



A BRIEF NOTE ON TATAR'S ELECTION

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Introduction

The Turkish Cypriots (and the settlers) went to the polls on 18 October 2020 to elect the new leader of their community (the 'President'). Voting took place on two rounds and the nationalist, right-wing Ersin Tatar won against the center-leftist Mustafa Akinci, thus becoming the fifth 'president' of the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus ('TRNC'), the illegal entity declared unilaterally in 1983 and recognised only by Turkey.

As a means of contextualization, analysis of these elections must take into account the type of political system in the occupied part of Cyprus, which represents a hybrid form of semi-presidentialism and parliamentarism. The 'president' draws his/her authority from the symbolic power vested in the office and the fact that the 'president' customary and ex officio represents the Turkish Cypriots in the inter-communal talks for the Cyprus problem. Moreover, he/she also gives the mandate to the leader of the winner party of the parliamentary elections to form the 'government'. However, the 'president' of the 'TRNC' has limited authority and power with regard to the internal administration of the community affairs that are the responsibility of the 'prime minister'. Rauf Denktash, former leader of the Turkish Cypriot community, added special weight and status to the office because of his powerful personality and the multiple ties he had developed with the 'deep state' in Turkey over the years that, in turn, allowed him to have a more balanced relationship with the Turkish governments than any of his successors.

Voting in the occupied part of Cyprus is an irregular process that lacks some important characteristics and functions political scientists usually attach to democratic electoral processes. This observation refers more to the function of elections as a legitimizing factor of a regime, a function which is clearly absent in this case, and less to the procedural aspect of organizing the elections. Hence, often the term elections is usually avoided for all electoral contests in the occupied part of Cyprus since they do not produce a legally accepted and legitimate outcome; voting is used instead. The innately undemocratic nature of all electoral

contests in the 'TRNC' is documented and at the same time made possible, because of the conditions created by the illegal occupation per se. Most important of these conditions is the perpetual interventions of Turkey in all electoral processes that falsify the electoral outcome. This is mainly due to the demographic engineering brought about by the purposive transfer of settlers from mainland Turkey to Cyprus throughout the years, but also as a result of the many ways and channels that Turkey has at its disposal for influencing the final results, thus twisting the free will of the Turkish Cypriots. Being the sole financier of the illegal regime, Turkey, enjoys a privileged position vis a vis the Turkish Cypriots possessing all the leverages towards the Turkish Cypriots.

The above point to the dominant role of Turkey in the occupied part of Cyprus. However, they should not be mistakenly perceived as the electoral contest and final result are immaterial. To the contrary, and as it will be argued below, they highlight important processes and dynamics within the community that are directly related to the balance of power between political forces, the relationships with Turkey and the Cyprus problem.

Given the above, voting / elections in the occupied Cyprus must be understood as the mechanism through which the Turkish Cypriot community selects its leader who is simultaneously the interlocutor of the Greek Cypriots in the bicomunal talks for reaching a solution to the Cyprus problem. They do not constitute evidence of regime legitimization whatsoever.

The context of the elections

Voting was expected to take place in April 2020 but it was rescheduled for October because of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The character of these particular elections is usually defined by the Cyprus problem since the major duty and mandate of the 'president' is to negotiate with the Greek Cypriots. However, this time it was a lot more than that (see below). Although there were 11 candidacies in total, the two main competitors were center-leftist Mustafa Akinci, 'president' at the time of the elections, and rightist Ersin Tatar, leader of the biggest Turkish Cypriot party, the nationalist right-wing National Union Party (UBP) and until the elections, 'prime minister' of the 'TRNC'.

What stood out in the campaign was Turkey's, and Mr. Erdogan's personally, continuous and loud interventions against M. Akinci and in favour of Tatar. These interventions were reported in the Turkish Cypriot press and in public statements of political parties and politicians and took many forms:

- The opening of part of the closed (and ghosted) town of Varoshia just a few days prior to the elections, in violation of all relevant resolutions of the UN,
- The manifold pressures and 'advices' to Akinci to withdraw his candidacy, including threats for his life as the former leader of the Turkish Cypriots revealed publicly,
- The numerous public statements by Turkish officials, Erdogan included, against Akinci and in favour of Tatar,

- The reopening of some big projects whose operation were temporarily suspended due to technical reasons like the water pipe line from Turkey to the occupied area of Cyprus,
- The mobilization of the powerful Turkish embassy and other 'agencies' in support of Tatar,
- The use of mass scale bribery through benefits and allowances granted literally a few days prior to the elections to professional groups among the population (e.g., teachers) but also briberies of a more personal form (direct payments to individuals).

