



## EDITOR'S NOTE

An EU member state in the Eastern Mediterranean, at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa; this is Cyprus in a nutshell.

The monthly FES Cyprus Newsletter gives you a current overview of the domestic political situation and the external affairs of an island, which is far more than a divided country. Have a pleasant read!

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## HEADLINES

Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot sides disagree on whether a leaders meeting has been agreed. Disagreement also prevails on the matter of crossing points and where they should be opened.

Keir Starmer visits Cyprus marking the first British Prime Minister to visit the island in 53 years.

Prometheas FSRU unit departs Shanghai and is currently moored in Malaysia to obtain additional certification.

Two reports compiled by US consultancy firms and commissioned by the Cyprus government concerning the Great Sea Interconnector (GSI) note serious concerns over the project.

The Turkish Cypriot government has issued a decree easing the restrictions imposed on foreign property buyers in May 2024, aiming to address the “panic” within the construction sector.





## FES CYPRUS NEWSLETTER

### CONTENT

EVENTS, PODCASTS, PUBLICATIONS 4

CYPRUS PROBLEM &  
INTERCOMMUNAL RELATIONS 5

HYDROCARBONS 6

GREEK CYPRIOTS 6

- Gender Developments
- Economic Developments in Times of Green Transition
- Domestic Developments
- Foreign Relations
- Future of Work, Labour Relations & Trade Unions

TURKISH CYPRIOTS 9

- Gender Developments
- Economic Developments in Times of Green Transition
- Relations with Turkey
- Domestic Developments
- Future of Work, Labour Relations & Trade Unions

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Newsletter No.151 DECEMBER 24

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3





## FES CYPRUS NEWSLETTER

PODCASTS in JANUARY:  
*No podcasts in January*



PODCASTS in FEBRUARY:  
*No podcasts in February*

PUBLICATIONS in JANUARY:  
*No publications in January*



PUBLICATIONS in FEBRUARY:  
*No publications in February*

EVENTS in JANUARY:  
*No events planned so far*



EVENTS in FEBRUARY:  
*No events planned so far*

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Newsletter No.151 DECEMBER 24

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## CYPRUS PROBLEM & INTERCOMMUNAL RELATIONS

Disagreement on the matter of crossing points and where they should be opened continued during the month of December. On December 5, Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar stated that there is a fundamental difference between the positions of Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots regarding the opening of new crossing points. According to Tatar, Greek Cypriots want crossing points which would effectively be transit roads, not crossing points, through military areas in Pyroi/Gaziler and Kokkina/ Erenkoy, while the Turkish Cypriots want a crossing point in Mia Milia/Haspolat. On December 8, the Cyprus News Agency reported that the Greek Cypriot side submitted in November 2024, a proposal for the opening of a new crossing point at Pyroi-Athienou and Kokkina. On December 17, both Christodoulides and Tatar met separately with United Nations Special Representative Colin Steward to discuss the matter of opening new crossing points. Christodoulides put forth three potential dates for a meeting to take place with Tatar and expressed his readiness to discuss the opening of new crossing points. Steward and Tatar touched on the matter of a potential expansion of the Agios Dometios/ Metehan crossing point. The Turkish Cypriot leader rejected the Greek Cypriot proposal for opening new crossing points in Kokkina and Athienou on the grounds that these were transit roads. On December 18, Tatar reaffirmed his support for a new crossing point to be opened in Mia Milia.

In what was described as a historic visit, Christodoulides welcomed, on December 10, British

<sup>1</sup>The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is only recognised by the Republic of Turkey. While for Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots, Ersin Tatar serves as President of the TRNC, the international community considers him the communal leader of the Turkish Cypriots. As the government of the Republic of Cyprus remains internationally

Prime Minister Keir Starmer at the Presidential Palace, marking the first British prime minister to visit Cyprus in 53 years. Bilateral relations, the developments in Syria, security, migration and the Cyprus problem were among the key topics of discussion. Starmer's decision not to visit the north was criticised by Tahsin Ertugruloglu, the Foreign Minister of TRNC,<sup>1</sup> who stated that the UK, as a guarantor power, had an obligation to treat both sides equally.

