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Research Report

European elections and their implications for the Cyprus issue: Populist challenges and Turkish Cypriot inclusion

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SWP Comment

NO. 28 JULY 2024

European Elections and their Implications for the Cyprus Issue

Populist Challenges and Turkish Cypriot Inclusion

Erol Kaymak

One of the big surprises of the June 2024 European Parliamentary elections occurred in the Republic of Cyprus, where a 24-year-old YouTuber and social media influencer, Fidias Panayiotou, won a seat running as an independent having secured over 19 percent of the vote. Whereas the vast majority of polls had predicted the rise of the radical right National People's Front Party (ELAM) in Cyprus along with other far-right parties in Europe, Panayiotou's victory and overall vote tally was unforeseen. His win came at the expense of the left-wing Progressive Party of the Working People (AKEL), dashing the hopes for the re-election of Turkish Cypriot MEP Niyazi Kızılyürek, whose 2019 election to the European Parliament was seen as a milestone for bi-communal relations in divided Cyprus. Kızılyürek's defeat highlights the persistent difficulties in achieving greater political integration and representation for Turkish Cypriots within the EU framework. This underscores the urgent need for inclusive dialogue, economic integration, and proactive measures to address Cyprus's unique challenges, aiming to foster a more cooperative and resilient future for the island.

Despite significant gains for far-right parties in France and Germany in the June 2024 European Parliament elections, European Union Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared victory on behalf of the European People's Party group (EPP), maintaining that the "centre is holding." The results from the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), which has a total of six seats allocated in the European Parliament, superficially support her claim, as the centre-right Democratic Rally (DISY) successfully defended its two seats in the European Parliament for the EPP, securing 24.78 percent of the vote,

given the small number of seats allocated to Cyprus. Echoing von der Leyen, Annita Demetriou, President of the RoC House of Representatives and President of DISY, celebrated the party's first-place finish in the European elections, emphasising its resilience having recovered from a 2023 presidential elections crisis and a potential split. Although DISY secured top spot, its ratings significantly dropped compared to previous European elections (29.02 percent) and the 2021 parliamentary elections (27.8 percent). In the municipal elections held concurrently with the European Parliament



elections, the results were dire for DISY. The party lost strongholds like Nicosia and failed to secure mayoral victories in Limassol and Larnaca.

The overall picture was further complicated by the rise of ‘anti-politics’, where 24-year-old independent social media influencer, Fidiás Panayiotou, won a seat as an independent, coming within four percentage points of overtaking DISY.

Panayiotou’s success came at the expense of the Progressive Party of the Working People (AKEL), despite opinion poll data suggesting that AKEL would retain its two MEPs. AKEL’s loss of one of its two seats ended any hopes for the re-election of Niyazi Kızılyürek, the Turkish Cypriot MEP elected in 2019. The result puts a dent in efforts to kickstart stalled peace talks regarding the Cyprus issue. It also raises questions regarding the EU’s overall strategy for integrating the Turkish Cypriot community.

The pre-elections landscape

Public dissatisfaction with the current government and internal party conflicts complicated predictions for the 2024 European Parliament elections. Immigration had become a key issue, particularly due to perceived EU failures in implementing a unified policy supporting frontline states like Cyprus. President Nikos Christodoulides’ government, supported by a coalition including the Democratic Party (DIKO) and the EDEK Socialist Party (EDEK), was sensitive to these parties’ relative decline, with potential implications for the coalition’s stability and the government’s mandate.

The main concern was the potential impact of the National People’s Front Party (ELAM) securing representation in the European Parliament, building on its RoC parliament seats. Any progress by ELAM in forming a broader opposition alliance with DISY could destabilise Christodoulides’ coalition. ELAM’s anti-migration stance introduced a challenging dynamic into Cyprus’s traditional political landscape. At the EU level, ELAM joins the European and Conservatives

and Reformists (ECR), including Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy, over the Identity and Democracy (ID) group. Given the overall European elections results, the political dialogue between Ursula von der Leyen and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni may also affect EPP-ECR relations within the European Parliament, as von der Leyen seeks re-election as European Commission president.

