

'Trumped, tricked, tripped up' from Die Zeit (29 April 2004)

Caption: On 29 April 2004, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit comments on the rejection by the Greek Cypriots of the plan for the reunification of the island drawn up by the United Nations.

Source: Die Zeit. 29.04.2004, Nr. 19. Hamburg. "Gepokert, getrickst, gestrauchelt", auteur:Thumann, Michael , p. 5.

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Trumped, tricked, tripped up

The Greek population of Cyprus turns down unification — a victory for Turkey/By Michael Thumann

EU expansion has begun with a split, namely the second governmental division of the island of Cyprus. The President of Cyprus relentlessly stirred the feelings of the island's Greek citizens until eventually, in a referendum held last weekend, they turned down the UN unification plan. The Meanwhile, Turkish Cypriots were voting in favour. The EU now finds itself having to welcome to the family the Greek troublemaker in charge of the affairs of Cyprus. In doing so, the Europeans are importing the Greek-Turkish dispute from the Levant. The EU will in future have a disputed border in the Mediterranean region, patrolled by UN troops and tanks: a disaster for European diplomacy.

How was this possible? This particular failure has many fathers. The crucial error was made by the EU Heads of Government in 1999, when they gave way to pressure from the Greek Government. The latter was insisting that with the enlargement to the East the Greek Cypriots be taken into the Union, whether or not there had been unification with the Turks. Athens was worried that the Turks on Cyprus and in Ankara would otherwise possess a de facto right of veto over the island's accession. Turkey's aggressive demeanour in the mid-nineties was reason enough for such a fear. But times have changed. As matters stand today in southern Cyprus, Greek nationalists and extremists of all persuasions have taken over the government benches. Günter Verheugen, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement believes he has been 'duped' by President Tassos Papadopoulos. Which was precisely what Papadopoulos meant to do.

Ammunition to fight the plan

The Cypriot President's formative years were those of Greek-Cypriot maximalism in the late fifties: terror attacks against Turkey, annexation of the island by Greece. And even today compromise is not really Papadopoulos' thing. Until the end of 2003 he was content to feign approval for reunification of the island, so long in fact as someone else was doing his work for him. Rauf Denktasch, the unbending, immobile figure at the head of the Turkish-Cypriot State, was after all a man who could be relied on. A man who for forty years has pursued his life's work, the division of the island and the segregation of its inhabitants. But when towards the start of the year many Turks in Cyprus began turning away from Denktasch, Papadopoulos switched from cooperation to sabotage.

All of a sudden, the compromise proposal put forward by UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, was quite inadequate. The fact that the UN mediators gave a few more unskilfully packaged concessions suited the Greek down to the ground. That was the ammunition he needed for his propaganda war against the plan. He even did deals with the Russians, who proceeded in the UN Security Council to veto a resolution in favour of unification. Adopting the Moscow model, Papadopoulos intimidated those who did not share his views, imposed TV bans and authorised phone-taps. For support he could look to venomous orthodox clerics, businessmen afraid of competition from the north and the head of the Central Bank, scared of losing his job. In Athens the new government of Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis bungled the issue and, indeed, said nothing. The outcome was that almost 76 % of Greek Cypriots turned the plan down and celebrated their rejection in the streets.

And yet what they are celebrating in reality is the Turks' release from their role as the villain of the piece. In 1974, politicians and generals in Ankara used the annexation plans of the Colonels' regime in Athens as an pretext for occupying the island, dividing it and forcing the Greeks in the north to flee to the south. Ankara was concerned less with protecting the Turkish minority as with conquering a strategic anchorage in the Mediterranean. This was why some forty thousand soldiers marched in. Their splinter state on Cyprus was recognised by no-one but themselves. Since Sunday all that is a thing of the past, forgiven and forgotten. It is now the Greeks with their 'no' vote who appear as the dividers of the island. They believe that as an EU member they could soon look forward to a second negotiating opportunity on better terms. That chance will not come.

In the future, the Turkish Government will no longer need to concede so much ground to the Greeks. It has, after all, done everything it could to ensure the UN plan was accepted. Almost 65 % of Turkish Cypriots have approved it.

EU observers in Ankara are crediting Recep Tayyip Erdogan with a major diplomatic coup. The Turkish Prime Minister has succeeded in obliging the generals to stay put, even though Cyprus is their favourite manoeuvring field. He managed to push Rauf Denktasch aside and deplete his stock of political friends in Ankara. He was able to persuade both the UN and EU that, for the purposes of a settlement, he is the best ally. Under Erdogan's leadership the Turks have taken the moral high ground without conceding so much as a square metre of land, without handing over a single hotel to the Greeks, without withdrawing a single soldier from Cyprus. Whether the Turks ever really wanted the Annan Plan is ultimately beside the point. Erdogan is quietly enjoying his success, while the Greek Cypriots frenziedly wave their flags.

In all this, the Turkish Premier has one particular goal firmly in view: the accession negotiations with Brussels, on which the EU is to take a decision in the autumn. The tussle over Cyprus has helped his case up till now. Papadopoulos, little short of ostracized, is barely in a position to threaten a veto in Brussels. He will if anything have to stand by and watch the fortunes of the Turkish Cypriots constantly improve. Not many countries will go as far as to recognise the republic in the northern part of the island, as Azerbaidjan has already announced. But a de facto recognition is beginning to take shape.

The EU Foreign Ministers are now promising easier trading conditions for Turkish Cypriots, direct transport links and subsidies that do not have to transit via the Greeks. The EU Commissioner for enlargement, Günter Verheugen, believes the EU should open an office in the North. The Turkish Foreign Minister is already asking for the UN embargo on the pariah republic to be lifted, for free trade and unrestricted transport and for the republic to be allowed to have its own passports. Who is going to turn this down, and with what arguments? If the Turks bide their time smartly and avoid piling on the pressure, Northern Cyprus could even, on this sort of trend, gain full international recognition at some point. Some Turkish commentators, in jubilant mood, are already saying: Rauf Denktasch is as good as dead, long live his State.

Is there still a chance of reunification? Any prospect of the two parts merging is distant indeed. If the Greek Cypriots ever wish to move back into the once Greek parts of the North, they must tread a narrow, unsure path left open by an irony of history. This is to work actively for the accession of Turkey to the EU. If those areas and everywhere else on Cyprus become home to EU citizens, it may be that the barbed wire could at last be rolled back across the island.