On December 19, Tatar eventually agreed to British involvement at the planned enlarged meeting on the Cyprus problem despite being initially against such involvement. According to Tatar, the meeting would be held in a 4+1+1 format, with the four being the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities, Turkey and Greece, and the two plus ones being the United Nations and the United Kingdom. The Turkish Cypriot leader was adamant that the UK would play a lesser role in the talks, and he also remained steadfast in his belief that the Cyprus problem could not be resolved with a federal solution, despite Greece, the UK, the UN and the Greek Cypriot side publicly favouring such a solution.

On December 27, Tatar announced that he would meet Christodoulides on either January 20 or January 21 and that the planned enlarged meeting on the Cyprus problem would take place in mid-March. Government spokesman Yiannis Antoniou however denied that such a date had been set.

UN spokesman in Cyprus Aleem Siddique stated on December 31 that existing agreements on farming activities in the UN-controlled buffer zone stood

recognised as the government of the whole of the island, the entire island is now considered to be a member of the European Union. However, the *acquis communautaire* is suspended in northern Cyprus pending a political settlement to the Cyprus problem (see Protocol no. 10 of the Accession Treaty).





and needed to be respected. His clarification came after the UN filed a formal police report earlier in the month after two peacekeepers had been injured and three UN vehicles had been damaged during a confrontation with Greek Cypriot farmers in the buffer zone. UNFICYP stressed that farming near the ceasefire lines inside the UN buffer zone is strictly prohibited and risks provoking tensions. No farmer is ever granted permission to work near the ceasefire line.

Scientists from the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities are setting up a bicomunal environmental committee to coordinate actions and to provide solutions in order to protect the island's trees from invasive species and address diseases caused by pathogenic microorganisms in crops. Two Greek Cypriots and two Turkish Cypriots of the committee will act as links between scientists and the areas in which the measures will be implemented.

## HYDROCARBONS

On December 14, the floating, storage and regasification unit (FSRU), dubbed Prometheas, departed Shanghai after getting certified as a single-voyage LNG carrier. The vessel is currently moored in Malaysia, where it is undergoing technical checks to also be certified as a storage and regasification unit. The FSRU is a key component and asset of the LNG terminal project. The entire project consists of the FSRU, the onshore facility at Vasiliko and the jetty.

On December 28, the TRNC Foreign Ministry warned that the Greek Cypriots are preparing to escalate tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean by undertaking unilateral hydrocarbon exploration activities. Government Spokesman Konstantinos Letymbiotis stated in response that the north's reaction over the Republic's stated plans to recommence drilling for natural gas in the seas off the coast of Cyprus was unfounded.

## GREEK CYPRIOTS

### Gender Developments

A barrage of complaints were filed on December 9 after former Cypriot footballer Costas Malekkos said during a TV interview that women should accept that men are in charge. His statements sparked the wrath of women's group Pogo as well as the gender equality commissioner who slammed the statements for sexism. Pogo reported the matter to the justice minister, police chief, law commissioner, ombudswoman, gender equality commissioner and the broadcast authority.

### Economic Developments in Times of Green Transition

The Energy Ministry will be offering small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and non-profit organisations a chance to secure funding through the "Save - Upgrade" scheme. The initiative, backed by the EU Recovery and Resilience Plan, seeks to promote energy-saving investments with a total budget of €24m.

On December 13, two new solar parks, set to enhance the Electricity Authority of Cyprus (EAC)'s electricity production, were inaugurated. The Achera A and C solar parks, a collaboration between the EAC and the Holy Archdiocese of Cyprus, will supply electricity to the EAC at a cost of 5.1 cents per kilowatt-hour. These parks are expected to play a decisive role in promoting sustainable development and reducing electricity costs. The inauguration of the two parks, with a total capacity of 8 megawatts, marks the completion of the first phase of the Acheras projects, which encompasses 16 megawatts of capacity. The second phase, aimed at adding 68 megawatts, is already underway and in the licensing stage.