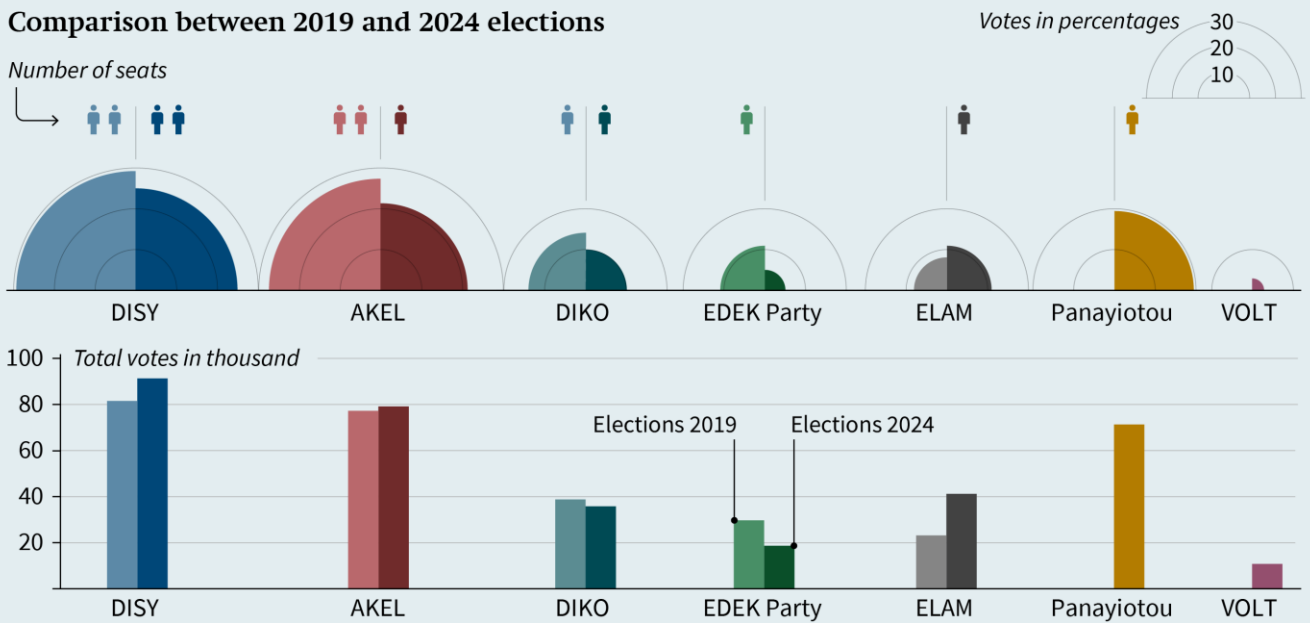
This alignment, along with ELAM’s efforts to distance itself from the Greek neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party, was seen as a strategy to buffer against potential bans or exclusions from future coalitions.

Potential alliances, whether formal or issue-based, both within Cyprus and at the European level, could amplify ELAM’s influence and enable it to advocate for policies aligned with its anti-immigration and potentially Eurosceptic stance. Such developments could further complicate the EU’s efforts to implement cohesive and inclusive policies, particularly in areas related to migration and asylum. In the context of the Cyprus issue, this could certainly impact the already complex relations between the EU and Turkey.

