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Back to “the Tradition”

Turkey’s Changing Position from a Federal to a Two- State Solution to the Cyprus Conflict

Turkey and
Middle East
Program

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Abstract

When it came to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) defended a bicomunal, federal solution for Cyprus, and supported the Annan Plan to reunite the island. This appeared at the time as a remarkable change in Turkish foreign policy, which had backed a confederal solution in Cyprus since 1997. Nevertheless, after years of negotiations to solve the Cyprus conflict, Ankara has decided to leave aside its support for a federal solution and re-embrace “the traditional policy.” Following the failure to reach a resolution in 2017, Ankara, together with the officials in Northern Cyprus, now proposes a two-state solution or a loose confederation in Cyprus. This dramatic shift shows that the gap between Greeks and Turks has widened ever more.

This paper analyzes the evolution of Ankara’s position by looking at the very essence of the new proposal and the irreconcilable positions between the parties. It further argues that the change in Turkey’s position is the product of many variables, including negotiations that lasted for decades, the weakening transformative power of the EU, and the changing balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Résumé

Lorsque le Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP) arrive au pouvoir en 2002, le parti défend une solution bi-communale fédérale sur le dossier chypriote et soutient le Plan Annan qui prévoit la réunification de l’île. À l’époque, cela marque un changement remarquable dans la politique étrangère turque, qui poussait pour une solution confédérale à Chypre depuis 1997. Cependant, après des années de négociations pour résoudre le conflit chypriote, Ankara a fait le choix de revenir à une « politique traditionnelle ». Après l’échec de 2017, Ankara et les officiels de Chypre du Nord soutiennent dorénavant une solution à deux États ou une confédération « lâche » à Chypre. Ce tournant souligne à quel point le fossé entre Grecs et Turcs s’est creusé.

Cette note analyse l’évolution de la position d’Ankara en s’intéressant à l’essence même de cette nouvelle proposition et à l’opposition irréconciliable entre ces deux parties. Le changement de positionnement de la Turquie est le produit d’une pluralité de variables, liée notamment à l’enlisement des négociations, la faiblesse du pouvoir de l’Union Européenne et la reconfiguration des équilibres des pouvoirs en Méditerranée orientale.

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Introduction

A new TV series, called “Once upon a time in Cyprus” (*Bir zamanlar Kıbrıs*), started on Turkish Radio Television (TRT) on April 1st, 2021. It tells the story of Turkish Cypriots in the 1960s. The TV series starts with the infamous “Bloody Christmas” events, in which Greek Cypriot militants from the EOKA¹ attacked Turkish villages on December 21, 1963. The outbreak of violence resulted in 25,000 Turkish Cypriots becoming refugees.² Using many nationalist symbols, the TV series also pays tribute to the first president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Rauf Denktaş. In this respect, beyond being a historical production for a Turkish state media channel, it is also a reflection of the change in the Turkish government’s position on the Cyprus conflict.

The Justice and Development Party (the AKP or Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) has been in power in Turkey since 2002. Contrary to their earlier position, which had pointed towards a reunification of Cyprus, officials of the Turkish government now defend a two-state solution or a loose confederation.³ This is a dramatic change in the AKP’s position. Having previously criticized the two-state solution as being “the traditional policy of the Turkish state”, the AKP government has now decided to drop its support for a federal solution and has embraced “the traditional policy,” after years of negotiations to solve the Cyprus conflict.

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1. Ethniki Organosis Kypriou Agoniston (EOKA or the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters) was a Greek Cypriot nationalist paramilitary organization. In the 1950s it was established to end British rule on the island and unify Cyprus with Greece. The objective of unification was known as *ENOSIS* (Union). Led by a former colonel of the Greek Army (Georgios Grivas), EOKA primarily attacked British forces and Greeks collaborating with them starting in 1955. At the beginning, EOKA was careful not to target Turkish Cypriots on the island. However, after British rulers’ decision to recruit the Turkish Cypriots for protection in the police force, the intercommunal conflict gained ground. In 1956, the Turkish Cypriots formed Volkan, a paramilitary organization which later became known as the Turkish Resistance Organization (TMT) to counter EOKA. After a relatively peaceful period after the independence of Cyprus in 1960, tensions escalated starting from the end of 1963.

2. Report by the Secretary General on the United Nations Operations in Cyprus September 10, 1964, available at: www.securitycouncilreport.org.

3. The proposal of a loose confederation refers to a confederal state that would bring sovereign states of Greek and Turkish Cypriots under the same umbrella, in a decentralized system.

This paper examines this change in Turkish foreign policy. It is important to understand Turkey’s positions to have a perspective on the future course of diplomatic affairs in the Cyprus conflict. For this purpose, we need to analyze the Turkish side’s arguments for a two-state solution and look at the steps taken by Turkey in coordination with the TRNC in support of this current strategy, in order to understand the dynamics behind Turkey’s changing position on Cyprus. I argue that the change in Turkey’s position is the product of many variables including negotiations that lasted for decades, the weakening transformative power of the European Union (EU), and the change in power balances in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Cyprus island map



Credits: Rainer Lesniewski.

A Dramatic Shift in the Turkish Position towards a “Two-State Solution” for the Island

On April 27-29 2021, an unofficial meeting dedicated to the Cyprus conflict took place under the auspices of United Nations (UN) General Secretary Antonio Guterres in Geneva. It aimed to pave the way for a return to official negotiations. Before coming to Geneva, officials from both Turkey and the TRNC shared their position in different forums, speaking about the need for a paradigm change to solve the conflict. They noted that the negotiations that have been under way since 1968 have ended in deadlock and have called for a new approach. Blaming the Greek side’s stance in the Crans-Montana talks,⁴ the representatives of the Turkish community and Turkey argued that future discussions should be based on a two-state solution or a confederation.

