

# THE CYPRIOT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 2023 AND ITS AFTERMATH

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Cyprus is the only full presidential democracy in the European Union. The presidential election is by far the most important election since the President of the Republic is both the head of state and the head of government. Cypriot voters perceive the presidential election as the most significant of all elections, and as a result, abstention rates are lower than in the other national election, namely the parliamentary elections. The President of the Republic is elected directly by the people (a majority of votes is needed), his/her term of office lasts five years, and his/her stay in power is not dependent on the parliament. In several instances in the past, the president did not secure the support of a majority of members of parliament (MPs) and therefore required support from opposition parties to implement his programmatic pledges. A prominent example of this is the current presidency of Nicos Anastasiades, who had the support of only 17 out of 56 MPs in the parliament, the MPs of his own party, centre-right DISY (Democratic Rally - EPP) - the largest party in Cyprus. Anastasiades was elected twice (2013 and 2018) and, for that reason, had no right to run in the latest elections. The newly elected president, Nikos Christodoulides, is the eighth president of the Republic of Cyprus since 1960.

Nicos Anastasiades was elected in 2013 at the height of the Eurozone crisis, with Cyprus especially hard hit by the haircut on Greek debt (Cypriot banks had invested heavily in Greek bonds). On taking office at the end of February 2013, he was called upon to adopt important and politically costly decisions aimed at reinvigorating the Cypriot economy, which was in severe recession. On the so-called Cyprus Problem - the ethnic division of the island - Nicos Anastasiades took one step closer towards a negotiated solution in the summer of 2017 at the Swiss resort of Crans Montana. Anastasiades was fortunate to have as his interlocutor the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community, Mustafa Akinci. In the spring of 2015 Akinci had managed to defeat the two candidates of the biggest Turkish Cypriot parties with the resolution of the Cyprus Problem as his main campaign pledge. There has been much speculation about what actually happened in Crans Montana when the negotiations failed to reach a final resolution plan. Anastasia-

des accused Turkey and the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, of being intransigent and inflexible in making significant concessions, while Anastasiades' critics within the Greek Cypriot community accused him of deliberately avoiding a final agreement given that the 2018 presidential elections were only six months away and that this may have been his top priority. His second term was tainted by major corruption scandals involving associates, family members and himself, resulting in a significant drop in his approval rating among voters.

## 2. POLITICAL PARTIES AND PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

The 2023 presidential election was preceded by the parliamentary elections in May 2021, where the abstention rate reached a record high of 34.28%. This was partly due to the electorate's increased disinterest in the political establishment following the revelation of numerous corruption scandals and misconduct (most notably the "Golden Passports" scandal). Not only did the mainstream parties (DISY, AKEL, DIKO, EDEK) lose electoral strength, but, for the first time, 14.5% of the electorate voted for niche/populist parties (nevertheless, all these failed to reach the 3.6% threshold, and none secured a seat in the new legislature). Although the mainstream parties remained the main political actors, after the 2021 parliamentary elections they were weakened and faced growing distrust from the electorate.

Democratic Rally (DISY - EPP), the party of the outgoing President of the Republic Nicos Anastasiades, remained the largest party with 27.8%. With the conclusion of the parliamentary elections, an intra-party contest began within DISY for the presidential nomination. Two high-ranking DISY officials, the party president since 2013, Averof Neophytou, and the then foreign minister and close associate of Nicos Anastasiades, Nikos Christodoulides, expressed interest in running for the 2023 presidential election. The internal party procedures for nominating the party's candidate started in late 2021, 14 months before the election. Nikos Christodoulides, who had already unofficially started campaigning for the presidential

election, decided to abstain from the intra-party proceedings of DISY, accusing Neophytou of manipulating the intra-party committees to benefit his nomination. Christodoulides' refusal to participate in any committee or intra-party meetings for the 2023 presidential elections was criticised by both his colleagues in the cabinet and high-ranking DISY officials. Thus, the pre-election period started with a rift between DISY and Christodoulides, who then resigned as foreign minister and officially declared his candidacy for the presidency of the Republic on 12 May 2022. Neophytou called on Christodoulides to respect the intra-party proceedings to select a presidential candidate, and when this did not happen, Neophytou emerged as the sole candidate for the DISY nomination and, thus, the official candidate of the ruling party.

