

CYPRUS

A Consultative Body for Deliberative Peacemaking

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Abstract

On 17 July 2025, the two leaders in the Cyprus peace talks responded to the call by the UN Security Council for a “meaningful role for civil society engagement in peace efforts” by coming to “a common understanding” on “a consultative body for civil society engagement” (Guterres 2025; UN Security Council 2025). This was followed on 30 January 2026 by UN Security Council Resolution 2815 which called upon the two leaders to form a consultative body (UN Security Council 2026). This decision presented a significant opportunity to enhance the settlement process and raise the chances of success by creating new mechanisms to incentivise a mediation process that has only produced repeated failures for the last 52 years. The rationale for this decision is that civic assemblies could increase transparency and civil engagement and ultimately empower the leaders in making highly sensitive and difficult decisions. In this paper, we argue for a deliberative peace process akin to the “Ostbelgien” model of a two-tier Consultative Body for Cyprus. Mandated by the leaders of the two communities, the Consultative Body would comprise of an expert Standing Civic Advisory Council, which manages the deliberative process and a Rotating Civic Assembly, randomly selected from ordinary citizens using rigorous professional methods as well as artificial intelligence (Remesh AI and Demos) in identifying convergence across linguistically diverse mini-publics. We present the design and rationale of this proposal, as well as empirical evidence of the two communities' readiness to endorse civic assemblies.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, deliberative peace, civic assemblies, facilitation, citizens' assemblies

Introduction

Cyprus is a paradigmatic case of an unfulfilled peace settlement project featuring repeated failures of elite-level negotiations. Historically, the island experienced the eruption of intercommunal violence in December 1963, the withdrawal — voluntary and forced — of Turkish Cypriots from state institutions, their confinement to enclaves between 1963–1974, and the geographic division of the island following the events of 1974 (Joseph 1997; Necatigil 1989). Since the 1977 and 1979 High-Level Agreements, and consistently within the UN-led process, successive leaders of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities have committed to seeking a comprehensive settlement on the basis of a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation with political equality, comprising two constituent states (Ker-Lindsay 2011: 50-52). Despite an early consensus for reunification, repeated negotiations have failed, marking a legacy of intractability sometimes described in diplomatic circles as ‘the diplomats’ graveyard’ (Lindahl 2019) — a characterisation this proposal seeks to challenge.

Led by the United Nations, facilitation and mediation processes in Cyprus have been limited to the two community leaders, often including representatives of Greece, Türkiye and the United Kingdom as guarantor powers (Michael 2009). The system has been described as archaic and failing to involve a broad range of political and civil society actors (Sözen & Şahin 2024). The aim of this article is to depart from the traditional approach in the Cyprus peace talks and advocate for a novel process design, including the establishment of a civic assembly, aimed at enhancing public consultation and legitimacy. We outline the rationale for this recommendation and provide reflections from actors' engagement with this idea.

Expanding on Previous Attempts for an Inclusive Peace Process

The primary reason for a civic assembly in Cyprus is that it would support the leaders in making difficult decisions and bolster the legitimacy and sustainability of a negotiated settlement. Secondly, it would reduce tensions at a time of heightened geopolitical risk for the region. In addition, a civic assembly would create a truly Cypriot-owned process, providing legitimacy and thereby avoiding a 'a settlement lacking sufficient civic ownership', which might not be sustainable in the long term. Citizens' assemblies, given their intercommunal nature in a geographically divided island it can function as a form of direct and indirect contact (Psaltis & Wagoner 2025; Yucel & Psaltis 2020) that would help to reduce symbolic and realistic threats, create empathy, reduce prejudice and build trust ensuring also that the voices of those who have never been involved in efforts to solve the Cyprus problem are heard (Curato et al. 2025). Such contact would also cover all geographical areas

of Cyprus, difficult to reach and far away from the UN-patrolled Buffer Zone where most systematic and meaningful contact takes place today.