The Turkish six-point proposal in Geneva

The leader of the Turkish community, Ersin Tatar, presented a six-point proposal in Geneva,⁵ asking the Secretary General to submit a new UN Security Council Resolution which would recognize equal the international status and sovereign equality of the two sides in Cyprus. The next step would be a new results-oriented negotiation, starting with a time limit. The proposal also envisions participation of the EU as an observer to the negotiations. Finally, in case of a resolution being found at the end of the new round of negotiations, the agreed plan would be put to a referendum held concomitantly in the northern and southern parts of the island.

The set of proposals shows that officials from Turkey and the TRNC are on the same page. Both want to avoid an open-ended negotiation, which they argue would likely lead to further futile diplomatic discussions. Therefore, they are pushing for one last negotiation with a time limit. In case of failure in reaching a solution, the Turkish side of the

4. “Crans-Montana Cyprus Talks Fail Amid Provocations”, *Daily Sabah*, July 11, 2021, available at: www.dailysabah.com.

5. B. Altuğ, E. Öz, M. İkbâl Arslan, “Trnc President Tatar Proposed a Six-Point Roadmap for a Permanent Solution in Cyprus”, April 28, 2021, available at: www.aa.com.tr.

island would be recognized as sovereign by the international community and the embargo would be removed.

The Turks argue that the reunification model proposed by the Greek side would designate the Turkish community as a minority in a new state. In the long run, such a formulation is seen as a threat to the very existence of the Turkish community.⁶ Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu thus opposed the previous negotiation framework, emphasizing that “in case of recognition of sovereign equality a new process could begin. From now on, the negotiations should continue between two states rather than two communities... in the meeting we reminded [our counterparts], with Mr. Tatar, that we closed the book on federation in 2017”.⁷

The irreconcilable positions between the parties

The roadmap proposed by Ersin Tatar does not impose a definite solution. The Turks argue that in the end, if both sides can reach an agreement, the North and the South can unite within a loose confederation; at the same time, the negotiations could end up in a civilized divorce with a two-state solution. Still, none of these solutions is a viable option for the Greek side. With the support of the EU and permanent members of the UNSC, the Greeks want to preserve a solution based on federation. Before the meeting in Geneva, the officials of Greece and the Republic of Cyprus (RC) convened in Athens on April 21st. President of the RC, Nicos Anastasiadis, stated that “the solution can only be based on the bizonal bicomunal federation, with one sovereignty, one nationality and one international personality; and of course, with the withdrawal of the occupation troops and the abolition of the anachronistic system of guarantees”.⁸

Guarantor status

One of the main elements of the disagreement is the status of guarantor states, that Mr. Anastasiadis labelled as “anachronistic” and which he wants abolished. In fact, the status of guarantor states can be traced back to the late 1950s. After the meeting in Zurich (February 5-11, 1959) and conference in London (February 19, 1959), the parties agreed on a legal framework defining the structure of the Republic of Cyprus. Later,

6. “Newsbreak... Trnc President Tatar Announced That the Door of Federations Is Open No More”, April 25, 2021, *Milliyet*, available at: www.milliyet.com.tr; www.tr.euronews.com.

7. M. Çavuşoğlu, “Geneva Is a Historical Critical Juncture in the Cyprus Issue”, April 29, 2021, *Kıbrıs Postası*, available at: www.kibrispostasi.com.

8. “Mitsotakis, Anastasiadis Coordinate Actions in View of Geneva Meeting”, *in-Cyprus*, April 21, 2021, available at: in-cyprus.philenews.com.

the agreed documents became effective with the independence of the RC in 1960.⁹ Annexed to the agreed text in these meetings was a Treaty of Guarantee, drawing a framework for the status of guarantor states. According to Article IV of this Treaty:

In the event of a breach of the provisions of the present Treaty, Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom undertake to consult together with respect to the representations or measures necessary to ensure observance of those provisions. In so far as common or concerted action may not prove possible, each of the three guaranteeing Powers reserves the right to take action with the sole aim of re-establishing the state of affairs created by the present Treaty.

Guarantor states thus have a right to take unilateral or joint action to reestablish security in the island.¹⁰ Turkey thus justified its 1974 military operation with reference to its guarantor status. Nevertheless, such legal grounds did not prevent the political and economic consequences that Turkey faced in the aftermath of the intervention: the United States (US) placed an arms embargo on Turkey in December 1974 and the Cyprus issue turned out to be a most thorny topic in the context of Ankara’s relations with the European Community, and later with the EU.

Both the Greek Cypriots and Greece insist that the new state should have full sovereignty over its territories without any guarantors or presence of foreign forces and argue that the guarantee of the European Union (EU) would be enough to maintain peace and security on the island. While President Anastasiadis claims that the guarantor system was designed within the political dynamics of the 20th century and the new republic’s sovereignty should no longer be constrained by such clauses, the Turkish side does not trust the EU’s security mechanisms as being sufficient. The TRNC and Turkey still believe for their part that the guarantor status would be one of the main insurances to maintain peace and stability on the island. Ersin Tatar likes to recall that nobody in Europe moved a finger in Bosnia in 1995.¹¹ Thus, giving up its guarantor rights altogether remains a politically sensitive issue in Turkey.

9. “Report Of the United Nations Mediator on Cyprus to the Secretary-General”, United Nations Security Council, March 26, 1965, available at: www.securitycouncilreport.org.

10. Harry J. Psomiades, “The Cyprus Dispute”, *Current History*, Vol. 48, No. 285, 1965, p. 272. There are also opposing views about the interpretation of Article IV, on the basis that such a framework contradicts the UN Charter. For further information see: E. T. Rossides, “Cyprus and the Rule of Law”, *Journal of International Law and Commerce*, Vol. 17, No. 21, 1991, pp. 55-60.

11. TRNC President Ersin Tatar: “We Might Accept the Confederation if Our Sovereignty Is Recognized”, February 7, 2021, available at: www.cnnturk.com.

Turkish troops in Cyprus

Another element that stands as an obstacle to negotiations is the presence of the Turkish military on the island. The Greek side calls the Turkish soldiers as “the occupiers”, whereas for Turks they are “peace forces” who brought stability to the island after 1974. Within the framework of the Annan Plan in 2004, Ankara had agreed to decrease the number of Turkish troops and leave only a symbolic force: the number of soldiers would have been reduced to 650 for Turkey and 950 for Greece.¹² These quotas were the same in the Treaty of Alliance agreed by the parties in 1960.¹³ This would constitute a profound change, considering the current presence of a Turkish army corps with an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 troops.

