

NEGOTIATING THE CORE ISSUES

THE IMPORTANCE OF GREEK CYPRIOT AND TURKISH CYPRIOT PUBLIC OPINION

The inter-communal peace talks have reached a critical juncture. To reach an agreement, the sides must reconcile their respective visions of a settlement, ultimately reaching convergences on core issues. It is important to not lose sight of how the general public is evaluating the process and outcome of the talks: Ultimately, it is the people of the two communities that will decide whether any proposed plan should be accepted or rejected, and to a greater or lesser extent that decision will be influenced by the content of the peace plan.

Currently, the details of the negotiations remain largely concealed from the public view. The sides tend to treat near convergences guardedly, concerned that public opinion will sway against them and that there scope for bargaining will be limited. Yet an analysis of public attitudes show that the majority of people from both communities want the peace process to succeed (see Figure 9) and to this end are ready to endorse a compromise solution, so that the future generations will have the chance to live in a functional country where they are able to focus their attention and energy on the real social and economic problems of the united Cyprus. It is hoped that this paper will help the talks at Greentree to pay attention to the implications of what we conclude are existing convergences in the public mind regarding the core “internal aspects “of the Cyprus problem.

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This brief report will present detailed findings from several public opinion polls conducted by the Cyprus 2015 project implemented by Interpeace and funded by the United Nations Development Programme – Action for Cooperation and Trust.

As can be seen in Figure 1, citizens of the two communities largely agree with one another on what the most important topics are that the negotiations should be focusing on. Most important and urgent for the public in both communities is the issue of Security and Guarantees, with Citizenship, Property, Territory and the Issue of the Presidency also being seen as somewhat important for Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots.

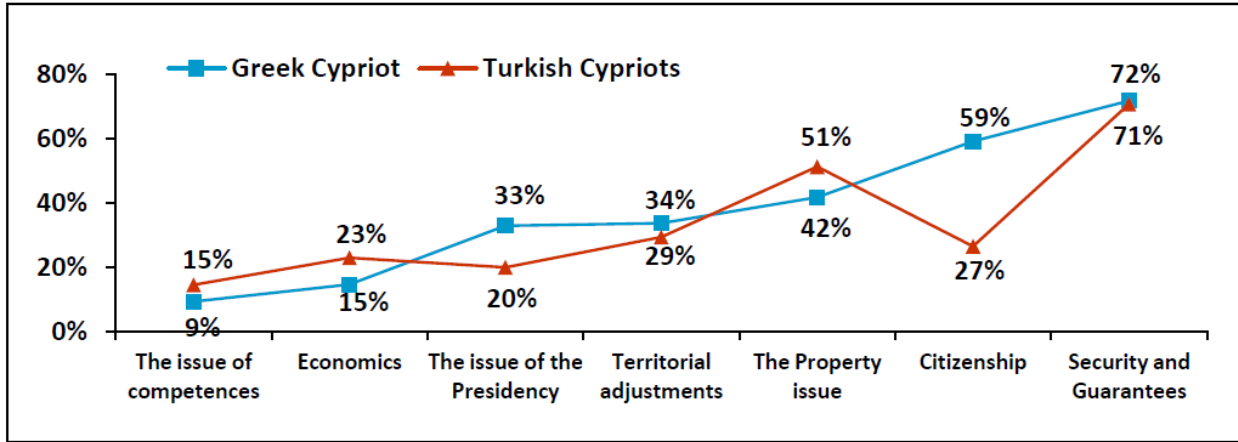


Figure 1 - Negotiating Priorities of the Wider Public. Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot responses to the question “Which are the five highest priority items which the negotiations should be working to resolve”. Reprinted from ‘Investigating the Future: An in-depth study of Public Opinion in Cyprus’, Cyprus 2015 Initiative, November 2009

Governance: Resolving the issue of Electing the Presidency

Though in the Talks process the Greek Cypriot side is advocating for Cross Voting combined with a Rotating Presidency, attitudes among citizens show that the Turkish Cypriot public support this package while significantly more Greek Cypriots are sceptical over the idea (see Figure 2). This paradoxical statistic points to the need for the sides to build consensus on alternative models for electing the executive branch of the state, with emphasis on identifying what is essential for arriving at consensus on modifications that achieve support in both communities.