A civic assembly would also be in line with the EU's Defence of Democracy package, which includes a 'recommendation to promote the participation of citizens and civil society organisations in policy making' (European Commission 2023).

Recent research shows that zones of possible agreement already exist, indicating that public attitudes are more favourable than might be expected: a clear majority of Greek Cypriots would accept energy cooperation between Cyprus and Turkey as part of a solution to the Cyprus issue, although not before a comprehensive agreement (Psaltis et al. 2025). More broadly, any progress in Cyprus will have wider positive effects across its region. Geopolitical risks in the Eastern Mediterranean have also risen considerably as a result of the disintegration of the rules-based world order. Geopolitical tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean have escalated, with occasional rhetoric in regional media speculating on Turkey–Israel frictions extending to Cyprus. Combined with frequent incidents in the UN-monitored buffer zone and the anticipated 2027 start of ENI's offshore gas production, these developments underline the urgency of a renewed peace process. (Bowden 2025; UN Secretary-General 2025). A leader-mandated civic assembly, therefore, is both timely and well-founded: it would signal that a path towards a resolution of the Cyprus issue had been set and should thereby reduce both tensions within Cyprus and with Turkey and Greece.

Developing an Ostbelgian-style Model for the Cyprus Context

There is an increased desire among civil society to ensure a more inclusive peace process, while the literature and academic research consistently find that more inclusive peacebuilding mechanisms lead to more durable peace outcomes (Lederach 2002; Nilsson 2012). The Cyprus Peace and Dialogue Center (CPDC) has launched an EU-funded project called C-UP to run a pilot, intercommunal citizens' assembly, where participants will be asked to make proposals for updating the design of the peace process, or in other words, focusing on process, not substance (CPDC 2025). The initiative also reflects conclusions articulated in the CPDC-Apofasi Irinis joint statement, produced through bicomunal deliberations among key figures, which highlighted that the core obstacle to progress has not primarily been substantive disagreements, given the significant convergences already achieved in negotiations but rather the methodology of the process itself, emphasising that 'this time must be different' (CPDC & Apofasi Irinis 2024). The deliberative framework proposed here directly responds to these conclusions by embedding inclusiveness, incentives, and deadlock-breaking capacity into the design of the peace process itself. CPDC also conducted UNDP-funded "mini" mono-communal assemblies in both communities in December 2024 on the subject of green transition in co-operation with the University of Cyprus Centre for Field Studies in a forthcoming report. Other initiatives that engaged Cypriot citizens include a workshop in Cyprus with CPDC and Professor Amanda Perry-Kessaris of the University of Kent, supported by the UK Socio-Legal Studies Association Impact Grant in November 2024, which tested whether a pre-assembly "interspecies council" could be useful to the peace process (Perry-Kessaris, Mullen & Samani 2025).

Youth from both communities were also engaged on Cyprus problem issues using the Remesh AI artificial intelligence deliberation platform (offering both quantitative and qualitative analysis) and language interpretation tool, which was run in fall of 2025 by CPDC and the University of Cyprus in cooperation with the Good Offices Mission (OSASG). The PEACERETURN project (UKRI/University of Warwick) in partnership with CPDC has pilot tested a civic assembly among displaced Cypriots from both communities in the London diaspora in January 2025. Finally, the Cyprus Futures Scenarios project conducted in 2023 tested another kind of participatory approach, which showed how a structured, participatory method can generate shared understanding and practical options across multiple stakeholders (total 36 Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots) that at the start have different, and at times, contrasting positions *without* substituting for Track 1 (Cyprus Futures 2022).

