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# THE 2025 TURKISH CYPRIOT ELECTION: BETWEEN FEDERATION AND THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

## INTRODUCTION

Turkish Cypriots went to the polls to elect the President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)<sup>1</sup> on October 19, 2025. In the election, Tufan Erhürman of the main opposition Republican Turkish Party (CTP) was elected president of the TRNC with a landslide 62.76% of the vote, defeating incumbent President Ersin Tatar, who received 35.81%. In contrast to the presidential system of the Republic of Cyprus, the TRNC operates under a parliamentary system in which executive power rests with a government led by a prime minister who must command a parliamentary majority. The president's role is largely symbolic in domestic governance. However, the Turkish Cypriot president is recognized by Greek Cypriots and the international community as the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and serves as their representative in Cyprus peace talks, giving the office far greater significance than in a typical parliamentary republic.

For nearly half a century, the Turkish Cypriot community was led by two nationalist figures: Fazıl Küçük, who served from 1960 to 1973, and Rauf Denктаş, who succeeded him and remained in office until 2005. Until 1974 both Küçük and Denктаş held the position of Vice President of the Republic of Cyprus. Following the 1974 Turkish intervention in response to a Greek-backed coup that sought union with Greece, the island became de facto divided. In 1975, the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus was declared, with Denктаş winning its presidential elections in 1976 and 1981. Eight years later, in 1983, the Turkish Cypriots unilaterally declared independence, establishing the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Denктаş subsequently won the TRNC presidential elections in 1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000, consistently advocating for an independent Turkish Cypriot state and opposing reunification on a federal basis. Backed by the right-wing National Unity Party (UBP), he maintained strong nationalist support, though he faced challenges from UBP leader and Prime Minister Derviş Eroğlu in the 1995 and 2000 elections, both of which went to a second round.

<sup>1</sup> The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is only recognised by the Republic of Turkey. While for Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots, Ersin Tatar serves as President of the TRNC, the international community considers him the communal leader of the Turkish Cypriots. As the government of the Republic of Cyprus remains internationally recognised as the government of the whole of the island, the entire island is now considered to be a member of the European Union. However, the *acquis communautaire* is suspended in northern Cyprus pending a political settlement to the Cyprus problem (see Protocol no. 10 of the Accession Treaty).

In 2005, Mehmet Ali Talat of the Republican Turkish Party (CTP) became the first Turkish Cypriot leader to genuinely support a federal settlement to the Cyprus problem, defeating UBP leader Derviş Eroğlu. Talat's success largely reflected the electorate's shifting preferences, as Turkish Cypriots had voted in favour of reunification under the UN's Annan Plan just a year earlier. Although the plan was rejected by a large majority of Greek Cypriots, a substantial majority of Turkish Cypriots supported it, hoping their pro-unification stance would ease their international isolation.

In 2010, Talat lost to UBP leader Derviş Eroğlu, largely because the electorate had grown disillusioned with the prospects of a federal settlement, as Talat and his Greek Cypriot counterpart, Dimitris Christofias, failed to reach significant agreement despite both representing left-wing, pro-federalist parties. It is worth noting that Talat's predecessor, Denktaş, and his successor, Eroğlu, also participated in UN-mediated negotiations aimed at establishing a bizonal, bicomunal federation, though both were known hardliners who clearly favoured a two-state solution over a federation. In 2015, Eroğlu was defeated by Mustafa Akıncı, who campaigned on a renewed commitment to reunifying the island and on redefining relations with Turkey along more egalitarian lines, rejecting the traditional "motherland–babyland" dynamic.