The pre-election period was also marked by intense polarization between the two main political and ideological blocs in the Turkish Cypriot community -the center left and the (center) right- based on opposing political programmes. Although internally not homogeneous, as revealed by the number of candidacies in both blocs (two for the center left and nine for the center right), they were divided on two major issues: relations with Turkey and the Cyprus problem.¹

The relation between the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey was the most thorny issue of the campaign. By its very nature as an issue of identity politics it brought the center left camp and particularly M. Akinci, in direct confrontation with Turkey and Erdogan. The Turkish Cypriots who share Akinci's view of these relations strongly oppose Turkey's efforts to assimilate the Turkish Cypriot community politically, culturally and religiously fearing the loss of the secular characteristics of their community.² The other center-leftist candidate, Tufan Erhurman, leader of the leftist Republican Turkish Party (CTP) although more careful in his public statements, he and his party also supported the traditional leftist position of Turkish Cypriot autonomy and equal relationships with Turkey.

The other disputed issue was the form of a possible solution to the Cyprus problem. The center left defended the long-agreed position for a bicomunal bizonal federation despite its internal nuances. The majority of the center-right on the other hand, complied fully with the (new) goals pursued by the Turkish government for a confederation of two independent states or two fully independent states. However, it must be noted that the center right entertained many more internal deviations than the center left with some of its constituent parts (e.g., Serdar Denktash) flirting with a peculiar Turkish Cypriot nationalism that kept some distance from Turkey.

As expected, Akinci and Tatar progressed to the second round of the elections polling 29,8% 32,34% respectively. The most noteworthy characteristic of the first round was the increased abstention that rose to 42% (38% in the 2015). The two center leftist candidates, Akinci and Erhurman, totaled 51,7% between them, thus creating feelings of enthusiasm among Akinci's supporters across the

¹ See, Nikolaos Stelgias, The Showdown for the new Turkish Cypriot Leadership. Federalists vs Ankara's bloc, EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN POLICY NOTE, Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs, University of Nicosia, September 2020, No. 54, Nicosia, https://cceia.unic.ac.cy/wp-content/uploads/EMPN_54.pdf

² Nicos Moudouros, «Ποιος (θα) είναι ο «ακρίτας» της Τουρκίας;», <https://www.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/politiki/poios-tha-einai-o-akritas-tis-toyrkias>

dividing line who expected him to win in the second round. Others, anticipated a much closer call knowing that part of Erhurman's voters were not leftists nor they agreed with Akinci's views on the Cyprus problem and the strained relationship with Turkey. Part of Erhurman's voters were of center right ideological background who were sensitive regarding the preservation of their community's distinct identity but who didn't share Akinci's intense rupture with Turkey.

Heading to the second round, the most crucial questions revolved around the choice of those who abstained in the first round and those who voted for other candidates, the possible alliances between candidates and/or parties, and above all the stance of Turkey.

Interpreting Tatar's win

Tatar won the runoff with 51,7% of the votes showing once more that politics is much more than simple mathematics. The result can be analyzed in two dimensions. First, the result in itself and how it came about. Second, the day after for the Turkish Cypriot community and for the prospects for finding a solution to the Cyprus problem.