Our proposal for an Ostbelgien-style consultative model, as set out in this article, was widely covered in the press, while the report launch took place under the auspices of UNFICYP (CNA 2026; Parikiaki 2026). Informal

feedback from UN interlocutors suggests that the two-tier model is under active consideration by both leadership teams, and our team has been encouraged to continue piloting the concept across the island and its diaspora. Trust for citizen-led institutions appears high while trust for state institutions is low both within and across communities (SeeD 2015). Recent findings from the European Social Survey (ESS) suggest a significant level of distrust for various political institutions in Cyprus (ESS 2026). Combined with low trust, there is demand for a more inclusive peace process among the general population of Cypriots across the island. Even after the collapse of high-level talks in the Swiss resort of Crans Montana in 2017 and in the fresh midst of despondency, the SCORE study of 2017 with a sample size of over 1,600 respondents found that “Support for a more inclusive peace process”, which measures the extent to which someone thinks that the peace process needs to have a better greater gender balance, include civil society and different stakeholders from different backgrounds and groups, was over 6.0 out of 10 for both communities (SeeD 2017).

At the same time, the period after the Crans Montana failure in 2017 offered the people of Cyprus opportunities for reflection on the risks of the current status quo. There is by now strong research evidence by the bicomunal research programme at the Genetic Social Psychology Lab of the University of Cyprus and the University Center for Field Studies that now is the time for a final push on an agreement, on the basis of the traditionally UN-mandated bi-zonal, bicomunal federation (BBF). Trends from representative sample surveys from 2010-2025 show that in both communities, there is currently a clear majority acceptance of BBF as the basis for a solution (71% of TCs and 79% for GCs), accompanied by a remarkable increasing trend of support for BBF in the GC community since 2017 onwards. With regard to decision-making by the leaders, research conducted by some of the authors of this paper, in collaboration with others, suggests that both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots in Cyprus can be more flexible on Cyprus problem issues than their politicians (Psaltis et al. 2025).

More broadly, leaders themselves see strong evidence in favour of civil assemblies, noting positive, unexpected benefits. The overall feedback we received so far is that this is the most popular and negotiable among the various ideas proposed on a renewed peace process design. This is because it is already pre-agreed and enjoys wide acceptance across the left-right divide in both communities, among the new-old parties in the Greek Cypriot community (including the new party, Direct Democracy) and among parties that tend to be supportive of federal reunification. This perspective has gained greater relevance and acceptance since the election of Tufan Erhürman in the 2025 Turkish Cypriot presidential election, who has proposed a four-point political framework that Greek Cypriot political actors have perceived as preconditions (Cleaver 2026; TRNC Presidency Press Office 2026). CPDC observed that this framework was similar to previous positions in bi-communal statements and formal correspondence with the UN Secretary-General.

Key Features of this Proposed Deliberative Framework

In line with the proposed Ostbelgien model, the proposed deliberative framework would involve a two-tier Consultative Body, comprising of an expert Standing Civic Advisory Council and a Rotating Civic Assembly, which would be randomly selected from ordinary citizens using rigorous professional methods.

The Standing Civic Advisory Council would task the Rotating Civic Assembly with making proposals to enhance the design of the negotiation process and providing palatable options to citizens when progress stalls, through feedback, fallback, and deadlock-breaking mechanisms. The rationale will be akin to the Ostbelgien (East Belgian) participatory model that has been praised by international media for its effectiveness (Gross 2025; Niessen & Reuchamps 2019; OECD 2020b).

We envisage that the Rotating Civic Assembly could make proposals in the following four areas:

