



THE CYPRUS PROBLEM AFTER THE VICTORY OF ERSIN TATAR AND TURKEY'S NEXT MOVE

Nikolaos Stelgias

Abstract

Tatar's victory brings to the fore essential questions, which this paper will attempt to answer. What happened during the 'presidential elections'? What is the latest socio-political atmosphere in the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey? What are the forthcoming moves of the new Turkish Cypriot leader and Ankara? In answering these crucial questions, the paper discusses Turkey's and the Turkish Cypriot community's focus on sovereign equality and the formulas for cooperation between the parties involved beyond the confines of the federation.

Introduction

"Fortunately for us, we established our state after the Peace Operation in 1974. We want to address the whole world [and say], this sovereignty issue is fundamental. Regardless of the solution model, we will continue to exist. We will never break our bonds with Turkey. The Turkish Cypriot people will continue to exist under the roof of their state."¹

Ersin Tatar made the above statement on the night of his election as the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community. The night of October 18, 2020 passed in the modern history of Cyprus as a historical turning point during which the prospect of alternative solutions to the Cyprus Problem have returned to the fore. That day, with Ankara's support, Tatar defeated Mustafa Akıncı, who until the last hour of his leadership continued to strongly support the bi-zonal, bi-communal federal solution. At this point it is essential to acknowledge that the influx of thousands

Dr Stelgias was born in 1982 in Istanbul and completed his doctorate in Athens, in 2011. He is a historian, researcher and writer. He has published many academic articles and books in English, Greek and Turkish, focusing on modern Turkey, Cyprus Issue, Kurdish Problem and the ongoing affairs and conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Dr Stelgias is also the correspondent of the Kathimerini Cyprus newspaper in the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey. Dr Stelgias' recent book, 'The Ailing Turkish Democracy' is available from the Cambridge Scholars Publishing House.

¹ "KKTC'nin Yeni Cumhurbaşkanı Ersin Tatar'dan Zafer Konuşması," İHA, October 18, 2020, <https://www.iha.com.tr/haber-kkctnin-yeni-cumhurbaskani-ersin-tatardan-zafer-konusmasi-872420/>

of settlers has a significant impact on the demographics in the occupied northern part of Cyprus.

Tatar's victory brings on essential questions, which this study will attempt to answer concisely. What happened during the 'presidential elections'? What is the latest socio-political atmosphere in the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey? What are the forthcoming moves of the new Turkish Cypriot leader and Ankara?

The first question mentioned above aims to help the reader understand the conditions prevailing when Tatar won the presidential elections. The second question helps us to understand the broader socio-political context in Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community, from which the vision of a two-state solution emerges. The answers to both questions are essential as to comprehend the strategy that the Turkish side will choose to pursue during the new period. The said strategy will also be discussed briefly at the end of our analysis.

What happened during the 'presidential elections'?

In October 2020, Turkish Cypriots were led to the 'ballot box' to elect the new leader of their community. The supporters of two conflicting visions for the solution of the Cyprus problem clashed at the two rounds of the 'presidential elections': The supporters of the federal solution and the camp the solution of two separate states. Ankara supported the second camp, which came out winning from the historic showdown.²

On the night of 18 October, the leader of the Turkish Cypriot Right, Ersin Tatar, emerged victorious from the second round by a small but notable margin. Three factors were important for Tatar's victory. First, the consolidation of the Turkish Cypriot Right's electoral base; second, Ankara's behind-the-scenes interventions and third, the support of the settlers. In this context, the cases of Famagusta and Trikomo are typical examples of the factors leading in the victory of the right-wing candidate. The large number of settlers, meaning the citizens of Turkey who had the right to 'vote' in the 'presidential elections' of 2020 living in these areas gave Tatar a clear advantage over his opponents.³

Tatar participated in the elections promoting the vision of solving the Cyprus problem based on the concept of two separate states. Just before his election to the leadership of the Turkish Cypriot community, when discussing his policies on the Cyprus Issue he repeatedly made mention to the term 'sovereign equality' ('eşit egemenlik' in Turkish, equal sovereignty)⁴ which was also the opinion of Ankara. During the 'election' period, Turkey openly intervened in the 'electoral

