



PRZEMYSŁAW OSIEWICZ

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan,
Poland

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-6883-7307

WIESŁAW LIZAK

University of Warsaw, Poland

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-7383-4012

TÜRKIYE'S DANGEROUS GAME IN CYPRUS: THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND THE TURKISH INTERFERENCE IN NORTH CYPRUS

ABSTRACT

Türkiye is interfering more and more in the internal affairs of the Turkish Cypriot community to pursue its own national interest. The interference threatens the interests of both Cypriot communities and regional security in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, in the longer term, the escalation of tensions in Cyprus may also negatively affect the position of Türkiye itself, significantly reducing its chances of full participation in European integration, complicating relations with its neighbors, and weakening NATO's south-eastern flank. While the international community focuses on combating the effects of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the conflict in Syria, Türkiye's policy shift toward Cyprus may represent the most significant challenge to regional security this decade. The history of the Cyprus dispute is full of examples of attempts by Türkiye to interfere in the internal affairs of the Turkish Cypriot community. Still, the current level and scale of this has been unprecedented since the proclamation of the de facto state of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 1983. Did Türkiye interfere in the 2020 presidential elections in the TRNC to pursue a policy of *fait accompli* on the Cyprus question? If yes, was it the first step toward annexation of north Cyprus and the final resignation from transforming Cyprus into a federal state of two communities?

KEYWORDS: *Türkiye, Cyprus, interference, annexation, the Cyprus question, conflict solution*

INTRODUCTION

The situation in Cyprus has remained unregulated since the end of hostilities and the consequent introduction of the actual division of the island in 1974. It was further complicated when the political representatives of the Turkish Cypriot community, led by Rauf Denktas, decided to create their own independent state in the northern part of the island in 1983 (Tamkoc, 1988). The international community, except for Türkiye, strongly opposed this decision. Since then, Türkiye has gained new opportunities to influence the political situation in the north of Cyprus, although it has formally recognized the independence and sovereignty of the new state.

The actual division on the island becomes permanent both in political, ethnic, and economic dimensions. For over 40 years, representatives of both Cypriot communities have periodically announced the start of the next

round of negotiations involving the international community, especially the United Nations (Richter, 2010; Diez, Tocci, 2009; Dodd, 2010; Denktas, 2004; Clerides, 1989). So far, however, none of these processes has resulted in a marked improvement in the situation and has not brought the parties closer to the comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus issue. The last significant round of negotiations failed in Crans Montana in 2017 (Michael, Vural, 2018; Drousiotis, 2023).

Although their leaders represent the Turkish Cypriot community during the negotiations, in practice, they cannot submit any substantive negotiating proposal without prior authorization from Türkiye. Those leaders who tried to take a position that differed from the Turkish government had to reckon with a strong reaction and political pressure from Ankara. It was the situation for Mehmet Ali Talat and Mustafa Akinci, among others. However, while Türkiye's attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of Turkish Cypriots are not a new phenomenon, the scale of the current one should cause concern to the international community. As is the apparent hardening of Türkiye's negotiating position and decisive actions that in practice may block the possibility of any agreement with the Greek Cypriot side. Did Türkiye interfere in the internal affairs of Turkish Cypriots to pursue a policy of *fait accompli* on the Cyprus question in 2020? If yes, was it the first step toward annexation of north Cyprus and the final resignation from transforming Cyprus into a federal state of two communities?

To answer these questions, the changes indicative of a significant shift in position on the Cyprus issue by Türkiye should be analyzed. These include the 2020 presidential elections, the issue of access to and control over the Varosha city area, and energy issues, especially those related to the exploration and exploitation of offshore natural gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean. The timeframe of the article covers the pre-election campaign period and the situation in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential elections in North Cyprus.