In the 2021 parliamentary elections, the Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL - GUE/NGL) remained the largest opposition party but was significantly weakened with its worst electoral performance, achieving a share of only 22.3%. AKEL initially tried to revive its strategic alliance with the Democratic Party (DIKO - S&D), which had led to significant electoral victories in the past (notably in the 2003 and 2008 presidential elections). In early 2022, AKEL and DIKO launched an extensive round of talks to find a joint candidate for the 2023 presidential election. The talks did not succeed as the two parties disagreed on the preferred candidate. AKEL then decided to run on its own. In AKEL's intra-party procedures, two individuals were suggested for the nomination, the long-time diplomat and negotiator on the Cyprus problem of the Anastasiades government, Andreas Mavroyiannis, and Achilleas Demetriades, a well-known lawyer active in the movement for the rapprochement of Greek and Turkish Cypriots, who had announced his candidacy in early 2022. On 5 June 2022, the political bureau, by a small majority, chose Andreas Mavroyiannis as AKEL's candidate. This choice signified an opening on the part of AKEL towards the centre since not only was Mavroyiannis not a party member, but he had also served in the Anastasiades government. Achilleas Demetriades remained an independent candidate for the presidential election until the end.

After failing to find a joint candidate with AKEL, DIKO called for an extended convention with party members, who agreed with the leadership's intention to seek a common candidate with the other parties of the ideological centre, especially with the Movement for Social Democracy (EDEK – S&D). DIKO leader, Nicholas Papadopoulos, who was defeated in the first round of the 2018 presidential election, approached Nikos Christodoulides, who had already resigned as foreign minister and launched his campaign to become DIKO's candidate. The talks between the leadership of DIKO and Nikos Christodoulides were successful, and on 26 June 2022, DIKO's support for his candidacy was confirmed. On 13 July 2022, EDEK decided to join forces with DIKO and support the candidacy of Nikos Christodoulides. On 31 August, the Solidarity Movement<sup>1</sup> (KA – ECR) also announced its support for Christodoulides. Finally, the Democratic Alignment (DIPA - Renew), a party created by

expelled DIKO members, decided on 15 October 2022 to support the candidacy of Nikos Christodoulides.

The radical right/far-right National Popular Front (ELAM - NI) decided to run on its own for the third consecutive presidential election, supporting its leader, Christos Christou. ELAM had maintained close ties with the Greek party Golden Dawn, which in October 2020 was convicted by the Greek judiciary as a criminal organisation, and the party's activities were suspended by law. Due to its radical discourse, which is often labelled as chauvinist and racist, ELAM is isolated from the rest of the parliamentary parties.

Finally, the Green Party of Cyprus, the Movement of Ecologists - Citizens' Cooperation (Greens - EGP), conducted an intra-party election to nominate its presidential candidate. None of the candidates met the required threshold for the party's nomination (which is set at 60%), and the party decided to invite its members and supporters to vote for the candidate of their choice. Most of the party's voters and officials supported one of the two left-wing candidates: AKEL's candidate Andreas Mavroyiannis or the independent candidate Achilleas Demetriades.

In addition to the candidates mentioned above, many other independent candidates took part in the elections. These were:

- Constantinos Christofides, an academic and former rector of the University of Cyprus, who created his own party, New Wave, a member of Volt, a pan-European party (New Wave has yet to participate in parliamentary elections). Christofides' programme listed significant progressive reforms and the immediate need to solve the Cyprus Problem.
- George Colocassides, a lawyer and ex-deputy president of DIKO (2007 - 2011). In 2011, the then-president of DIKO and current president of DIPA, Marios Karoyan, ousted him after a heated exchange of words during the national council on the Cyprus Problem. Colocassides represented the DIKO voters and officials who were against the federal solution to the Cyprus Problem and took part in the 2023 presidential election "to give an option to voters who opposed a federal solution for the Cyprus problem".
- Alexios Savvidis, educator and leading member of the anti-vaccine movement in Cyprus.
- Charalambos Aristotelous, former AKEL member and for many years president of the Cyprus Students' Organisation in Bulgaria. He is a politician of the Marxist left, and he accused AKEL of collaborating with the elite and left the party. He addressed the working class and the radical left by claiming that Russia portrays a successful economic model.
- Celestina de Petro, a former member of the ELAM Women's Organisation.
- Andronicos Zervides, businessman.
- Ioulia Khovrina Komninou, businesswoman and member of the Russian community in Limassol.
- Andreas Efstratiou, businessman and candidate for almost every election (parliamentary, European and presidential) since 2001 to date. He gets meagre percentages, usually close to or below 0.1%.

<sup>1</sup> The Solidarity Movement failed to reach the 3.6% threshold in the 2021 parliamentary elections.

- Loukas Stavrou, painter. Loukas Stavrou has previously stood for presidential and parliamentary elections. He represents a fringe part of the far right.

In total, 14 candidates with different ideological orientations, ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right, participated in the elections.