In analyzing Tatar's win someone must take stock of the following. First, Tatar, marginally albeit successfully mobilized more voters in the second round than Akinci (48,3%), particularly among those who abstained in the first round. Turnout was 67,3% in the second round compared to 58% in the first round something that obviously benefited Tatar. The powerful organizational mechanism of the UBP contributed decisively in this mobilizing effort. Traditionally a cartel party, the UBP took benefit of the numerous clientelistic networks it commands in the Turkish Cypriot community, thus reaching far more voters than Akinci could have managed. The occupational structure in the Turkish Cypriot community with the majority of the population working in the government or other government related sectors means that they are totally depended on Turkey for their job security and salaries. Turkey pays all 'TRNC government' expenses. Consequently, and resulting from this state of affairs, a large part of the Turkish Cypriots and the Turkish settlers not only depend, but also benefit from the existence and reproduction of the (illegal) power structures. This, in turn, means that although they might not accept Turkey's head lock, when faced with the dilemma of rupture or continuity and stability, they choose the latter.

Second, the results show once again that the balance of forces within the Turkish Cypriot community remains in favour of the right-wing despite the fragmentation in the wider rightist camp in the first round and the advances of the center left in recent years. The presence of the Turkish settlers comprises a large part of the explanation for this right-wing majority. The settlers although not a homogeneous bloc they are, overall, more conservative compared to the Turkish Cypriots which renders them more receptive to nationalist callings. However, this balance is far from static, is already changing for some time now and the margin between the two camps is fragile. Whether it will shift once again in favour of the right following Tatar's election remains to be seen.

Third, and arguably the most decisive element in explaining Tatar's win was the role of Turkey. Turkey exercises key influence over all aspects of life in the occupied Cyprus since 1974. This influence is arguably waning in recent years as a result of the resistance of a number of social and political forces of the Turkish Cypriots that mobilize along political and cultural lines against Turkey's grip over the community. However, Turkey still commands various and multiple channels of influence over the Turkish Cypriots which utilizes appropriately. The Turkish embassy acted rigorously and constituted a powerful leverage over the rightist, conservative voters and particularly those originating from Turkey. Districts like Trikomo and Famagusta with a large concentration of Turkish settlers voted *en mass* in favour of Tatar. Conversely, Akinci won the majority in areas where the Turkish Cypriots constitute the majority. Polarization over identarian issues and Akinci's bad relation with Turkey facilitated the vote of Turkish settlers for Tatar. Polarization widened the gap between Akinci and the settlers whose main point of reference is still Turkey, but also with many Turkish Cypriots as well who do not want to jeopardize their relation with Turkey.³ Many of the them eventually voted for Tatar.

Fourth, the actual winner of these elections was Erdogan himself. Erdogan turned the elections into a personal bet against Akinci and the stakes were so high that he could not afford to lose. He did everything in his power for Akinci to lose. Tatar is in full accordance with him on all issues, which will probably ease Turkey's hold over the community in the future.

Fifth, the Turkish Cypriot community seems to be in a critical juncture. They are essentially divided as demonstrated by Akinci's result (48%), which was achieved amidst open and intense conflict with Turkey throughout his 'incumbency' and especially during the electoral campaign. Seen from the perspective of electoral sociology, Akinci's score reflects the historical evolution of the Turkish Cypriot vote and the changes therein. Viewed macrohistorically, the Turkish Cypriot vote testifies to a gradual political and ideological shift in the Turkish Cypriot community over the years and away from Turkey's grasp and towards positions defending their community autonomy and existence. These positions were usually expressed by left political and social forces but are no longer secluded to the left. The electoral behaviour of the Turkish Cypriots expresses in the political/electoral level societal processes that have been set in motion for years now within the community and that tend towards increased autonomy from Ankara's will. However, and following Tatar's election this process is now in doubt and under pressure.

What comes next

The second dimension of analysis focuses on what happens next, following Tatar's election, which again is subdivided in two main questions. One, refers to the developments within the Turkish Cypriot community per se and the second to the

³ Ktoris Sotos, 'Akinci's 48% is a strong message of disapproval towards Turkey', *Haravgi*, p. 7, 20 October 2020.

prospects for finding a solution to the Cyprus problem. Although the election of the leader of the community alone cannot create a new setting for the Cyprus problem it can nevertheless affect the dynamics of the relations with Turkey and for the Cyprus problem.