#	Mechanism	Rationale and aim	Empirical support
1	Deliberative and Structured Process of Civic Engagement	A first consideration is how to update the negotiations process to be inclusive, transparent and mandated by the leaders: one which does not replace the leaders but supports them in making difficult and sensitive decisions. Specifically, it would make proposals for how to run a leader-mandated fully fledged deliberative process of civic engagement, using international best practice and tailored to the specific circumstances in Cyprus. This is known in the literature as “deliberative democracy” or “citizens’ assemblies”. We believe that the term “civic assembly” could be more widely accepted and introduce novel terminologies and argumentation into the public discourse ² .	<i>Ostbelgien</i> (East Belgian) permanent citizens' assembly; Ireland Citizens' Assembly (2016–18).
2	A “Fast Feedback Mechanism” for negotiators	A second consideration would be how to establish a “fast feedback mechanism” to negotiators, using a scientific toolkit that has already been tested successfully in Cyprus – the mechanism is intended to reveal hopes and fears for each community, levels of prejudice and distrust, and levels of acceptance of various forms of solution to the Cyprus issue.	Successful use of Remesh AI and Demos (SeeD), which have received positive feedback thus far; conjoint survey experiments (Loizides et al. 2022); peace polling methods.
3	Constructive Fallback Mechanisms (backstops)	In order to help incentivise the sides to start negotiations, certain pre-agreed insurances or fallback mechanisms should be built into the process. Backstops could be defined as a form of safeguard or contingency plan that aims to guarantee a certain positive outcome regardless of the outcome of a negotiation. This is known in the literature as “backstops” but we believe fallback mechanisms might be a more widely understood term.	An updated framework for the Cyprus context, based on the Northern Ireland backstop; (Loizides et al. 2025).
4	Deadlock-Breaking Mechanisms	The Rotating Civic Assembly should address obstacles during the process or a transition period with pre-agreed deadlock-breaking mechanisms. This is known in the literature as “arbitration” but given how the term was misused in the Annan Plan period, we believe that the term “deadlock-breaking mechanisms” can gain broader acceptance (Fisher 2011: 166; Loizides & McGarry 2019).	Default mechanism, based on the Northern Ireland peace process (Kelly & Tannam 2023); judicial intervention from neutral judges; civic assemblies.

Table 1: Proposed Key Features of the Rotating Civic Assembly.

Civic engagement and empowerment are still relatively new concepts and practices in the Cyprus peace process, given Cyprus’ *sui generis*: two languages and a long, frozen conflict and high levels of mistrust, both within and across communities. Yet, according to research elaborated in numerous academic studies, citizens still wish for a settlement of the Cyprus problem and support a more inclusive process in the vast majority. We believe that the time is ripe to introduce new, tested mechanisms into the process.

The Consultative Body would be mandated by the leaders. Similar to the Ostbelgien model (i.e. East Belgian participatory democracy model), it would have two tiers: the **Standing Civic Advisory Council** and the **Rotating Civic Assembly**. The Standing Civic Advisory Council would be appointed by the leaders (in later iterations it could comprise previous participants in the deliberative process as in the Ostbelgien model).

Selection could be via an open call with clear criteria and terms of reference as well as honoraria paid to the participants. The specific terms of reference will be announced by the UN and convened by the UN. This would avoid rivalries and delegitimising narratives around who is in and who is out.

Standing Civic Advisory Council would be comprised of an interdisciplinary group of academics (politics, international relations, history, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, conflict resolution), civil society practitioners/leaders and other specialists (eg energy, economy).

The Standing Civic Advisory Council would manage the deliberative process by tasking the Rotating Civic Assembly to make proposals that can enhance the design of the negotiations process and to provide options that are palatable to citizens when progress is stalled under the three mechanisms: fast feedback, fallback and deadlock-breaking mechanisms. It could also facilitate a process of preparing the public for a referendum on a final peace plan. The Standing Civic Advisory Council would thus support both societal conflict transformation-reconciliation and the Rotating Civic Assembly in deliberating on the methodology of the negotiations, specifically addressing how to ensure the process remains result-oriented and inclusive.

The Rotating Civic Assembly would be a representative group of ordinary citizens selected through professional sortition (see more details in later sections), provided with balanced evidence and expert input, and supported to deliberate in a structured environment insulated from external influence. Assemblies typically involve 100–200 participants over several weeks or months, and they work best when political leaders endorse the process and commit to a formal response to its recommendations (Smith & Setälä 2018: 301). A Cyprus-wide assembly would require resourcing for selection, facilitation, interpretation, secure technology, logistics, communications, and fair participant remuneration. Material or immaterial resources can be optimised by incorporating automation and AI solutions in a responsible and ethical way.