Before the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, EU leaders focused on increasing voter turnout and addressing the rise of far-right parties. In April 2024, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola visited Cyprus, warning voters “not to take the EU for granted” and urged citizens to vote and support the EU’s role in civil rights and democracy. She also highlighted recent EU accomplishments, including a new asylum and migration deal. Metsola’s visit coincided with a surge in Syrian refugees arriving from Lebanon. In May, European Commission President von der Leyen announced a €1 billion aid package to Lebanon to curb refugee flows. Both Metsola and von der Leyen reaffirmed the EU’s commitment to a bizonal, bicomunal federation for Cyprus, rejecting any two-state solution. The Turkish side set conditions for peace talks, including recognition of Turkish Cypriot sovereign equality and a six-month mandate for UN envoy, María Ángela Holguín Cuéllar.

Figure 1

Comparison between 2019 and 2024 elections



Source: Ministry of the Interior, Republic of Cyprus, <http://www.elections.gov.cy>

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European Parliament elections results: 2019 versus 2024 Results

The elections, based on a proportional representation system, ensure that the number of elected members from each party reflects the proportion of votes they receive. Eligible voters included Cypriot citizens and EU citizens residing in Cyprus, with voter registration required on the permanent electoral roll. Additionally, there is a special electoral list to accommodate over 100,000 Turkish Cypriots.

The 2019 European Parliament elections in Cyprus were marked by high abstention rates, with apathy continuing to be a dominant factor. The far-right ELAM party consolidated its position, becoming one of the five largest parties despite not securing a seat in the European Parliament, while the 2019 elections had seen a swing against the governing DISY party.

In contrast, the 2024 European Parliament elections in Cyprus were characterised by a “fluidity” in the political landscape, with weakening party affiliations and increasing voter individualisation. As demonstrated in Figure 1, the overall shift away from centrist parties towards ELAM

and especially the independent candidate Panayiotou stand in contrast to the 2019 results.

The 2024 elections held on 9 June in Cyprus were the most complex in the nation’s history, as they combined both European Parliament and local government elections. The unprecedented overlap led to increased voter turnout, as anticipated.

The major parties competing in the 2024 European Parliament elections in Cyprus included the historically dominant DISY, which despite facing internal struggles and declining popularity secured first place overall with nearly 25 percent of the vote, thus retaining two MEP seats.

In contrast, AKEL failed to retain one of its two seats from 2019, thus losing one. Despite expectations of a strong performance due to its inclusive platform appealing to both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, and the unpopularity of the government, AKEL significantly underperformed compared to opinion polls that had it closely trailing DISY. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, AKEL experienced a notable decline in voter support, with its percentage dropping to 21.5 percent from 27.5 percent in the 2019 elections. Although there was a

slight increase in the absolute number of votes, the party failed to capitalise on favourable political circumstances, such as the potential split within DISY and the challenges faced by DIKO and EDEK under the Christodoulides government. Notably, the party's heavy investment in the Turkish Cypriot vote did not yield the expected results.

Newer parties, including the far-right ELAM, benefitted from the electoral realignment. Whereas DIKO and EDEK have been historically key players, EDEK has been particularly vulnerable to the rise of ELAM. Additionally, the new pan-European progressive movement Volt Cyprus competed for progressive and federalist voters, which impacts AKEL's voter base. Although ELAM secured a seat, it underperformed with 11.19 percent of the vote, compared to polling data that had predicted closer to 15 percent.

The big shock was the success of a YouTuber known for pranks. Fidias Panayiotou's independent candidacy was initially seen as a novelty but it proved to be much more significant. His remarkable overall tally of 19.4 percent came as a complete surprise to most. During the campaign, Panayiotou consistently polled in single digits, reaching as high as 8.7 percent in the last opinion poll published prior to the June 9 elections, raising the possibility of winning a seat. Fidias Panayiotou's political ascendancy is largely attributed to his sizable online following, with 2.6 million subscribers across platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Despite his lack of political experience and simplistic views on the Cyprus problem, his anti-politics stance resonated with a significant portion of the electorate.

