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CYPRUS PROBLEM IN DOMESTIC POLITICAL LIFE OF
TURKEY IN 1960–1970S

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Abstract

In the 196–1970s Cyprus became a zone of confrontation between Greek Cypriots who sought unification with Greece and Turkish Cypriots who did not want this unification. The latter became the object of terrorist attacks by the militarized Greek nationalist organization EOKA. In December 1963, real battles started on the island. The Turkish population reacted painfully to the tragedy of the Turkish Cypriots, who were helpless to the aggression of the Greek armed groups. This outrage was actively used in the political struggle by the People’s Republican Party and the Justice Party, alternately accusing each other of ignoring the problem of Turkish Cypriots. However, coming to power, they continued the restrained policy of competitors. The situation changed dramatically in 1973–1974. The rise in oil prices led the Turkish government to search for oil deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean, including near the northern part of the island of Cyprus. The seizure of power in July 1974 in Nicosia by EOKA members, who proclaimed the island’s entry into Greece, served as the reason for the Turkish landing on the island. The issue of the borders and the future fate of the island territory occupied by Turkish troops led to a split in the coalition government of the People’s Republican Party and the National Salvation Party and new elections. Following the elections and inter-party approvals, the right-lost its former relevance amid the general aggravation of the political situation in the country.

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1. Introduction

In 1960, the island of Cyprus gained independence from Great Britain. In the early years of the new state, the Greek and Turkish ethnic communities of the island coexisted peacefully. However, the popular idea among the Greek population of enosis – the unification of the island with Greece and the terrorist activities of the armed wing of supporters of this pan-Hellenistic EOKA alliance led to an increase among Turkish Cypriots – the idea of taqsim, i.e. the federalization of Cyprus on an ethnic basis. The refusal of the first president of Cyprus, Makarios, to concede to the Turks led to final alienation between the communities. The problems of the Turkish community of the island of Cyprus caused a lively response among the Turkish population, which became an important trump card in the struggle between political parties in 1960 and, especially in the first half of the 1970s.

2. Problem Statement

In 1960, a large-scale military coup took place in Turkey leading to the overthrow of the Democratic Party, Prime Minister A. Menderes and President D. Bayar. The head of the coup, D. Gürsel, became the president of the country, and the closest associate of K. Ataturk, the head of the People's Republican Party (PRP) I. İnönü became the prime minister. However, contrary to the plans of the military, the consolidation of the political field of Turkey did not happen. Former members of the Democratic Party formed the right-wing liberal Justice Party. In the PRP itself, a strong left wing arose, led by B. Ecevit. The Party of Nationalist Action (PNA) led by A. Turkesh was formed on the extreme right wing. The popularity of the Islamic-conservative Milli Geryush movement was rapidly growing thus subsequently giving rise to the influential National Salvation Party (NSP) led by N. Erbakan. The issue of the fate of the Turkish Cypriots played an important role in the political confrontation between these parties in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1974, disagreements on the Cyprus issue led to the collapse of the PRP-NSP coalition.

3. Research Questions

The first large-scale outbreak of violence on the island of Cyprus occurred on December 21, 1963. Mass Greek attacks on Turks in Nicosia, Larnaca and in 104 villages were later called “The Bloody Christmas”. On December 24, the wife of Turkish Rear Admiral N. Ilhan and their three children were killed by EOKA militants. The “The Bloody Christmas” and the murder of the family of N. Ilhan stirred up the Turkish community of the island and provoked their political mobilization on an ethnic basis. Turkey was swept up by mass solidarity actions of students with Turkish Cypriots (Suleymanov, 2019). The humanitarian aid was organized in favor of the victims (Erciyas). The situation on the island was vigorously discussed in the Turkish parliament. The opposition deputies demanded immediate intervention. The Justice Party especially attacked the government of I. İnönü. One of the party leaders, the future acting president of the Republic of Turkey, Ihsan Sabri Chaglajangil, reminded I. İnönü of his 1959 statement in which he accused the Democratic Party of surrendering the national interests in Cyprus and asked ironically: “Why does Mr. Prime Minister not make decisions when his forecasts come true?”

(Erciyas). I. İnönü objected that the current international situation does not allow Turkey to unilaterally intervene in the internal problems of Cyprus. His activities were reduced to alleviating the fate of Turkish Cypriots with the support of the United States or the USSR. In the end, UN peacekeepers were stationed on the island.