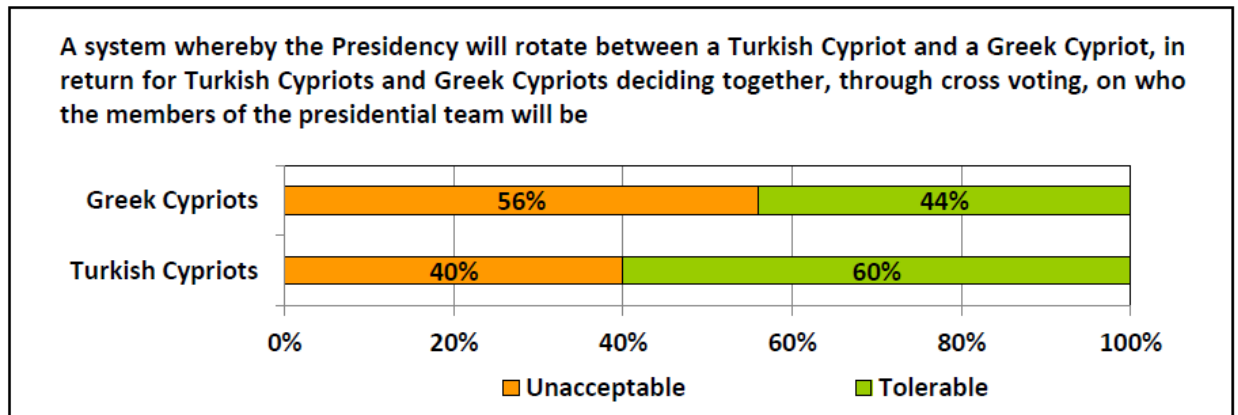


Figure 2 - Acceptability of Cross Voting and Rotating Presidency. Reprinted from ‘Bridging the Gap in the Inter-Communal Negotiations: An island-wide study of Public Opinion in Cyprus’, Cyprus 2015 Initiative, May 2011

Mutual suspicion and fear, rather than public cynicism and opportunism, fuel resistance to particular proposals among people. For instance, what seems to concern Greek Cypriots is the possibility that the Rotating President will enjoy full executive privileges during his or her tenure (see Figure 3), a scenario which evokes fears as long as levels of trust are low between the two communities. In contrast, a collective executive that is more akin to a Presidential Council raises fewer fears and is more acceptable

amongst Greek Cypriots. Ultimately these fears, and those of the Turkish Cypriots, will have to be acknowledged by the respective leaders, building the way for public confidence in the future.

Finally, it is worth noting that any proposal which involves the Presidency being elected directly by the people shall inevitably be more acceptable and popular than any method of indirect election (see Figure 4). However, direct elections may or may not entail joint tickets. What does seem crucial is that the people want to have a say in who governs, and it is on this point that the sides may wish to focus in order to bridge gaps at Greentree.