## FES CYPRUS NEWSLETTER

Two reports compiled by consultancy firms and commissioned by the Cyprus government concerning the Great Sea Interconnector (GSI) and noting serious concerns were leaked to the press in December:

- The first was an analysis done by Charles River Associates, a global consulting firm headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts. It evaluated the technical feasibility of the subsea cable as well as its capabilities if and when completed. According to the analysis, it is unclear whether the development and utilisation of the GSI will ultimately decrease the cost of electric power for Cypriot consumers.
- The second was a legal due diligence report by Curtis, Mallet-Prevost, Colt & Mosle LLP, a New York-headquartered international law firm. It assessed what kind of a deal the various stakeholders, potentially including the Cypriot state, could expect to get from the concession agreement offered by ADMIE, Greece's Independent Power Transmission Operator and owner of the project. According to the summary of the Curtis report, the terms and conditions proposed for an equity investment in GSI are not sufficiently developed and not adequate to attract any serious strategic equity investors to GSI, particularly considering that GSI offers limited profitability upside and is facing a steep challenge to raise the financing required to develop the project. In addition, the Draft Concession Agreement is heavily one-sided in Admie's favour and would create an unnecessary additional layer of risk for any equity investors in GSI.

In early December, Energy Minister George Papanastasiou had sent a letter to his Greek counterpart Theodoros Skylakakis regarding the reports issued. Cyprus is still contemplating its participation as an equity investor in the project.

### Domestic Developments

On December 15, VOLT elected its new leadership during its in-house elections. Andromachi Sophocleous and Panos Parras are the new party leaders, and Lysia Demetriou and Charilaos Velaris are the deputy leaders.

On December 18, and after a heated three-day debate, the state budget was voted through in parliament, with the backing of DISY, DIKO, ELAM, EDEK, DEPA and independent MP Andreas Themistocleous. The budget for 2025 garnered a total of 37 votes in favour and 18 against, with far-right ELAM stipulating it was voting against any funds that would go towards migration. Casting a negative vote were AKEL, the Greens, independent MP Alexandra Attalidou and independent socialist MP Kostis Efsthathiou. The 2025 state budget marks an increase in expenditure and significant changes in revenue and spending. Total expenditure for the budget amounts to €9.4bn, reflecting a 3.25% increase compared to the 2024 budget, while total projected revenues are expected to reach €11.75bn, marking a 4.1% increase.

On December 22, former Auditor-General Odysseas Michaelides stated that he planned to remain independent of political parties in his endeavour to contest the next presidential election in 2028. Michaelides made the statement on X after left-wing AKEL General-Secretary Stefanos Stefanou said the former independent official was welcome to present his proposals and be heard by the people.

### Foreign Relations

No notable developments occurred during the month of December.

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Newsletter No.151 DECEMBER 24

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## FES CYPRUS NEWSLETTER

### Future of Work, Labour Relations & Trade Unions

On December 2, the Association of Concrete Manufacturing Companies backtracked on its initial agreement to accept a mediated proposal regarding the renewal of the collective agreement, particularly on the timing and implementation of overtime pay regulations. Despite trade unions having accepted the proposal with broad support, the employers requested an extension for the implementation period, a condition that trade unions firmly rejected. This had led to the continuation of a strike in the ready-mix concrete sector for the fifth consecutive week. Mediation efforts, including involvement from the President of Cyprus, have failed to resolve the dispute. Trade unions criticised employers for misleading public opinion and refusing to sign the collective agreement. Employers claimed that they are consulting legal advisors and suggest that a resolution may be near.

On December 3, the Cyprus Hotel Association (PASIXE) approved the revised mediated proposal prepared by the Minister of Labour and Social Insurance for the renewal of the hotel workers' collective agreement. The revised proposal includes key changes, such as retroactive pay increases, annual salary increases, inclusion of the 13-month salary in employment terms and new salary scales for newly recruited staff. Trade unions had preliminarily accepted the proposal, pending final approval from their respective governing bodies. The collective agreement covers the years between 2025 and 2027.

Additionally on December 3, labour peace was partially restored in the ready-mix concrete industry after trade unions had decided to lift strike measures against companies that accepted the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance mediation proposal and agreed to implement it. However, strikes contin-

ued at companies refusing to sign and implement the collective agreement.

On December 5, trade unions and Ministry of Finance reached an agreement concerning the upgrade of the salary scales of low-wage public sector employees. Furthermore, the agreement addresses the calculation of service years for pay increase. Trade unions, Pancyprian Federation of Labour (PEO), Cyprus Workers' Federation (SEK) and Pancyprian Public Servants' Union (PASYDI) expressed satisfaction with the agreement, highlighting the importance of social dialogue. However, EQUALITY trade union criticised the exclusion of a certain provision concerning the fixed-term contracts and stated their intention to continue advocating to address these gaps.