Since October 1965, Süleyman Demirel became the Prime Minister of Turkey. In 1967, his government faced a situation similar to that of 1963–1967 and, despite its warlike rhetoric while in opposition and opposition pressure, especially nationalists led by A. Turkesh, as well as part of the military, Demirel continued the diplomatic course of the government of I. İnönü. As a “Solomon’s decision”, the idea of diplomatic coercion of Greece to withdraw the armed forces from Cyprus was put forward, which, in their opinion, would reassure both the opposition and the military and would save the Turkish Cypriots from possible attacks (Erciyas). By the early 1970s the government of S. Demirel and the Justice Party headed by him lost their former popularity. The country was shocked by the crimes of left-wing extremists. A conspiracy arose in the army with the aim of bringing left-wing nationalists to power, the so-called national revolutionaries (“devrimchiler” in Turkish historiography), who occupied a sharply anti-American position and ideologically close to the Arab party BAATH. It shall be noted that the leaders of the national revolutionaries Cemal Madanoğlu, Doğan Avcıoğlu and İlhan Selçuk advocated military intervention in Cypriot affairs and the occupation of the island. However, the conspiracy in the army was uncovered by the right wing of the military elite, who organized the coup on March 12, 1971, overthrown the Justice Party, cracked down on left-wing parties and groups, and also recruited the Islamists. But, unlike the 1980s, in the first half of the 1970s the attempts by the military to form a stable over-party government of right-wing technocrat liberals failed (Tovsultanova et al., 2020).

The 33-year period of dominance in the party of I. İnönü ended at the V Extraordinary RPP Congress on May 7, 1972. An elderly associate of K. Atatürk ceded power in the party to the leader of its left wing, Bulent Ecevit (Çelikler, 2009). According to the results of the general elections of October 14, 1973, the RPP received 33 %, and the NSP – about 30 %, the Democratic Party and the National Salvation Party received 11.9 and 11.8 % of the vote, respectively. On October 17, the parties began negotiations on the creation of a coalition government. Following the talks, B. Ecevit achieved the most positive result at the meeting with NSP leader N. Erbakan (Çelikler, 2009). After lengthy negotiations, the leaders of the RPP and the NSP agreed to mutual concessions and concluded an agreement on the creation of a coalition government. From the very beginning, it was an extremely difficult and unstable alliance. The National Salvation Party was based on the principles of respect for Islamic values, the Ottoman political tradition, anti-communism and anti-Zionism. They also advocated the development of heavy industry in the country. The charismatic NSP leader repeatedly spoke negatively about Atatürk and his political heritage, which caused extreme irritation in the RPP, which positioned itself as the heiress to the political tradition of Kemalism.

The global oil crisis began in 1973 causing an increased interest of the Turkish authorities in the exploration of possible oil deposits in the territorial waters of Turkey. In this regard, the issue of the maritime border with Cyprus acquired relevance. The idea of armed intervention in the affairs of the island state was supplemented by significant arguments about its possible economic benefit (Kireev, 2007; Shmarov, 1982). The likelihood of gaining independence from energy imports was a popular topic

in Turkey's political discussions of those years. Meanwhile, on July 15, 1974, a military coup took place in Nicosia. The nationalists who came to power in Cyprus announced their unification with Greece. This violated all agreements between Greek Cypriots and Cypriots of Turkish origin. In response, after the approval of all parliamentary parties, B. Ecevit ordered the start of Operation Attila, which implied the landing of the Turkish naval forces in the north of Cyprus. Despite the fact that the leadership of both parties that were part of the ruling coalition supported direct military intervention, however, they disagreed on the question of its possible limits. B. Ecevit, well aware that the international community will never accept the open annexation of the territory of Northern Cyprus, publicly stated that he had no doubt that the Turkish army was capable of capturing the entire island, but was not sure of the possibility of retaining it given the pressure from the United States and Europe: "I am doing what Atatürk and I. İnönü would do. I am a Republican teenager who once learned a lot from them. We should know where to stop in order to achieve the greatest success in the war. In Cyprus, only thirty percent can be Turkish..." (Gökçe, 2018, p. 57). Moreover, B. Ecevit allowed the possibility of withdrawing Turkish troops from the island with the consent of the Greek side to transform the state structure of Cyprus on the principles of a bicomunal territorial federation (Çelikler, 2018). Such a compromise position provoked a heated protest from his partner in the ruling coalition N. Erbakan. The latter was a consistent supporter of taqsim and insisted on the annexation of at least 50 % of the territory of Cyprus and stated: "We want the division of the island to follow a certain equal line. This is the maximum of concessions that we are ready for" (Gökçe, 2018). He called for the recall of Turkish diplomats from the Geneva negotiations and the continuation of Operation Attila. Its second stage in August 1974 was carried out under the pressure of a hawk – N. Erbakan (Gökçe, 2018). B. Ecevit, who was under direct pressure from the United States, was annoyed by the aggressive rhetoric of N. Erbakan. Having lost hope of influencing his deputy with persuasion, he said that he would no longer coordinate with him further actions of the Government on the Cyprus problem. In turn, the members of the NSP accused B. Ecevit of being too succint to American pressure (Çelikler, 2009). Undoubtedly, the radical statements of N. Erbakan and other NSP leaders had the main goal of strengthening their own popularity within the country.

However, there were other contradictions between the RPP and the NSP in addition to Cyprus: this is the issue of the role of religion in the political life of the country and the emphasis of the NSP on the need to develop heavy industry primarily, the rejection by the NSP members of the amnesty of left politicians initiated by B. Ecevit, as well as the disagreement of the impulsive NSP leader N. Erbakan. The Cyprus problem has only exacerbated the accumulated differences. After discussions with colleagues in the RPP, B. Ecevit announced his resignation on September 16, 1974 and set a date for early elections, hoping, due to the popularity acquired after the Cyprus operation, to form a one-party government (Kireev, 2008). Thus, instead of reconciling the ruling elites the military operations in Cyprus, on the contrary, split it.