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### 3. SALIENT CAMPAIGN ISSUES

Unlike the pre-election periods preceding the 2013 and 2018 presidential elections, which were related to the eurozone crisis that severely affected the Cypriot economy and society, the pre-election period before the 2023 presidential election, although long, was less heated and polarised. This was partly facilitated by the convergence of the positions of the three major candidates (Christodoulides, Mavroyannis and Neofytou) on some important issues. For instance, all three major candidates favoured a bizonal, bicomunal federation as the resolution to the Cyprus Problem, and all three accepted most of the agreements reached at the negotiations table in 2017 with the Turkish Cypriot leadership and Turkey. Despite this, the Cyprus Problem persisted as one of the main issues of the pre-election period, as the candidates differed on who could better negotiate on behalf of the Republic of Cyprus. Apart from the Cyprus Problem, two equally important issues were immigration and inflation. In recent years, Cyprus has been the number one country in asylum seekers per capita in the EU. Inevitably, the immigration problem is a critical issue of political competition among the parties. Again, the three leading candidates concurred on the need for immediate action on immigration by the new government, but none of them adopted anti-immigrant rhetoric as is the case in other European countries. The only major issue of the pre-election period on which the three candidates took different positions was in dealing with the negative consequences of the inflation crisis. Mavroyannis proposed solutions based on a modernised model of development that would be human-centric with more state intervention for helping households in need. Neofytou, being a supporter of fiscal discipline, announced tax alleviations for various social groups. Christodoulides proposed a new, holistic economic model that supports the free market and competitiveness through the promotion of digital transformation.

Apart from the Cyprus Problem, a perennial topic in Cypriot politics, and immigration and the inflation crisis (which are common European problems presently), there was the issue of corruption. In particular, the “Golden Passports” scandal and its adverse effects on the country’s international status, dominated the political campaign. The “Golden Passports” (“Citizenship by Investment”, CBI) scheme of Cyprus allowed wealthy individuals to obtain Cypriot citizenship in exchange for significant financial investment in the country. The programme was criticised for lack of adequate due diligence measures and for granting citizenship to individuals with controversial backgrounds, including those facing criminal investigations and sanctions, who used their new Cypriot passport, and by extension EU passport, to escape criminal prosecution in their home countries.

In late 2020, the issue gained widespread attention following a report by Al Jazeera, which revealed details of the CBI program. The report alleged that the Anastasiades government had granted citizenship to individuals with links to organised crime, including those facing criminal investigations in other countries. In October 2020, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Dimitris Syllouris, resigned after allegations that he had received kickbacks in exchange for helping individuals obtain citizenship through the CBI program. Syllouris denied the allegations, but his resignation prompted calls for an investigation into the matter. The Al Jazeera report led to increased scrutiny of the CBI program by the EU and sparked public and political outrage. In response to the report and the growing controversy, the government suspended the CBI program. The matter overshadowed a large part of the 2023 pre-election period, as two of the three leading candidates (Neophytou and Christodoulides) were close partners of President Anastasiades and were repeatedly called upon to comment on how they would deal with the increasing corruption in Cyprus.

Despite the length of the campaign, there was increased interest and coverage by traditional and new media. This included a series of tv debates between the candidates along with a high number of opinion polls throughout the campaign in which Nikos Christodoulides was presented as the first choice of the electorate.

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## 4. THE ELECTION

### 4.1 The outcome of the first round

The first round of the presidential election was held on 5 February 2023. No candidate succeeded in obtaining a majority of votes, so a second round between the top two candidates was held a week later, on Sunday, 12 February 2023. In the first round of the presidential election, the two candidates who received the highest percentages and advanced to the second round were Nikos Christodoulides with 32.04% and Andreas Mavroyiannis with 29.59%. With a vote share of 26.11%, Averof Neophytou came third and was therefore eliminated from the second round. This was the first time the DISY candidate did not advance to the second round of the presidential elections, as Neophytou had lost the support of a significant number of his party’s voters who opted for Christodoulides instead.<sup>2</sup> The candidate and leader of ELAM, Christos Christou, came fourth with 6.04%, and Achilleas Demetriades came fifth with 2.05%. Konstantinos Christofidis came sixth with 1.59%, and Georgios Colocassides came seventh with 1.33%. All the other candidates had percentages below 0.5%.