While some citizens' assemblies allow participants to set the agenda, the protracted nature of this conflict, cultural norms and the fact that the leaders will be reluctant to agree to anything that they perceive as losing control means that this is unlikely to be workable in Cyprus. We propose that leaders refer specific questions to the assembly. Especially at the outset, these should be enabling issues rather than core settlement trade-offs. This should include preventive security measures (SeeD, Berghof Foundation & Interpeace 2017), whether implementation should be immediate or phased and practical options to accelerate the resolution of property issues in a manner consistent with the agreed parameters of a settlement. They would also be the conduit for “fast feedback, fallback and deadlock-breaking mechanisms”. In any phased implementation approach, the civic assembly could also be tasked with addressing implementation issues, resolving ambiguities, recalibrating where things are not working, and addressing matters that directly affect citizens across both communities, including questions of property, residency, and any adjustments arising from an agreed settlement.

Separate assemblies could also be designed for affected cohorts, including displaced persons and families of the missing. Highly technical areas, such as finance, should instead be covered through expert input and briefing materials.

Participation within the Cyprus Context

Our proposed recruitment method for the Rotating Civic Assembly is informed by international best practice, with reference in particular to the OECD Recommendation on Open Government (2017), the OECD Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes for Public Decision Making (2020a), the Pinheiro principles emphasizing broader inclusivity and countries with extensive experience of Citizens' Assemblies, including Canada, Ireland and Australia (OCHA et al. 2007). We propose a methodology similar to the stratified random selection used by the University of Cyprus for the bi-annual European Social Survey. This involves using anonymised data from the Electricity Authority of Cyprus to make the first random selection of households and then randomly selecting one household member “using the last birthday rule” (ESS 2018: 51). Another option is that the sample to receive invitations would be randomly generated from existing datasets, including PAKEPE

(UCY) and LIPA consultancies, which have so far run dedicated public opinion polls on both communities and their diasporas (Lipa 2026; UCY Centre for Field Studies 2026).

Our proposals are made with reference to the cultural characteristics of Cyprus - participation would be voluntary. To incentivise participation, participants would be offered remuneration for their time on the assembly. Employer and employee representatives (e.g. the chambers and unions) would be involved beforehand to manage any work disruptions and ensure that participants do not need to use “annual leave days” to participate. To keep participants engaged, they could be offered recognition awards, participation in a “lottery”, or an award that is contextually valued in Cyprus.

Countering Political Interference

If a civic assembly is to come up with proposals that have genuine broad acceptance, they must have the “safe space” to deliberate without any external pressure. We expect this to be the most challenging aspect of running a citizens’ assembly and we strongly recommend external expertise to advise on these matters. We make two key proposals for the time being and several other speculative proposals for how to handle this:

1. *No “core” issues.* As above, at least until there is broad acceptance of assemblies as a tried and tested method for decision-making, the civic assembly would not be charged with deciding on “core” Cyprus problem substantive issues but would rather focus on processes and procedures. This would reduce the desire of political parties and others to put pressure on participants.
2. *Standing Advisory Council briefs political parties.* The Standing Advisory Council would brief the political parties regularly on its deliberations. More generally, there should be broad transparency about what the Rotating Civic Assembly is doing. If political parties are well informed, they are less likely to feel the need to interfere.
3. *Multiple civic assemblies?* One way to make it more difficult for outsiders to interfere is to hold multiple citizens’ assemblies on different topics at the same time. As noted above, these could include assemblies on preventive security; on implementation as a big bang or step-by-step; on property claims processing; assemblies with displaced persons; and assemblies with families of the missing, as well as on mechanisms to enhance the process. This approach also has the added benefit of engaging a larger number of people in the process cumulatively, which is of vital importance for successful referendum campaigns.
4. *Partial “lock-in”?* One option to prevent external influence is to conduct the citizens’ assembly over a single, consecutive period of days. Ideally, participants would have no access to phones or email or other forms of communication during that process. However, we envisage that this would be highly unpopular among Cypriots. It might be more acceptable if the “lock-in” only happens on the final day, is known about beforehand and if the participants are highly remunerated for this part of the process, including, for example, daily per diems or entry into a lottery.