² "Premier Tatar Wins Presidential Runoff in N.Cyprus," Anadolu Ajansı, October 18, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/premier-tatar-wins-presidential-runoff-in-ncyprus/2010881>

³ "En Fazla Katılım Lefke'de," Kıbrıs, October 13, 2020, <https://www.kibrisgazetesi.com/kibris/en-fazla-katilim-lefkede-h97609.html>

⁴ "Cyprus Issue Should Be Resolved on Sovereign Equality," Anadolu Ajansı, accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/cyprus-issue-should-be-resolved-on-sovereign-equality/1979109>

process' advocating in favor of this use of term causing a backlash from supporters of the federal solution.⁵

The federal solution camp was defeated in the 2020 'presidential elections' by a small margin. Outgoing Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı participated in the final round of the elections having secured the support of Tufan Erhürman, who shared the federation vision and came third in the first round. After the final result, Akıncı accused Ankara that its interference in the elections had deprived the federation camp of victory.⁶

When the 'elections' were concluded, Tatar's victory put the prospect of the final partition of Cyprus on the table. As we will analyze below, the Tatar-Ankara duo has brought to the fore the possibility of solving the Cyprus problem based on the two-state formula. Ankara invoked the result of the 'presidential elections' to promote the claim that the majority of Turkish Cypriots now support this formula.⁷

What is the latest socio-political atmosphere in the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey?

The end of the 'presidential elections' found the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey amid the widespread Covid-19 pandemic and deepening economic crisis. The fall of the Turkish lira, the worsening financial situation and the pandemic affected all aspects of Turkey's daily life.⁸ The crisis also directly affected the Turkish Cypriot community, which is multidimensionally dependent on Turkey.

Due to the ongoing pandemic and economic crisis, the conservative nationalist government alliance in Turkey is experiencing deep turmoil. The situation within the governing coalition (conservative Justice and Development Party (Ak Party) and its nationalist allies) intensified a few weeks after the 'elections' with a change in the country's economic leadership.⁹ At the same time, the Erdoğan government, without giving up its peculiar positions and claims on a number of issues and under strain from the financial crisis, the pandemic and internal turbulence, issued new messages of friendship and cooperation to the West. Almost in parallel with the election of Joe Biden to the US Presidency, the Turkish President advocated strengthening his country's relations with the EU and

⁵ Yücel Vural, "Seçimlere Niçin Müdahale Edildi?," Yeni Düzen, October 23, 2020, <https://www.yeniduzen.com/secimlere-nicin-mudahale-edildi-16445yy.htm>

⁶ "Akıncı: 'Bu Sonuç Yaratıldı, Elde Edildi,'" Yeni Düzen, October 18, 2020, <https://www.yeniduzen.com/akinci-bu-sonuc-yaratildi-elde-edildi-132782h.htm>

⁷ "Erdoğan: Kıbrıs'ta İki Devletli Çözüm Müzakere Edilmeli," DW, November 15, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/tr/erdo%C4%9Fan-k%C4%B1br%C4%B1sta-iki-devletli-%C3%A7%C3%B6z%C3%BCm-m%C3%BCzakere-edilmeli/a-55608261>

⁸ "Turkish Central Bank under Pressure as Fears of Currency Crisis Loom," DW, November 6, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkish-lira-under-increasing-pressure/a-55516956>

⁹ "Scale of Turkey's Economic Crisis Triggered Erdogan Family Implosion," Financial Times, November 13, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/53271c57-d636-466a-936b-c58667d35f3a>

announced that his government would proceed with reforms in the fields of economy and justice.¹⁰

On the other hand, Tatar after his victory, left the post of the 'Prime Minister' to take over the "presidency" of the "TRNC". From 19 October to the end of November 2020, the right-wing parties represented in 'parliament' attempted to join forces in forming a new coalition government.¹¹ Ankara intervened in this process also, provoking thus a strong reaction in the Turkish Cypriot community.

Defeated in the 'presidential elections', the federation camp raised its voice against Ankara's interventions within the Turkish Cypriot community. On the anniversary of the death of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, on 10 November 2020, several political parties, organizations and citizens demonstrated against Ankara using the characteristic slogan "Freedom, not allegiance."¹²

What are the new moves of the new Turkish Cypriot leader and Ankara?