In 2020, Akıncı lost to Ersin Tatar, the leader of the UBP and then prime minister. The election was highly controversial, with widespread allegations of significant Turkish interference in Tatar's favour.<sup>2</sup> During the campaign, Tatar appeared alongside Turkish President Erdoğan to reopen the fixed water pipeline from Turkey to Northern Cyprus. Akıncı was not invited to the ceremony, which violated electoral law prohibiting official openings close to an election. Erdoğan and Tatar also announced together in the run up to the election the opening of Varosha<sup>3</sup> to public, which was seen as a move reaffirming Turkey's push for a two-state solution. The main reason for Akıncı's deteriorating relations with Türkiye was his continued pursuit of a federal solution in Cyprus, which contradicted Ankara's growing preference for a two-state solution following the collapse of the UN-mediated Crans-Montana summit in 2017. Akıncı's public remarks opposing Turkey's military incursion into Syria in 2019 also contributed to further straining the already tense relationship. During Tatar's five-year leadership of the Turkish Cypriot community (October 2020–October 2025), one aspect stands out: there were no negotiations aimed at resolving the Cyprus problem. Although UN-mediated meetings continued to bring the two sides together, they produced no meaningful progress. Tatar's relationship with Turkey's government and President Erdoğan appeared hierarchical, as he consistently underscored his

alignment with Ankara's policies—most notably, the two-state solution for Cyprus.

Under the 1985 TRNC Constitution, the president is elected by popular vote and must secure an absolute majority. If no candidate achieves this in the first round, a runoff is held a week later between the two candidates with the highest vote shares. If one of the two withdraws, the remaining candidate is declared the winner, as occurred in 2000 when Eroğlu withdrew, allowing Denktaş to win without a second round. The president is prohibited from leading a political party. Consequently, when a sitting prime minister or party leader is elected president, they must relinquish their party position. This transition often ushers in new party leadership, which can trigger internal divisions and a delicate balance of power between the president and the prime minister—particularly when both hail from the same political party. Such tensions were evident when UBP leader Derviş Eroğlu and President Rauf Denktaş became bitter rivals, as Eroğlu consolidated control over the party, prompting Denktaş's son, Serdar Denktaş, and his allies to break away and establish the Democratic Party (DP) in 1992. After Tatar became president in 2020, the UBP entered a similar fractious period, experiencing three different leaders over the past five years. Although the constitution imposes no term limits on the Turkish Cypriot presidency, every president since Denktaş has served only a single five-year term, despite all seeking re-election and being defeated. Tatar's defeat further reinforced this pattern established by the electorate.

## POLITICAL SPECTRUM AND PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

The Assembly of the Republic is the legislature of the TRNC, with the most recent general election held in January 2022. The UBP and CTP won 24 and 18 of the 50 seats, respectively, receiving 39.61% and 31.91% of the vote. The remaining seats went to the DP (Democratic Party) with 3 seats, the HP (People's Party) with 3 seats, and the YDP (Rebirth Party) with 2 seats, each securing roughly 7% of the vote. Notably, the TDP (Communal Democracy Party) failed to enter parliament, receiving only 4.4% of the vote—just below the 5% threshold required for representation.

In terms of ideological positioning, the UBP is generally considered centre-right (or right), the CTP centre-left, the YDP centre-right (or right), the DP centre-right (or right), the HP centrist, and the TDP centre-left (or left). Left-wing parties support a bizonal, bicomunal federation to reunite the island, while right-wing parties typically back the two-state solution. The current government is formed by a coalition of the UBP, YDP, and DP, while the main opposition is the CTP. The HP has withdrawn from parliamentary activi-

<sup>2</sup> Tatar's second-round victory was largely attributed to strong backing from Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Erdoğan. Turkish officials actively campaigned on his behalf, while pro-government media in Turkey sought to inflame nationalist sentiment and mobilize right-wing voters on the island. Members of Akıncı's team also reported being threatened by individuals they identified as Turkish intelligence officers.

<sup>3</sup> Varosha, a suburb of Famagusta, has remained uninhabited and under Turkish military control since 1974 and was expected to be returned to the Greek Cypriot side in the event of reunification.

ty: its leader, Kudret Özersay, resigned as an MP, and two other HP MPs, left their parties to become independents.

