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The new economic protocol of Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community: Implications for Cyprus, Turkey and the EU

The new economic protocol, an economic support and reform package that Turkey signed with the Turkish Cypriot community, has further destabilised the political situation of the community, setting difficult dilemmas for the island of Cyprus as a whole, as well as for regional actors.

We aim to provide a background to the Turkish Cypriot community's economy and contextualize the recent, politically charged, economic protocol given by Turkey in April 2022. This protocol explicitly introduced political and administrative conditions to the 'Turkish Cypriot authorities'¹ that aim to control the political, the administrative and the social fabric of the Turkish Cypriot community.

In Euro terms, the economy of the TCc in 2020 was 12.5% of the Republic of Cyprus.

The background: The Turkish Cypriot community economy

The Turkish Cypriot community (henceforth TCc) is often overlooked in terms of accurate reporting of its social and economic progress. Yet, it is important to note how the economic challenges faced by the community interact with the increasing Turkish intervention in TCc affairs, furthering political instability within the TCc and hampering the efforts for a settlement in Cyprus.

Although the population estimates of the TCc community are controversial, the size of the TCc economy is far lower than the share of TC in the population of Cyprus. In Euro terms, the economy of the TCc in 2020 was 12.5% of the Republic of Cyprus, and as a result, the average income per capita of the TCc is substantially lower than the income per capita of the Republic of Cyprus. This income disparity has been exacerbated by the

¹ Note: most of the Turkish Cypriot community resides in the area not under the effective control of the Republic of Cyprus in the northern part of Cyprus. This entity is named the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus ("TRNC"). The entity is only recognised by Turkey.

fall of the Turkish lira vs the Euro – The Turkish lira fell from 2 lira to the euro in 2011 to currently 18 Turkish lira to the euro in 2022. This has fuelled inflation, with the 12-month inflation in August running at 118%.

Nevertheless, the inflationary pressure impacted the TCc economy concurrently with the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has affected its three major service (export) industries (higher education, tourism and to a lesser extent real estate), while the economy suffered the consequences of inadequate health infrastructure (World Bank, 2021). These challenges exacerbated long running problems faced by the Turkish Cypriot economy in terms of restrictions in its global interactions, and its poor economic competitiveness (KTTO, 2021).

The inflationary pressure impacted the TCc economy concurrently with the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In terms of public finances, the TCc has been dependent on Turkey for financial support. However, this financial support was on a declining trend, as Turkey pushed the TCc authorities to aim for self-sufficiency. Foreign aid from Turkey has been reduced from 4.9% of GDP in 2017 to 2.5% in 2018 (World Bank, 2020). However, aid was increased from 1.614bn Turkish lira (henceforth TL) in 2020 to 1.834bn TL in 2021 (an increase of 13.6%) due to the increased demands on the TCc budget by the Covid-19 pandemic. The foreign aid from Turkey is granted in forms of grants and loans, and is used to pay for defence, public investment projects and other public expenditure. In 2021 the total amount of aid announced was 1.833bn TL: out of this 491.5mln TL (26.8% of the total) was given in the form of loans, while 677mln TL (36.9%) went to pay for defence (Sapienta Economics, 2022b). The amount given does cover parts of the budget deficit, in particular the cost of defence: this defence aid contribution will increase from 677mln TL in 2021 to 940mln TL in 2022 to partially take account of inflation.

Since 2009, the provision of aid by Turkey was granted in terms of an annual economic protocol between Turkey and the TCc authorities. This protocol was mainly an economic conditionality programme, where Turkey would extract economic concessions and promises of reform from the TCc, mainly in an effort to reduce the level of future aid support and in order to increase the competitiveness of the economy. However, the implementation of the conditionality by the TCc was patchy, and during the time when

Mr Akıncı was the Turkish Cypriot leader, the annual economic protocol was often delayed by Turkey, thus creating public financing uncertainty. Whether due to the patchy implementation of conditional actions or due to the displeasure of Turkey towards the TC leadership, only 20% of the aid agreed was received in 2020 (Sapienta Economics, 2022a). Prior to the election of Mr Tatar in October 2020, Turkey was reluctant to provide additional funding to the public finances of the TCc. In that election, there were allegations of Turkey taking an active role in ensuring the victory of Mr. Tatar (Euronews, 2021a).