Despite the complacent calculations of B. Ecevit to reap the glory of the savior of the Turkish Cypriots, the RPP failed in the elections and after a five-month government crisis, a new coalition came to power, called the "National Front" ("Milliyetçi Cephe"). It included the conservative Justice Party, the former partner of the RPP – the National Salvation Party, the Republican Party of Trustand the Nationalist Action Party. On April 12, 1975, by a margin of four votes, the government list proposed by

the Nationalist Front was approved by the parliament. The leader of the strongest in the coalition, Justice Party S. Demirel, again became the Prime Minister (Dursun, 2018).

While the transitional government of Sadi Irmak was in power in Turkey, on February 13, 1975, the Turkish Federal Republic of Cyprus was proclaimed in Northern Cyprus. In response, the US leadership imposed an embargo on the supply of American weapons to Turkey, citing the fact that such weapons are used by Turkey against its NATO ally, Greece. In response, S. Demirel announced the suspension of the joint defense agreement with the United States (Kireev, 2007). In addition, in order to balance the pressure of the West, the Nationalist Front government began a policy of rapprochement with the ideologically alien Soviet Union.

In 1977–1979, with the submission of the Turkish side, community leaders held negotiations for the formation of a bicomunal Cyprus Federation, which ended to no avail (Gözde, 2008). The relevance of the Cyprus problem to Turkish domestic political discourse during this period is noticeably falling amid the bloody vendetta of right-wing and left-wing extremists and the growth of Kurdish separatism in the south-east of the country (Sayari, 2010).

The issue of the territorial structure of the Mediterranean island periodically regained its former relevance after the entry of the Greek Republic of Cyprus into the EU and subsequent 2004 referendums on unification in both parts of the island. At the same time, the principles of the federal structure once formulated by B. Ecevit, were adopted as its basis. Recently, the Cyprus issue has again been aggravated in connection with a new round of Greek-Turkish disputes over the border of their territorial waters in the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. It is enough to recall a visit by a student and political heir to the hawk of Turkish foreign policy of the 1970s and 1990s N. Erbakan by the current president of the Republic of Turkey R.T. Erdogan in November last year to the resort of Varosha in Northern Cyprus. During his visit, he stated that negotiations around Cyprus should be based on the principle of existence, on the island of two states. He added that Turkey, as a guarantor country for the Cyprus settlement, “will no longer tolerate diplomatic games”, referring to the exploration of hydrocarbon deposits on the Cyprus shelf. According to him, Turkey will continue drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean until a “fair agreement” is reached (Yakimycheva, 2020). Despite the fact that R.T. Erdogan’s warlike rhetoric is primarily aimed at strengthening his personal authority within Turkey, it had the widest international resonance, was discussed by the US Congress and once again aggravated the relations with France, which had its own interest in the Cyprus shelf. All this once again proves that the Cyprus question does not lose its former relevance and is still far from being resolved.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to find out the role of the Cyprus question in the internal policy of the Republic of Turkey in the 1960–1970s.

5. Research Methods

The methodological basis of the study is the principles of historicism and objectivity.

6. Findings

In the 1960s the problem of Turkish Cypriots was a political tool in the confrontation between Turkish parties for seats in the Supreme National Assembly. The situation changed dramatically after the coup of July 15, 1974 and the start of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. The issue of the boundaries of the advance of Turkish troops and the subsequent political fate of the occupied territory predetermined the collapse of the coalition of the RPP and the NSP. Despite the fact that it was not the only and far from the most important in their contradictions, it was it that accelerated and was the most striking public expression of the gap between the parties after 8 months of cooperation.

7. Conclusion

In 1963, Turkish Cypriots became victims of terror by the Greek extremist organization EOKA. From that moment on, the issue of the protection of Turkish Cypriots began to play an important role in Turkish domestic political discourse. In 1974, in connection with the military coup in Nicosia and the announcement of the accession of Cyprus to Greece, the Turkish naval forces organized a landing on the island. In the ruling coalition of the RPP and the NSP, a split arose over the future of Cyprus. The leader of the RPP B. Ecevit admitted the idea of withdrawing Turkish troops after the creation of the bicomunal Cyprus Federal Republic. In turn, the leader of the NSP N. Erbakan insisted on annexing half of the island. None of them were willing to concede to the other, as a result of which this conflict led to the collapse of the already fragile government coalition. After the occupation of the north of the island of Cyprus, the Turkish Federal Republic of Cyprus was formed on its territory. In the second half of the 1970s Cyprus issues temporarily lose their urgency in Turkish domestic political discourse, giving way to the problems of left and right extremism and sharply intensified Kurdish separatism. Nevertheless, Cyprus issues have regained their relevance in recent years, due to disputes over the borders of Turkish territorial waters and an increased interest in the outcome of this struggle within Turkey.

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