Ersin Tatar and Tufan Erhürman announced their presidential bids months ahead of the election. Tatar announced his intention to seek reelection in March, and on June 2, UBP, DP, and YDP jointly endorsed him as their candidate for a second term at a shared event. At the CTP's April congress, Erhürman was named their candidate. Academic Mehmet Hasgüler joined the race as an independent in June. On 12 September, the deadline for submitting candidacy applications, five additional candidates also submitted their applications to the Supreme Electoral Council. All met the eligibility criteria specified in the constitution—being of Turkish origin, holding a university degree, having minimum five-year residency in the country and being over 35—and were approved. Of the eight candidates, only Tufan Erhürman (CTP) and Osman Zorba (KSP) run for political parties. Cyprus Socialist Party (KSP) is a tiny protest party, and its candidate, Osman Zorba, has virtually no popular support, registering almost no backing in the polls. Independent candidates Mehmet Hasgüler, İbrahim Yazıcı, Arif Salih Kırdag, Ahmet Boran, and Hüseyin Gürlek had no significant public support, in the event the combined total vote for the four independent candidates (except Tatar) and KSP's Zorba amounted to just 1.44%. The day before the election, Hüseyin Gürlek withdrew in favour of Tatar, but his name remained on the ballot. Months before the election, YDP leader Erhan Arıklı proposed an amendment to the electoral law that would require candidates to collect 1,500 signatures to qualify, arguing that this measure would prevent the ballot paper from becoming crowded with individuals merely seeking publicity. However, the proposal was deemed unconstitutional, and therefore no action was taken.

Given the bleak prospects of the other six candidates, the election effectively became a two-horse race between the incumbent, Ersin Tatar—running as an independent with the backing of the UBP, YDP, and DP—and Tufan Erhürman, leader of the main opposition CTP. The UBP, YDP, and DP, which together form the coalition government of Northern Cyprus, all advocate a Turkish Cypriot nationalist position, supporting a two-state solution to the Cyprus problem and maintaining full alignment with Turkey.

Erhürman, by contrast, is a strong proponent of a bizonal, bicomunal federation as the framework for resolving the Cyprus issue. He also received support from the like-minded TDP, which, despite lacking parliamentary representation, is considered the second-largest left-wing party. The TDP's backing was viewed as particularly significant, given that both former Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı and Nicosia Turkish Municipality Mayor Mehmet Harmancı are affiliated with the party. Serdar Denктаş—the son of former Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denктаş and long-time head of the DP before his resignation—also endorsed Erhürman. In addition, former HP members and current independent MPs Ayşegül Baybars and Jale Refik Rogers were among Erhürman's supporters.

It is also worth noting that none of the eight candidates mentioned above are women, highlighting the underrepresentation of women in Turkish Cypriot politics. Although there are 11 female MPs in parliament, the Turkish Cypriot cabinet currently has no female ministers.

## MAIN ELECTION ISSUES

Tatar and Erhürman were the only candidates to run comprehensive campaigns. While the other six candidates largely relied on their allotted state TV airtime and occasional appearances on invited programs to reach voters, Tatar and Erhürman visited all major towns, engaged directly with the public, and maintained daily interactions with the media. The TV, YouTube, and print and online media advertisements were dominated by the two.

The Cyprus problem constituted the central theme of incumbent President Ersin Tatar's campaign. His main election slogan, "*Offensive Diplomacy*," emphasized a commitment to intensifying efforts toward securing broader international recognition for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). A key highlight of Tatar's campaign was his reminder to the electorate that, under his leadership, the TRNC had attained "observer member" status in the Organization of Turkic States. Tatar further argued that initiatives such as the creation of a common market with Turkic states could help alleviate Turkish Cypriots' political and economic isolation.

In the final week leading up to election day, Tatar's campaign rhetoric increasingly framed a federal solution to the Cyprus problem as an existential threat to the survival of Turkish Cypriots. One campaign poster read: "*If there is a federation, I will lose my homeland, my flag, and my land!*" Tatar also underscored his close alliance with the Turkish government, contending that his opponent, Tufan Erhürman, would be unable to maintain the same level of cooperation with Ankara. In media appearances, Tatar criticized Erhürman for remaining silent when AKEL (the Progressive Party of Working People—the main socialist party in Greek Cypriot politics) described Turkey as an "invader" in Northern Cyprus during the Socialist International meeting held in New York in September 2024. He further accused Erhürman of straying from Turkey's political line, citing the Republican Turkish Party's (CTP) boycott of the Turkish Cypriot Parliament during President Erdoğan's address in September 2021—as a protest against Turkey's interference in Turkish Cypriot politics—as evidence.