Immediately after the conclusion of the 'elections', the Ankara-Tatar duo took three significant steps on the Cyprus issue. Turkey and the new Turkish Cypriot leadership supported the convergence of two separate conferences in order to discuss the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the course of the Cyprus Issue. At the same time, the Turkish side focused on the two-state solution formula. Finally, steps for the opening of the closed city of Famagusta under Turkish Cypriot administration were intensified.

On the first issue, it should be noted that Turkey and Tatar are taking a positive approach to the convergence of an informal conference to clarify the landscape in the Cyprus Problem. The two political actors, Erdoğan and Tatar, are in favor of materializing the planned summit as a platform that will serve to promote alternative solution formulas. The new Turkish Cypriot leader has stressed the following:

"We (the two leaders) have agreed to support the UN Secretary-General's efforts to convene the conference at the right time and stage. We assess that such a conference would be an opportunity to put our new thoughts on the table. The five-way conference is the last chance to see if we can reach an agreement with the Greek Cypriot side."¹³

¹⁰ "Erdoğan: Kendimizi Avrupa'da Görüyoruz," DW, November 21, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/tr/erdo%C4%9Fan-kendimizi-avrupada-g%C3%B6r%C3%BCyoruz/a-55686063>

¹¹ "Saner İlan Etti: Kuramadık!," Yeni Düzen, November 19, 2020, <https://www.yeniduzen.com/saner-ilan-etti-kuramadik-133965h.htm>

¹² "İnönü Meydanı'nda 'Biat Değil Özgürlük' Sloganları Atıldı," Yeni Düzen, November 10, 2020, <https://www.yeniduzen.com/inonu-meydaninda-biat-degil-ozgurluk-sloganlari-133612h.htm>

¹³ "Türkiye İle KKTC'nin Kardeşliğini Korumamız Şart," Sözcü, November 8, 2020, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/dunya/turkiye-ile-kktcnin-kardesligini-korumamiz-sart-6116016>

Furthermore, in relation to the energy issue, which is at the epicentre of developments in the Eastern Mediterranean region, the Turkish side is also proposing an international conference. In this, Ankara lays down the essential condition of the Turkish Cypriots autonomously participating in the forum:

“President Erdogan believes that a regional conference in the Eastern Mediterranean, with the participation of all sides, including Turkish Cypriots, will result in positive and constructive decisions that will benefit everyone.”¹⁴

By aiming at separate conferences on the Cyprus and energy issues, Ankara and Tatar bring the two-state solution to the fore. The Turkish side puts forward this view based on the claim that there are two separate peoples in Cyprus who have lived *de facto* in particular parts of the island since 1974:

“Today, in Cyprus, there are two separate peoples, two separate democratic orders and two separate states. A two-state solution must be discussed and negotiated based on sovereign equality.”¹⁵

Moving one step further, Tatar puts forward the term ‘sovereign equality’. With this term, Tatar insists that there are *de facto* two separate sovereign state entities in Cyprus. Within this framework, he proposes the solution of the Cyprus problem with a formula that legitimizes the distinct presence and cooperation of these entities:

“If a process starts, we will bring to the table not only a federal solution but also [other] alternatives. We will push for a solution based on sovereign equality. I must say that nothing will ever be the same again.”¹⁶

Along with the abovementioned moves, Turkey and the new Turkish Cypriot leadership also insist on the opening of the closed city of Famagusta under Turkish Cypriot administration. A few weeks after Tatar's victory, the Turkish side made a show of force hosting a so-called ‘picnic’ in the area of Varoshia, attended by representatives of Turkey’s nationalist government alliance.¹⁷ At the time of the so-called ‘picnic’ it was made known in journalistic circles that there is an increase in the number of property owners applying to the ‘Real Estate Committee.’¹⁸

¹⁴ “Kritik ‘Doğu Akdeniz’ Zirvesi! İletişim Başkanlığı’ndan Açıklama,” *Hürriyet*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/son-dakika-haberler-kritik-dogu-akdeniz-zirvesi-iletisim-baskanligindan-aciklama-41617956>

¹⁵ “Turkey’s Erdogan Calls for ‘two-State Solution’ in Cyprus,” *DW*, November 15, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-erdogan-calls-for-two-state-solution-in-cyprus/a-55608867>.