Known by his first name, Fidias, Panayiotou underlines the political relevance of social media. Beginning his journey in the public eye as a YouTuber in 2019, his unique content, which included a mission to hug 100 celebrities and culminated in a hug with Elon Musk, quickly gained popularity as his channel amassed over 2.6 million subscribers. In April 2024, Fidias announced his candidacy for the European Parliament. Running on an anti-partisan platform, he emphasised the importance

of education and the significance of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and Bitcoin.

Turnout seems to have played a role in the unexpected outcomes. Most notably, Turkish Cypriot turnout was exceptionally low despite attempts to encourage participation. Paradoxically, the efforts to enhance turnout led to greater participation in all districts other than Nicosia, as can be observed in Figure 2. In Nicosia, turnout decreased from 42.8 percent in 2019 to 38.7 percent in 2024, far below the 72.8 percent turnout for the 2023 presidential elections. By contrast, in some districts, the 2024 turnout was not only significantly higher than 2019 levels, but even exceeded the 2023 presidential election turnout.

Higher turnout seems to have helped Panayiotou overall. In Paphos District, where the 2024 turnout exceeded that of the 2023 presidential election, he decisively came in first place with 22.5 percent to DISY's 18.3 percent.

Implications of the Results

The meteoric rise of Fidias Panayiotou and his anti-politics platform represents a seismic event. Moreover, it appears that efforts to enhance turnout paradoxically mobilised disaffected voters.

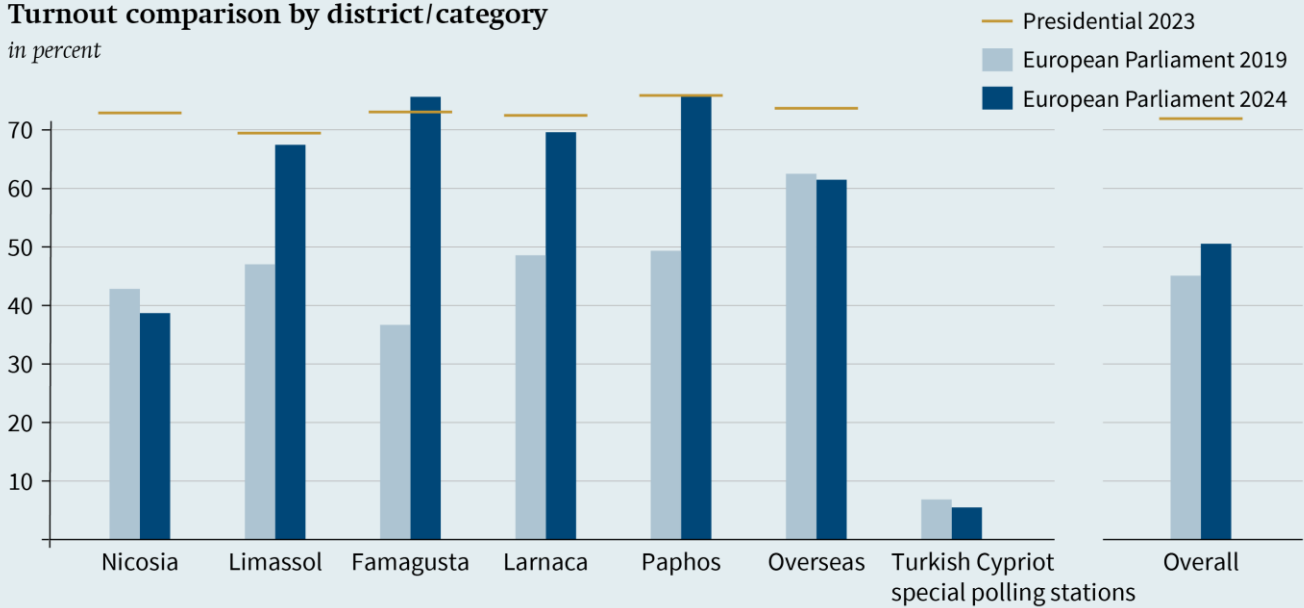
Panayiotou is unlikely to have a significant impact in the European Parliament as an MEP. Aside from his lack of experience, he is still not affiliated with any party group in the European Parliament. Yet, his ambition and ability to mobilise disenchanted voters cannot be underestimated. While he campaigned on an 'anti-politics' platform, there are clues regarding his position on the Cyprus issue, which may align him with ELAM and put him in opposition to Christodoulides' policies. Yet, with twice the amount of ELAM's popularity and his expertise as a social media influencer, it remains to be seen how he may rebrand himself.

