

ERDOĞAN'S AMBIGUOUS NORTHERN CYPRUS POLICY: CALCULATION OR OVER-REACTION ?

Emel Akçali, Central European University

Ever since he came to power in 2002, the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan has been the main ally of pro-solution, pro-EU Turkish Cypriot socio-political actors. Erdoğan was supportive of these forces in their quest for the reunification of the Island and their claims for self-determination. On the domestic front, this was a way for Erdoğan to counter the statist-Kemalist elite in Turkey and, on the international scene, it was a way to ease Turkey's bid to join the European Union. Thus, by drastically changing Turkey's traditional foreign policy towards the Island giving full support to the Annan Plan for the reunification of the Island, he could gain the hearts and minds of pro-solution Turkish Cypriots. He was in fact so popular among them that their leader, Mehmet Ali Talat, qualified him as the Turkish politician who understood the Cyprus problem the best.

However, today, Erdoğan seems to have lost his popularity among the pro-solution Turkish Cypriots. One main reason is that Erdoğan's pro-Islamist government has been financing the construction of mosques in northern Cyprus and the opening of summer courses for children to study the Koran. These are seen as deliberate moves to change the cultural landscape of Northern Cyprus by pro-solution, pro-European socio-political actors. Another major reason is the neo-liberal economic policy of Erdoğan's government which wishes to straighten up the Northern Cyprus economy by imposing an austerity package. In reality, Turkish Cypriots themselves know that their economy is non-sustainable, can easily go bankrupt and hinders the private sector to flourish. According to the finance minister of Northern Cyprus, Ersin Tatar ,for example, if the austerity package imposed by Erdoğan's government is not implemented, the public sector salaries will not be paid at the end of the year. Furthermore, Turkish Cypriot economists are well aware that if Northern Cyprus ever becomes a part of the EU, the Turkish Cypriot economy needs to go through a shock therapy in order to comply with EU economic criteria.

Why has then the austerity package imposed by Turkey on Turkish Cypriot economy created such a powerful reaction among Turkish Cypriots and led to mass demonstrations? Arguably, the answer is not purely economic. The pro-solution and pro-EU socio-political actors in Northern Cyprus seem like using this package as a pretext to revive a self-determination sentiment among Turkish Cypriots so to find a solution to the Island's division and the de-facto situation of Northern Cyprus. Erdoğan is well aware of such sentiments and aspirations among Turkish Cypriots. Nevertheless, he responded to such demonstrations by accusing Turkish Cypriots of ungratefulness and calling Turkish Cypriot authorities to punish those who held offensive banners against Turkey during the demonstrations.

There may be two scenarios which may explain Erdoğan's over reaction to those Turkish Cypriots who he understood so well once upon a time. Scenario number one is that neither the Cyprus problem nor the EU integration are Erdoğan's priorities at the moment. Today, thanks to the diplomatic efforts of Turkish foreign affairs minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, alternative foreign policy scenarios that put an emphasis on a greater Turkish regional engagement outside Europe are developing in Turkey. Within such a framework, solving the Cyprus problem so that Turkey's bid to join the EU can be facilitated is not really that vital for Erdoğan's government as there is a great level of mistrust between the EU and Turkey at the moment. Erdoğan's priority is thus to concentrate on the northern part of Cyprus and to straighten up its economy, and he seems ready to fight against whoever will stand in his way.

Scenario number two is that Erdoğan's reaction against the Turkish Cypriot demonstrations is deliberate. He would like to pave the road for a Cyprus deal within his foreign policy of "zero problem" or "maximum cooperation" with neighbours by provoking anti-Turkey sentiments among Turkish Cypriots. This act of forcing division between Turks and Turkish Cypriots would save his face in case Turkey reached a compromise in the Cyprus problem. However, negotiations have been going on in Cyprus since 2008, and no one is optimistic. The Turkish Cypriot pro-solution and pro-EU forces feel confident that a provisional agreement could soon be reached, but the Greek Cypriots remain opposed to strict deadlines and timeframes. In such a case, it seems vain to follow any pro-solution policy in Cyprus and Erdoğan seems better off if he keeps pushing his neo-liberal economic agenda in Northern Cyprus. After-all, he knows well that Turkish Cypriots do not have many ways out of the Cyprus conundrum.