The day after the first round, Mavroyiannis and Christodoulides arranged to meet with Neophytou and the DISY leadership to seek their support for the second round. At the same time, Neophytou called a political bureau meeting to decide the party’s stance for the second round of the presidential elec-

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<sup>2</sup> Nikos Christodoulides, regardless of the support from the ideologically centrist parties, continued throughout the pre-election period to claim DISY membership despite his refusal to take part in the party’s internal procedures.

tions. Both the public and the media expected that the DISY political bureau would support Christodoulides, as he was a high-profile party member and had been foreign minister in the Anastasiades government. Furthermore, Mavroyiannis was supported by the left-wing AKEL, which is the traditional opponent of the centre-right DISY. In the end, however, the DISY political bureau decided not to support either candidate and recommended a free vote (a so-called “vote at will”) to its members. The DISY leadership attributed the defeat of Neophytou to the many DISY voters whose allegiance was with Christodoulides.

In the following days, the week between the first and second rounds, the two remaining candidates set out to win over the DISY voters who had supported Neophytou. At the same time, a significant rift appeared within the DISY leadership, with members loyal to Nicos Anastasiades openly accusing Neophytou of improperly leading the party to disavow Christodoulides in the second round of the elections. On the other side, Neophytou and his allies accused members of the Anastasiades government of working for Christodoulides’ candidacy and undermining Neophytou’s campaign. Despite the official party position not to take a stance between the two candidates, several members of the Anastasiades government openly supported either Christodoulides (e.g., Minister of Education, Prodromos Prodromou, Minister of Agriculture, Kostas Kadis) or Mavroyiannis (such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ioannis Kassoulides, Finance Minister, Konstantinos Petridis, and Katie Clerides -daughter of DISY founder Glafkos Clerides). It is noteworthy that when Neophytou was asked publicly about his preference for the second round, he replied that he would not cast a blank ballot, but neither would he vote for a defector. This statement was interpreted as an implicit endorsement for Mavroyiannis, supported by AKEL, the historical rival of the centre-right DISY. At the same time the statement further fuelled the internal strife within DISY since it was considered as a violation of the political bureau’s decision the previous night to endorse a “vote at will”.

#### 4.2. The outcome of the second round

The second round of the 2023 presidential election was held on 12 February. Nikos Christodoulides won the second round and became the eighth president of the Republic of Cyprus, with 51.97% of the vote against 48.03% for Andreas Mavroyiannis. The results show that most of those who had voted for Neophytou (DISY - EPP) and Christou (ELAM - NI) in the first round voted for Christodoulides in the second, while those who had voted in the first round for the other candidates seem to have decided on Mavroyiannis. It was also observed that voters who did not vote in the first round but did so in the second round, for the most part, seem to have gravitated towards Mavroyiannis.

In his first post-election speech, Nikos Christodoulides proclaimed that his cabinet would be composed mainly of technocrats, and publicly stated that he wanted DISY as a member of his government. This seemed unlikely though as the party leadership, voting by a large margin, decided to reject any proposal by Christodoulides to include DISY in his government.

The day after the second round of the presidential elections, Neophytou, as leader of DISY, convened a meeting of the political bureau and announced that intra-party elections for the leadership of the party would be held. At the same time, he declared his intention to run for the party presidency in the election.

Two other candidates declared their intention to run against Neophytou: the party spokesman, Nicosia MP and close associate of Neophytou, Dimitris Demetriou; the current deputy president of DISY and former finance minister of the first Anastasiades government (2013-2018), Harris Georgiades. Then, in a rather unexpected twist, on 21 February, the day for submission of official candidacy for the party’s presidency, Annita Demetriou, the current president of the Parliament announced her candidacy, having collected the required 100 signatures. Demetriou declared that her decision was based on the need to keep DISY unified and that she would not run against Neophytou, since this would deepen the division in DISY. As a result, Neophytou decided to withdraw his candidacy and avoid the risk of another defeat that could cause greater polarisation within the party. Following the same logic, Georgiades also decided to withdraw from the race. Therefore, the two final contenders competing for the party presidency in the elections scheduled for 11 March are Annita Demetriou and Dimitris Demetriou. Intra-party elections for the rest of the party leadership seats will be held at the end of April.

The internal situation at AKEL seems to be calmer in contrast to the case of DISY. The final election outcome is regarded as a success by the party leadership, since Mavroyiannis very narrowly lost the presidential election while being backed only by AKEL. Nevertheless, there is criticism of the leadership within the party, as for the third consecutive time AKEL will not be part of the government. Also, despite its candidates performing better in the presidential than in the parliamentary elections, AKEL is uncertain whether it can recover from its continued decline in numbers. Party members have not raised the question of a leadership change, yet the need for party modernisation and a potential opening to the centre lie at the core of intra-party discussions.

For DIKO and DIPA, the election of Christodoulides brings the two parties together in power. This may open the debate on a potential merging of the two parties, as DIPA was formed by expelled members of DIKO who openly opposed the leadership of Nicholas Papadopoulos. However, during the pre-election period, the two parties worked together successfully, and the same is expected to happen after the elections when they will be together in the Christodoulides cabinet.