Fidias and ELAM's presence in the European Parliament could impact RoC and EU-Turkey relations, potentially hindering

Figure 2

Turnout comparison by district/category

in percent



Source: Ministry of the Interior, Republic of Cyprus, <https://elections.gov.cy/moi/elections/elections.nsf/0/2c14393df028b523c2258b37005a427e?OpenDocument&Click=>

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diplomatic efforts and emboldening nationalist forces.

Turkish Cypriot participation has also been affected. AKEL's 2019 strategy of including Turkish Cypriot candidate Niyazi Kızılyürek aimed to attract Turkish Cypriot votes and support reunification. However, in 2024, Kızılyürek failed to get re-elected, and AKEL lost a seat. Efforts to mobilise Turkish Cypriot turnout failed, and competition among AKEL candidates also influenced the outcome. While the candidacy of Anna Theologou was meant to draw voters from outside of AKEL, in practice she secured second place over Kızılyürek whose popularity within the party had plummeted. Other parties, VOLT Cyprus and the Green Party, also included Turkish Cypriot candidates, but this did not increase turnout.

Turkish Cypriot participation and representation

The European Parliament elections results are quite problematic in terms of the Cyprus issue. Participation of Turkish Cypriots in the European Parliament elections is crucial for ensuring their representation and

integration into the EU framework. Turkish Cypriots residing in the northern part of Cyprus – where the RoC does not exercise effective control – are only eligible to vote in European Parliament elections if they hold official documents of the Republic of Cyprus, such as an identity card or passport.

Since the opening of the Green Line for crossings in 2003, Turkish Cypriots have found it easier to obtain RoC ID cards. To establish their citizenship, Turkish Cypriots must prove their Cypriot ancestry and residency prior to the island's partition in 1974, which typically involves demonstrating that their parents were citizens. Efforts to encourage higher participation included both the automatic registration of more than 100,000 Turkish Cypriots residing in the north and the provision of special polling stations along the Green Line. Typically, to be registered as a voter, citizens must meet specific residency requirements, including proof of six-month residency in Cyprus. However, due to the unique circumstances of Turkish Cypriots, residency criteria were not verified in the automatic registration of over 100,000 Turkish Cypriots for the 2024 elections. A total of 32 special polling stations were set up near the checkpoints

between the north and south of Cyprus, located in the Nicosia, Larnaca, and Famagusta districts to ensure accessibility and encourage higher voter turnout.

The strategy was enabled by the landmark ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in *Aziz v. Cyprus* (2004), which secured voting rights for Turkish Cypriots. Ibrahim Aziz, a Turkish Cypriot, was denied the right to vote due to his ethnicity despite being a Cypriot citizen. The European Court of Human Rights, which ruled in his favour, thus prompted the Republic of Cyprus to reform its electoral laws.

In practice, the participation of Turkish Cypriots in European elections has been an experiment in *de facto* cross voting, and is controversial among Turkish Cypriots, as it not only legitimises the Greek Cypriot-led government of the Republic of Cyprus, but it also contradicts the system of separate electoral rolls for Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots that date back to the London-Zurich Agreements of 1959 and the 1960 Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus. Since 1964, Turkish Cypriots have not been represented in the internationally recognised RoC, marking the origins of the Cyprus problem.