Mr. Anastasiadis put forward the withdrawal of Turkish troops as a condition in 2017.¹⁴ In response, recalling the smaller size of the Turkish Cypriot population compared to the Greek one, the then President of the TRNC Mustafa Akıncı said that the need for the security of Turkish Cypriots had to be respected. He added that if the discourse of “no soldier no guarantee” continued, negotiations would end before starting.¹⁵ Indeed, the negotiations in Crans-Montana collapsed in 2017, as presumed by President Akıncı. Mr. Anastasiadis nonetheless repeated his position in Athens before the April 2021 meeting, confirming that the issue was a redline for the Greek Cypriots.

In 2017, Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that a full withdrawal of the Turkish forces from divided Cyprus is “out of the question” unless Greece also agrees to pull out troops (the number of Greek soldiers is estimated to be around 1,000).¹⁶ This could be seen as a compromise, but in a recent telephone interview with a columnist from Sabah daily,¹⁷ Mr. Erdoğan took a more rigid line, saying that:

We will not leave Cyprus open to the attack of Greeks. The withdrawal of Turkish troops [from Cyprus] cannot even be suggested. We will pursue diplomatic efforts in the international platforms in the coming days. Their

12. See the part “Dynamics Behind the Change in the Akp’s Policy” for further details on the Annan Plan.

13. Treaty of Alliance (with Additional Protocols). Nicosia, August 16, 1960, available at: www.peacemaker.un.org.

14. “Cyprus Talks: Erdogan Dismisses Full Turkish Troop Withdrawal”, BBC News, January 13, 2017, available at: www.bbc.com.

15. S. Girit, “Mustafa AKİNCİ: It Is Not Possible Turkish Troops to Leave Cyprus”, BBC News Türkçe, January 9, 2017, available at: www.bbc.com.

16. “Cyprus Talks: Erdogan Dismisses Full Turkish Troop Withdrawal”, BBC News, January 13, 2017.

17. S. Bursalı, “We Cannot Trust Anyone, but Ourselves”, Sabah, May 17, 2021, available at: www.sabah.com.tr.

[the Greeks’] position regarding the TRNC is clear, but we will continue to claim the rights of the Turkish Cypriots. But let me say this, we don’t trust anyone, but ourselves.

On several aspects, the gap between the parties is thus clear and these differences set the tone for Geneva. Under these circumstances Antonio Guterres could only admit that there is “not enough common ground to allow for the resumption of formal negotiations” and added that the UN would make a new attempt in “probably two or three months”.¹⁸ Hoping for a compromise to arise in a such short period of time may seem over-optimistic. Still, Mr. Guterres’ position has allowed channels of communication to be kept open for a possible resolution of the conflict.

18. S. Nebehay, M. Kambas, T. Gumrukcu, “UN’s Guterres Says Common Ground Elusive in Cyprus Talks”, April 29, 2021, Reuters, available at: www.reuters.com.

Turkey's Policy of Coordinating Closely with the TRNC

Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in 1983, the Turkish Cypriot community has suffered an economic and political blockade. The UNSC Resolution No. 541 “calls upon States not to recognize any Cypriot State other than the Republic of Cyprus”. Accordingly, no country in the world, other than Turkey, recognizes the TRNC. This has had economic and political consequences for the Turkish community.

The economic outlook and cooperation between Turkey and the TRNC

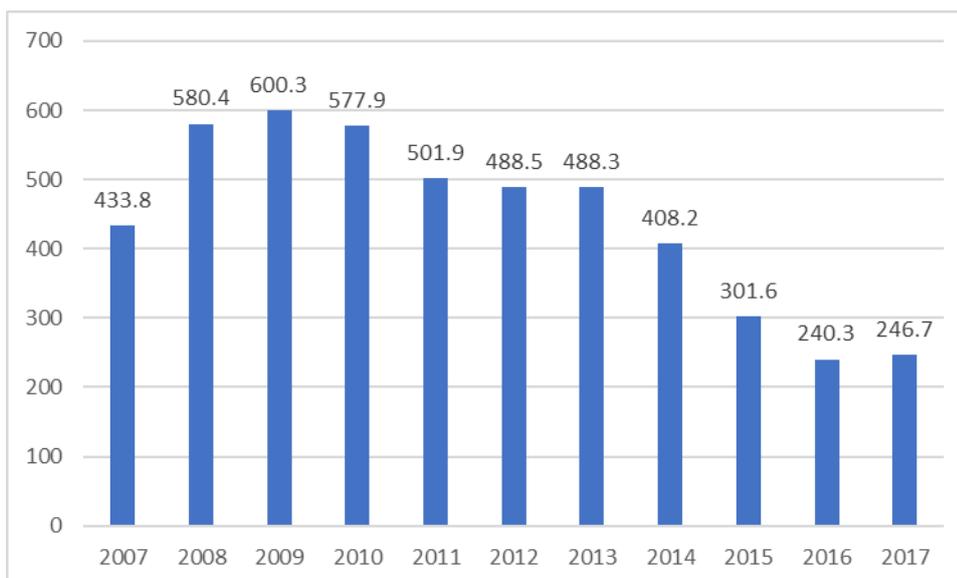
The TRNC's economy is mainly dependent on Turkey, due to the current isolation policy imposed on it. To begin with, there are no direct flights to Ercan Airport in Nicosia, other than the flights from Turkey. This hinders the development of trade and tourism in the North. The same applies to ports in the TRNC: in October 1974, the Republic of Cyprus declared that the ports of Famagusta (Gazimağusa), Kyrenia (Girne) and Karavostasi (Gemikonağı) were closed to all vessels. This means that international cargo arrives primarily at Mersin port in Turkey, before being shipped to the TRNC. This indirect transportation route increases the costs of imports for Northern Cyprus. Moreover, there is an ongoing *de facto* trade embargo on the North by the EU. In April 1994, a decision by the European Court of Justice put an end to the exportation of agricultural products (mainly citrus fruits) to Europe.¹⁹ In 1994, the share of agricultural products in total exports from Northern Cyprus was 48.1%, and this decision has had strongly negative consequences on the economy of the TRNC.