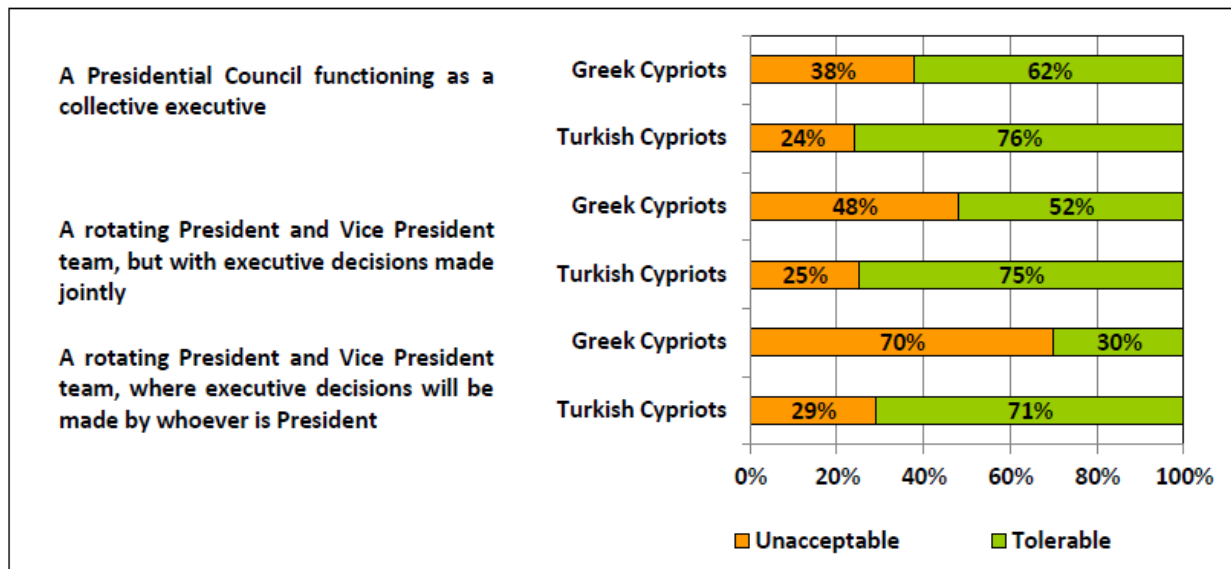


Figure 3 - Executive Authority in the Federal Presidency. Reprinted from 'Investigating the Future: An in-depth study of Public Opinion in Cyprus', Cyprus 2015 Initiative, November 2009

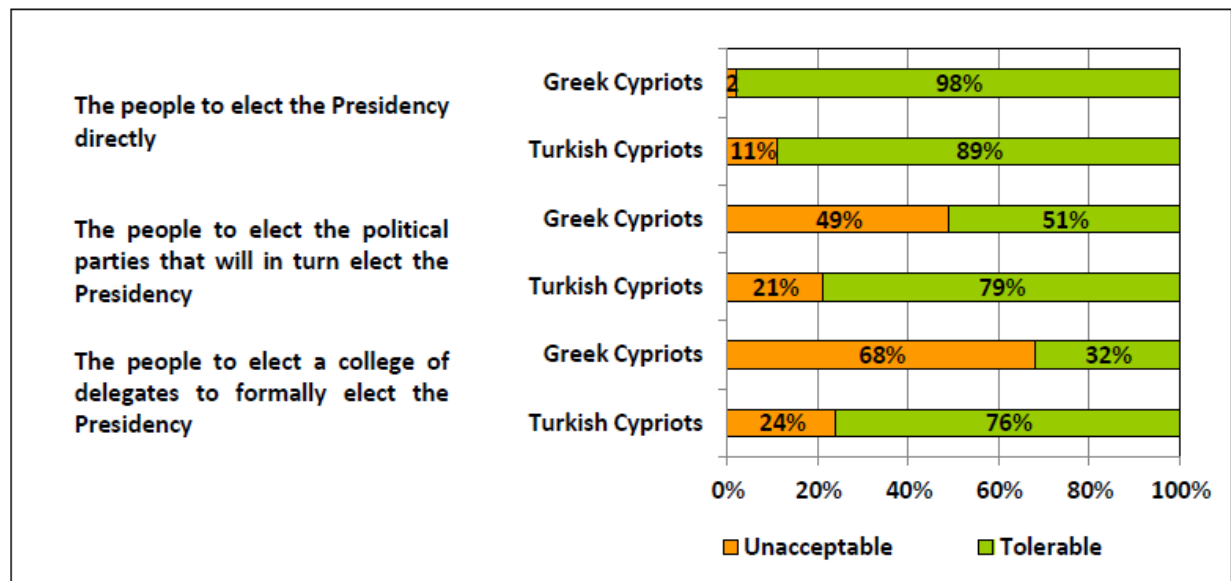


Figure 4 - Direct versus indirect vote in the election of the Presidency. Reprinted from 'Investigating the Future: An in-depth study of Public Opinion in Cyprus', Cyprus 2015 Initiative, November 2009

