

# The Cyprus Conflict: New Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean

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## Not a Good Year

Even for the standards of a conflict-ridden place such as Cyprus, the period between May 2020 and May 2021 can hardly be described as a good one. Turkey continued to probe Greek Cypriot patience through its gas explorations in what the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) considers its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Elections in the internationally not recognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) brought about a shift in the Presidency from pro-solution Mustafa Akinci to nationalist Ersin Tatar. The new government and Turkey have started to openly question the remit of United Nations-led negotiations. And all the while, Covid-19 made direct bicomunal contacts next to impossible.

In this brief contribution, I will offer a condensed review of these developments. In doing so, my underlying argument is that the openings of the past twenty years, both physically in terms of green line crossings, and metaphorically in terms of negotiations, have done little to alter the basic conflict structure. In the meantime, Turkey's grip on Northern Cyprus is becoming ever stronger, as the island has turned into one of Erdogan's main bargaining chips. While this calls for a fresh approach, for which recognition of the TRNC would be one option, this year's elections, and the subsequent unilateral steps towards a change in the basis for negotiations has further undermined whatever little prospect such a strategic change had anyway.

## The Gas Scramble

When gas was found in the eastern Mediterranean seabed more than ten years ago, many had seen this as a window of opportunity to overcome conflicts and enhance cooperation (e.g. Gurel and Le Cornu, 2014). In particular, economies of scale, given the limited size of the finds and logistical necessities regarding gas storage and transportation, provided incentives for collaboration. Indeed, in September 2020, the RoC, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority signed the foundation charter establishing the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EastMed), which had been brought into existence through the 2019 Cairo Declaration, as an international organization. Yet Turkey has remained outside EastMed, and instead in 2019 agreed EEZ boundaries with the Libyan Government of National Accord, overlapping with the RoC's EEZ (Axt 2021). So instead of universal cooperation, the gas finds led to a resource scramble that helped overcome some divisions, but reinforced others. In Cyprus, possible revenues were subsumed under existing conflict structures and competing sovereignty claims.

Thus, Turkish vessels started drilling for gas in waters claimed by the RoC as its own EEZ, both in areas seen by Turkey as its own and others by invitation of the TRNC. The RoC government as well as many other international actors have condemned these incursions as violations of the RoC's rights. Yet the Turkish government also seems to have used the drillings for tactical purposes, withdrawing their ships periodically, a behaviour that continued in 2020/21. While in late summer 2020 it looked as if Turkey would engage in continued brinkmanship,

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ships sailed back to their ports in mid-September, only for the research vessel Oruc Reis to return into contested waters in October. In early 2021, coinciding with the beginning of the Biden Administration in the United States, Turkey started to pursue a more conciliatory strategy, Greece and Turkey resumed their bilateral dialogue, and EU High Representative Josep Borrell submitted a report to the European Council outlining a more positive agenda for EU-Turkey relations. Yet in early June 2021, Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Donmez made threats of further drillings, continuing Turkey's double track of threats and detente.

### Turkish Strategies

In part, this reflects Cyprus's standing as a strategic asset for the Turkish government. When the AKP and Erdogan came to power in 2002, their aim had been to solve the Cyprus issue, and Turkey thus supported the 2004 Annan plan. Yet, whatever other reasons there may have been, in retrospect it looks as if this conciliatory line was at least partly motivated by the need to weaken a hostile military, whose domestic reputation is fed by the continuation of the Cyprus and Kurdish conflicts. Yet as Erdogan managed to weaken the Kemalist influence on the army and had to form coalitions with nationalist forces, Cyprus returned to its former place in Turkish domestic politics, as a source of identity politics and influence (including attempts to make Turkish Cypriots more pious, see Moudouros, 2019), as a vital pillar of Turkey's geopolitical strategy and as a bargaining chip in Turkey's relations with the EU.

### Electoral Shifts

Of course, Turkish Cypriots are not mere puppets of Turkey. As many other societies today, Turkish Cyp-

riot society, too, is deeply divided, and the division lines in Cyprus mostly run between supporters and opponents of a solution within the UN bizonal, bi-communal framework. The disappointment of many Turkish Cypriots with the EU following the failure of the Annan Plan has clearly weakened the pro-unification camp. While Mehmet Ali Talat won the 2005 presidential elections by a large majority in the first round, results since then have been more contested and fluctuated between victories for each camp. After five years of pro-solution President Mustafa Akinci (independent), the 18 October 2020 second round of elections resulted in a victory for conservative candidate Ersin Tatar (UBP, National Unity Party) by the narrowest of margins (51.7 per cent). The UBP had already won the parliamentary elections in 2018. The tide thus seems to have shifted back to a more hardline stance in the conflict, in line with Turkey's strategies.