This article complements the studies on the Cyprus question, highlighting the interference of Türkiye in the internal affairs of the Turkish Cypriot community, which is often overlooked in analyzes or scientific texts. The Cyprus issue has been extensively scrutinized in terms of intercommunal relations, while researchers are less likely to highlight the complex relationship between Türkiye and the Turkish Cypriot community. Meanwhile, it is precisely these

relations that require special attention at present, as they will soon affect the quality of the peace dialogue in Cyprus or its complete breakdown and a resolution of the Cyprus question by force.

THE 2020 ELECTIONS: THE END OF ILLUSIONS?

Interference in electoral processes is indicated as one of the greatest contemporary threats to democratic systems. With minor differences between the poll results of the leading political parties or candidates, external interference may distort the election's outcome in a way that will not reflect the actual voting preferences of citizens. Such an interference occurs when an external actor or actors undertake actions aimed at changing the actual distribution of voting preferences of citizens of a given country in such a way as to increase the chances of persons or groups that will pursue a more compliant policy towards them. This threat is becoming more and more common, as evidenced by actions taken, inter alia, by the European Union, especially in the context of counteracting disinformation practices and open interference in electoral processes in the member states by third countries (Ohlin, 2020). Attempts to interfere in the election processes were also analyzed in many academic studies (Hollis, Ohlin, 2021), especially in the context of the interference of the Russian Federation in the campaign during the 2016 presidential elections in the United States (*Foreign interference*, 2021). Such a phenomenon took place in the case of the presidential elections in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not recognized by the international community. The lack of international recognition for the Turkish Cypriot state does not change the fact that also, in this case, the primary international standards should be respected, especially non-interference in internal affairs. Meanwhile, 2020 marks the beginning of significant changes in Türkiye's approach to North Cyprus, also in the context of open interference in the political processes of the Turkish Cypriot community.

Türkiye interfered directly or indirectly with the electoral processes of the Turkish Cypriot community from the beginning of the actual division of the island in the 1970s. However, until the presidential elections in 2020, Ankara had never so openly attempted to influence their outcome. Yet during

the 2020 election campaign, both President Erdogan and the Turkish government did not hide their sympathy for Ersin Tatar, the candidate of the right-wing National Unity Party (UBP), and at the same time took various actions to weaken the position of the then President Mustafa Akinci (Salihoglu, 2020). During his tenure in office, Akinci repeatedly emphasized the independence of the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus from Türkiye in critical areas, which was always met with strong reactions from members of the Turkish government, as well as accusations of national treason by the then right-wing opposition or of *behaving like a Greek Cypriot* (Moudouros, 2020). As Akinci had a good chance of being re-elected, Türkiye took decisive action to block his re-election and guarantee itself a more significant say in the situation on the island by selecting a loyal candidate who shared the Turkish point of view. Due to his worldview and prior political activity, Tatar was the perfect candidate for Türkiye. However, doubts arose whether Turkish Cypriot voters would share this point of view. For this reason, Türkiye has decided to take measures to change the electoral preferences of some Turkish Cypriots to guarantee the election of Tatar. At the same time, his electoral success was to enable critical decisions that would affect the form and content of the solution to the Cyprus question and secure Turkish political and economic interests in this area.

The elections were a platform for discussion on the current domestic policy, and above all, on the future of Cyprus and the form of settlement of the Cyprus issue preferred by Turkish Cypriots. While Akinci advocated the continuation of the dialogue with the Greek Cypriots and the transformation of Cyprus into a federal state of both communities, Tatar argued that the best solution would be to recognize the status quo and the existence of the two Cypriot states by the international community. Thus, the second round of elections held on 18 November 2020 became a kind of referendum on the future of north Cyprus. Tatar won the election, defeating Akinci by a difference of three percentage points (Hatay, 2020). At the same time, voices began to appear that the result of the elections and Tatar's victory were primarily the result of considerable commitment and support for his candidacy on the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Media reports on the activities undertaken by Turkish intelligence services and politicians related to Tatar on the eve of the elections have been analyzed by independent researchers.

