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Research Report

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Erdoğan the Builder in Northern Cyprus

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Visit to the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" Cements a Shift in Turkey's Cyprus Policy and Reinforces Ankara's Isolation

Günter Seufert

Ahead of his trip to Turkish-occupied northern Cyprus on July 20, 2021, the Turkish President announced that he would be bringing "good news" to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Speculation ran rampant that Erdoğan would use the 47th anniversary of the Turkish invasion to announce that Azerbaijan, Pakistan, or Kyrgyzstan would establish diplomatic relations with the TRNC, which is currently recognized only by Turkey. But Erdoğan merely unveiled the construction of a pompous presidential palace that would befit a future, independent "Turkish Cypriot State". The Turkish president is still reluctant to back up his words of international recognition of the TRNC with deeds. But the visit shows that Ankara is working toward the final division of the island, and Erdoğan's actions made it clear once again that he alone calls the shots in northern Cyprus.

Since the election of former "Prime Minister" and national-conservative Ersin Tatar as "President of the Republic" of the TRNC on October 18, 2020, Turkey has turned its back on reunifying the island under a bi-communal, bi-zonal federation. Guided by Turkey's president, Tatar has declared that only international recognition of the TRNC and a two-state solution can lead to a peaceful settlement in Cyprus. Tatar boasts of the support that he receives from Erdoğan and says that he is proud to be Turkey's man in northern Cyprus.

In Ankara, the government and parts of the secular opposition have once again adopted the stance that for Turkey, Cyprus is first and foremost a matter of security. For Erdoğan's unofficial coalition partner

Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Turkish troops in Cyprus are an essential contribution to the security of Anatolia and an indispensable element of Turkey's far-reaching strategy in the region.

Marginalization of the Turkish Cypriots

From Ankara's perspective, Turkish Cypriots cannot hold the reins when the interests of Turkey are at stake. Still, Ankara always postulates that the Cypriot Turks are sovereign and that Turkey only defends their rights and interests. The TRNC has been economically dependent on Tur-

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key since its foundation in 1983, and the Turkish military has always determined the security policy of the TRNC. Nonetheless, Ankara has so far shied away from enforcing strategies and decisions that openly confront the Turkish Cypriots. This changed in the run-up to the 2020 TRNC presidential election, in which Ersin Tatar, Ankara's preferred candidate, came out on top.

Mustafa Akıncı, Tatar's federation-oriented predecessor, said that never before had a northern Cypriot election seen such concerted action by Turkey's intelligence service, military, diplomats and politicians. Furthermore, never before had there been such pressure and threats, and never before had financial resources been used to such an extent. Akıncı ran for reelection despite the serious threats this posed to him and his family. Unbeknownst to him, his co-workers were summoned to Ankara and the Turkish embassy in Nicosia, and he saw himself denigrated as an agent of the United States and the Republic of Cyprus.

The Turkish secret service also exerted pressure on other right-wing candidates running against Tatar. One of them, Sertaç Denkteş, son of the founding president of the TRNC, openly stated this on September 4, 2020.

When Erdoğan addressed the parliament of the TRNC, the left-liberal opposition refused to participate. Tatar, in response, accused the opposition parties of treason, showing that Turkey's authoritarian political climate is now spreading to northern Cyprus as well.

A Boastful Announcement

Like a father to his children, Erdoğan announced to the Turkish public that he had "good news" before his trip to Cyprus, and the press raised expectations to a fever pitch. There was talk not only of diplomatic recognition of the TRNC but also of a major infrastructure program. A "Turkish Cypriot State" with a new constitution governed by a presidential system based on the model of Turkey would replace the TRNC. Last but

not least, the Turkish administration would open Cyprus's former tourist hub, the suburb of Varosha (Maraş in Turkish) near Famagusta, to investors. The region is Greek-owned and has been off-limits since the Turkish invasion in 1974. Two United Nations (UN) resolutions call for the return of the area to its original owners.

Like a victorious commander, Erdoğan traveled to Cyprus with two airplanes and a large entourage. He was accompanied by MHP Chairman Bahçeli, eight ministers, the chief of the general staff and commanders of all branches of the armed forces. Western politicians who called on Ankara to adhere to the internationally agreed upon framework for resolving the Cyprus conflict and to heed UN resolutions received a harsh response. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen reiterated the EU's position, namely that it would never recognize a two-state solution. Erdoğan rebuked her, saying, "have you ever heard Erdoğan let anyone dictate his speech?" In a similar tone, he also dismissed a bi-partisan warning issued by US senators and a call for moderated action made by the EU's foreign affairs envoy Josep Borrell.

Ankara's Salami Tactics

Against this backdrop, the "good news" that Erdoğan finally announced before the parliament of the TRNC was quite modest. He neither declared a new state nor the introduction of a presidential system. Instead, he announced the construction of a presidential palace, a national recreational park and new premises for the parliament. In Turkey, the secular and nationalist opposition always rejected any concession on the Cyprus issue, and when Erdoğan made this statement, they did not conceal their disappointment. The opposition press is calling for concrete steps that would facilitate friendly states' recognition of the TRNC. Also, from the perspective of the opposition parties, the current dispute over natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has

once again highlighted the strategic importance of Cyprus for Turkey.