For EDEK, the victory of Christodoulides consolidates the position of the party’s president, Marinos Sizopoulos, who has been challenged for the past year and has faced legal disputes involving members and party officials. EDEK’s participation in Christodoulides’ government is expected to reduce intra-party disputes.

Finally, regarding the Cypriot Green Party and the far-right ELAM, the election of Christodoulides is not expected to affect them, as they did not support openly his candidacy and do not wish to participate in his cabinet.

## 5. IMPACT OF THE OUTCOME

### What does Christodoulides' election mean for Cyprus?

Throughout the pre-election period, Christodoulides remained committed to the solution of the Cyprus Problem on the basis of a bizonal, bicomunal federation. At the same time, the day after his election he announced a plan of action aimed at resuming the negotiations. His main objective is the effective involvement of the EU in the negotiations with Turkey. He argues that the stalemate in the negotiations can be overcome if pressure is put on Turkey to make essential compromises, and this in turn would help Turkey relaunch its European course. Criticism of Christodoulides comes from those who consider him untrustworthy and incapable of convincing EU authorities to engage in the negotiations, as he was the only foreign minister in 2020 who vetoed the European sanctions package against Belarus (Cyprus eventually withdrew its veto).

Also, many accuse him of deliberate ambiguity about his real intentions regarding the resolution of the Cyprus Problem. During the election campaign, he claimed that he would renegotiate some of the critical points of the Guterres plan, which had evolved during the talks and formed the basis for the negotiations in Crans-Montana in 2017. This plan included provisions for the creation of a bizonal, bicomunal federation with political equality between the two communities and a single international personality.<sup>3</sup>

Scepticism about his real intentions is also centred on the positions of the main parties supporting him: DIKO is ambiguous on the Guterres plan and the solution it favours, while EDEK is against a bizonal, bicomunal federation. Christodoulides is supported by parties and independent MPs (who have only 17 of the 56 seats in parliament) holding different positions on the resolution of the Cyprus Problem; hence the resumption of negotiations may jeopardise the already minority support he enjoys in parliament.

Regarding his economic policy, Christodoulides identifies himself as a supporter of social liberalism, and is not expected to drastically change the government's current economic policy. Under the presidency of Christodoulides, Cyprus is expected to remain primarily focused on the service sector. The two sectors expected to continue to flourish are the tourist industry and the technology sector (mainly due to the continued attraction of foreign IT companies to Cyprus). He also announced that upon election, he intends to increase the tax-free income from €19,500 to €24,000.

<sup>3</sup> Further provisions of the Guterres plan included: a) a complex power-sharing arrangement between the two communities, with a rotating presidency, a bicameral legislature and an independent judiciary; b) territorial adjustments, with some territories returned to the Greek Cypriots and some remaining with the Turkish Cypriots; c) the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the island and the creation of a new security arrangement, including a police force and a border force, to ensure the security of both communities; d) the return of property to its rightful owners or compensation for those who could not return to their homes; e) the abolition of the system of guarantor powers (Turkey, Greece and the United Kingdom); f) the creation of a new security regime based on the United Nations.

On the immigration issue, he is expected to adopt a tougher anti-immigration line. He has insisted on the distinction between legal and illegal immigrants, pointing out the issue's critical importance. In his first speech after winning the presidency, he described immigration as one of the most critical issues that Cyprus faces today and promised to tighten the state's immigration policy to minimise immigration inflows. Furthermore, Christodoulides has very close relations with the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus (more than 90% of Greek Cypriots identify as Greek Orthodox). That said and given the more conservative position of the Church on social and cultural issues, no significant reforms are expected in terms of civil and minority rights (e.g. adoption rights for the LGBTI community, euthanasia, legalisation of cannabis for recreational purposes, etc.). On several occasions during the pre-election period, he refused or studiously avoided responding to inquiries about the rights of the LGBTI community and ways to tackle homophobia in Cyprus.

Finally, an essential question to which Christodoulides did not give an official response during the campaign was with which European party he would sit in the European Parliament as Cyprus' representative. The parties supporting him are members of S&D and Renew (Solidarity Movement was a member of ECR when it had representation in the European Parliament), although as a member of DISY, Christodoulides has close ties with EPP. Yet, if Christodoulides wanted to choose EPP, he would need the approval of DISY, which is the only Cypriot party that belongs to EPP. Soon after the elections, Christodoulides held his first meeting with Neophytou, where it was commonly agreed that Christodoulides would join the European People's Party.

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