The 2004 UN ‘Annan Plan’ United Nations proposal was aimed at resolving the Cyprus dispute by restructuring the Republic of Cyprus into a federation of two states. The plan was put to separate simultaneous referenda on April 24, 2004, in which both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots cast their votes. If approved, Turkish Cypriots would have received two of the six MEP seats. However, the Greek Cypriots rejected the plan, while the Turkish Cypriots approved it. Since the EU accession treaty had already been signed and ratified, Cyprus joined the EU as a divided territory on May 1, 2004, without provisions for Turkish Cypriot representation.

Niyazi Kızılyürek’s tenure as an MEP and campaign for reelection underscored a sense of ontological anxiety among Turkish Cypriots. From this vantage point, the MEP only served to reify and legitimise the sov-

ereignty of the RoC against the interests of the Turkish Cypriots, thus his candidacy proved polarising. Moreover, Kızılyürek had been outspoken against efforts to facilitate a deal between the EU and Turkey that does not affirm Turkey’s obligation to extend the customs union to the RoC.

In parallel, his appeal to pro-federalist voters waned. Progress on the various issues championed by Kızılyürek had been slow, underscoring the limited capacity of an MEP to change the status quo regarding the status of Turkish Cypriots in the EU, leading to apathy.

Still, it was assumed that the combined efforts of the Republic of Cyprus, the EU, and the mobilisation efforts of political parties might double Turkish Cypriot turnout. However overall Turkish Cypriot turnout fell from 5,804 in 2019 to 5,676 in 2024.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the fall in turnout occurred despite the (automatic) registration of more Turkish Cypriots via a special electoral roll by the Republic of Cyprus. To facilitate their participation, special polling stations were set up near the Green Line that divides Cyprus. Unlike other voters who were assigned specific polling stations, Turkish Cypriots in this category could vote at any of these special stations.

The EU’s Integration Strategy for Turkish Cypriots

The outcome, and especially the low voter turnout among Turkish Cypriots, raises questions regarding the validity of the EU’s overall approach towards integration and the Cyprus issue. Encouraging Turkish Cypriots to participate in European elections had become an integral part of the broader integration strategy. Following the failure of the 2004 reunification referendum on the UN blueprint dubbed the ‘Annan Plan’, the EU Council expressed its commitment to supporting the Turkish Cypriot community. The Council had aimed to end their isolation, promote economic development, and encourage integration with the rest of the island and the EU. Despite these efforts,

Table 1

Comparison of Turkish Cypriot voter turnout in European Parliament elections

Year	Registered	Votes cast	Turnout
2019	82,925	5,804	7.0%
2024	103,281	5,676	5.5%

Source: *Kathimerini*, 17 June 2024, <https://knews.kathimerini.com.cy/en/news/only-5-676-of-103-281-eligible-t-c-voters-participated-in-the-eu-elections>

Turkish Cypriots, as a political community, remain underrepresented in the EU. In essence, the election of Niyazi Kızılyürek through his AKEL candidacy in 2019 was an experiment where Turkish Cypriots participated as individuals but clearly voted on communal lines and interests.

The EU has implemented various programmes to support the economic and social integration of Turkish Cypriots. The Green Line Regulation of 2004 has enabled trade between the northern part of Cyprus, where EU legislation is suspended, and the Republic of Cyprus, which is part of the EU’s single market. In 2023, the value of Green Line trade reached a record €16 million, a significant increase from €6.2 million in 2021. To further support this trade, the European Commission has implemented measures such as a €4 million support scheme launched in April 2024 to provide financial grants and technical assistance to Turkish Cypriot producers engaged in Green Line trade.

While trade figures are headed in the right direction, the volume is far less than what had been originally envisioned. Twenty years since the accession of Cyprus to the EU, the level of trade – through the Green Line Regulation that is still not fit for purpose – and overall engagement between the EU and the Turkish Cypriot community remains limited.