Property and Territory:

Between the “right to return” and the “right to remain”

While the property and territory issues have frequently been conceptualized as a conflict between the Greek Cypriot desire for a restitution-based solution and the Turkish Cypriot desire for a compensation-based solution, recent studies reveal a more complex picture. Specifically, Greek Cypriots are themselves divided between those who still wish to return to their original home in the northern part of the island and those who prefer to remain in the areas where they currently reside. The desire to return is much stronger under the scenario of territorial adjustment, so that the returnees would be under Greek Cypriot administration (see Figure 5).

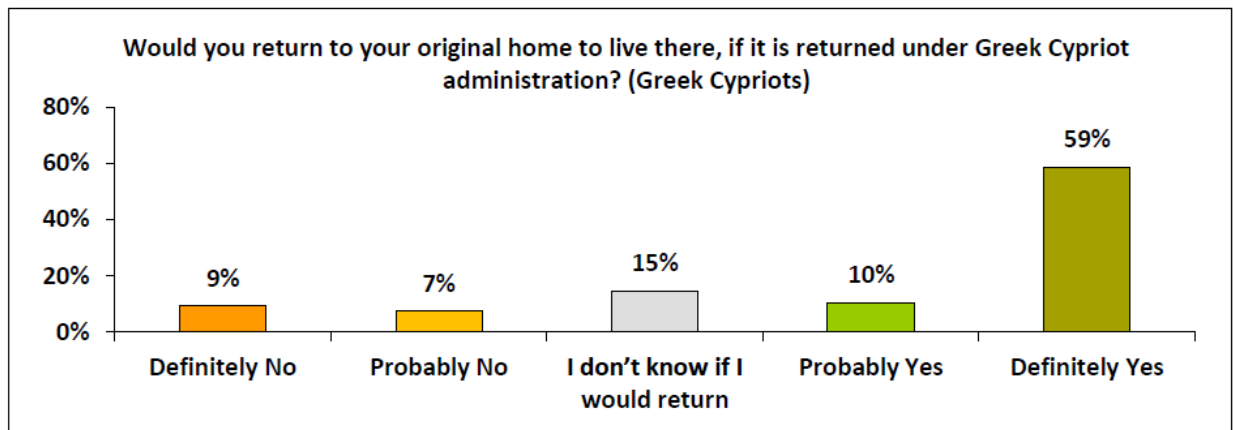


Figure 5 - Desire to return under Greek Cypriot administration. Reprinted from 'Investigating the Future: An in-depth study of Public Opinion in Cyprus', Cyprus 2015 Initiative, November 2009

Having said that, only a minority of Greek Cypriot refugees would still be interested to return, even under Turkish Cypriot administration (see Figure 6), which might alleviate some Turkish Cypriot concerns. The challenge for the peace process is to find ways to cater to the needs and expectations of all these groups. Thus, property issues can be considered in conjunction with the overall expectations of people who will be affected by both a new property regime and territorial adjustments. Squaring the circle may be a challenge, but the leaders can converge on models that meet the needs of the greatest number of people from both communities.