The National Unity Party (UBP), the Rebirth Party (YDP), and the Democratic Party (DP)—Tatar's political backers—echoed similar positions. On October 14, just five days before the election, they passed a parliamentary resolution declaring the two-state solution as the sole framework that Turkish Cypriots would henceforth consider for resolving the Cyprus problem. Erhan Arıklı, leader of the YDP—which is widely viewed as a party primarily supported by Turkish Cypriots of mainland Turkish origin—went so far as to

claim that, considering the resolution, Tufan Erhürman would be replaced as the Turkish Cypriot representative in the Cyprus peace process if elected. However, Turkish Cypriot Foreign Minister Tahsin Ertuğruloğlu rejected this assertion, emphasizing that the authority of the Turkish Cypriot leader to represent the community in peace negotiations is a long-established norm that cannot be overridden.

Erhürman, on the other hand, ran a campaign that officially did not mention a choice between federation and the two-state solution. His main slogan, “*Our Word*”, suggested that Turkish Cypriots themselves should decide, indirectly implying that Tatar was more aligned with Turkish officials than with his own people. When questioned by journalists, Erhürman emphasized his commitment to UN resolutions advocating a bizonal, bicomunal federation, which he said he views as the only realistic path forward. He even outlined specific conditions for resuming negotiations in his election manifesto. Accordingly, Erhürman’s manifesto stipulates that, to commence official negotiations, the Greek Cypriot leadership must first accept political equality and a rotating presidency, as outlined in UN Security Council resolutions and previous agreements. A clear timetable should be established to prevent the talks from becoming prolonged or open-ended, and it must be reaffirmed that earlier agreements—such as those concerning property—will not be reopened for discussion. Furthermore, it should be ensured from the outset that the Turkish Cypriot side will not revert to the current status quo if the Greek Cypriot leadership once again withdraws from the negotiations.

Erhürman also reaffirmed his commitment to advocating for EU citizenship—in practice, citizenship of the Republic of Cyprus—for Turkish Cypriots of mixed Turkish and Turkish Cypriot parentage. He further pledged to push for the opening of new crossing points between the two sides of the island. While Erhürman maintained that federalism remains the way forward, his election campaign slogans notably avoided direct references to the words *federal* or *federalism*, in contrast to Tatar’s consistent emphasis on the two-state solution. In an indirect response to Tatar’s stance, Erhürman declared during one campaign rally that he “will not give up on Paphos, Limassol, and Larnaca like others,” thereby positioning himself firmly against a north–south partition of the island. Regarding his approach toward Turkey, Erhürman pledged to make his first official visit to Ankara, with CTP Secretary-General Erkut Şahali noting, “It is not possible to make progress on the Cyprus issue by rejecting Turkey or acting in spite of it.”

Many Turkish politicians, officials, and celebrities expressed opinions or attempted to influence the vote by campaigning on the island. Imprisoned Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and CHP leader Özgür Özel called for respect for the Turkish Cypriots’ will, while other opposition figures voiced support for Erhürman. Turkish Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz visited the island three times ahead of the election, attending meetings organized by the UBP, YDP, and DP in support of Tatar. Alongside Yılmaz, AKP member and for-

mer Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım appeared at some campaign events for Tatar. Turkish German ex-footballer Mesut Özil, known for his closeness to President Erdoğan, also attended some campaign events for Tatar.

Additionally, former Turkish Chief of General Staff and AKP MP Hulusi Akar, former Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, and several MPs from the MHP (Nationalist Action Party)—the AKP’s coalition partner in the Turkish legislature—visited the island and campaigned in Tatar’s favour. One of the more unusual endorsements came from Turkish celebrity imam Cüppeli Ahmet Hoca, who released a YouTube video urging Turkish Cypriots to vote for Tatar and concluding with Islamic prayers. Given the community’s largely secular culture, this gesture raised questions about whether it would attract or alienate voters.