In June 2021, a group of activists prepared a comprehensive report describing the situations that proved Türkiye's open interference in the TRNC presidential election process (*Report on the interference*, 2021). They also formed 'We Are Reporting on the Interference and Irregularities Working Group', which has set itself the goal of demonstrating infringements and preventing similar practices in the future. The report contained essential facts proving the open and unprecedented interference of the Republic of Türkiye in the presidential election process in the TRNC. Journalists and politicians who either experienced or witnessed the violations and the interference became critical sources of information. Among the observed irregularities, the following was indicated: wiretapping, persuading Tatar countercandidates to resign from the start in elections by the Turkish National Organization (MIT), making money transfers to the accounts of people supporting pro-Turkish groups, and summoning parliamentarians to meetings with the Turkish ambassador to the TRNC. Moreover, a special task force was to be sent from Türkiye to the island on the eve of the elections. Their main task was to coordinate activities undertaken by several hundred people in North Cyprus to secure the electoral success of Tatar. All the ballot boxes, for example, were to be stored in the premises of the Near East University, whose management was not to hide their sympathy for the candidacy of Tatar (*Report on the interference*, 2021).

This information was confirmed in spring 2021 by both Mustafa Akinci and another opposition leader, Serdar Denktas (Aygin, 2021). Their testimony was also included in the report mentioned above, enhancing its credibility. Serdar Denktas testified that there had been intense pressure on him to resign from running in the elections. People from his political environment and the businessmen who supported him were to be subjected to similar pressure. In turn, former president Mustafa Akinci pointed to examples of his being ignored as the head of the TRNC state when his statements did not meet Türkiye's expectations. He also pointed to the various activities undertaken by the Turkish ambassador in Nicosia, who attempted to influence local politicians and exert pressure on parliamentarians. Akinci even maintained that members of a special task force sent from Türkiye did not hide their intentions and publicly discouraged Turkish Cypriots from voting for him. They were also told that even if Akinci were re-elected for another term, he would be forced to leave the country.

The cases mentioned above of violations and overt interference in the internal affairs of the Turkish Cypriot community were unprecedented events. They demonstrated Türkiye's determination to support the candidacy of Tatar. His opinions were in line with the official position of Türkiye and did not pose a threat to Turkish influence on the island. Moreover, on the day of his election victory, he became the guarantor of maintaining Turkish domination and the expected tightening of the course towards the Greek Cypriot leadership. This way, the president of Türkiye and the officials subordinate to him have consistently started to implement a policy that may perpetuate the divisions on the island and even create conditions conducive to the annexation of north Cyprus. It is an unlikely scenario, but still possible. For now, one can observe the intensification of the confrontational policy toward the Greek Cypriot community.

A RADICAL SHIFT IN THE TURKISH POLICY: TOWARD CONFRONTATION?

Interference with the election results in North Cyprus was not the goal but only the means of achieving the goal. Türkiye needed a Turkish Cypriot leader who was more loyal than Mustafa Akinci to be able to implement some of the assumptions of Türkiye's new policy on the Cyprus question. Several issues prove a decisive shift in the Turkish approach to the Cyprus issue. These are the official position on the future status of the Varosha area, energy issues, and stiffening of the negotiating position on the comprehensive and lasting settlement of the Cyprus question. Turkish interference in the electoral processes of the Turkish Cypriot community and the electoral success of Tatar have enabled Türkiye to take more radical decisions on these key issues. Its beginning was marked by a symbolic change in Türkiye's position regarding the status of the closed area of the city of Varosha.

The decision to partially open the closed zone of the city of Varosha marks a turning point in the history of the post-1974 Cypriot conflict. The occupation of Varosha has become a symbol of the dispute and one of the main bargaining cards in the intercommunal negotiations. In return for recognition of the de facto division of the island, Türkiye was ready to hand over Varosha

to the Greek Cypriot administration. The Greek side did not want to agree to it, but it was hoped that it would be possible to regain control over this area in exchange for other concessions. Regardless of the situation in Cyprus and the confrontational narrative, the Turkish side did not dare to make such a move in the past because it would violate the decisions of the UN Security Council and would close the possibility of a constructive dialogue with the Greek Cypriot side. Yet the situation has changed recently.