Due to the economic embargo, the TRNC needs financial transfers from Turkey. As can be seen on the graph below, Turkey transferred \$4.86 billion to the TRNC between 2007 and 2017, and transfers will amount to \$336.83 million in 2021, within the

19. S. Talmon, “The Cyprus Question before the European Court of Justice”, *EJIL*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2001, p. 729.

framework of the Turkey-TRNC Economic and Monetary Cooperation Agreement.²⁰ These transfers are mainly used to fund public expenditures, including infrastructure and defense projects, thus covering budget deficits and providing incentives to the real sector.

Turkey's Transfers to the TRNC (\$ million)



Source: Tuğba Sin, “TRNC Economic Indicators Report, Republic of Turkey”, Embassy of Nicosia – Development and Cooperation Office, July 2018.

The economy of the North has diversified for the last two decades with investments in the tourism, education and real estate sector. It has become more dynamic, but still there is a big gap in per capita income between the TRNC (\$12,649, TRNC Statistical Institute 2019)²¹ and the RC (\$27,858, World Bank 2019).²²

Tourism has been the backbone of the economy for years, but recently the higher education and construction sectors have become locomotives for growth. There are 100,000 university students in the North and almost 90% of these come from abroad. Considering that the population is 326,000, the number of university students represents nearly a third of the population. In the academic year 2019-2020, students registered in the TRNC universities came from 140 different countries. There are 21 universities in the North and the programs mainly attract students from the Middle East and Africa.²³

20. A. Yasin Güler and M. İkbâl Arslan, “Turkey, Turkish Cyprus Sign Financial Cooperation Pact”, March 3, 2021, AA, available at: www.aa.com.tr.

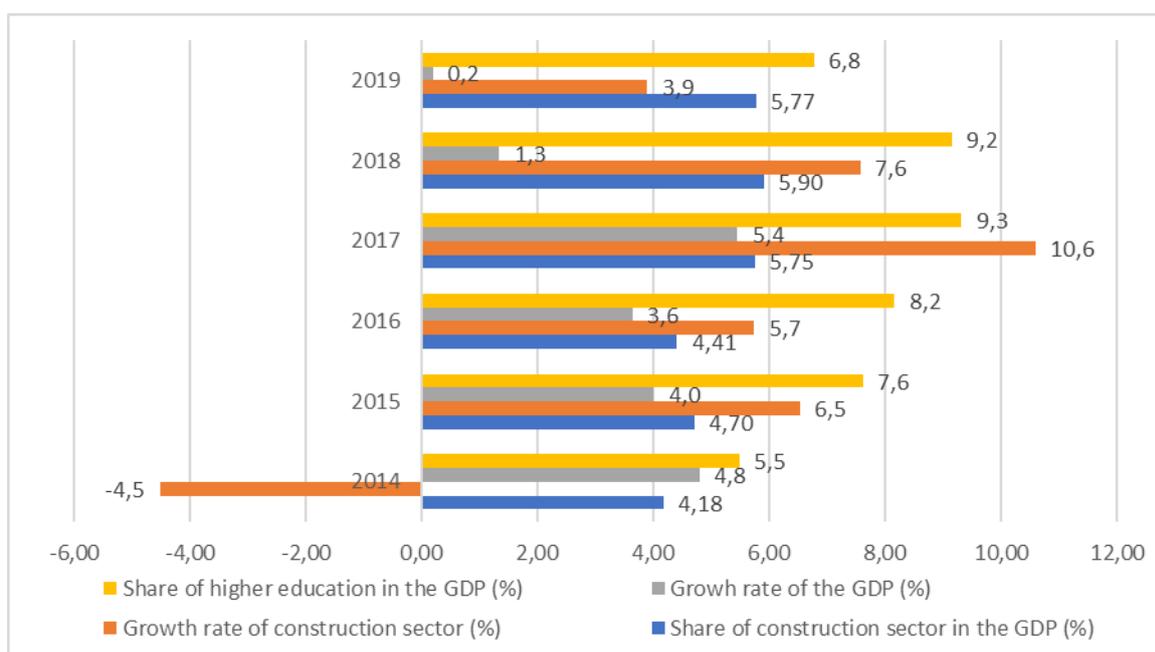
21. Available at: www.stat.gov.ct.tr.

22. Available at: data.worldbank.org.

23. “We Have 41,219 Students from 140 Countries”, *Kıbrıs Gazetesi*, December 19, 2019, available at: www.kibrisgazetesi.com.

At the top of the list stand Turkish students with 50,286 enrollments. Nigerians and Jordanians come next, with 7,916 and 3,405 students respectively. These students contribute to TRNC’s economy immensely, by creating domestic demand and bringing in foreign currency.

Some Economic Indicators of TRNC



Source: “Statistical Yearbook 2019”, TRNC Statistical Institute, Nicosia: December 2020.

The construction sector has also been thriving rapidly just as in Turkey. The growth rate of the sector was higher than the GDP, between 2015 and 2019: at 5% per year on average for the period. The price of luxurious residences went up to £1.5 million in Kyrenia (Girne).²⁴ However, the prices of summer residences and apartments are still attractive for foreigners. Even though the market dynamics has been negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis, investors are still coming from Scandinavia, Russia and the UK.²⁵

24. “Pioneer of the Real Estate Sector in Cyprus: Kyrneia”, *Haberturk*, February 19, 2019, available at: www.haberturk.com.

25. E. Orakçoğlu, “Bottleneck in the Real Estate Sector”, *Kıbrıs Gazetesi*, April 21, 2021, available at: www.kibrisgazetesi.com.