President Erdoğan, however, did not publicly endorse any candidate, stating in response to a journalist’s question that Turkey would respect the will of the Turkish Cypriot people. Overall, Turkish involvement during this campaign period was less pronounced than the 2020 election and was not raised as an issue by any candidate, including Erhürman.

Traditionally, Turkish Cypriot presidential elections conclude with a live TV debate on the public broadcaster BRT1, featuring all candidates. This time, however, BRT1 organized a one-on-one debate between Tatar and Erhürman on 17 October, the final night of the electoral campaign, prompting a protest and formal complaint from independent candidate Mehmet Hasgüler and KSP. The Supreme Electoral Council subsequently cancelled the debate, citing the need for the public broadcaster to provide equal treatment to all candidates. Tatar and Erhürman also refrained from participating in any other one-on-one television debates on other stations.

## THE ELECTION AND ITS OUTCOME

On Sunday, 19 October, Turkish Cypriot voters went to the polls between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. Tufan Erhürman won decisively with 62.76% of the vote, while incumbent Ersin Tatar received 35.81%, down from his 51.69% in the 2020 runoff. Of the 218,313 registered voters, 141,504 cast ballots, resulting in a turnout of 64.8%—an increase from 58.29% in the first round of 2020, but slightly lower than the 67.29% recorded in the 2020 runoff. Erhürman won all six electoral districts—Nicosia, Famagusta, Kyrenia, Morphou, İskele, and Lefke.

The left-wing candidate’s share of the vote was highest in Nicosia, where he received 68.8%, compared to Tatar’s 29.8%, the latter’s lowest result across all districts. In İskele, which is predominantly populated by the mainland Turkish-origin voters, the two candidates came closest, with Erhürman securing 50.8% and Tatar 47.4%. İskele was considered crucial, as the swing of votes there in the second round of the 2020 election was widely seen as a key factor contributing to Akıncı’s failed re-election bid.

The official overall results, as announced by the Supreme Electoral Council on the morning of 20 October 2025, are presented below. The candidates are listed in the order in which they appeared on the ballot paper.

Tab. 1

## The 2025 Turkish Cypriot Presidential Election Results

Candidate Name (Party/Independent)	Votes Received	Percentage (%)
Osman Zorba (KSP)	443	0.32%
Tufan Erhürman (CTP)	87,137	62.76%
Arif Salih Kırdag (Independent)	458	0.33%
Ahmet Boran (Independent)	198	0.14%
Mehmet Hasgüler (Independent)	300	0.22%
İbrahim Yazıcı (Independent)	331	0.24%
Hüseyin Gürlek (Independent)	258	0.19%
Ersin Tatar (Independent)	49,714	35.81%
Total Number of Registered Voters: 218,313	Voter Turnout: 64.82% (141,504 voted in the election)	Invalid Votes: 2,665

On election day, only minor incidents were reported, such as voters taking pictures of their ballot papers. The most notable development was the Supreme Electoral Council ruling against incumbent Ersin Tatar for urging voters to support him on the Turkish TV channel CNNTürk after the official campaign period ended at 6 pm on Saturday. The Council referred the incident to the police for further investigation. If found guilty, Tatar could face a prison sentence of up to six months.

The results were declared very quickly. Within about half an hour, social media and TV channels began reporting a clear victory for one side, although names were not initially mentioned due to a broadcast ban. By 7 pm, the Supreme Electoral Council began announcing the first results and lifted the broadcast ban.

In his first speech following the announcement of the results, Erhürman stated that he would act in consultation with Turkish officials on matters of foreign policy and issues related to the Cyprus problem. He also emphasized that he is no longer the leader of the CTP, but the leader of

all Turkish Cypriots, inviting everyone to a celebratory gathering at Kızılbaş Park in north Nicosia.

Meanwhile, Tatar congratulated Erhürman but expressed uncertainty about why his share of the vote fell well below the combined vote share of the UBP, YDP, and DP in previous elections. Regarding his next steps, he said he would take a break before making a decision.

