than a third of Europeans still consider immigration to be the most important issue facing the EU with 89% in Cyprus being in favor of a common European Asylum System followed by 86% in Germany and 84% in Netherlands (Eurobarometer, 2020). On September 23, 2020, the European Commission (2020b) presented its new proposal for a common asylum policy, but still some member states are reluctant to embrace it (Lahodinsky, 2020). Article 80 TFEU (2016) states that “the policies of the Union in the field of borders management, asylum and immigration shall be governed by the principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility, including its financial implications, between the member states when such measures are necessary”. But the concept for solidarity remains vague.

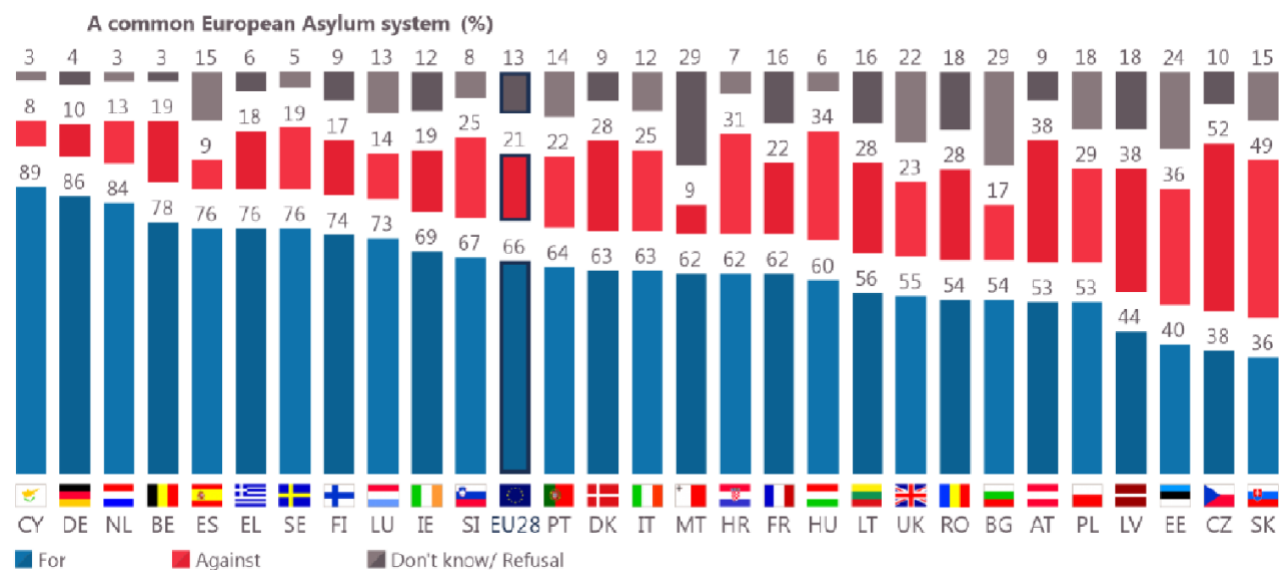


Figure 1 - A Common European Asylum System

Source: Eurobarometer, 2020

In 2018, there were an estimated 2.4 million immigrants to the EU-27 from non-EU-27. Cyprus was the top receiving country per capita of asylum seekers in the EU in 2018, according to a report published by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO, 2019). More recently (second quarter of 2020) the highest number of first-time applicants per million population was recorded in Cyprus (989), followed by Slovenia (441), Greece (376) and Malta (363) (Eurostat, 2020).

Due to the division of the island it is practically impossible for the RoC to implement similar security measures at its borders as do other EU countries. Cyprus has not been a traditional



migratory route mainly because of its size and the distance it has from the nearest EU member state. However, this scenario has been altered in the last few years as more and more refugees and migrants are now travelling to Cyprus. This is achieved either by boat, to both the south and the north, or by plane through northern Cyprus (Karakoulaki, 2019).