Domestic politics following the water pipeline to Cyprus and the re-opening of Varosha

In spite of all these developments, Turkey’s financial support and development projects have been the main pillars of economic momentum in the North. Within this framework, the Turkish plan to supply water to the northern part of the island appears to be absolutely vital. The project was completed in four years and cost approximately \$590 million (£1.6 billion).²⁶ Following completion, it has pumped 75 million m³ of water per annum to the island from Turkey since 2015. Considering water poverty in the North, the pipeline has contributed to the development of many sectors including agriculture and tourism. The pipeline passes beneath the sea for 80 kilometers, before reaching the shores of the island, where it is then stored in a reservoir created by the Geçitköy dam, prior to distribution to households.

The pipeline stopped pumping water due to technical reasons at the beginning of 2020. Water deficiency became critical when the level of water decreased in the reservoir. The supply of water resumed in the autumn of 2020 after repairs. In the reopening ceremony of the pipeline Ersin Tatar, the then Prime Minister of the TRNC, came to Ankara. Together with President Erdoğan, he announced that Varosha (Maraş) would be reopened to the public before the presidential elections. Located on the green line, which separates the island into North and South, the district of Varosha was closed to the public in 1974. Previously, the city had been known as the Las Vegas of the Mediterranean with its luxurious hotels. After its closure, it turned into a ghost-town, but remained a contested area during the negotiations. In 1983, the town’s status was even mentioned in the UNSC Resolution No. 550, stating that the UNSC “considers attempts to settle any part of Varosha by people other than its inhabitants as inadmissible and calls for the transfer of that area to the administration of the United Nations”.²⁷

Naturally, the announcement of re-opening such a symbolic place triggered a political crisis on the eve of presidential elections in the TRNC. The People’s Party (PP), a member of the then incumbent coalition, left the government on October 6th. The PP’s chairman Kudret Özersay, who was also a presidential candidate for the 2020 elections, stated that Mr. Tatar had used the opening of Varosha as an electioneering ploy, without informing his coalition partners. In parallel,

26. O. Bilge, “Water to Cyprus in Numbers”, *Hurriyet*, October 17, 2015, available at: www.hurriyet.com.tr.

27. Full text of the resolution is available at: www.unscr.com.

the then president of the TRNC Mustafa Akıncı, criticized this step as an intervention by Ankara in the elections.²⁸

In the first round of the elections, Mr. Akıncı received 32.34% of the votes, whereas Mr. Tatar was the runner-up with 29.84%. Kudret Özersay came fourth, out of eleven candidates with 5.74% of the votes. In the second round, Ersin Tatar was elected as the new president with 51.69% of the votes cast. In other words, the strong supporter of the federal solution, Mustafa Akıncı, lost the elections, whereas the proponent of the two-state solution, Ersin Tatar, became the new leader of the Turkish community. The votes taken by the two candidates were rather close and the impact of Ankara’s position (or interference) continued to be discussed afterwards both in Turkey and in the TRNC.

Mr. Akıncı had already lost Ankara’s support even before the elections. In November 2019, he had openly criticized Turkey’s operation *Peace Spring* in Syria, which led him to clash publicly with President Erdoğan. In an interview released by the *Guardian* in early 2020, he said that “in case of a failure of a reunification in an equitable federal solution...the North would grow increasingly dependent on Ankara and could end up being swallowed up, as a *de facto* Turkish province”.²⁹ Making an analogy with the annexation of Hatay (Alexandrette) by Turkey in 1939, he also added that he would not be a second Tayfur Sökmen (the president of the Hatay Republic in the 1930s). His statements were harshly condemned by Turkish officials, including the chairman of the Nationalist Action Party (NAP/MHP). Devlet Bahçeli even blamed Mr. Akıncı for using EOKA’s language and further suggested that “if his suspicious views about Turkishness prevailed, living in the South for the rest of his life would be a reasonable choice”.³⁰

The opening of Varosha was, in any event, a symbolic step, demonstrating change in the Turkish position. The town has always been an important trump card in the bargaining process and was left to the Greek side with the Annan Plan: yet the transfer did not take place as the plan was rejected in a referendum. In the opening ceremony, the Turkish officials claimed that the land belonged to the foundations (*vakıflar*) of the Ottoman Empire and was illegally confiscated under the British administration. According to this argument, Greek and foreign claims to the land were considered

28. “Coalition Partner in the Northern Cyprus Withdrew, PM Pointed Out Aftermath of the Elections for the New Government”, October 7, 2020, BBC Türkçe, available at: www.bbc.com.

29. L. Harding, “Turkish Cypriot Leader Warns Cyprus Is Facing Permanent Partition”, *The Guardian*, February 6, 2020, available at: www.theguardian.com.

30. “Newsbreak: Nap’s Leader Bahçeli’s Reacts to AKİNCİ’s Statements”, *Hurriyet*, February 9, 2021, available at: www.hurriyet.com.tr.

baseless.³¹ Such a statement comes at a critical juncture for Turkey’s position regarding property rights in Cyprus. However, the inventory of property, which is being closely followed by former settlers, still continues and the officials have stated that the re-opening of the whole town will be done with consideration of property rights.³²

As expected, the EU and the UN have condemned the decision to open Varosha. But their statements have had no impact on Turkey’s position. In fact, following the limited opening of the town, there were many reports in the Turkish media suggesting that the town would be rebuilt and reopened for tourism.³³ Such a scenario would involve an even bigger diversion from the initial conventional position.

Altogether, the coordination between Ankara and Nicosia has become more intense since 2010. The construction of two more lines supplying natural gas and electricity from Turkey to the island is being discussed. In case of realization, these projects would further contribute to the development of the economy in the TRNC, and also consolidate the asymmetric interdependence between Ankara and Nicosia. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the potential contribution of these projects to the economy of the island.

31. H. M. Poyraz and B. Özdemir, “Decision to Open Varosha and Strategic Gains”, AA, October 12, 2020, www.aa.com.tr.

32. A. Yıldız, “We Support a Fair Share of Resources in the Eastern Mediterranean”, AA, September 12, 2020, available at: www.aa.com.tr.

