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The Final Phase

Discussions got underway at the UNPA on the morning of Thursday 19 February. Although de Soto called on the two sides to avoid divulging any details of the discussions to the press, reports soon emerged that the first two-hour meeting had been constructive and business-like in its tone.1 This impression was seeming confirmed by an announcement from the UN that the two negotiating teams would meet every weekday morning, with extra meetings as necessary, instead of the originally planned two or three meetings a week. However, Papadopoulos soon painted another picture of the developments. Speaking upon his return to the presidential palace after the first session, he claimed that Denktash was still calling for changes that were outside of the scope of the Annan Plan and had even questioned the fundamental principles of the proposals.2 Speaking just hours later, Iacovou explained that the Turkish Cypriot leader wanted to alter the terminology and basic territorial provisions of the plan. Iacovou also issued a warning. If the Turkish side continued to try to go beyond the basic parameters of the plan, the Greek Cypriots would follow suit.3

The next day the sides met again for less than an hour. This time they focused on the flag, anthem and locations of federal government buildings. There was then a three day break before the teams met again on 24 February. This time Denktash presented a lengthy set of proposals covering a wide range of issues.4 When Papadopoulos refused to discuss the paper, instead focusing on the referendum and trying to seek assurances that the Turkish Grand National Assembly would ratify the agreement prior to the referendum, Denktash accused the Greek Cypriot leader of behaving as if the key issues had already been solved.5 The next morning matters got worse. Denktash submitted a nine-page letter to the Greek Cypriots calling for Cyprus to either reapply for EU membership or, at the very least, postpone its entry to allow for the member states to ratify a new treaty of accession signed with the new
Cypriot state. In order to allow the Greek Cypriots to discuss the document with the Commission and the UN team the next scheduled meeting was called off. Meanwhile, the Commission quickly confirmed that there was no need for a new application, nor was any delay required. Denktash was furious. In protest he demanded that the EU withdraw from the process completely. However, fears that Denktash would walk away were soon quashed. Over in Ankara, Erdogan repeated that the Turkish side would remain at the table until the end. It would be up to the Greek Cypriots to decide whether to continue or not.

By this point, less than one week into the negotiations, there was already a widespread, and growing, pessimism about the chances of reaching a settlement before the next phase. While, there were those who felt that an agreement could still be reached without directly involving Greece and Turkey, no doubt encouraged by the obvious pressure being brought to bear on Denktash by the Turkish Government, most observers believed that the only way to break the deadlock would be through the direct intervention of the Greek and Turkish Governments. As usual, de Soto played down the differences and said that the two sides were already focusing more closely on the issues and would shortly hand over their complete sets of proposals. Having said this, he nevertheless noted that a clearer sense of purpose and commitment was required from the two leaders. There was little chance of this happening. When the two sides met again on 1 March, it was obvious that the process had degenerated into a series of accusations and counter-accusations. Following the Greek Cypriot decision to reject his call for a delay to EU entry, Denktash reciprocated by refusing to consider a call for territory to be handed back to the Greek Cypriots to be put under UN administration at the moment when the agreement came into force – a proposal that had been prompted by fears that Turkey might hold up implementation of the agreement. Papadopoulos then accused Denktash of undermining the talks by refusing to enter into substantive negotiations. In response, Denktash argued that the Greek Cypriot leader was also trying to introduce elements beyond the core of the plan and that he was simply delivering a blanket ‘no’ to all Turkish Cypriot demands. On this last point, Denktash asked how it was possible that the Greek Cypriots could reject every single Turkish Cypriot proposal on the grounds that it fell outside of the remit of the discussions.