However, the majority of people who seek asylum in Cyprus arrive by plane at Tymbou (Ercan) airport in northern Cyprus, especially those who do not need a visa to travel to Turkey. As stated by James Ker-Lindsay “The simplest way is to think of the north of Cyprus as the world’s biggest airport transit lounge”. Once the migrants cross the green line (which is not a border itself) they are officially in EU territory (Stevis-Gridneff, 2020). Due to the increase in arrivals via this route and with the potential for migration to turn into Cyprus' largest problem, the government asked the EU for support (Hazou, 2020). The former Minister of the Interior Constantinos Petrides accused Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriots of facilitating migration to the island, and also suggested that they were involved in the smuggling and trafficking of people (Ekathimerini 2019).

5. Cyprus and Brexit

According to the Brexit sensitivity index prepared by S&P in 2019, Cyprus is among those countries with the "most to lose" in a no-deal scenario. Even though Cyprus is familiar with external shocks (i.e. 2013 financial crisis), its close historical connection with the U.K., in addition to large tourism, auditing, and financial sectors, makes the Cyprus economy vulnerable to Brexit (Rosenbaum, 2020a). But not everything is looming. A number of businesses, especially from the financial sector have expressed an interest to relocate and benefit from the high-skilled low-budget workforce and lifestyle that is offered in Cyprus (Busfield, 2020).

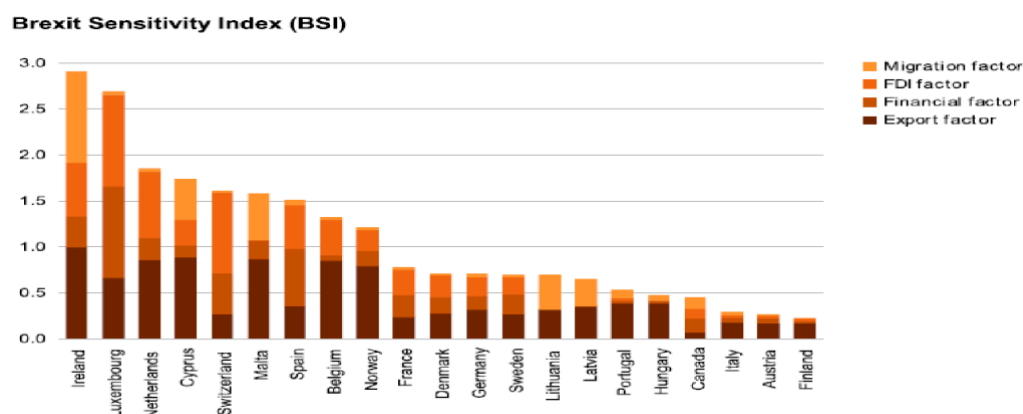


Figure 2 - Brexit Sensitivity Index
Source: S&P Global, 2019

Cyprus is taking steps to implement the agreement reached for the withdrawal of the U.K. from the EU but is also preparing for the no deal scenario. Already various governmental services and



ministries are preparing for the no deal and a number of laws have been passed through the Cyprus Parliament dealing exactly with this matter. But apart from the issues that all EU members will have to handle in case of no deal, Cyprus has another unique issue to deal with.

Under the Treaty of Establishment of the RoC in 1960, the U.K. retained two SBAs in Cyprus: Akrotiri and Dhekelia that takes approximately 3% of the territory of Cyprus. The withdrawal agreement includes a protocol protecting the interests of Cypriots who live and work in the SBAs following the U.K.'s withdrawal from the Union (European Commission, 2019). Under the protocol the RoC assumed some more responsibility in implementing and enforcing some provisions of EU Treaties in the base areas, which the U.K. entrusted to it (Hadjigeorgiou and Skoutaris, 2019).

What will be interesting is to see what will happen in case of a no deal, as under the Treaty of Establishment the U.K. is obliged not to create customs posts on the island but on the other hand a third party entity (SBAs) will share external borders with an EU member state with all the implications this entails (Kentas, 2018: 329). Nonetheless, it is expected that a cooperation will prevail even in the event of a no-deal Brexit (Harris Kyriakides LLC, 2019).

6. COVID-19, Cyprus Economy and Recent Developments

The COVID-19 pandemic has nothing to do with the previous financial crisis. It has caused an upheaval to peoples' lives, families and communities and continues to be a threat for health. But also it has a significant impact on businesses and the economy. The COVID-19 pandemic is a global issue, affecting all economies in Europe and beyond. It is worth noting that the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated how difficult co-operation can be between member states, and that initially countries adopted an inward-looking reaction; by closing their borders and focusing on internal crisis management. It took a while prior actions were taken at EU level (Russack and Blockmans, 2020: 1-3).