33. A. Eroğlu, “338 Greek Applied for Varosha”, *Yenişafak*, November 17, 2020, available at: www.yenisafak.com.

The Dynamics behind the Change in AKP's Policy

When it came to power in 2002, the AKP defended a bicomunal, federal solution for Cyprus, based on the Belgian model.³⁴ After winning the majority in Parliament, it pursued this line and supported the Annan Plan. This appeared at the time as a dramatic shift in Turkish foreign policy, which had supported a confederal solution in Cyprus since 1997.³⁵ After the elections, the chairman of the AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, said that “Turkey’s traditional Cyprus policy does not coincide with ours...We defend mutual sacrifice, not compromise...We support continuation of the negotiations, and a Plan-B [no-resolution] is not acceptable [for us]”.³⁶ This led to a rift between the Turkish government and the leadership of the TRNC. Rauf Denктаş, like his counterpart Tasos Papadopoulos on the Greek side, was opposed to the Annan Plan. The Turkish government openly criticized Denктаş, arguing that he had undermined the prospect of a solution for Cyprus.³⁷

Almost two decades later, the AKP government has changed its position and has chosen to support one of the most intransigent representatives of Denктаş’s ideas, Ersin Tatar. Never-ending negotiations, blurred prospects of EU membership for Turkey, the discovery of hydrocarbon resources in the vicinity of the island, and changing dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean have all been significant factors in shifting Turkey’s position.

The declining momentum of the EU’s transformative power on Turkey

After the official recognition of its candidate status in 1999 at the Helsinki Summit, Turkey’s relations with the EU gained momentum. When the AKP won the elections in November 2002, Turkey’s EU

34. AKP’s Party Declaration 2002, p. 90, available at: www.akparti.org.tr.

35. M. Fırat, “Relations With Greece” (Yunanistan’la İlişkiler), p. 475 in Baskın Oran (ed.), *Turkish Foreign Policy: Facts and Analyses with Documents, Vol. II: 1980-2001* (Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar, Cilt:II, 1980-2000), İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2004.

36. “Erdoğan: The Akp’s Cyprus Policy Is Different”, *Hurriyet*, December 12, 2002, available at: www.hurriyet.com.tr.

37. K. Özersay, “Cyprus Issue”, p. 647 in Baskın Oran (ed.) *Turkish Foreign Policy: Facts and Analyses with Documents, Vol. III: 2001-2012* (Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar, Cilt:III, 2001-2012), İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2017.

membership was a priority in the political agenda. The AKP’s predecessors had taken political risks, critical steps in favor of rapprochement and had passed important structural reforms before the elections. Yet such strong reforms did not prevent their electoral defeat. After the AKP’s landslide victory, the new government also embraced the EU agenda and continued the reform process. However, the Cyprus issue remained a thorny issue in EU-Turkey relations.

In parallel with its EU policy, the AKP government decided to support the Annan Plan in 2004. Its constructive discourse in support of a federal solution for Cyprus played a positive role in the European Council’s decision in 2004 to start accession negotiations in 2005.³⁸

After years of negotiations, the referendum for reunification took place on April 24th, 2004. 75.8% of the Greek Cypriots said “No” to the Annan Plan, whereas 64.9% of the Turkish Cypriots said “Yes”. The fact that the AKP and the opposition in the North jointly backed the Plan was influential in shaping the choice of Turkish Cypriots. Yet it was clearly rejected in the South.

The condition of reaching a solution to the conflict before granting effective EU membership to Cyprus had been removed at the Helsinki Summit in 1999.³⁹ The RC would thus become the member of the EU in any case, even if the Annan Plan was rejected. Nathalie Tocci argues that, during the referendum campaign, rejectionists advocated that “Cyprus’ membership and Turkey’s aspirations to join the Union would increase Greek Cypriot bargaining power”.⁴⁰ Consequently, the perception of potential leverage for the Greek Cypriots undermined the cost of opposing the plan, and supporters of the plan lost in the South.

Following the RC’s entry into the Union, the conflict became a European internal issue, although the Europeanization of the conflict did not bring any improvements.⁴¹ As presumed, the Greek Cypriots gained leverage in shaping EU policies through their veto power. Thus, despite the Turkish community’s approval of the referendum, the embargo on the TRNC was not removed and the promised EU aid was not sent to the North.⁴²

38. “Presidency Conclusions”, Brussels European Council Summit, December 16-17, 2004, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu>.

39. “Presidency Conclusions”, Helsinki European Council Summit, December 10-11, 1999.

40. N. Tocci, *Reflections on Post-Referendum Cyprus: The International Spectator*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2004, p. 43.

41. K. Ulusoy, “The Cyprus Conflict: Turkey’s Strategic Dilemma”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2016, p. 393.

42. S. Barış Gülmez, “The Cyprus Policy of the CHP: Change or Continuation?”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2007, p. 134.

The Cyprus issue thus remained on the agenda, but it did not feature as much as before. The prospect of Turkey’s membership of the EU lost momentum, particularly in the second half of the 2000s.⁴³ Indeed, following the change of political leadership in France and Germany, Turkey’s membership became a domestic issue in these influential EU member states. While leaders like Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder had played a constructive role, their successors Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel questioned Turkey’s membership by bringing up concerns such as the Union’s effective capacity to absorb new members. In parallel, the pro-EU agenda gradually went down in the AKP’s list of political priorities. After playing a crucial role both in the domestic reform process and to uphold Turkey’s support for a solution in Cyprus, the EU’s transformative power declined dramatically within a decade.

Shifting geopolitical balances in the Eastern Mediterranean

In the 2010s, the atmosphere dramatically changed in the Eastern Mediterranean following the new discoveries of hydrocarbon reserves. From 2011 onwards, and after the Arab uprisings, the changing geopolitical fault lines in the Middle East further led to nation states striving for security in their foreign policies. The region then became an arena of power competition, with the notable engagement of actors like the US, Russia, France, and Iran.