The 2022 economic protocol


A new economic protocol for 2022 was signed between Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot leadership on the 14th of April. The protocol was not officially published before the 20th of May. The protocol provides a long list of necessary reforms and investment projects. It will provide 4.25bn TL (€236.1mln in the current exchange rate) to the TCc public finances, out of which 1.05bn TL (34.7% of the total) will be a loan and the remaining will be a grant (See Table 1). The increase Turkish lira terms had more to do with the depreciation of the lira rather than actually with increasing aid from Turkey to the Turkish Cypriot community – in euro terms the aid to the Turkish Cypriot community is similar to the economic protocol of 2021, although as noted above the 2020 protocol was larger than the protocol of 2019.

What makes the 2022 economic protocol an important break from past protocols is not the amount of aid, but the social and political demands that Turkey has set as conditions for the aid to be given. The 2022 economic protocol has placed a series of political, administrative, and social demands on the TCc as a provision in delivering the Turkish financial support, which are demanded under very tight timelines.

Table 1: Summary table of the amounts pledged in the Economic protocol of 2021 and 2022

	Grants	Loans	Total	Estimated as delivered
Economic Protocol 2022	3.2bn TL	1.05bn TL	4.25bn TL	13.6% (by August)
Economic protocol 2021	2.25bn TL	1bn TL	3.25TL	56.4%

Source: (Sapienta, 2022b)



The political demands of the economic protocol seek to prevent dissent towards the new Turkish policy on the Cyprus settlement of a two-state solution and align the TCc to the desired social priorities of the current Turkish Cypriot leadership.

The economic protocol consists of 107 conditional actions, with most actions needing to take place in the last 6 months of 2022. According to the protocol, 74 of the actions out of 107 had to be finalized by the end of August 2022 – this has not happened. So far, other than a few symbolic actions, the Turkish Cypriot authorities have been unable to bring forward any policy reforms. This has been mainly due the instability of the political system which is analysed below. The economic protocol acted as a catalyst making cooperation both between coalition parties, but also within the largest party in power, UBP, very difficult.


A substantial part of the aid has not yet been delivered. According to the publicly available information (KKTC, 2022), the total amount of the payments made under the protocol was 579.3mln TL (13.6% of the promised aid of the 2022 protocol) and that amount was mainly spent on defence. This is far lower than what was promised to be delivered by August. As it currently stands, the 2022 economic protocol has just ensured the sustained presence of Turkish armed forces in the northern part of the island. It is noteworthy that the protocol also stipulates the strengthening defence cooperation, including increasing the power of the police and other law-and-order units effectively under the control of the Turkish army.

The political demands of the economic protocol seek to prevent dissent towards the new Turkish policy on the Cyprus settlement of a two-state solution and align the TCc to the desired social priorities of the current Turkish Cypriot leadership.² The protocol demands legislation banning TCc unions from having political aims. This is a direct attack to TCc unions, which are known for their political activism in favour of leftist aims and in favour of Cypriot re-unification. Active steps will be taken to combat “disinformation campaigns” run by civil society and third countries about the relations between Turkey and the TCc authorities . The protocol also demands that legislation on the press will be

² TCc leader Tatar presented a 6 point programme detailing a two state solution to the UN Secretary General. (Public Information Office, 2021)

modernised following best practices from Turkey – where press freedom has been plummeting, as evidenced by the Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2022).

Further, the protocol demands a hitherto unknown subjugation of the TC authorities to Turkish institutions. Any new civil servant appointments need to be submitted to the Turkish embassy for vetting and employment of teachers is to be reorganised. The religious affairs department should become an integral part of the state, with the curriculum of schools reorganised to follow the system in Turkey.



The protocol further demands that by November the fenced-off part of Varosha should be prepared for daily use after completing infrastructure and construction works.

The protocol also allows for a greater assimilation of Turkish citizens, who have been migrating to the northern part of Cyprus since 1974. Turkey supports this migration, as it creates a de facto demographic change on the island. Turkey, through the protocol, demanded that it should be easier for Turkish citizens to acquire trnc citizenship, and restrictions on investment and property to be lifted. This was reiterated by Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, in July, leading to significant backlash from some TCc political parties, unions and civil society organisations (Cyprus Mail, 2022a). These organisations argue that the aid given by the protocol for developmental projects is then given to Turkish companies who win the tenders projects, who then employ low-wage Turkish workers.