The 2004 agenda for Turkish Cypriot integration included a direct trade regu-

lation proposal to allow Turkish Cypriot goods direct access to the EU market. However, it was frozen due to disagreements and legal challenges. Cypriot MEPs, including Kızılyürek, also oppose it, fearing it would weaken their negotiating position in the Cyprus dispute. Conversely, restricting trade is argued to strengthen Turkish Cypriot ties with Turkey and hinder reunification efforts.

This highlights the broader critique of the EU’s inconsistent policy on Turkish Cypriots, whose admission of Cyprus before reunification created legal and political complexities, leaving Turkish Cypriots caught between dependence on Turkey and the Republic of Cyprus for EU citizenship rights and benefits.

During his tenure as an MEP, Niyazi Kızılyürek had expressed frustrations with the EU’s “hands-off” approach, which he believes has exacerbated tensions and hindered reunification efforts in Cyprus. Highlighting the untapped potential of the Green Line Regulation, which facilitates trade between Turkish Cypriots and the EU, he argued for more robust support for Turkish Cypriot producers.

On the rights of citizens, Kızılyürek had campaigned for the inclusion of Turkish Cypriots in the Erasmus+ programme, resolving citizenship issues stemming from mixed marriages, and ensuring that Turkish becomes an official language of the EU. His efforts serve to frame the EU’s failure to fully integrate Turkish Cypriots and address their unique challenges.

The issue of mixed marriages and the citizenship rights of their children has also been a contentious topic in Cyprus. The European Parliament’s Petitions Committee has deliberated on the citizenship rights of children born to Turkish Cypriots and Turkish immigrants who are otherwise considered settlers by the RoC. The core of these petitions revolves around securing the right to Cypriot citizenship for these children, thereby granting them full rights as EU citizens.

The RoC government has recently moved to grant citizenship to 14 individuals from



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mixed marriages, a decision welcomed by NGOs advocating for the rights of these families. However, the 2007 law that stopped granting citizenship to children from mixed marriages in Cyprus is still in effect, which sets criteria that have prevented many children of mixed marriages, particularly those involving Turkish Cypriots and Turkish immigrants/settlers, from obtaining Cypriot citizenship.

Outlook and Recommendations

President Metsola's calls for Cypriots not to take the EU for granted is a timely reminder of the importance of democratic participation. However, it is equally crucial for all involved to demonstrate that they also do not take Cyprus for granted by actively engaging with the island's unique challenges and working towards a more inclusive future.

The EU's vision of a unified Cyprus contrasts with the positions of Turkey and Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar, who support a two-state solution. Rising nationalist sentiments among both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots further complicate cooperative efforts. Stakeholders should focus on encouraging active participation from both communities, supporting confidence-building measures, and addressing the unique challenges faced by Turkish Cypriots. Recognising their legitimate concerns and aspirations for democratic participation is essential in maintaining peace and cooperation. The shift to the right in the EU and the RoC may affect reunification talks. Allowing Turkish Cypriot goods direct access to the EU market would reduce economic dependency on Turkey and foster greater integration. Implementing economic cooperation initiatives under the Green Line Regulation and a broader agenda of cooperation can ensure fair and balanced growth. Developing common spaces and projects can create shared inter-

ests and foster long-term cooperation. The EU should impress on the RoC that human rights issues must be resolved independently of progress in talks related to the Cyprus issue. Providing Turkish Cypriot youth with access to programmes like Erasmus+ can foster growth and integration within the EU framework. Going forward, stakeholder efforts should focus on fostering regional collaboration in energy, maritime security, and migration management. Emphasising good neighbourly relations and dialogue with Turkey can create a stable environment for long-term peace and development. To ensure sustainable progress, stakeholders should explore innovative solutions, such as tailored customs union arrangements to facilitate balanced economic integration. Ultimately, the path forward requires adopting a proactive strategy that emphasises inclusivity, broad participation, and regional stability. By embracing these principles, all parties involved can more effectively contribute to building a shared, prosperous future for the entire Cypriot population, transcending the current divide.

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