



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

The new president of Cyprus ties the island more tightly to the European mainland



When two experienced diplomats end up in the race for president of a country, it means that the key internal problems stem from foreign politics.

This also means that voters recognise that the head of state should be someone who is well versed in international politics and economics.

In Cyprus, the younger of the two experienced diplomats was elected president on Sunday. Both ran as independent candidates, and succeeded, which caused concern to the traditional, established parties, and above all the ruling centre-right DISY.

Their "renegade" and recent head of diplomacy of Cyprus, Nikos Christodoulides (49), won with a margin of only 3.8% over long-term diplomat and former ambassador to the UN, Andreas Mavroyiannis (66).

Although narrow, the victory was achieved with a fairly high turnout of 72%, even higher than in the first election round, which gives the winner a high and indisputable legitimacy.

He will need it, because the new president of Cyprus will have a very complicated job in the next five years, and will require substantial diplomatic and negotiation skills.

Without a doubt, Christodoulides has those skills. He served as the head of Cypriot diplomacy from 2018 until last year, when he left the position to run for head of state.

He acquired these skills as a spokesperson for the Government and chief diplomatic adviser to the president from 2014 to 2018, and before that as a university lecturer and diplomat.

Inherited and internationalised problems

Although highly internationalised, the key problems for the new president have been inherited from previous administrations.

The number one national issue concerns the

north of the island, which has been occupied by Turkey since 1974 and for which, after numerous initiatives and long negotiations in international frameworks, there is still no solution.

There is also the problem of migrants and refugees from the Middle East, for whom Cyprus is an important transit point.

The country still suffers from the repercussions of the financial crisis of a decade ago, but also an international image problem related to widespread corruption.

As a candidate of the conservative part of Cyprus' political spectrum, Christodoulides was considered a leader who would take a tough approach to solving the issue in the north of the country, under Turkish control.

His opponent, Mavroyiannis, provided different expectations in this regard, suggesting that the country is closer to a conciliatory solution, and thus to an ultimate exit from the division of almost half a century.

Mavroyiannis could have been much more authoritative than his younger rival, given that for years he led the Cyprus delegation during the negotiations on the North.

A solution for the north with the help of the EU

However, Christodoulides' victory shows that the majority are fed up with years of failed negotiations on northern Cyprus and want to support a different approach: the one advocated by today's winner.

Christodoulides' platform, which he also discussed in the campaign, includes the European Union, much more than the UN, for example, as an important factor with the help of which a solution could be reached.

He suggested that Cyprus could support Turkey's desire to improve the customs union with the EU, including visa liberalisation for

Turkish citizens traveling to the EU. In return, he demands that Ankara lift the 35-year-old embargo on Cyprus' ships in Turkish ports.

The new president of Cyprus wants to make the most of his position as a member of the EU in order to get out of the bilateral dispute with Turkey, which has been straining their relations for decades, but also relations in the Mediterranean and even in the EU.

"If the EU is smart it will work on that suggestion because it could break the logjam", said Fiona Mullen at the Nicosia consultancy Sapienta Economics, according to The Guardian.

Changing the pro-Russian image

With the election of Christodoulides, Cyprus has a president who will have a more pronounced pro-EU and pro-Western policy than his predecessor Nicos Anastasiades and his opponent Mavroyiannis.

The main reason for Mavroyiannis' electoral failure has been the support he had from the main opposition party, the communists from AKEL (Progressive Party of the Working People). Citizens of Cyprus still remember their government almost bankrupted the country during the global financial crisis, but in the current geopolitical circumstances, an even bigger problem is its closeness to Russia.

The victory of Christodoulides will also mean the exit of Cyprus from the zone of covert sympathisers of Russia, and the strengthening of trust with Western partners, primarily in the EU.

In the circumstances of Russian aggression against Ukraine, this is a plus for Cyprus' reputation as a loyal member of the European Union. That loyalty has been in question for years, due to political leaders who were more or less openly tolerant of the regime in the Kremlin.

But even more so because of the business landscape of Cyprus, as one of the long-standing favourite destinations for the dubious business of Russian oligarchs, and for the storage and placement of their wealth. By 2012, there was as much as 72 billion euros in Cyprus' bank accounts, of which a third belonged to Russian nationals. Due to the financial crisis in Greece, which threatened to sink the Cypriot economy, the authorities, fearing that they would be left without the large deposits from Russian investors, enabled the "citizenship by investment" programme, which kept many of them on the island.

From 2013 to 2020, Cyprus issued almost 7,000 "golden passports", almost half of which were given to Russians, Alexandra Attalides, a member of the Cyprus Parliament, recently told CBS News.

Although the practice of issuing "golden passports" was stopped in 2020 due to established corruption during their issue, a good part of their owners of Russian origin still use them.

The new President Christodoulides will also have the opportunity to demonstrate a departure from Cyprus' tolerant policy towards Russia, its wealthy citizens, and particularly towards their capital.