Lessons from Empirical Examples

This model of deliberative democracy has been widely used across developed and developing economies. The OECD lists a database of 733 cases from 1979 to 2023, and Participedia lists 2,372 cases across 160 countries (OECD 2023; Participedia 2026). One of the most renowned citizens’ assemblies was the Republic of Ireland citizens’ assembly established in 2016, which led to the referendum on the highly sensitive issue of abortion (Farrell, Suiter & Harris 2019). Assemblies can also be run on a range of questions. For example, France ran the 150-member Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (Citizens’ Convention on Climate) in 2019-2020, which resulted in 149 proposals and the Climate and Resilience Bill of 2021, while progress on implementing all the proposals is still monitored (Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat 2021; Ministère de la Transition écologique, de la Biodiversité et des Négociations internationales sur le climat et la nature 2023).

Importantly, citizens’ assemblies and other deliberative forums have been organised in other divided or post-conflict societies to positive effect, including in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon and the

Bangsamoro region in the Philippines. (Douglas & Petrovic 2024; Levy, McCulloch & O'Flynn in press). As a result of the large number of assemblies run to date, there is now a significant body of work on how to run citizens' assemblies. The OECD has developed a toolbox for governments embarking on a deliberative democracy process (OECD 2024). The European Commission has the Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy (European Commission 2026). Other civil society and non-governmental organisations, such as Participedia and DemocracyNext, offer guidebooks and case studies (Democracy Next 2026; Participedia 2026).

AI in Deliberation

There are a growing number of ways in which AI can assist, some of which have already been tested in Cyprus. The Remesh AI tool, which allows for discussion in multiple languages, was successfully tested in 2025 by CPDC and the University of Cyprus in co-operation with the UN Good Offices team. The potential for focus group discussions with hundreds of people across the island, who can be asked, in their own language, both predetermined questions and others added as the discussion evolves, gives negotiators the potential for immediate feedback about process and substantive ideas by representative samples of the population in online panels. Demos is a multi-agent AI tool, developed in Cyprus by Cypriots (SeeD), as a tool to empower participatory peacebuilding processes. As a prototype which is tested by simulating negotiation processes, it can be a supportive tool to: a) identify landmines that can create deadlocks and emotive triggers; b) simulate the palatability of various options before proposing them; c) optimise learning, for example facilitator training, and digestion of good practices; and hence d) help equip facilitators and mediators better to maximise constructive dialogue and minimise the risk of failure. This helps sustain the civic assemblies in the long term. Demos was recently presented at the UNFICYP civil society networking event (UNFICYP 2026).

More recently in early 2026, the potential of recruitment and participation in trilingual (EN, GR, TR) online deliberative AI dialogue with the open-access platform pol.is was also explored by the Genetic Social Psychology Lab of the University of Cyprus. A recruitment campaign through Facebook Ads across the divide in Cyprus lasted one week and costed only 71.81 Euros, reaching 13,190 unique users with final participation by 50 individuals from both communities of Cyprus. Low participation in Facebook Ad political campaigns is the norm. Nevertheless, the findings revealed some substantial and important findings for policy making as it identified a high level of consensus and low polarisation on the idea for participation by people in the peace process. Importantly, the deliberation did not divide along ethnic or linguistic lines; most participants communicated in English, a common lingua franca in bicommunal settings. The principal difference concerned levels of confidence in participatory mechanisms: while the majority expressed optimism about citizen engagement tools such as civic assemblies, a smaller group remained sceptical about whether such initiatives could meaningfully influence political negotiations. At the same time, several bridging statements received near-universal support across clusters, particularly those emphasising the importance of citizen participation, transparency, and the inclusion of youth and women in peace process discussions. These findings provide preliminary evidence that structured digital deliberation can generate constructive dialogue and identify areas of consensus even in a deeply divided conflict setting.