Against this backdrop, the Republic of Cyprus signed agreements with Mediterranean coastal states like Egypt (2003), Lebanon (2007) and Israel (2010) during the 2000s, in order to delimit its maritime borders. After the discovery of giant gas deposits off Israeli shores, the RC agreed with international energy companies to organize explorations off the coasts of Cyprus.

Regional competition between Turkey and actors like Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt then triggered an escalation of tensions. Instead of de-escalating such tensions, Ankara opted to collaborate closely with the TRNC and started to resort to the use of hard power in the region.

Shifting balances in the region, along with the discovery of new energy reserves, have thus changed the nature of the conflict in Cyprus. The delimitation of maritime zones and agreements with energy companies have become a matter of concern for the Turks, and soon turned into a political problem. Turkey and the TRNC advocated that the decisions like giving licenses to energy companies should be taken

43. H. Tolga Bölükbaşı and S. Özçürümez, “Of Context, Interaction and Temporality: Historical Institutionalism and Turkey’s Approach to the Enp and the Ufm”, *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 4/5, 2011, p. 533.

together by the Greek and Turkish communities of the island; otherwise, they would violate the interests of the Turkish people in Cyprus.

In 2011, following the RC’s decision to give Noble Energy a license to start drilling off the island, Turkey signed a continental shelf agreement with the TRNC.⁴⁴ Moreover, a product sharing agreement was signed between TPAO (*Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı*, Turkish Petroleum Corporation) and the Ministry of Economy and Energy of the TRNC. After the agreement, TPAO opened an onshore well named Turkyurdu-1 near the town of Trikomo (İskele) and carried out seismic research offshore of the island.⁴⁵

Some of the gas blocks licensed by the TRNC overlap with those claimed by the Greek Cypriots.⁴⁶ Still, Turkey sent its drilling and seismic research vessels escorted by warships to the contested areas. In some cases, Turkish Navy vessels conducted maneuvers in these areas to stop drilling activities by companies licensed by the RC. Turkey’s policy was harshly criticized in the EU’s progress reports. Such maneuvers were considered a violation of the sovereign rights of the RC in its exclusive economic zone and territorial waters.⁴⁷ This led in 2019 to imposing sanctions on Turkish officials and entities, a decision that was extended in 2020 until November 2021.⁴⁸ However, such measures fell short of changing Turkey’s policies until the level of threats increased with an EU Council meeting in 2020. Turkey then decided to step back and re-called its survey ship (the *Oruç Reis*) to the port of Antalya to avoid a heavier set of sanctions that would potentially hamper its fragile economy.⁴⁹

The strengthening of security in Turkish foreign policy in the 2010s

The policies pursued by Ankara can be better explained by looking through the lens of seeking greater security, particularly in the second half of the 2010s. For almost a decade, Turkey has pursued a strategy of power projection in a wider geography. It established new military

44. “Continental Shelf Agreement Was Signed”, *Al Jazeera Turk*, September 22, 2011, available at: www.aljazeera.com.tr.

45. “KKTC”, TPAO, available at: www.tpao.gov.tr.

46. H. S. Özertem, “Turkish Foreign Policy and the Energy Bonanza in the Eastern Mediterranean”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2016, p. 366.

47. “Turkey 2020 Report”, European Commission, Brussels: 2020, p. 8, available at: ec.europa.eu.

48. “Sanctions Regime Against Illegal Drilling Activities in the Eastern Mediterranean Extended by One Year”, European Council of the European Union, November 6, 2020, available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

49. “Turkey’s ORUÇ Reis Back in Port Ahead of EU Summit”, *Daily Sabah*, November 30, 2021, available at: www.dailysabah.com.

bases abroad, like in Qatar and Somalia and also actively used its military power in conflict zones, like in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Traditionally, Ankara would shape such policies of engagement in coordination with international organizations, like NATO or the UN, but it has recently adopted robust, national security concerns in parallel with developments in nearby areas.

The Eastern Mediterranean is not an exception. Turkey perceives efforts to delimit maritime zones in the region as a major threat to its interests and also as a violation of its sovereign rights. Subsequently, along with the protection of the Turkish Cypriots’ rights, Turkey is pursuing a strategy that leverages its position in the region. Referring to the claims of Greece and the RC, Turkish officials argue that Turkey, having the longest coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean, cannot be pushed back to the Gulf of Antalya. The Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine currently reflects Turkey’s objective to protect its sovereign rights in the Mediterranean, the Aegean and the Black Sea.⁵⁰ In parallel, Ankara has enhanced its military presence and undertaken military exercises in the Aegean and the Mediterranean concomitantly since 2019. Escorting exploration activities of TPAO vessels by the Navy can also be understood within the framework of this doctrine.

The establishment of a drone base in Geçitkale (Lefkoniko) is another concrete example of Turkey’s assertive policy in the region. Following the decision to host French Navy vessels in the Mari naval base⁵¹ and the acquisition of Israeli drones by the RC,⁵² Turkey sent armed drones from its Dalaman base to Geçitkale in 2019. The then Prime Minister of TRNC Ersin Tatar stated that:⁵³

The strategic importance of Cyprus has increased more than ever. Turkey defends not only its interests but also the interests of Turkish Cypriots. The Blue Homeland comprises not only waters around Turkey, but also Cyprus. Greeks have provided bases to France, Israeli drones have been deployed on the island, Britain already has its bases. Under these circumstances, we cannot just be spectators.

50. The concept of the Blue Homeland doctrine was first used by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in a symposium in 2006. Later the concept was further developed by Admiral Cihat Yaycı. For more information, see A. DenizEAU, “Mavi Vatan, the ‘Blue Homeland’: The Origins, Influences and Limits of an Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey”, *Études de l’Ifri*, Ifri, April 2021.

51. “Cyprus, France Reportedly Agrees On Use of Naval Base”, *Ekathimerini*, May 16, 2019, available at: www.ekathimerini.com.

52. “Cyprus Stocking Up on Drones”, *Ekathimerini*, October 3, 2019, available at: knews.kathimerini.com.cy.

