Cyprus and the Schengen Area: Balancing Accession and the Resumption of Reunification Talks

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International Policy Review - Policy of the Month

November 9th, 2026

Introduction

The Republic of Cyprus is one of two EU member states that has not joined the Schengen Area, a border-free travel zone that enhances the geographical mobility for its residents and simplifies visa applications for third-state nationals. President Nikos Christodoulides appears intent on the Republic joining the Schengen Area in the coming years, despite internal border disputes not being resolved. These disputes arise from what is referred to as *the Cyprus problem*: long-standing contention regarding the collapse of the bicommunal Cypriot state and fighting between Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, beginning in 1963. This resulted in the division of the island in 1974, and the military occupation now referred to as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).[1]

Cyprus entering the Schengen Area presents issues surrounding the nation's internal and external borders, with the United Nations Buffer Zone ('Green Line') extended by the UNFICYP in 1974.[2] Turkish Cypriot communities are also disproportionately affected due to the difference in identification cards, presenting issues such as that of mixed marriages. This paper will examine the tension in priorities amid a new wave of reunification talks between the Republic of Cyprus and the TRNC.

Background

The island of Cyprus is split territorially between three nations: the Republic of Cyprus has sovereignty over the majority of the land, the TRNC occupies around 36% of the island, and the British maintain their Overseas Territories.[3] These territories are the air force bases in Akrotiri and Dhekelia, covered by the 1960 treaty signed to declare independence from the UK, and recently claimed as "non-negotiable" by former armed forces minister Al Carns.[4] Claims to Cypriot land from these two external forces in the absence of hard borders results in complications to Cyprus' application to join the Schengen Area.

Prior to becoming a member state, the European Union's 2003 'Protocol 10 on Cyprus' affirmed the Union's commitment to the resolution of the Cyprus problem. This protocol suspends the enactment of EU law in the regions over which the Government of the Republic of Cyprus does not have effective

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[1] James Ker-Lindsay, 'The Cyprus Problem', in *"Frozen Conflicts" in Europe* (Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2015), 19, https://doi.org/10.3224/84740133.

[2] 'About the Buffer Zone', UNFICYP, United Nations Peace Operations, 22 November 2025, https://unficyp.unmissions.org/en/about-buffer-zone.

[3] Thomas, 'Occupied Territory or Colonial Remnant? The Nuance behind the British Bases in Cyprus', Euronews, 9 September 2026, https://www.euronews.com/2026/09/09/occupied-territory-or-colonial-remnant-the-nuance-behind-the-british-bases-in-cyprus.

[4] Ibid.

control.[5] This fact is important in discourse surrounding Cypriot implementation of EU policy, as it does not impact the geographical area occupied by the TRNC. If Cyprus were to enter the Schengen Area, by virtue of Protocol 10, this would only apply to the geographical boundaries defined by the UN buffer zone.

Cyprus' accession to the European Union in 2004 came just seven days after the failed referendum surrounding the *Annan Plan*, the nation's most recent reunification effort at the time. Despite diplomatic efforts, the Cyprus issue remains unresolved. More than two decades later, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres met with Greek and Turkish Cypriot representatives in July of 2026 in order to prompt dialogue between executives on the Cyprus problem, and bring reunification back into popular discourse. His message on behalf of the Cypriot people was clear: "They want to see their leaders make compromises and to walk that last mile towards a settlement of the Cyprus issue".[6]

Analysis

This division presents problems when a nation wants to join a passport-free travel zone such as the Schengen Area. The first issue is with the nature of the Entry-Exit System (EES) and third-country nationals. Airports such as Paphos (PFO) and Larnaca (LCA), as well as Cyprus' sea ports, will become external borders to the Schengen Area, and those travelling for short stays will have their biometric data recorded.[7] An issue presents itself when someone enters through one of these airports, crosses the Green Line and leaves through an airport in the TRNC, such as Ercan (ECN). For the purpose of immigration records, the individual would never have been seen to have left the Schengen Area. This issue diminishes the integrity of the region and has been one of the reasons behind hesitation from other Schengen nations to approve of this change, including the Netherlands and Austria.[8]

Moreover, there is salient internal concern within the Turkish Cypriot community surrounding the impacts of this measure. Tufan Erhürman, president of the TRNC, has stated that the Turkish Cypriot community needs to be involved in its implementation, due to the potential restrictions to freedom of movement - notably for mixed marriages between Turkish Cypriots and Turkish citizens, as well as any

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[5] Protocol No 10 on Cyprus, 236 Official Journal of the European Union 955 (2003), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/acc_2003/act_1/pro_10/sign/eng.

[6] 'Cyprus: Guterres Calls for Renewed Trust and a New Meeting on the Way Forward', UN News, 29 July 2026, https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/07/1168048.