On December 6, the first collective agreement was signed between the District Local Authority Organisation (EOA) of Nicosia and the trade unions PEO and SEK. Note that EOA started operating on July 2024 following the elections. The agreement will serve as a model for all district organisations across Cyprus. Trade union leaders emphasised the importance of clearly defined employment terms and appreciated the constructive cooperation with the EOA leadership.

On December 9, Eurostat released data demonstrating that the percentage of workers in Cyprus who continue working after retirement exceeds the EU average. More specifically 29.6% of individuals aged 50-74 continue working after receiving their pension with the primary reason being financial necessity (68.6%).

On December 10, the Minister of Labour and Social Insurance, employers' and workers' representatives, and three experts from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) discussed the reform of the pension system. The aim of the reform is to improve the

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### Newsletter No.151 DECEMBER 24

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living standards especially for private sector workers who primarily rely on the Social Insurance Fund (SIF). ILO experts expressed strong support for enhanced state intervention to improve low pensions and plan to submit reform proposals to the Ministry by early 2025, prioritizing SIF sustainability and targeted support for low pensioners. Additionally, the ILO reaffirmed that current data indicates SIF is sustainable until 2080 and sees no immediate need for increased contributions.

On December 12, the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth initiated a public consultation on a draft bill titled: "Regulation of the Employment of Fixed-Term Full-Time or Part-Time Employees in Support Programs of the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth Law of 2024." The draft bill is open for public feedback, inviting stakeholders and individuals to submit their comments and suggestions by January 11, 2025.

On December 20, the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance issued decrees aimed at addressing the increased demands of the labour market, strengthening the attraction of specialised professionals to Cyprus, and expanding access of third country national (TCN) students to specific sectors and professions. The decrees specify the sectors eligible for granting a Blue Card for highly specialised professionals from third countries, with a minimum gross annual salary set at €43,632. The eligible sectors include Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), Pharmaceutical Research, and Maritime (excluding ship captains and crews). Additionally, the decrees update the date TCN students must be present in Cyprus to gain access to the labour market (now December 2024 instead of March 2024). Furthermore, TCN students studying ICT programmes, who have completed their first academic semester, are allowed to work in fields related to their studies. Specific professions and sectors for student employment that were also listed included roles in healthcare, retail, and the hospitality sector.

On December 30 and 31, trade unions shared their messages for the challenges and opportunities of 2025. In 2025, PEO's focus will be on improving workers' share of wealth and reducing economic and social inequalities. Its message, directed to both Cypriot and migrant workers, also expresses solidarity with those suffering from conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine, and Syria. PEO condemns imperialist tensions, the arms race and the suffering caused by war. Additionally, it highlights the intensifying economic issues such as inflation, rising housing costs, and labour devaluation despite economic growth. PEO calls for wage increases, particularly for low-paid workers and newcomers, and it demands that employers adhere to sectoral collective agreements.

In 2025, SEK urges the government to strengthen social dialogue and collective action in labour relations, and to promote democracy, worker dignity, health and safety, and work-life balance. Key priorities for SEK include pension reform, tax reform based on family income, effective implementation of the European Directive for adequate wages, and restoring COLA. It also calls for revising the Employment Strategy for Workers from third countries and increasing the National Minimum Wage and link it to the cost of living.

### TURKISH CYPRIOTS

#### Gender Developments

No notable developments occurred during the month of December.

#### Economic Developments in Times of Green Transition

According to the Statistical Institute, the consumer price index increased by 53.29% in December 2024 compared to December 2023, reflecting an annual inflation rate of 53.29% for 2024. Consumer prices rose by 1.10% in December alone. The highest

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### Newsletter No.151 DECEMBER 24

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monthly inflation was recorded in the “food and non-alcoholic beverages” category, with a 2.49% increase, followed by the “miscellaneous goods and services” category, which rose by 2.29%.

According to T&T, the Turkish company operating Ercan (Tymbou) Airport, passenger numbers increased by 21.1% and flights by 14.9% between January and November 2024, compared to the same period in 2023. During this period, passenger traffic rose from 3,637,741 in 2023 to 4,406,672 in 2024, while aircraft movements increased from 24,319 to 27,931.