The government press in Turkey strikes a different tone. It presents the construction projects as a sign of Erdoğan's political determination and as "symbols for the coming declaration of the Turkish state in Cyprus". It asserts, as in domestic policy, Erdoğan is pursuing incremental steps in foreign policy as well. He is patiently placing the pieces, and the question is not whether but when he will found the new state.

Indeed, Turkey has been applying this tactic in Varosha, the aforementioned former tourist hub of Famagusta in the Turkish-occupied north of the island. Already in July 2019, as prime minister of the TRNC, Ersin Tatar said that his government was preparing to open the closed area. Under the Turkish Cypriot administration, the Cypriot Greek owners of the properties located there would be allowed to resume economic use of the premises or to apply for compensation. A little over one year later, in October 2020, on the occasion of Erdoğan's visit to the island, Tatar opened the gates of the restricted area and invited the Turkish Cypriot population to inspect it.

The next step took place during Erdoğan's visit in July 2021. In an area that comprises 3.5 percent of the overall fenced territory, Greek property owners were invited to invest in the reuse of the buildings under the Turkish Cypriot administration or to apply for compensation.

International Response

In Washington, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, "the United States views Turkish Cypriot actions in Varosha, with the support of Turkey, as provocative, unacceptable, and incompatible with their past commitments to engage constructively in settlement talks." Calling for an early meeting of the UN Security Council on the issue, Great Britain, one of the three guarantor states of the Republic of Cyprus along

with Greece and Turkey, stated that Turkey's actions violated UN resolutions. France, Israel, Cairo and Moscow expressed similar views.

In a statement issued by its president on July 23, the UN Security Council condemned "the July 20, 2021 announcement by the Turkish President and the leader of the Turkish Cypriots on the opening of a portion of the restricted area of Varosha." The Council calls for a reversal on the matter and underlines its commitment to a bi-communal and bi-zonal federation in Cyprus.

Turkish Path Dependency and the Significance of European Policy

As the saying goes in Turkey: Cyprus is the field in which Turkish foreign policy has achieved its most success to date. Despite international condemnation, Ankara has managed to maintain its occupation of the island's north for nearly five decades without significant consequences. During the Cold War, the relatively strong presence of communist movements in Greece and amongst Greek Cypriot populations, the British military bases on the island, and Turkey's central role in NATO were all reasons why Ankara faced little international pressure with regard to its policy in Cyprus.

In 1975, Ankara founded the so-called "Turkish Federal State in Cyprus" (Kıbrıs Türk Federe Devleti) and replaced it with the TRNC in 1983. In this way, Turkey has cautiously but successively advanced the statehood of Turkish Cypriots. However, contrary to the rhetoric cultivated in Turkey, Ankara has never seriously attempted to persuade friendly states to recognize the TRNC. Ankara has always followed the credo of Rauf Denktaş, the founding president of the TRNC, according to which Turkey's solution to the Cyprus problem should be to facilitate the persistence of the state of limbo between international law and the factual situation.

Now is the worst possible moment for Ankara to escalate the situation in Cyprus.

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Unlike a few years ago, Turkey appears largely isolated in the region. Under President Joe Biden, the US is pursuing a far more principled policy toward Ankara than it had under Donald Trump, and Turkey's cooperation with Moscow is reaching its limits.

Erdoğan's visit to Cyprus did not result in the declaration of a new state, and Erdoğan did not call on other states to recognize the TRNC. This is undoubtedly due to the internationally unanimous rejection of Ankara's new Cyprus policy and the decision to open up even a small part of the fenced area of Varosha.

When Tatar first brought up the opening of Varosha in July 2019, but also when he announced his shift toward a two-state solution in the months leading up to his election as president, Ankara was still embarking on its collision course in the Eastern Mediterranean. Joe Biden was not yet elected, and Washington and Brussels were not yet talking about a joint strategy toward Ankara. This was the time in which Erdoğan and Tatar put the new Cyprus policy on track, giving rise to high expectations in Turkey, and the TRNC, that cannot be met today.

However, international condemnation alone will not stop Ankara from continuing to pursue its salami tactics. It will not prevent Turkey from taking the whole of Varosha under Turkish Cypriot administration step by step: as it — at least partially — compensates the area's Greek Cypriot owners and transfers their properties to investors from the Turkish mainland. Erdoğan himself describes this as the goal of his policy, and the process will result in the further consolidation of Turkish statehood in the north of the island.

The EU and its member states should be aware that Ankara's approach to Cyprus is not motivated by the desire to defend the interests of the Turkish Cypriots, it is instead part of Turkey's expansionist strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean. While Tur-

key cannot currently pursue its goals due to its isolation, Ankara remains committed to its expansionist policy, to which it will revert as soon as conditions allow.

In its latest resolutions, the European Council made de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean the precondition for closer cooperation with Turkey. The positive agenda that the European Council envisioned cannot be implemented if Ankara fuels the Cyprus conflict.

As a result of Turkey's actions over the past few months, reevaluation has begun in the Republic of Cyprus. Nicosia now seems more willing to share power with the Turkish Cypriots in a federal state. Here, too, Brussels may exert its influence.

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