The protocol further demands that by November the fenced-off part of Varosha should be prepared for daily use after completing infrastructure and construction works. This is contrary to the statements of the High representative of the European Union, who requested for a reversal of all steps taken to re-open Varosha (EU Council, 2021). Any actions by the TC authorities to open Varosha further will have serious negative consequences in Cyprus problem negotiations efforts. The President of the Republic of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, has stated in the past that if Turkey continues to press for the opening of Varosha this would be " a tombstone not only to the continuation of the negotiations but more importantly in the search of a viable and functional settlement"

(Euronews, 2021b) Thus, it would seem difficult to envision any progress in the Cyprus peace negotiations if further steps are taken to open Varosha.

The 2022 economic protocol indicates a desire by Turkey to use the aid it provides in order to acquire unprecedented control over the political, social and administrative decision-making in the TCc community.

What makes this protocol particularly noteworthy is Turkey's clear demand for the TCc to comply on a range of issues that are political and social in nature, rather than economic. The pressure for non-economic conditionality for Turkey to provide aid is a reversal of the course of the economic protocols before 2022, which emphasised economic self-sufficiency. The 2022 economic protocol indicates a desire by Turkey to use the aid it provides in order to acquire unprecedented control over the political, social and administrative decision-making in the TCc community.

Even the economic stipulations of the protocol are deeply controversial within the TC community. The protocol seeks to eliminate the use of other currencies other than the Turkish lira. This will be a blow to the Turkish Cypriots, who use foreign currencies (including cryptocurrencies) as a hedge to the rapid devaluation of the Turkish lira. This will also mean that those who receive income in other currencies (through trade or through expenditure of EU citizens who cross the green line) will come under increasing pressure on their income if they must receive payment only in the devaluing Turkish lira. There is also a demand to privatise the port and the lottery system, as well as a suggestion to reform the electricity authority in a way that could lead to future privatisation: all of this is very controversial to the Turkish Cypriot community, which has seen past privatisations create private monopolies.

Political ramifications

Even before the economic protocol of 2022 was signed, Turkish Cypriot politics seemed to lurch from crisis to crisis. Intra-party-political rivalries in the UBP, rivalries among the coalition partners and direct intervention by Turkey have created an unstable political situation, which was further destabilised by the demands of the economic protocol.

The economic protocol created shockwaves in an already fraught political environment (Cyprus Mail, 2021a). The TCc has a directly elected position for TCc leader and a prime ministerial system linked to parliamentary elections. Turkey strongly leaned into supporting Ersin Tatar in the 2020 leadership elections and the right-wing National Unity Party (henceforth UBP) in parliamentary elections. Yet these efforts have not brought a stable political governance. The UBP is having difficulty in maintaining unity within its own party as well as having difficulties with its coalition partners. There have been three prime ministers in the past 17 months and there have been repeated resignations of the government, as well as constant ministerial re-shuffling.

Turkey's recent intervention in the political sphere of the TCc is not just evidenced through the economic protocol. There seems to have been an intervention to avoid the election of Faiz Sucuoğlu as the President of the UBP, the party in power. As a result, the leading contestants ruled out their candidacy and Ersan Saner, seen by many as the candidate preferred by Turkey, was appointed to act as a leader of the party and prime minister. Saner was forced to resign under the weight of a sex scandal and a new UBP Congress took place in October, leading to the election of Faiz Sucuoğlu as party leader and "prime minister" (Cyprus Mail, 2021b). A "government" was formed with UBP in coalition with the Democratic Party - DP and Revival Party – YDP, which follow a harder line in the Cyprus issue. This led to snap "parliamentary elections" in January 2022; as a result, the UBP remained the largest party in parliament with 24 seats. At the same time, these elections also led to the revival of leftist party CTP which gained an additional six seats to come second with 18 seats.

The results of the "parliamentary elections" did not lead to government stability. A range of cabinet reshuffles took place before a new crisis affected the ruling coalition. The member of the cabinet responsible for the economy, Sunat Atun, created an uproar when he tried to re-adjust the taxation on alcohol. This was seen by many as a nod to the conservative Islamist government of President Erdogan in Turkey and aligned with policies enacted by the AKP government there (Kibris postasi, 2022a). The particular attempt was seen as attacking the secular lifestyle of the TCc, and in combination with rise in prices of fuel, led to the Prime minister Sucuoğlu to demand the resignation of Sunat Atun. Eleven days later, this request was rejected by Mr Tatar, leading to the resignation of Faiz Sucuoğlu as prime minister on 25th April 2022. In this difficult political situation, it became known that the protocol was signed but what was signed was only made public on 20th May 2022.