The circumstances in which the Turkish army decided to open the Varosha zone were also significant. It was announced at a joint press conference of Tatar and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara. The meeting took place shortly before the elections. Journalists interpreted it as an open expression of support for the candidacy of Tatar by the president of Turkey (Gumrukcu, Kambas, 2020). Those declarations soon became a reality. Tatar won the presidential election, and in parallel, the Turkish army has opened a part of the Varosha area for the first time since 1974.

The opening of the Varosha area in autumn 2020 is a break with Türkiye's former policy toward the Cyprus question and a significant change in inter-communal contacts. The announced inflow of investments into the zone would constitute another violation of the property rights of the rightful owners of real estate, mainly Greek Cypriots. Such actions will also cause a further build-up of the mutual trust deficit, will have irreversible effects and will most likely determine the form of a possible future peace agreement in Cyprus. Varosha's future will cease to be an important element of negotiations between representatives of both Cypriot communities. At the same time, Türkiye will realize its national interest at the expense of the Turkish Cypriots as the decision blocks the way to transform the unitary Republic of Cyprus into a federal state or a confederation based on an agreement concluded. The ongoing pandemic additionally complicated the situation.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the months-long closure of border checkpoints only strengthened the existing divisions and seriously impeded cooperation between members of both Cypriot communities, especially activists of non-governmental organizations working to develop bi-communal cooperation and dialogue. The leaders of both communities also preferred to counteract the development of the pandemic and to fight its consequences on

their own rather than to undertake cooperation that could bring the members of both communities closer together, constitute an important symbol of the shared Cypriot identity and the will to settle the Cyprus issue in the future peacefully (Kaymak, Loizides, 2020). Such cooperation would be beneficial to Turkish Cypriots, who could count on the support of better organized medical services of the Republic of Cyprus and gain access to medical programs and vaccines distributed within the European Union. There is no doubt that the abandonment of such broad cooperation resulted from a political decision and a lack of consent on the part of Türkiye. From the Turkish government's point of view, the restoration of the de facto isolation of members of both Cypriot communities could only foster radicalization of political attitudes and increase the dependence of North Cyprus on aid provided by the patron state.

Erdogan's visit and official statements to Cyprus in July 2021 only strengthened the notion that Türkiye has significantly changed its position on the Cyprus issue and is moving towards a fait accompli policy. During his speech to members of the TRNC parliament, the Turkish president clearly emphasized that it would be Türkiye that would decide on Cyprus and would not succumb to pressure from the international community, including the European Union and the United States. At the same time, he announced an increase in investments and new infrastructure projects, which in practice will only contribute to increasing the political and economic dependence of the Turkish Cypriot community on the position of Türkiye (Seufert, 2021). At the same time, a straightforward boycott of the Turkish president by Turkish Cypriot opposition parliamentarians became noticeable. It was an unprecedented event in the history of the TRNC. On the other hand, the assessment of this action by President Tatar and the description of the oppositionists as traitors only testify to an increase in authoritarianism in the policy of north Cyprus, following the example of Türkiye. Tatar also accused the opposition members, including the former president Mehmet Ali Talat of cooperating with the Greeks (*Northern Cyprus*, 2021). In this context, a gradual marginalization of the political scene of the Turkish Cypriot community can already be noted, especially those groups and politicians who, to a greater or lesser extent, undermine the rightness of the actions taken by Türkiye. Ankara has tolerated

opposition in north Cyprus in the past, but now it is no longer allowed to express opinions that are not in line with Turkish national interests.

The result of Türkiye's significant interference in the internal affairs of north Cyprus is also a further polarization of society and political instability, the best example of which are the continued problems with securing parliamentary support for the current coalition government. However, regardless of whether the early elections take place or not, there is no doubt that the level of Türkiye's involvement in the Cypriot affairs is now so high that it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the Turkish president and his government would give up the possibility of influencing for their final result. In the opinion of Günter Seufert, Türkiye's current policy towards Cyprus can be described as a salami tactic (Seufert, 2021). Gradually, decisions are taken which perpetuate the de facto division of the island and make the recognition of the existence of two separate Cypriot states the only peaceful solution available.