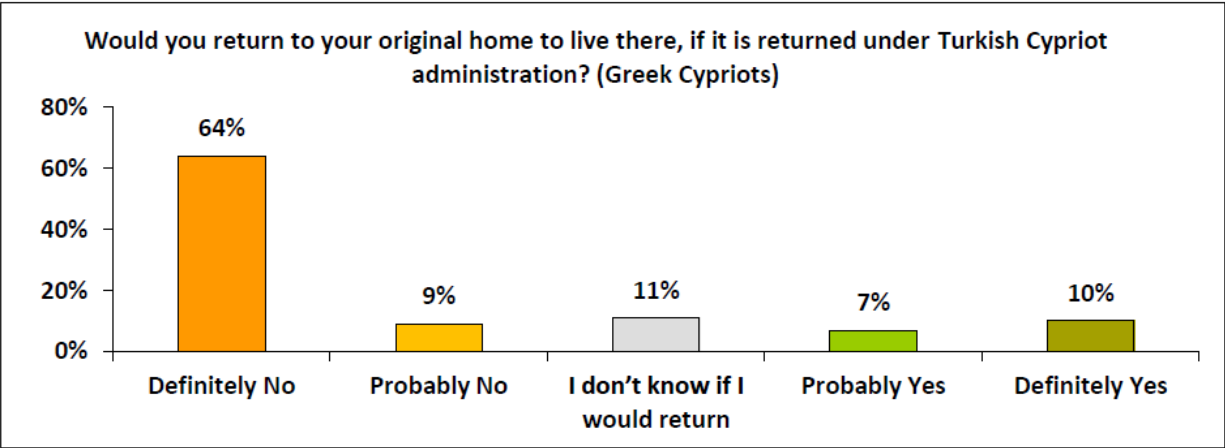


Figure 6 - Desire to return under Turkish Cypriot administration. Re-printed from 'Investigating the Future: An in-depth study of Public Opinion in Cyprus', Cyprus 2015 Initiative, November 2009

Focusing more specifically on the issue of Territorial Adjustments provides both a challenge and an opportunity (see Figure 7): The challenge can be seen in that Turkish Cypriots appear quite resistant to the idea of territorial adjustments, even though this is a parameter of the peace process that all sides acknowledge.