### Relations with Turkey

Following his official visit to Ankara, Prime Minister Ünal Üstel told public broadcaster BRT that his meetings with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz were highly productive, achieving progress on key challenges and 2025 plans. He expressed optimism about reviving citrus and artichoke exports, which were disrupted last year, and highlighted energy infrastructure as a major focus: “We initiated steps to finalise feasibility studies for the energy cable project. President Erdoğan and I discussed ways to expedite its implementation”, he said. Üstel also raised concerns over actions by the Greek Cypriot government, particularly the detentions targeting Turkish Cypriot businesspeople. He confirmed discussing these issues with President Erdoğan, seeking Türkiye’s support to counter such measures.

### Domestic Developments

The diplomatic missions of the United States, the United Kingdom and of several other countries in Cyprus expressed their support for Turkish Cypriot journalist Ali Kışmir ahead of the continuation of his trial on December 7 for “insulting” the armed forces. US Ambassador to Nicosia, Julie Davis Fisher, called the trial “a critical moment for press freedom”, and stating, “decisions taken during his trial will demon-

strate either a commitment to a free and independent press or an effort to suppress journalism. We reiterate our support for Kışmir’s rights.” Similarly, the British High Commission and the embassies of Ireland, the Netherlands and Switzerland issued a joint statement expressing concern about any attempts to restrict press freedom, silence debate, or intimidate journalists. “We believe people must be able to debate issues freely and make informed decisions, supported by access to information from a strong, robust, and independent media. We are concerned about the potential implications of the Ali Kışmir case on media freedom and will continue to monitor developments closely”, the statement read. Kışmir, the head of the Turkish Cypriot Press Workers’ Union (Basın-Sen), is facing criminal prosecution for “insulting and defaming the moral personality” of the security forces. The charges stem from an article he wrote in the Afrika daily newspaper during the 2020 presidential election campaign, in which he criticised the Turkish government and the Turkish security forces in northern Cyprus for interfering in Turkish Cypriot affairs.

On December 9, a motion for the urgent discussion of holding an early election, submitted by Republican Turkish Party (CTP) chairperson Tufan Erhürman, was rejected by the general assembly. Erhürman called for an early election, citing unresolved issues in various areas and pointing out: “We currently have a historic budget deficit.” He highlighted a “crisis in the construction sector”, particularly concerning property sales to foreign citizens, criticised financial losses at the Electricity Authority and the use of poor-quality fuel in the power plant, and noted reduced financial contributions from Turkey. He accused the government of poor planning, using the case of imported potatoes as an example, and he faulted it for inaction on earthquake preparedness and for ignoring expert advice. Erhürman also questioned the tender process for Famagusta and Kyrenia ports’ handling services and criticised the gov-





ernment’s silence regarding a baby’s death caused by formula containing alcohol. Additionally, he claimed that the official cost-of-living figures were misleading, concluding “you can no longer claim to be the government”.

On December 14, the Council of Ministers issued a decree amending the new property regime that came into effect in May 2024. The decree allows “foreign real or legal persons who are nationals of states that recognise the TRNC [i.e., Turkey]” to establish partnerships with TRNC citizens in the build-to-sell property sector, provided the foreign share of the partnership does not exceed 49%. The May 2024 law had banned all foreigners after Interior Minister Dursun Oğuz vowed in parliament last year, “We will ban foreigners from building to sell.” Another amendment allows foreign property owners, who were previously required to dispose of any “excess” properties (i.e., more than one property) within two years under the May law, to obtain a “certificate of use” for these additional properties, valid for seven years. Last month, the Council of Ministers also extended several deadlines related to sales contracts signed before the May 2024 law, citing challenges in implementing the new regulations. The main opposition Republican Turkish Party leader, Tufan Erhürman, questioned why the government, which opposed foreign involvement in the sector seven months ago, is now allowing a 49% share for foreigners, and why this change was hastily implemented through a Saturday decree rather than proper legislation. Defending the decree, Interior Minister Dursun Oğuz explained that the law was initially introduced to ensure all property transactions were processed through the land registry and that all taxes were properly collected, recovering up to £100 million in foregone revenue. However, he noted that after developer Simon Aykut and others involved in selling property to foreigners in the TRNC were arrested by Greek Cypriot authorities—an action he described as an attempt to harm the TRNC econo-

my—the entire sector plunged into crisis. Acknowledging the “panic” within the industry, Oğuz argued that opening the market to foreign investors is crucial for revitalizing the sector. He emphasized that the government had consulted with industry representatives before making the decision and described the decree as a necessary response to the sector’s urgent needs. Erhürman, taking the floor again, criticised the government for relying on decrees instead of enacting laws, pointing out that they had repeatedly warned against this practice. He argued that the current state of the sector is a result of the government’s lack of foresight and remarked that the administration “could not care less about the state of the country”.

