

# Turkish Cypriot poised to win seat in European parliament elections

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**‘Watershed’ moment for island as Niyazi Kızılyürek campaigns on AKEL-led reunification ticket.**

A Turkish Cypriot candidate is set for the first time to win a seat in next month’s European parliament elections in what is already being hailed a watershed moment for the partitioned island.

In a country riven physically and psychologically by ethnic division, polls show widespread support for Niyazi Kızılyürek, a prominent Turkish Cypriot academic who is being fielded by Akel, the main opposition leftist party in the Greek-controlled south.

“It will be a watershed in the modern history of [Cyprus](#),” said Hubert Faustmann, professor of political science at the University of Nicosia. “No Turkish Cypriot has held elected office in the Greek Cypriot-dominated republic since the breakdown of the constitutional order in 1963. It’s hugely symbolic that for the first time the Turkish Cypriot community will feel that they have a voice in an international forum.”

Since unilaterally declaring independence in 1983, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus has been recognised only by Ankara. With the exception of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, where it has observer status, the tiny self-styled state remains diplomatically isolated, unable to be heard in any official capacity.

Akel’s decision to include Kızılyürek on its ballot has been met with delight by pro-reunification supporters on both sides of the Mediterranean island’s ethnic divide. Nearly two years after settlement talks collapsed in Switzerland, the quest for a solution to the west’s longest-running diplomatic dispute remains frustratingly elusive.

As in other parts of the bloc, support for the far right is on the ascent in the EU’s most easterly member state. The nationalist Elam party, seen as the Cypriot counterpart to Greece’s neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, also looks likely to win a seat in the 751-member European parliament. For many, its appeal is a reminder of the dangers inherent in failing to unite Cyprus, where ethnic Greeks and Turks have been segregated behind a UN buffer zone since an abortive attempt at annexation with [Greece](#) prompted Ankara to invade and seize the island’s north in 1974.

Kızılyürek is a staunch advocate of reunifying the country’s two feuding communities in a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. And as the only Euro MP candidate canvassing on both sides of the divide, he has taken his campaign from Paphos in the south to the Karpaz peninsula in the north.

“The European Union is a peace project,” said the 59-year-old, who lives in the south where he teaches at the University of Cyprus. “My main objective is rapprochement. I am going into this not on the basis of ethnic background but on the basis of my ideas,” he told the Guardian. “Yes, I am Turkish Cypriot, yes I am Cypriot, but above all I am a federalist.”

For progressives, the polyglot professor is the embodiment of the values [Europe](#) so badly needs. Fluent in English, German and French, as well as Turkish and Greek, his enthusiasm for the EU is regarded as the antithesis of the policies espoused by Eurosceptic populists bent on breaking up the bloc.

“Turkish Cypriots are really excited about these elections not only because a Greek Cypriot party has taken the unprecedented step of putting a Turkish Cypriot on its list but also because in some sense they are a meeting point,” said Sami Özusu, who heads the Journalists’ Association in the rump state.

“For the first time peace supporters on both sides are working and campaigning together.”

Since acceding to the EU in 2004, Cyprus has been designated six seats in the European parliament. In theory, two of them are reserved for Turkish Cypriots, who represented 18% of the island’s population at the time of the invasion. But with EU law suspended in the unrecognised north, only Greek Cypriots have ever represented the island in Strasbourg.

Şener Levent, the Turkish Cypriot journalist who has taken mischievous delight in taking on Turkey’s strongman president, [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#), is also contesting the elections along with five other candidates in his Jasmine Movement. “I am running so that our voices are heard in the international arena and our struggle becomes visible in the European parliament,” said Levent from behind his desk in the offices of Afrika, the newspaper he runs in the north.

“Erdoğan is an Islamo-fascist dictator and as Turkish Cypriots we are at Turkey’s mercy,” he insisted, adding that he hoped the poll would help highlight “the occupation” of the enclave by mainland Turkish troops.

Levent, whose trial for publishing an “offensive” cartoon of Erdoğan takes place next week, is not as popular as Kızılyürek as he does not have the backing of a Greek Cypriot party and is less likely to win a seat.

As the island gears up for the vote, its election service announced this week it would be setting up 50 polling stations to cater for the estimated 81,000 Turkish Cypriots who are eligible to cast ballots. Booths will be erected within walking distance of the nine crossing points connecting the two sides.

There are mounting concerns that with so many voters expected to make the journey, Turkish Cypriot participation could ultimately be at risk unless extra measures are also taken to expedite crossings on the day.

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**Helena Smith**

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