Cyprus is also gaining importance for Türkiye because of the natural gas deposits under the continental shelf of the Eastern Mediterranean. On this point, too, Türkiye is not seeking a compromise with the Republic of Cyprus, but competition and confrontation. The question of the division of the exclusive economic zones is open, and the Turkish government is consistently trying to use the northern coast of Cyprus to extend the broadest possible zone of control. However, the policy of confrontation will not be conducive to reaching a compromise not only with the Republic of Cyprus. Still, it will also negatively impact possible negotiations between Türkiye and Greece in the Aegean Sea. It may also lead to tensions with other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Dalay, 2021). There is, therefore, a common element in all of the issues mentioned above. It is the peaceful and mutually beneficial settlement of the Cyprus issue, which could reduce tensions, increase mutual trust, and improve security in the region. For now, however, Türkiye's new approach has prevented Greek Cypriots from forming any constructive proposals. For this reason, the Republic of Cyprus signed an agreement in March 2021 to construct the world's longest offshore gas pipeline, connecting Greece via Cyprus with Israel. The implementation of this project is highly disadvantageous from the Turkish point of view. It also runs through a part of the exclusive economic zone claimed by Türkiye (Fasanotti, 2021).

However, the confrontational policy must lead to the conclusion of such projects in which Türkiye, instead of a party to multilateral agreements, becomes a state acting alone and on its own.

CONCLUSION

Increasingly frequent cases of Türkiye influencing the situation in the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, including interference during the 2020 electoral process, deepen divisions on the island and pose a threat to regional security in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Turkish government's actions clearly showed a radical change in the approach to solving the Cyprus question. The declared readiness for dialogue with the Greek Cypriot community was replaced by a confrontational attitude that is not shared even by a significant part of the Turkish Cypriot community.

The interference in the presidential elections in the north of Cyprus and the consequent changes in the negotiating position of the Turkish Cypriot community affected not only the situation of this community but also of Türkiye itself. It complicated the already prolonged process of Türkiye's accession negotiations with the European Union. A fait accompli policy can even lead to their breaking. The opposition of Greece and the Republic of Cyprus is enough to ultimately block the entire process, regardless of the position of the other EU member states. Even if Türkiye was no longer interested in membership, an open conflict with the European Union would cost it much more than it could gain by tightening its course on the Cyprus question. In the long run, this change only serves the interests of the incumbent president and the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

The confrontational policy may also threaten regional security in the Eastern Mediterranean. There is no doubt that the activities undertaken with the consent of President Erdogan are also aimed at testing the readiness of the international community to defend the status quo on the island, especially the provisions resulting from successive resolutions of the UN Security Council. Türkiye is taking advantage of its absolute political, military, and economic benefit in the confrontation with the Greek Cypriot community.

At the same time, however, it risks tensions in relations with the EU and the United States and with the Russian Federation, which has special political and economic ties with the Republic of Cyprus.

Türkiye has just opened a new stage in the history of the Cyprus question, which will be characterized by the abandonment of constructive dialogue, the rejection of the federal concept of settling the dispute, and a return to unilateral actions, the consequences of which in practice will ultimately close the way to restoring the Republic of Cyprus in its constitutional form from 1960, or an establishment of any federation of two communities. Such a policy can lead to the sanctioning of the division of the island into two states or even constitute the first step toward the future annexation of North Cyprus by Turkey. While there are currently no clear signals from Türkiye of a willingness to annex north Cyprus, such a scenario is becoming more likely given the unilateral and decisive actions of the Turkish executive. The international community can be considered as witnessing the first step toward a unilateral settlement of the Cyprus question. Whatever President Erdogan's true intentions are, Türkiye has embarked on a dangerous game that could bring benefits in the short term and seriously jeopardize itself in the long run.

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