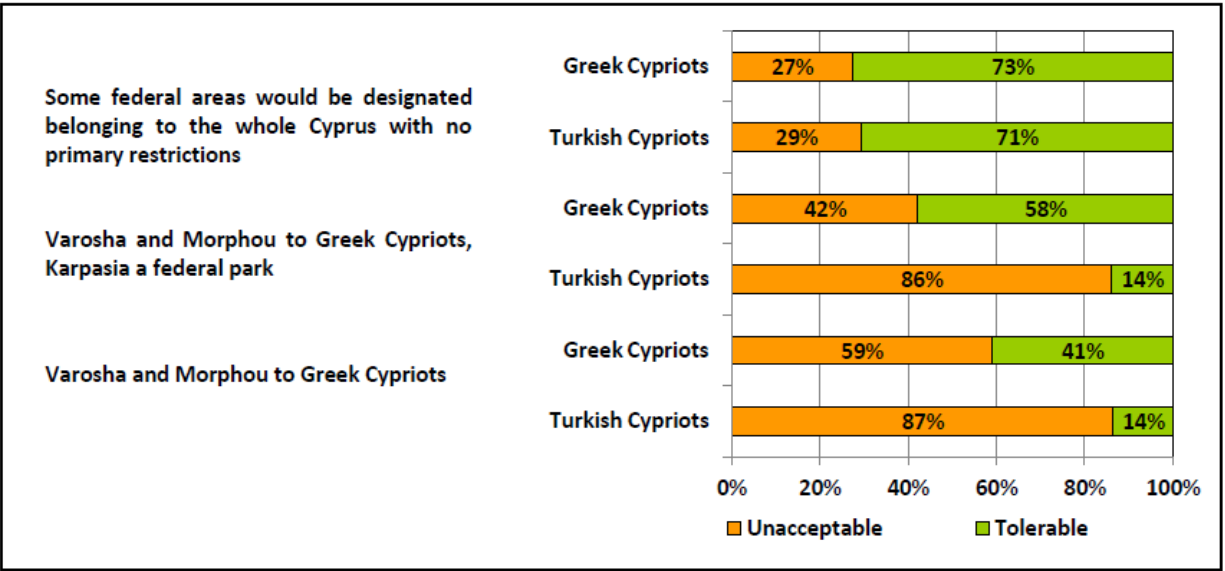


Figure 7 - Acceptability of Alternative Proposals on the Territory Dossier. Reprinted from 'Bridging the Gap in the Inter-Communal Negotiations: An island-wide study of Public Opinion in Cyprus', Cyprus 2015 Initiative, May 2011

Thus, territorial adjustments can only be addressed in the context of a comprehensive package. The opportunity can be seen in that both communities are open to new ideas regarding the implementation of bizonality (see Figure 7). Support for the creation of Federal Areas, which would be under the direct control of the Federal Government is one example. This is a potentially helpful convergence in an otherwise controversial dossier.

The Issue of Citizenship

This is a sensitive dossier, but one where once again, public opinion is showing a degree of sophistication in their opinions which go beyond the usual “numbers game”. The opinions of Cypriots on these issues reveal scope for finding innovative compromises. For example, an overwhelming majority of Greek Cypriots would accept a situation where some people from Turkey would stay with residence permits only, an option which almost 40% of Turkish Cypriots would also be willing to live with (see Figure 8). This is a partial convergence which might provide scope for further compromise. Like the Territory dossier, the Citizenship issue would also have to be packaged comprehensively with the other dossiers in the context of a *give and take*, to avoid a strong negative reaction. It is also important to note that the exchange of data would also help Cypriots make informed decisions regarding this issue. As with property, a consideration on the choices of affected people is the best means of building trust, and this should be a message that emerges from Greentree.