The Case for a Deliberative Body: Feasibility and Rationale

Protracted conflicts are not solved by perfect proposals but by a process that is inclusive, deliberative, and disciplined. Elegant solutions can only come from elegant processes that are deliberative, inclusive and structured. Structured deliberative and inclusive methods move people from positions to possibilities. This article aims to provide a method for elegant process design:

#	Proposition	Rationale
1	It builds on the direction already agreed by leaders and the UN.	UN Secretary-General António Guterres publicly noted the leaders' "common understanding" on establishing a consultative body for civil society engagement.

#	Proposition	Rationale
2	Inclusion is not just merely “nice to have” but is about managing the risk of failure.	Myriad academic research and peacebuilding literature consistently found that civic and civil society inclusion is closely associated with more resilient peace processes, more durable peace outcomes and lower risk of conflict recurrence (Lederach 2002; Nilsson 2012).
3	A consultative body can strengthen <i>procedural legitimacy</i>.	Work on inclusion and peace process legitimacy emphasises that “how” decisions are made shapes acceptance and resilience, not only “what” is decided (Gibson 2004: 150; Tyler 2000).
4	The two-tier Standing Advisory Council and Rotating Civic Assembly model is empirically tested.	The Standing Advisory Council and Rotating Civic Assembly model has been empirically tested in both Belgium with the example of Ostbelgien and in France through the Economic, Social and Environmental Council which also hosted the Citizen Convention on Climate (Baeckelandt, Wüthrich & Bonin 2023)
5	It reduces capture and “usual suspects” dynamics.	OECD good-practice principles stress representativeness via random selection, time to learn/deliberate and skilled facilitation, which are exactly the safeguards needed when there is lack of confidence, optimism and fatigue with regard to the peace process (OECD 2020a).
6	Deliberation can actively lower polarisation and improve inter-group relations.	Reviews of deliberation research find consistent conflict-mitigating effects when people deliberate under structured conditions (Lijphart 2019). As in the example of Ostbelgien, civic assembly choice matters not only because it generates trust in abstract but because it reduces risk in practice.
7	It gives leaders political “cover” to make progress on controversial or taboo issues.	Ireland’s citizens’ assembly process is widely analysed as helping create informed public debate and enabling decisions on highly sensitive constitutional questions (Courant 2021).
8	Operationalises transparency without turning negotiations into a media battleground.	A structured two-tier conduit can offer a “transmission belt” to Track 1, share dilemmas, trade-offs, and progress in an effective way that counters cynicism while protecting negotiators and participants.
9	Cyprus-specific need and demand is demonstrably present.	Studies cited in this proposal show meaningful support for the basis of BBF, regional co-operation as part a solution, inclusive approaches, exactly the gap a deliberative two-tier consultative approach can bridge.

Table 2: Rationale for the Workability of the Proposed Consultative Body

A Rotating Civic Assembly could be the conduit for establishing a “fast feedback mechanism” to negotiators by making use of a scientific toolkit that has already been tested in Cyprus. This would include AI tools, including Remesh AI, Demos and Conjoint analysis (quantitative survey-based research). These tools, together with more traditional peace polling methods, can help identify acceptance levels of policy packages in both communities.

This research-based monitoring programme backed by robust sampling methodologies has already been successfully tested in Cyprus, revealing hopes and fears for each community, levels of prejudice and distrust and levels of acceptance of various forms of solution to the Cyprus issue and variations of the Guterres packages that were accepted in simulated referendums in both communities (Loizides et al. 2022; Psaltis & Wagoner 2025; SeeD, Berghof Foundation & Interpeace 2017). An understanding of intergroup dynamics between the two communities relating to social psychological and political psychological mechanisms is of critical value for the preparation of both communities for a referendum.

