



By: **Sharmila Devi**

Will Trump push for peace in Cyprus?



Might the collective choice of 218,000 voters in the internationally unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus whet the peacemaking ambitions of President Donald Trump to push for its reunification with the Greek Cypriot side after more than half a century of division?

A pro-reunification candidate won the presidency of the **Turkish-Cypriot republic** on 19 October, raising hopes of renewed peace talks amid congratulatory messages sent from Ankara as well as from Athens and the Greek Cypriot government.

Tufan Erhurman, 55, won by a landslide, receiving 62.76% of the vote against incumbent Ersin Tatar's 35.81%, according to unofficial figures broadcast on BRT TV. Nearly 65% of the 218,000 registered voters cast ballots.

Days later, the **Trump administration** announced the nomination of John Breslow as ambassador to the Republic of Cyprus amid speculation of greater US involvement to resolve the Cyprus question.

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey invaded in response to a coup sponsored by Greece's military junta. The self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is recognised only by Ankara, while the Greek-Cypriot Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in 2004.

The last UN-backed peace talks broke down in acrimony in 2017.

A softened atmosphere conducive to talks

"Trump could offer **Ankara** what the UN never could, such as increased co-operation on defence or trade and energy deals with European support, in exchange for the withdrawal of Turkish troops and a renewed power-sharing plan on the island," wrote the conservative Washington Examiner.

After Trump met Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan in the White House on 25 September, "the level of Turkish interference noticeably declined" in northern Cyprus's election campaign, and there was now a "softened atmosphere" conducive to talks, according to Abdullah Korkmazhan of the Turkish Cypriot Left Movement.

Erhurman defeated incumbent Ersin Tatar, who had pushed Ankara's two-state solution and insisted on a fully sovereign state, which is rejected by Greek Cypriots.

The new president wants resumption of formal talks with the Greek Cypriots. "As our previous four presidents did, we will certainly consult with Turkey in foreign policy, on the Cyprus question," he told a post-election rally.

One of Erdogan's key allies, Turkish nationalist leader Devlet Bahceli, dismissed calls for a federal solution and urged Turkish Cypriots to join Turkey

Given northern Cyprus's economic and military reliance on Turkey, Ankara is key to its future as well as the destination for Erhurman's first presidential visit. Erdogan made warm remarks after the election, notable because the failed candidate was backed by Ankara.

"This election once again demonstrated the TRNC's democratic maturity and reflected the will of our Turkish Cypriot brothers at the ballot box," **Erdogan** said in a post on the Turkish social media platform NSosyal.

But one of Erdogan's key allies, **Turkish nationalist leader** Devlet Bahceli, dismissed calls for a federal solution and urged Turkish Cypriots to join Turkey. His remarks were widely condemned in northern Cyprus.

Paving the way to exploiting natural gas

In Turkey, there was a swift reaction from the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which is facing a crackdown by Erdogan's government that started in March with the arrest of **Ekrem Imamoglu**, mayor of Istanbul, who remains in jail.

Ozgur Ozel, head of the CHP, welcomed Erhurman's victory and claimed that Turkey had used "black propaganda" in an effort to secure a win for Tatar.

Greek Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides told Euronews he is "ready to resume negotiations even next week".

The Greek Cypriots and Greece have a number of other disputes with Ankara over maritime boundaries and energy connections

Nicosia will take up the rotating presidency of the EU in January, giving it a visible platform for its concerns, such as its opposition to Turkey joining the European Union's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) programme.

It remains unknown whether and to what extent Nicosia may tie any progress on Cyprus to allowing Ankara's participation in SAFE, a multibillion-euro effort launched earlier this year to bolster European security.

The Greek Cypriots and Greece have a number of other disputes with Ankara over maritime boundaries and energy connections.

A Cyprus peace deal could pave the way to exploit natural gas off its southern coast and unlock an electricity cable project connecting Greece and Cyprus and which Israel is keen to join.

Trump, Erdogan, and Cyprus

A peace accord would also help northern Cyprus's moribund economy, which had the highest electricity bills in the EU, Eurostat

said. The lack of a settlement has cost the island more than €20 billion in lost economic potential, said a 2020 academic paper.



Ankara will be studying closely how to take advantage of the possible opening represented by the presidential results - Donald Trump with Recep Tayyip Erdogan

Furthermore, northern Cyprus has seen a growing "dark" economy because of the lifting of restrictions on casinos. Additionally, a surge in student numbers in the north to about 100,000 - up to 20% of the entire population - has been accompanied by fraud and **human rights abuses** of people seeking student status to migrate from the north and into the EU, the FT reported.

Erhurman's victory will have raised the hopes of many Turkish-Cypriots seeking an end to their isolation and a bettering of their futures, and he will need strong political will to tackle growing lawlessness, says Korkmazhan of Cyprus Left.

Ankara, meanwhile, will be studying closely how to take advantage of the possible opening represented by the presidential results.

"Erhurman's victory represents both a challenge and an opportunity," said analysis on the Turkish Minute web site. "The win of a pro-EU, pro-federation candidate complicates Ankara's two-state rhetoric but also provides a chance to signal constructive engagement with Europe."

Such engagement would also play well with Trump, who bestowed his favour on Erdogan last week after Ankara persuaded Hamas to accept the **US Gaza deal**. "This gentleman from

a place called Turkey is one of the most powerful in the world,” said Trump. “He's a reliable ally. He's always there when I need him.”

Perhaps the Turkish president will be there should Trump push for peace in Cyprus.