53. Ö. Bilge, “Drone Base in the TRNC: Turkish Drones Patrolling in Cyprus”, *Hurriyet*, December 12, 2019, available at: www.hurriyet.com.tr.

The Geçitkale base was constructed in 1982 for military purposes, and is now planned to become a permanent base for Turkish drones. Turkish experts argue that after the renovation, the base could later be used by F-16s when necessary.⁵⁴ Drones taking off from Geçitkale can patrol a wide geographical area in the Eastern Mediterranean, which makes the use of the airbase important, both strategically and symbolically.

Former Lieutenant General İsmail Pekin’s statements also reflect the changing perception of the security elite in Turkey. After the decision to establish a drone base in Geçitkale, Pekin said that the latest developments require Turkey to establish a naval base in Famagusta.⁵⁵ According to him, such a base would show Turkey’s assertiveness, contribute to its policies in the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean and provide Turkey with an advantage in gunboat diplomacy. Such a step has not been taken yet. However, it is hard to dismiss such a scenario totally, considering President Erdoğan’s declarations in 2018:⁵⁶

We do not have a base problem in Cyprus. We can reach Cyprus within minutes from Turkey. But Greece doesn’t have such a proximity. Thus, we do not need to establish a base in Cyprus. We do not have such a problem. This is just a psychological dimension of the issue. In this respect, we can establish a base if we need it. Our presence over there is important. We have to be strong in terms of capabilities. With all due respect, we will not decrease the number of troops there. We will increase them. They don’t listen. If they did so, we would have solved this issue with Kofi Annan. We accepted everything in the Annan Plan, but they sold out. From now on we will follow our own recipe [roadmap].

For the military elite, Cyprus is geopolitically a natural aircraft carrier in the Eastern Mediterranean. The presence of Turkish troops on the island has been seen an important guarantee for the protection of Turkish Cypriots’ interests for decades. Yet upgrading the Geçitkale base shows that Turkey seeks to project its power beyond the territories of the island. Considering this move in line with the Mavi Vatan doctrine, it will also contribute to Turkey’s balancing strategy in the region.

54. E. Toplar, “ Turkey to Establish a Drone Base in Cyprus! The Base Will Be Active as of July 20”, *Milliyet*, June 6, 2021, available at: www.milliyet.com.tr.

55. L. Elmacioğlu, “ Establishment of a Naval Base in Cyprus Is On the Agenda After the Drone Base in GEçitkale”, *Independent Türkçe*, available at: www.indyrturk.com.

56. “President Erdoğan Talked About That Issue for the First Time: It Is a Gift to the State, Not to Me”, *Vatan*, September 17, 2018, available at: www.gazetevatan.com.

Conclusion

The Cyprus issue has partly taken Greek-Turkish relations hostage, since the second half of the 20th century. The red lines of each party stand as serious obstacles to a solution. On the one hand, the Greek side demands the withdrawal of foreign forces and abolition of the guarantor status of Greece, Turkey and Britain. On the other hand, the Turkish side wants to keep a symbolic number of troops as peacekeepers on the island and continue its guarantor status. In the absence of a compromise on these issues, enduring disagreements on topics like power sharing, territorial arrangements further complicate the picture.

The parties have continued to meet in different forums since failing to reach a solution based on the Annan Plan in 2004. A promising initiative to find a solution within the framework of a bi-communal and bi-zonal federation failed once again in Crans-Montana in 2017. In this respect, the 2021 unofficial meeting in Geneva marks a turning point to resume negotiations. Yet, the talks stalled again, showing that the gap between positions has widened even more.

Together with Turkey, the new leadership in the North now supports a formula based on a two-state solution or a loose confederation. This is not seen as a viable option by the Greeks. Moreover, after the Geneva meeting, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres openly stated that it was impossible for his office to look beyond the limits of a solution based on federation. Thus, the Turkish side's new proposal has its own limitations.

It is clear that Turks need to search for the support of the permanent members of the UNSC before seeking a radical change at the negotiation table. The US is firmly backing a federal solution for the island, and officials from the Biden administration have not hesitated to express this in different contexts. It is also hard to expect a radical shift in Russia's position, which has been a close partner of the RC for decades, and is today an aspiring player in the region. Nevertheless, London's potential intervention as a game changer is being articulated out-loud in Turkey. After Brexit, London has gained new leeway in its foreign policy. A recent report in the *Sunday Express*,⁵⁷ claiming "UK ministers are considering officially

57. D. Maddox, "Britain Urged to Use Brexit Freedoms to Recognise North Cyprus as a Sovereign Country", *Sunday Express*, April 24, 2021, available at: www.express.co.uk.

recognizing North Cyprus as an independent country”, has also been cited by Turkish columnists to this end.⁵⁸

The dramatic change in the AKP’s position has not taken place overnight. Signs of transformation in Turkish foreign policy became more visible in the last decade. New discoveries of energy deposits, efforts to delimit the maritime zones and the transformation of the region into an area of power competition have dramatically shifted regional balances. In response, Turkey has decided to cooperate with the TRNC in many spheres, including signing agreements to delimit maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean to protect its interests. This has been accompanied by a policy of escalation and use of hard power instruments to offset steps taken by other actors.

Such a strategy resulted in increasing political pressure on Ankara. Subsequently, Turkey started to curb its activism before the end of 2020, which was also seen as a positive step by Brussels. The EU’s position has been effective in Turkey’s de-escalation. This strategy could be effective in de-escalating tension, but is not sufficient to change the course of affairs fundamentally, as in the early 2000s. It is important to note here that the lack of incentives from the EU, and its diminishing transformative power on Turkey has hardly contributed to a breakthrough in the conflict since 2004.

History proves that there are limits to a strategy which counts more on sticks than carrots. In this regard, the EU has a potential role to play, but considering the redlines of the parties, it is hard to estimate the odds for changing the present stalemate.

58. M. Gürcan, “Turkey Sees Turning Point In Failed Cyprus Summit”, *Al-Monitor*, May 3, 2021, available at: www.al-monitor.com.



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