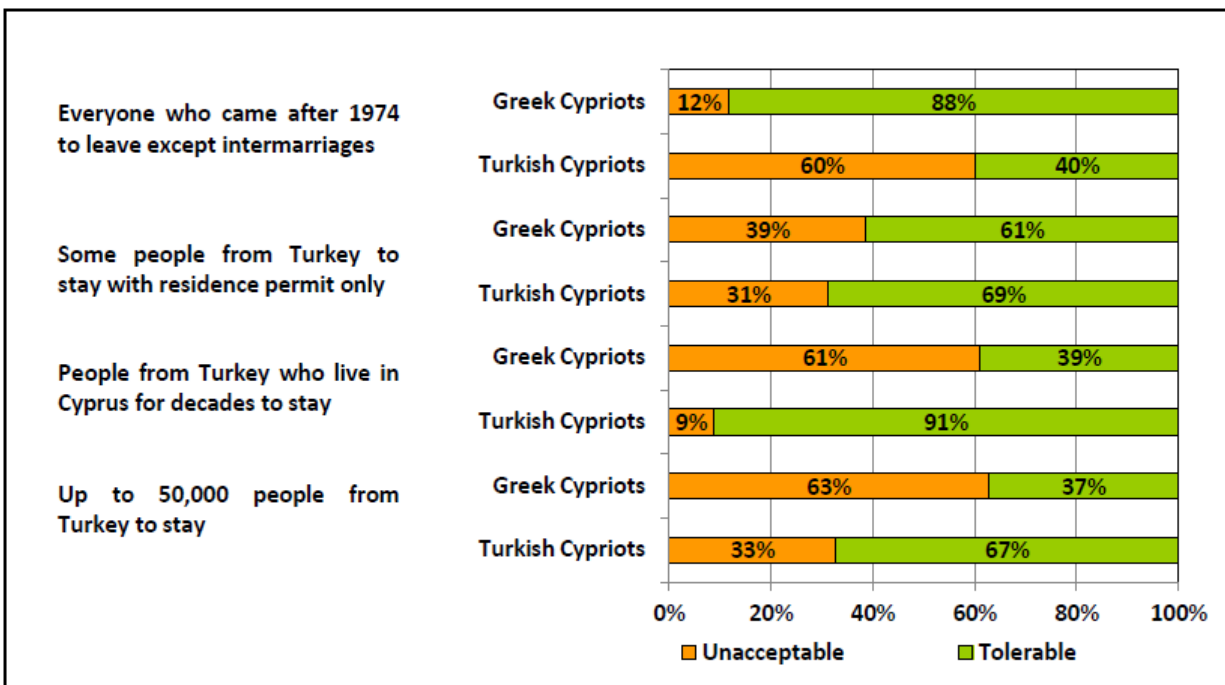


Figure 8 - Acceptability of Alternative Proposals on the Issue of Citizenship. Reprinted from 'Bridging the Gap in the Inter-Communal Negotiations: An island-wide study of Public Opinion in Cyprus', Cyprus 2015 Initiative, May 2011

Looking Ahead: Towards a Comprehensive Solution

The majority of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots desire a solution (see Figure 9). Moreover, as evidenced by the research above, the public are demonstrating sophistication and flexibility in their willingness to compromise.

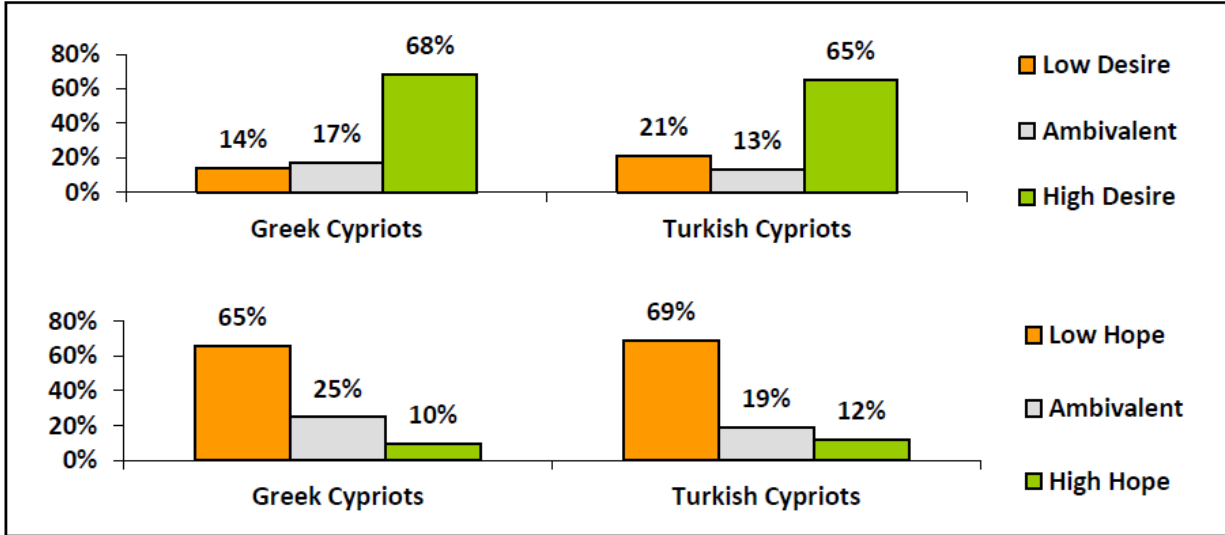


Figure 9 - Level of desire and hope that the peace process should / will produce results. Reprinted from 'Next Steps in the Peace Talks: An island-wide study of public opinion in Cyprus', Cyprus 2015 Initiative, December 2010

Thus, it is important to build on this public willingness to compromise towards achieving a workable, sustainable settlement. A sustainable settlement is a settlement which accommodates the genuine and verifiable hopes and fears of the people on this island, since they are ultimately the actors through which a reunited island will become a reality.