The decision to hide the details of the economic protocol must be seen in light of the events above. The friction between Atun and Sucuoğlu took place in the context of the new, politically interventionist, Turkish economic protocol. Sucuoğlu signed the economic protocol, but due to his resignation, the challenging task of passing the conditions attached was left to his successor, Ünal Üstel.

One cannot underestimate the unpopularity of the 2022 economic protocol. Kudret Özersay, head of the Peoples Party HP said that the protocol consists of serious risks “against our lifestyle, fundamental rights and freedoms, and our existence.” (Cyprus Mail, 2022b). The President of Turkish Cypriot Union of Civil Servants (KTAMS) Güven Bengihan, emphasized the secrecy around the protocol stating: “The protocol came into surface 36 days after it was signed. Not the current prime minister but the former prime minister, Faiz Sucuoğlu, signed this protocol. This kind of secrecy has never happened before. We believe that this is not an economic and cooperation agreement, it goes further, it is a protocol of submission.” (Yenidüzen, 2022a). The Secretary General of Republican Turkish Party (CTP) Erdoğan Sorakın labelled the protocol as ‘annihilation protocol’, underlining that “whatever it will cost, we are stating openly and clearly CTP is saying no to the protocol.” (Yenidüzen 2022b).

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The protocol faced even some opposition in Turkey, with an adviser to opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu of the Republican People Party (CHP), stating that the “2022 Economic and Financial Cooperation Protocol neglects the political will of the Turkish Cypriots and their sovereignty” and refers to the protocol “as a capitulation document, as a way of exporting one-man rule to TRNC in order to create [there the] AK Party – Erdoğan State”. He further added that “This protocol, [is a] derogatory and dangerous document ignoring the independence of TRNC, its elected parliament, government, institutions, unions as well as Turkish Cypriots’ political will” (Odakhaber,2022).

Sunat Atun defended the protocol stating “Turkish Cypriots do not want a vicious conflict between the government and the opposition and against Turkey. They expect their problems to be resolved [...] Motherland Turkey does not have any other calculations

other than to want us to live in safety and well-being. Whoever is trying to distort our aim to make the best use of the protocol and to reach our goals and to use it against Turkey is doing evil to the people.” (Havadis, 2022).

In May 2022, Mr Tartar appointed UBP’s Ünal Üstel as prime minister, which caused rifts within UBP as Faiz Sucuoğlu remained as head of the party. On the 26th of July 2022, Sunat Atun announced his own resignation with Üstel appointing Alişan Şan responsible for the cabinet finance portfolio.

Üstel will have to deliver on the demands of the 2022 economic protocol. The appointment of Üstel was seen as a further interference in TCc politics by Turkey. Üstel announced that he will be following the conditionality of the economic protocol. However, the terms of the protocol galvanised the political opposition, the labour unions and civil society organisations who are calling for a rejection of the protocol to secure the independence of the TCc from Turkey.

Despite the extensive political instability, at least some of the conditions of the 2022 economic protocol are being discussed in the “parliament”. A bill was passed reducing the number of local administrative bodies from 28 to 18, causing significant reaction. The main opposition party CTP stated that “the law will create further chaos in local administrations” while the unions representing the workers in the local administrations held a demonstration which led to the breaking down of the door of the TC parliament (SesKibris, 2022). There is also a bill in “parliament” to allow the increase of the number of properties that foreigners can buy in the north of Cyprus. The TC authorities are also trying to implement changes in education that are in line with the protocol. While the proposed legal change mostly aims to re-organize the spending on the education, there are also provisions for “on-the-job-training” and redefining the teachers’ academy and its role by expanding it to serve as an institution that will accept students from Turkey; the intention is to also give opportunity to Turkish graduates to work in the Turkish Cypriot primary schools. This was seen by the teacher’s union as an effort to dilute their political, largely federalist support for a solution (KTOEOS, 2022).