On December 20, parliament approved the 2025 budget with 29 votes in favour. The budget projects total government spending of 136.28 billion TL (€3.75 billion) and a budget deficit of 17.6 billion TL (€484 million). However, earlier, Finance Committee Deputy Chairman and opposition CTP Famagusta MP Erkut Şahali stated that, based on his calculations, the actual budget deficit could significantly exceed government forecasts, potentially reaching 50 billion TL (€1.37 billion).

#### Future of Work, Labour Relations & Trade Unions

On December 9, representatives of 27 trade unions made a statement to the press in front of the Finance Ministry, protesting “the government’s attempts to change the method of calculating the cost of living and its interference with the right to collective agreement”. The unions also accused the government of manipulating inflation data to present a lower rate. They highlighted that outdated items, such as CDs and DVDs, are still included in the basket of goods and services used to measure the cost of living. According to the Statistical Institute, consumer prices rose by 0.78% in November compared to October, marking the lowest monthly increase since February 2021 and attracting criticism.





Eventually, a two-day general strike on December 26 and 27 forced the government to back down on the proposed amendments. After talks with the trade union representatives, the government has withdrawn the amendment regarding the Collective Bargaining Agreement and Referendum Law, and it has suspended the amendment regarding the calculation of the cost of living until an agreement is reached. Earlier, members of a total of 33 trade unions, reportedly numbering in the thousands, marched on the parliament building demanding that the two bills be withdrawn. The strike had been called after Prime Minister Ünal Üstel and Finance Minister Özdemir Berova had met with unions a week earlier and promised them they would consider the demands made before submitting the bill unamended to parliament the following day. Demonstrators tore parliament's front gate off its hinges as part of the protest on December 26, with prominent trade union leaders making speeches.

In the meantime, Air Traffic Controllers Union (HTKS) chairperson Cem Kapisız criticised the government for obstructing his union by postponing the planned strike at Ercan (Tymbou) Airport for 60 days, citing "national security, public safety, and essential services". Speaking to the daily Yenidüzen, Kapisız strongly condemned the government, saying it had illegally issued a decree to postpone the strike [for the third time in 2024], as the law permits the government to postpone strikes only twice a year. Kapisız emphasised that disputes arising since the privatisation of Ercan Airport have jeopardised aviation safety. He also accused the government of failing to protect workers' rights while transferring millions of euros to the private company managing the airport. Referring to the government as a "lawless gang", Kapisız announced that they would take the matter to court.





## SHORT BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

### Yiannis Charalambous

Yiannis Charalambous has been a Research Assistant for FES Cyprus contributing to the writing of the monthly FES Cyprus Newsletter since July 2012. Yiannis obtained a Bachelor's degree in Turkish Studies from the National Kapodistrian University of Athens and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the University of Nicosia. The subject of his dissertation focused on evaluating the catalyst effect in resolving the Cyprus problem, by comparing the factors of EU membership and the discovery of hydrocarbons. Yiannis speaks Greek, English and Turkish.

### Hubert Faustmann

Hubert Faustmann is a Professor of History and International Relations at the University of Nicosia. Additionally, he is the director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Cyprus. He is an expert on British colonial Cyprus and post-independence Cypriot history and politics. His research also focuses on Hydrocarbon politics in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the relationship between state and society with a focus on Political Culture, Clientelism and Political Patronage.

### Sertac Sonan

Prof. Dr. Sertac Sonan works in Political Science & International Relations Department at Cyprus International University. He is the Director of the Centre for Cyprus and Mediterranean Studies at the same university.

### Stavros Stavrou

Stavros Stavrou holds a Bachelor's degree in History from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Warwick and a Master's in Industrial and Employment Relations from International Training Centre of the ILO in collaboration with University of Turin. His research focuses on the employment relations of migrants and refugees, trade unions, and social inequalities.





## FES CYPRUS NEWSLETTER

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Newsletter No.151 DECEMBER 24

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