Regarding Turkey's response, President Erdoğan congratulated Erhürman in a message posted on X. However, his political ally, Devlet Bahçeli of the MHP, surprised many by claiming that voter turnout was relatively low—which was inaccurate—and therefore the result was illegitimate. He further suggested that the Turkish Cypriot Parliament should convene and decide on uniting Northern Cyprus with Turkey.

### ANALYSIS: WHAT DOES ERHÜRMAN'S ELECTION MEAN?

Although Erhürman had been leading in most opinion polls, such a landslide victory was not anticipated. His 62.76% share is notably close to the 64.91% "Yes" vote Turkish Cypriots cast for the Annan Plan in 2004. This clearly indicates that most Turkish Cypriots continue to support a federal solution to the Cyprus problem, whereas the two-state solution lacks popular backing.

However, as noted earlier, Erhürman's election manifesto set out specific conditions for resuming negotiations for resolving the Cyprus problem. His preconditions—including acceptance of a rotating presidency in a reunified Cyprus and an agreement on the international status of Turkish Cypriots should negotiations fail—may hinder efforts to secure the Greek Cypriot side's consent to restart talks.

Many agree that Erhürman benefited from the lack of unity within the UBP, which has gone through a turbulent period, experiencing three leadership changes in the five years since Tatar's election as president in 2020.

Erhürman is believed to have received significant backing from mainland Turkish-origin TRNC citizens, though there is no concrete data to confirm this beyond his strong performance in some towns with large mainland Turkish-origin populations, especially when compared to Akıncı's results in 2020.

Throughout the electoral campaign, Erhürman walked a tightrope, attempting to avoid provoking Turkey while asserting an autonomous voice for Turkish Cypriots. His post-election pledge to consult with the Turkish government on steps concerning the Cyprus problem is likely to be welcomed by Turkish policymakers; however, it remains uncertain in what form such consultations would occur and whether Erdoğan and other Turkish officials would be willing to compromise in case of disagreement. Is Turkey going to backtrack from seeking a two-state solution? The an-

swer to this question is likely to be provided when the two leaders meet in person, as Erhürman pays his first official visit to Turkey.

Domestically, Erhürman's campaign promises include a more active presidency in promoting transparency, gender equality, justice, and welfare. Yet, these objectives are difficult to achieve without a cooperative government enjoying solid legislative backing. Given that the UBP-YDP-DP coalition may call an early parliamentary election in response to their presidential defeat, political instability could impede the implementation of such policies. Should Erhürman attempt to exercise the full authority granted by the constitution, he would likely face opposition from the government. Co-habitation—where the president belongs to one party while the parliamentary majority and prime minister belong to another—is typically tumultuous in Northern Cyprus, often resulting in deadlock over appointments of senior bureaucrats, since the president is the final signatory.

In a more optimistic scenario, Erhürman could benefit from the support of his former party, the CTP, if it wins the next parliamentary election—scheduled to take place no later than January 2027—thereby facilitating the implementation of his domestic and foreign policy agenda. Much will depend on progress toward resolving the Cyprus problem; if those efforts fail, Erhürman is likely to become yet another one-term leader of the Turkish Cypriot community.

Finally, it should be noted that the Turkish Cypriot electorate has once again demonstrated its political sophistication, a trait evident since the ill-fated Annan Plan referendum in 2004. Their tendency to alternate electoral preferences every five years—from supporting secessionist to federalist candidates—suggests a kind of *mixed strategy* in the game-theoretic sense. Faced with persistent uncertainty, voters appear to be testing both options over time rather than committing definitively to one.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Özker Kocadal** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Cyprus International University. He holds a Ph.D. in Politics from the University of Exeter, where he focused on the role of kin-states in peacemaking, particularly in Bosnia, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland. His research centers on intra- and interstate conflict, international peacemaking, and peacebuilding, with a special emphasis on the Cyprus conflict. Dr. Kocadal has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes and is a regular contributor to opinion and analysis platforms.

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