¹⁶ “Cyprus Issue Should Be Resolved on Sovereign Equality,” *Anadolu Ajansı*, September 19, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/cyprus-issue-should-be-resolved-on-sovereign-equality/1979109>

¹⁷ “Erdoğan Met by Protests from Turkish Cypriots during Visit,” *The Guardian*, November 15, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/15/erdogan-met-by-protests-from-turkish-cypriots-during-visit-northern-cyprus>

¹⁸ “300 Βαρωσιώτες Έτοιμοι Να Επιστρέψουν,” *Καθημερινή*, November 22, 2020, <https://www.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/politiki/diplomatia/0300-barosiwtes-einai-etoimoi-na-epistrepsoyn-stis-perioysies-toys>

Conclusion: What will Ankara and the new Turkish Cypriot leadership do next?

The above analysis indicates that Cyprus is entering a critical crossroad at which the future of the effort to solve the Cyprus problem based on the federal formula will be judged. The federal solution formula, which measures a half a century life, has been stagnant since 2017. The points highlighted above, in the context of this brief analysis, offer a first reading of the possible new moves of the Turkish Cypriots and Ankara's leadership regarding the Cyprus issue. In particular, they lead us to three important arguments.

First, the voice of those Turkish Cypriots who support alternative formulas for the solution of the Cyprus Issue is now heard in a more resonant way. The Turkish Cypriot political camp which is in favor of 'divorce' has emerged victorious from the 'presidential elections' and has the strong support of the conservative nationalist government alliance of Turkey. Furthermore, the Turkish Cypriot Right and Ankara agree that the chapter of the federal solution to the Cyprus problem closed on the night of July 7, 2017, at the Crans Montana Conference. In other words, unlike the five-year period of 2010-2015 when the nationalist Derviş Eroğlu was the leader of his community, during this period the Turkish Cypriots and Ankara appear to be on the same page.

Second, the opening of the 'divorce' chapter in the Cyprus Issue coincides with a period of deep political and economic anomaly in both Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community. In Turkey, the government alliance is showing signs of political fatigue and is facing a challenging political and financial situation. At the same time, the climate of political and social uncertainty is perpetuated in the Turkish Cypriot community. Under these circumstances the change of page on the Cyprus Issue is an urgent need for both Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot side. Turkey needs new moves in Cyprus to pressure her interlocutors by either imposing her new policies in the wider Eastern Mediterranean region or to reaching compromising solutions. Similarly, the Turkish Cypriots are in need of 'room to breathe' on a political, diplomatic and, above all, economic level.

The two points mentioned above lead us to an essential question. Let us consider that no unilateral action on the Cyprus Issue has a future and that the Turkish and Turkish Cypriot side open the chapter of equal sovereignty although is well aware of this reality. Why is the Turkish side taking this step, which will unsurprisingly cause the Greek Cypriot side to resent it? We believe that the answer to this question is simple. The Turkish side aims at a solution, which will enshrine its objectives in Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean multidimensionally. On the one side, Ankara aims to secure its share of the Eastern Mediterranean energy map. On the other hand, it attempts to perpetuate the presence of its strategic interests in Cyprus. The discussion concerning the possibility of Turkey remaining in Cyprus as a guarantor force of the Turkish Cypriots after the solution has raised serious objections from several Turkish

Cypriot political actors. In our opinion, this discussion within the Turkish Cypriot community is certainly essential.¹⁹

To sum up, Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community are currently under heavy internal and external pressure. Putting forth the issue of political sovereignty, their aim is moving beyond the confines of the federation and promoting formulas which will solve the Cyprus problem based on the cooperation between the parties involved. In this context, we believe that from Ankara's perspective, the confederation prospect or other models of loose cooperation between the two communities could appear as sustainable solutions.