[7] Yannis Seitanides, 'What Is Blocking Cyprus's Accession to the Schengen Area', Politis, 1 October 2026, https://en.politis.com.cy/news/1041222/what-is-blocking-cypruss-accession-to-the-schengen-area.

[8] Ibid.

Turkish Cypriot who does not hold a passport from the Republic of Cyprus.[9] Children of these mixed marriages do not always inherit citizenship, and are given 'TRNC Identity Cards' which they can use to cross checkpoints.[10] The continuation of this arrangement with Cyprus in the Schengen area would set a precedent that those holding non-recognised documents could travel freely throughout the zone with them.

This highlights the disparity between citizens of the Republic of Cyprus and those resident in the TRNC without citizenship. Accounts from Turkish Cypriots highlight that applying for citizenship can be a long and arduous bureaucratic process, and without citizenship, applying for Schengen visas is a complicated process depending on the destination, requiring multiple-entry visas in almost every instance.[11]

For this reason, Cypriot accession to the region presents a logical tension in light of restarting reunification talks. Accession to the Schengen Area provides clear benefits to the Republic of Cyprus as it simplifies travel for Cypriot citizens throughout the other member states. However, in achieving a bizonal, bicommunal unified state, the Republic should also consider the concerns of those currently resident in the TRNC and how this policy could affect them, with consideration that Cyprus aims to join the area in the next year.[12]

Policy Solutions

Firstly, the ideal resolution to such logical tension would be to resolve reunification efforts as a first mover. A bizonal, bicommunal federated republic in Cyprus could enter the Schengen Area as one entity, and there would be no obstacle in working through Europe's entry/exit framework - provided that Cyprus has made arrangements for the British sovereign territory. However, with the proposed time constraint of roughly a year, this is unlikely to happen due to the geopolitical nuances of reunification talks.

There is optimism in the eyes of the European Commission that talks will happen between Nicosia and London to facilitate a 'technical equivalent' to handle the issue of the air force bases being British sovereign territory.[13] Negotiations being successful under the precedent that the UK will likely not let the

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[9] 'South Cyprus' Schengen Report Heads To EU Council As Mixed-Marriage Concerns Persist', Kıbrıs Postası, 16 July 2026, https://www.kibrispostasi.com/c140-DAILY_NEWS/n608120-south-cyprus-schengen-report-heads-to-eu-council-as-mixedmarriage-concerns-persist.

[10] Filip Polo, 'Schengen Raises Concerns Among Turkish Cypriots', Politis, 17 July 2026, https://en.politis.com.cy/in-depth/eu/1019837/schengen-raises-concerns-among-turkish-cypriots.

[11] Ibid.

[12] James Morphakis, 'Cyprus "to Be Fully Integrated into Schengen Area by next Year"', Cyprus Mail, 10 October 2026, https://cyprus-mail.com/2026/10/10/cyprus-to-be-fully-integrated-into-schengen-area-by-next-year.

[13] Filip Polo, 'Schengen Bid Hinges on Bases, Green Line', Politis, 6 October 2026, https://en.politis.com.cy/news/politics/1047106/schengen-bid-hinges-on-bases-green-line.

Republic of Cyprus take control of the bases indicates that open discussion could be a possibility between the Republic and the TRNC under the temporary pretext that the northern areas remain Turkish territory by occupation. In addition, the state would have to consider a new or updated form of identification for the Turkish Cypriots without Cypriot citizenship, to ensure their mobility.

As a last suggestion, the indefinite postponement of Cyprus' entry to the Schengen Area is to be considered. It is noted that the only other EU member state to not join the zone, the Republic of Ireland, made such a decision in 1985 to preserve the Common Travel Area (CTA) with the United Kingdom.[14] This was made with the consideration that there was no hard border between the two states, similar to the case of Cyprus. Given this alongside the political context of reunification discussions, it may benefit both states to push back the Republic's entry into the Schengen Area to give time for Christodoulides and Erhürman to continue negotiations naturally. Postponement would ensure the continued free movement of both Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, as well as avoiding incidents involving third-state nationals crossing through the island.

Conclusion

Cyprus' bid to access the Schengen Area has unsurprisingly been met with hesitation throughout the European Union. In its present form, there are clear reservations regarding the mobility of third-state actors through the divided nation's internal borders, which would complicate the Schengen Entry/Exit System.

Given the recent dialogue between Christodoulides and Erhürman, it is necessary to reconcile the ideas of Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot citizens alike to allow for smooth integration into the Schengen Area and avoid the breakdown of reunification talks in light of such a contentious issue. Representatives from the TRNC should ideally be involved in policy negotiations on this matter, as cooperation between both communities is essential in the formation of a proposed bicommunal state.

[14] Judith Crossbie, 'MEP Says Ireland Should Join Schengen', Politico, 28 November 2007, https://www.politico.eu/article/mep-says-ireland-should-join-schengen/.

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