In relation to the Turkish Cypriot community the questions now posed are fundamental and to some extent existential since they relate to the future of the community. Despite Akinci's good result which reflects the degree of support for maintaining the community's autonomy and distinct identity in the community, the Turkish Cypriots will face more integrative pressures from Turkey. This was made clear not only throughout the campaign but arguably long before. Tatar's election and his fully obedient attitude towards Turkey could foretell a greater osmosis with Turkey; certainly, at the official level.

One of the most pressing issues is the formulation of a new 'government' given that Tatar, until recently 'prime minister', is now 'president' elect. The processes of forming a new coalition 'government' will reveal the crystallization of the new power bloc in the occupied area and the alliances within and maybe between the two main political and ideological blocs of the center left and the center right. Arguably, these processes and the dynamics in the right-wing camp are more interesting in this regard given that they won the elections and are favoured by Turkey on the one hand but more fragmented and diverse on the other.

This issue now seems to have been settled in the face of a new tripartite right-wing 'government' that includes Tatar's National Unity Party (UBP), the Democratic Party (DP) -founded by R. Denktash-, and the Rebirth Party (YDP) - a party representing the settlers. A small number (3) of defected MPs from Kudret Ozersay's People's Party will provide support for the new 'government'. Although this development seems to settle the issue, a deeper look suggests that processes within the right-wing camp are far from over. For example, Serdar Denktash's (former president of the DP, son of Rauf Denktash and candidate in the elections) distanced himself from this decision and his party. Kudret Ozersay's resignation from his post as 'foreign minister' of the 'government', a few weeks before the elections in protest against Turkey's preference to Tatar was another indication of the problems within the right-wing camp. Ozersay also distanced himself from the new 'government'. All these, suggest the right-wing bloc is far from homogeneous. It also reveals a partial distancing of some Turkish Cypriot politicians from Turkey. This part of the right-wing now adopts a more autonomist rhetoric than in the past.

With regard to the Cyprus problem Tatar is definitely a hardliner which makes the task of finding a compromise even harder. He is a staunch supporter of a solution that will acknowledge the so-called realities imposed in Cyprus since 1974, which means two separate states. He has spoken clearly of that before and after the elections. In this respect, he is also echoing the new stance of the Turkish government. Despite his personal views he is expected to partake in any summit (official or unofficial) convened by the Secretary General of the UN simply because neither him nor Turkey would want to take the blame for failing the process and make it so easy for the Greek Cypriots. He will possibly not turn

down the federal solution altogether and immediately but, as he already declared, he will put other possible solutions on the table. He has already signaled his intention to negotiate the natural gas along with anything else and prior to a comprehensive solution.

All in all, Tatar's position for a two-state solution is difficult to be reconciled not only with that of the Greek Cypriot side but most importantly with the long-standing positions and the provisions of the resolutions of the UN regarding the form of the solution. Crucial issues such as the possible future guarantees, the presence of foreign military personnel and issues such as political equality, territorial adjustments, fundamental freedoms, the distribution of power etc., remain open. Tatar's hard positions on all these issues foretell a rather gloomy future. Moreover, Tatar is easier to be manipulated and handled by the Turkish government with all the negative implications that this will have for reaching a mutual understanding.

Arguably though there is an even greatest danger that lurks ahead, and that is a possible change in Turkey's -and by consequence to Tatar's- end goal. Some analyses indicate that Turkey's attitude and moves in the last three years and since the inglorious conclusion of the Crans Montana negotiation round, point to the total annexation of the occupied part of Cyprus. In this regard, Turkey's moves in the ghost town of Famagusta are seen as something much more than electoral moves in support of Tatar; they are part of a bigger Turkish plan in which important economic actors related to Erdogan seek to economically exploit the area, signaling at the same time Turkey's new goal re the Cyprus problem.

At the pure procedural level that unavoidably though touches upon the essence of the Cyprus problem, it is possible that some foreign actors, and Turkey, will push to incorporate the Cyprus issue into a wider frame/agenda of regional problems or even within the overall frame of the Greco-Turkish disputes and seek a comprehensive solution in this new framework. This would represent a very worrying development because in such situation the Cyprus problem will be marginalized and any possible solution will seek first and foremost to diffuse tensions in the wider region and among the more powerful actors, and not how to find a solution in the benefit of the people of Cyprus.