Perhaps the most controversial reform demanded by the protocol relates to the media. The draft amendment law on “Establishment of public or private radio and TV Stations”, aims to regulate digital streaming and online debate. The draft law is going to make web broadcasters to pay for application fee as well as yearly licence, which is seen as an attack on alternative media outlets and is seen as an intervention to the freedom of

expression. The union of press labourers reacted to the draft law stating that it primarily impinges the freedom of expression and emphasized that the draft law “suppress[es] the views of the people in opposition” (Kibris Postasi, 2022b). The Turkish Cypriot union of journalists also strongly reacted to three proposals seeking to amend the penal code, in terms of ‘Protection of Private Life’, ‘Confidentiality’ and ‘Malicious Publications’.

This led the TC authorities to take a step back and re-consider the controversial amendments.

The public opinion towards the protocol is increasingly negative and the expression of dissatisfaction towards it comes to surface sporadically, often linked with other economic demands.

Another reform that is moving ahead is the privatisation of ports and of Telecommunications. Both are in the portfolio of Transportation, led by YDP leader, Erhan Arıklı. Recently, at a TV interview, Arıklı, stated that the roadmap to initiate the privatisation process is in place as of September 2022 and emphasized that the labour unions are the main obstacle against privatisation (Yenidüzen, 2022c; Kibris Genc TV, 2022).

The unpopularity of the protocol is now mixed with occurring protests again the announcement by President Erdoğan that he would build a palace to house the TC authorities’ main buildings. The economic protocol has thus created additional political instability within the TCc and this has decreased the TC authorities’ ability to make effective decisions. The public opinion towards the protocol is increasingly negative and the expression of dissatisfaction towards it comes to surface sporadically, often linked with

other economic demands.

The political instability in the TCc has continued, with Faiz Sucuoğlu announcing in September that he is stepping down from his role as the party president due to the friction of the current duality between himself as the leader of UBP and UBP’s Ünal Üstel as prime minister (Kibris Postasi, 2022c). The continuing instability in the largest party in the ruling coalition has galvanised the opposition and the ability to pass reforms requested by the protocol are now seem unlikely until after the UBP leadership election period.

The economic protocol creates uncomfortable dilemmas for all actors.

The new, politicized, economic protocol of 2022 between Turkey and the TCc has raised the uncomfortable dilemmas for all stakeholders with an interest in Cyprus.

From the aspect of the Turkish Cypriot authorities, the economic protocol has weakened the ability to create policy, as it stimulated internal fighting in the main ruling party, as well as becoming the centre of derision due to the unpopularity of the protocol agreement. Yet time is running out and there is a real risk that the aid from Turkey will not be provided if further reforms are not pursued before the end of the year.

The economic protocol also raises uncomfortable dilemmas for Turkey. The very political nature of the conditions attached to the protocol have not been met, but withholding aid further undermines the support for Mr Tatar and those parties who favour direct involvement of Turkey in the TCc political life. Thus, aid might still be provided, despite the protocol conditions not being met, in order not to provide support for the galvanised opposition and prop up the UBP coalition government.

The very political nature of the conditions attached to the protocol have not been met, but withholding aid further undermines the support for Mr Tatar and those parties who favour direct involvement of Turkey in the TCc political life.

For the Republic of Cyprus, the economic protocol raises further concerns over the role of Turkey in the TC community. However, the Republic of Cyprus has been unable or unwilling to create the necessary conditions so that the TC civil society's concerns about the protocol are conveyed to the European Union.

The economic protocol is also a challenge for the European Union. The European union is a major funder of the TC community under Council regulation No. 389/2006, and such aid aims to bring TCc closer to the EU and support the solution of the Cyprus issue (European Commission, 2022). Despite the EU programming €592mln of aid for the period 2006-2022 to support the TC community, the economic protocol is directly opposing some of the reforms that the EU has been supporting (European Commission, 2021): especially in terms of the rule of law, freedom of expression, and administrative

efficiency. Aspects of the protocol also directly contravene the stated position of the EU on Varosha, as stated by the High representative. However, it seems that the EU is unable or unwilling to suspend funding in aid projects for the TCc to raise concerns for the undemocratic elements requested by the protocol.

Finally, the economic protocol raises concerns to all stakeholders who seek Cypriot reunification. The demand for liberalisation of the property market to foreign investors, as well as the provision of identity to Turkish individuals, are both creating additional complications to the two issues that have been very contentious in the Cyprus peace talks– property and population. The direct mention of supporting development in Varosha also creates direct obstacles in re-starting discussions even for confidence building measures. Finally, the direct intervention of Turkey to TC affairs as expressed by the protocol, raises doubts on the ability of the TCc leadership in the future to have any room to negotiate a solution.

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