The EU Commission and the ECB have adopted more flexibility in terms of fiscal and monetary supervision, which is expected to foster economic recovery, even though initial discussion for a Eurobond failed to materialize (Jonson, 2020). Cyprus, who has been in favor of a Solidarity Fund, is expected to benefit from €2.7 bln in pandemic emergency funds (FM, 2020). Cyprus' government reacted speedily to combat the COVID-19 crisis, both in terms of dealing with the health hazard (i.e. early adoption of lockdown measures), as well as with the adoption of an appropriate fiscal and monetary response (PWC, 2020).

According to Cyprus Finance Minister Constantinos Petrides, Cyprus is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels of economic normality next year, while in the next three years, the real growth rates are expected to exceed on average 3%. According to DBRS rating agency, the government's



debt-to-GDP ratio is rising close to a still manageable 115 per cent of GDP in 2020 (Rosenbaum, 2020b).

What is worth mentioning is a topic that has been in the headlines the last few months and up to an extent it has suppressed COVID-19 news coverage. We are referring to the Cyprus Investment program and specifically the “citizenship by investment” program which has been known as the "Golden Passports" Scheme. For history, in March 2014, Cyprus changed the legislation that enables foreign investors to become a Cypriot citizen and obtain a Cypriot passport through naturalization in order to attract new investments amid the financial crisis.

The relevant legislation and the program it-self was amended numerous times as loopholes were allowing criminals to benefit from the program. Recently, Al Jazeera (2020) news agency released evidence which showed that Cypriot politicians were willing to assist convicted criminals obtain a passport. At the same time, the European Commission (2020c) launched infringement procedures against Cyprus and Malta as the granting of nationality in exchange for “pre-determined payments or investments without any genuine link with the member-states concerned, undermines the essence of EU citizenship.” Following the above developments the government announced the abolishment of the scheme as from 1st of November 2020 (Lawther, 2020).

7. Recommendations and Conclusion

Discussing the various topics above, which are considered important both by the EU and the member states, one can easily point out the importance of a common policy and strategy over shared issues and concerns. The recent proposal for a new Migration Policy along with the efforts by the Health Commissioner for the establishment of a European Health Union are within this scope (European Commission, 2020a ; Dalitis, 2020b).

The EU should have a more active role in peripheral cooperation by e.g. assigning a permanent representative to participate in tripartite (or similar) meetings. Therefore, issues of common interest will not only be discussed between states but also on a broader sphere that includes the EU and which could be an expansion of the existing European Neighborhood Policy. In addition, more resources should be allocated to peripheral projects that promote cooperation between member states and neighborhood countries similar to the EastMed Pipeline project and the EuroAsia Interconnector but emphasis should also be given in other areas of common interest beyond energy, such as research and development, education, culture.

International relations have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic but this could be Europe's golden opportunity to improve its mechanism and decision making process in favor of its external actions strategy. What could member states, and the EU in general, utilize is what we have learned during COVID-19 pandemic, especially when it comes to time management and technology. It was proven that EU's respective commissions and councils could have online meetings without



the need of physical presence. Also time was no longer a restrictive issue. Therefore, EU's Foreign Policy could be implemented and actions to be taken in a relatively short period of time again through discussion and compromise but without the strict limitations of Council meetings and its repetitions.

Of course having said the above we also recognize the importance for member states to have the right of veto especially on matters of foreign policy. As stated by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ambassador Korneliou in a recent interview (CyBC, 2020) "the EU is the art of compromise". By Europeanizing various policies within the member states is the way forward for making a more "united Europe". It is up to the EU to convince member states that a common foreign policy would take into consideration the interests of all member states and therefore of the Union as a whole.

As for Cyprus, it should emphasize more on building regional alliances with the participation of more countries (beyond its neighbors) based on the already established model of trilateral partnerships, but without necessarily focusing on energy matters; even though it is a good starting point. For example, Cyprus could become a health hub in the region, by utilizing its geographical position for example, especially if a European Health Union is succeeded. As long as the Cyprus Problem remains unresolved it will always be on the agenda of Cyprus' foreign policy but at the same time it should not be the only topic on it.

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