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This shift had already been visible during the election campaign. Following initial plans from the previous year, the then Foreign Minister and presidential candidate Kudret Ozersay put forward proposals in August 2020 to re-open the military zone of Varosha, sandwiched between Famagusta and the Green Line. In the 1960s, Varosha had been the main and most glamorous site of tourism in Cyprus. In 1974, it was occupied by the Turkish army and cordoned off, and has remained a ghost town ever since. The UN Security Council has repeatedly called for Varosha to be returned to its mostly Greek Cypriot former inhabitants, and its return or opening has often been floated as part of a broader territorial adjustment in the context of a solution. While Ozersay wanted to return property to the Greek-Cypriot owners, his plan was to do so under Turkish-Cypriot administration, which was unacceptable to the RoC. However, in October 2020, Ozersay's plans were overtaken by the then Prime Minister and co-contender for the

Presidency Tatar, who unilaterally opened parts of Varosha to visitors and assumes that most property actually belongs to the Evkaf foundation, successor to an Ottoman ministry, which supposedly held these properties following the Ottoman conquest of the island in the 1570s. Such claims, in turn, also align with Erdogan's invocations of the Ottoman empire as part of his foreign policy. The picture of Erdogan having a picnic on Varosha's beachside worked as a perfect illustration of this discourse.

On 31 May 2021, parliamentary elections were held in the RoC. Because of the presidential system in the South, these are less significant, especially regarding the conflict, in which the presidents function as the respective leaders of their communities. Nonetheless, it is alarming that the extreme right-wing ELAM party received 6.8 percent of votes and doubled its seats in Parliament to four. However, while ELAM pursues a policy of a unitary, Greek Cypriot-led Cyprus, its election may be more of a reaction to corruption scandals in the government, including contested schemes of selling Cypriot passports, than directly related to the conflict.

### Negotiating Negotiations

Despite these highly unfortunate circumstances, UN efforts to resolve the conflict resumed in Geneva on 27-29 April 2021 in the new format of a "five plus one" meeting. The parties involved included not only the two Cypriot leaders, but also the three guarantor powers under the 1960 Treaties that established the RoC: Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom, as well as the European Union. The talks were not formal negotiations, but rather designed to clear the ground for possible steps towards later negotiations. Even so, in light of the context outlined so far, hopes were extremely low. In this sense, it was already a success that the parties agreed to meet again in the near future.

However, the main difference to previous negotiations was that Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots openly declared the need to move beyond the existing remit of negotiations, towards a bizonal, bicomunal federation, and explicitly include the possibility of a two-state solution. In light of the debates around Varosha and the Turkish gas drilling exercises, such a move was quickly interpreted as more

Turkish aggressive posturing and rejected by Greek Cypriots.

### Covid-19

All of these developments took place against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, which by the end of May 2021 had seen more than 360 deaths in the RoC alone and more than eight percent of the population contracting the virus. As the pandemic led to unilateral border closures even within the EU, so it did in Cyprus. While tourists were no longer able to come to the island anyway, this meant that those commuting between the two sides for work or education could no longer do so, and that bicomunal contacts, which had flourished on the island even in times of deepening tensions, were restricted to virtual encounters. Even after the RoC allowed workers to cross from the North, quarantine restrictions in the TRNC made daily commutes practically impossible. Both sides finally reached an agreement to open all crossings according to a traffic light system in early June 2021. Developments are to be monitored by the Technical Committee on Health, one of several bicomunal committees set up as long-term confidence-building measures and whose importance was enhanced by Akinci and Greek Cypriot President Anastasiades in the mid-2010s.

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On the one hand, turning to such established institutions of bicomunal cooperation is a positive sign; yet, on the other, the Committees themselves risk becoming the object of political tactics. While they should have been the core mechanism right from the start of the pandemic, the fact that Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots seem to insist that they are no longer referred to as "bicomunal" further illus-

trates the determination with which they are presently pursuing a two-state solution.

## Prospects

The current context in the eastern Mediterranean and, in particular, Turkey's present foreign policies are far from conducive to a solution of the Cyprus conflict within the established bizonal, bicomunal framework. As a two-state solution is anathema to most Greek Cypriots, it is difficult to see how significant steps towards overcoming the status quo on the island may be taken in the foreseeable future. While some of the developments outlined in this chapter are linked to domestic Turkish politics, it is far from clear that a change of government in Turkey would make things easier, especially now that the pendulum has swung back to a nationalist administration in the TRNC as well. The sad irony of all this is that the Turkish Cypriots are becoming ever more dependent on Turkey, and thus Turkey's influence on Northern Cyprus is constantly increasing. This has led to a deepened division in recent decades, despite all bicomunal contacts and the opening of the Green Line. Perhaps, there-

fore, it is time for a new approach, which may well entail a move away from the old framework (Diez 2021). Alas, the timing for such a move seems far from ideal.

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