Bibliography

- Καθημερινή. "300 Βαρωσιώτες Έτοιμοι Να Επιστρέψουν," November 22, 2020. <https://www.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/politiki/diplomatia/0300-barosiwtes-einai-etoimoi-na-epistrepsoyn-stis-perioiysies-toys>
- Yeni Düzen. "Akıncı: 'Bu Sonuç Yaratıldı, Elde Edildi,'" October 18, 2020. <https://www.yeniduzen.com/akinci-bu-sonuc-yaratildi-elde-edildi-132782h.htm>
- Anadolu Ajansı. "Cyprus Issue Should Be Resolved on Sovereign Equality," September 19, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/cyprus-issue-should-be-resolved-on-sovereign-equality/1979109>
- Anadolu Ajansı. "Premier Tatar Wins Presidential Runoff in N.Cyprus," October 18, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/premier-tatar-wins-presidential-runoff-in-ncyprus/2010881>
- DW. "Erdoğan: Kendimizi Avrupa'da Görüyoruz," November 21, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/tr/erdo%C4%9Fan-kendimizi-avrupada-g%C3%B6r%C3%BCyoruz/a-55686063>
- DW. "Erdoğan: Kıbrıs'ta İki Devletli Çözüm Müzakere Edilmeli," November 15, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/tr/erdo%C4%9Fan-k%C4%B1br%C4%B1sta-iki-devletli-%C3%A7%C3%B6z%C3%BCm-m%C3%BCzakere-edilmeli/a-55608261>
- DW. "Turkey's Erdogan Calls for 'two-State Solution' in Cyprus," November 15, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-erdogan-calls-for-two-state-solution-in-cyprus/a-55608867>
- DW. "Turkish Central Bank under Pressure as Fears of Currency Crisis Loom," November 6, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/turkish-lira-under-increasing-pressure/a-55516956>
- Financial Times. "Scale of Turkey's Economic Crisis Triggered Erdogan Family Implosion," November 13, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/53271c57-d636-466a-936b-c58667d35f3a>

¹⁹ "Soyer: 'Türkiye Sadece Kuzey Parça Devletin Garantörü Olamaz,'" Kıbrıs Postası, February 4, 2016, https://www.kibrispostasi.com/c35-KIBRIS_HABERLERI/n182199-soyer-turkiye-sadece-kuzey-parca-devletin-garantoru-ol

- Hürriyet. "Kritik 'Doğu Akdeniz' Zirvesi! İletişim Başkanlığı'ndan Açıklama," September 22, 2020. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/son-dakika-haberler-kritik-dogu-akdeniz-zirvesi-iletisim-baskanligindan-aciklama-41617956>
- İHA. "KKTC'nin Yeni Cumhurbaşkanı Ersin Tatar'dan Zafer Konuşması," October 18, 2020. <https://www.iha.com.tr/haber-kktcnin-yeni-cumhurbaskani-ersin-tatardan-zafer-konusmasi-872420/>
- Kıbrıs. "En Fazla Katılım Lefke'de," October 13, 2020. <https://www.kibrisgazetesi.com/kibris/en-fazla-katilim-lefkede-h97609.html>.
- Kıbrıs Postası. "Soyer: 'Türkiye Sadece Kuzey Parça Devletin Garantörü Olamaz,'" February 4, 2016. https://www.kibrispostasi.com/c35-KIBRIS_HABERLERI/n182199-soyer-turkiye-sadece-kuzey-parca-devletin-garantoru-ol
- Sözcü. "Türkiye İle KKTC'nin Kardeşliğini Korumamız Şart," November 8, 2020. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/dunya/turkiye-ile-kktcnin-kardesligini-korumamiz-sart-6116016>
- The Guardian. "Erdoğan Met by Protests from Turkish Cypriots during Visit," November 15, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/15/erdogan-met-by-protests-from-turkish-cypriots-during-visit-northern-cyprus>
- Yeni Düzen. "İnönü Meydanı'nda 'Biat Değil Özgürlük' Sloganları Atıldı," November 10, 2020. <https://www.yeniduzen.com/inonu-meydaninda-biat-degil-ozgurluk-sloganlari-133612h.htm>
- Yeni Düzen. "Saner İlan Etti: Kuramadık!," November 19, 2020. <https://www.yeniduzen.com/saner-ilan-etti-kuramadik-133965h.htm>
- Vural, Yücel. "Seçimlere Niçin Müdahale Edildi?" Yeni Düzen, October 23, 2020. <https://www.yeniduzen.com/secimlere-nicin-mudahale-edildi-16445yy.htm>