The formula of ‘nothing is agreed until everything is agreed’ has been widely criticised for lacking incentives and leading to failures (McGarry & Loizides 2022: 144). We have previously proposed introducing insurance or fallback mechanisms known as backstops in the negotiation process (Loizides et al. 2025). In Cyprus, a ‘backstop’ could refer to a fallback arrangement that will kick in if parties fail to reach a comprehensive peace settlement. Potentially, this fallback arrangement could be win-win, securing for instance, irreversible wins for

all sides after negotiations start. The two sides could decide on a mechanism to determine the backstops and criteria for implementing them. We recognise that backstop mechanisms need to be delicate and well thought through to ensure that they do not backfire as disincentives, although they are also essential to make the ‘cost of failure’ more concrete. The mandate on the level of backstops and how they are positioned needs to be predefined and clear.

If these are not agreed ahead of any new process, including a civic assembly, a second option is to consider mini-fallbacks as part of the mandate of the new consultative body for civic engagement. Mini-backstops could be provided by leaders but refined and decided by the civic assembly, for example, a two-thirds majority and then approved by the two negotiators. Either way, the two leaders will maintain control and oversight while encouraging citizens to develop the most viable and effective recommendations. Mini-backstops will be less extensive than backstops; nonetheless, they will be significant enough to demonstrate commitment to the process.

Stakeholders in Cyprus could also consider various deadlock-resolving mechanisms as last-resort solutions. In the Northern Ireland context, the UK and Irish governments act as mediators if problems arise, and a default mechanism is present if power-sharing fails, notably a transfer of power to London with Dublin’s input (Kelly & Tannam 2023). In a reunited Cyprus, not just judicial issues but also political deadlocks could be resolved through the intervention of courts comprising neutral (and sometimes foreign) judges. At the negotiation level, such interventions might be more difficult to agree but for specific issues of minor political or strategic significance sides might consider involving civic assemblies, maximising their effectiveness and legitimacy - this approach will fall outside the conventional arbitration paradigm but nonetheless offer an alternative dispute resolution method to the leaderships in the two communities.

Conclusion

In essence, if civic assemblies become an acceptable agenda item among Cypriots, they will incentivise the adoptability of agreements by minimising political risks for the leaders. Civic assemblies could also enhance the adaptability of an agreement in the first place. They could also adjust any agreements to future conditions, as well as facilitate implementation, a key priority in high-stakes securitised conflicts. As noted above, the sides could initiate the talks with a ‘significant win’ for each side. If parties fail to agree on the details, the ad hoc dispute resolution mechanisms, including tribunals or civic assemblies, will decide how those ‘wins’ would be regulated, for instance, on the basis of the goodwill each side demonstrates in the comprehensive talks. This would incentivise reaching a comprehensive agreement, adding another advantage to the civic assemblies’ rationale: enforceability and implementation. The ideas proposed in this article have, to date, not received any negative reactions from political and civil society actors, while the empirical evidence presented shows that a consultative body and deliberative peace process is gaining traction. Overall, the ideas presented above should not be seen as distinct to each other - they could be instead combined into a mutually reinforcing process design framework. For instance, agreed mutual bitesize backstops would serve as the initial anchor, enabling early steps while avoiding a premature peace referendum. These steps would be protected by enforcement mechanisms, ensuring that early gains are credible and not subject to unilateral reversal. At the same time, the two-tier *Ostbelgien*-style mechanism as suggested in this article would be embedded to enhance legitimacy and problem-solving capacity.

Notes

¹Decisions on who would be eligible for citizenship of a united Cyprus is a highly sensitive question and one of the “core issues” in previous negotiations to solve the Cyprus problem. See, for example, the following European Parliament briefing: <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=10153&lang=EN>

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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